LENIENCY AND TESTINESS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: REMARKS ON IDEOLOGY AND CONTEXT IN INTERACTIONAL SOCIOLINGUISTICS¹

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1. Introduction

As early as 1961, J.L.M. Trim made the following observation:

"One (...) feels that the rise-fall used by many Poles in simple statements *does* denote intellectual arrogance, that the heavy stress, syllable-by-syllable descent, and low level nucleus found in some North German statement sentences *is* domineering. As a result, we react sharply. The foreigner, bewildered, knows only that a promising friendship has foundered for no apparent reason. Thus human relations suffer and the myths of 'national character' grow." (Trim 1961: 35, emphasis in original)

In these sentences, Trim discusses the possible consequences that intercultural encounters between native speakers (NSs) and nonnative speakers (NNSs) may have at the level of group perceptions. He refers to the way in which the diverging realization by NNSs of the suprasegmental layers of the language (here, English) may lead the NS to attribute these differences to psychological characteristics of the interlocutor. Thus, Trim points out, intercultural communicative encounters can support or give rise to stereotypes about cultural, racial, or ethnic groups.

Trim's early anecdotal assessment of the embedding of cultural stereotypes in concrete conversational incidents turns up again in the development of a specific empirical approach to intercultural communication, namely that formulated by John Gumperz.² Gumperz's work is recognized as a landmark in the field of interactional

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² Most of Gumperz's work on intercultural communication published before 1982 has been assimilated in *Discourse Strategies* (Gumperz 1982). Later publications include Gumperz (1983, 1984, 1992); Gumperz & Roberts (1991); and Gumperz et al. (1984). Examples of the many investigations that have been carried out in this tradition are Chick (1985, 1991); Raith (1985);

sociolinguistics and has significantly influenced the last decade's boom in intercultural communication research. The extent of his influence is such that we can safely speak of a well-established research tradition within the study of cross-cultural encounters. The Gumperzian approach conceives of the communicative embedding of stereotypes in the following way. Encounters between culturally different speakers may suffer from communicative problems caused by the fact that these speakers use diverging pragmatics in a common language. This approach has it that, due to influence from the sociocultural or linguistic background, speakers may 'coat' the formally similar language with a contrasting repertoire of 'contextualization cues', i.e. "surface features of message form (...) by which speakers signal and listeners interpret what the activity is, how semantic content is to be understood and how each sentence relates to what precedes or follows" (Gumperz 1982: 131). Contextualization cues include pragmatic elements such as backchanneling devices, norms for turn taking, formulaic expressions, intonation contours, style- and codeswitching, conversational opening and closing conventions, and other discursive strategies. Such cues are said to function at very subtle and elusive levels of linguistic production and expectation, and hence, differences in cues are not readily recognized in terms of technical linguistic variation. Rather, the approach maintains, erroneous inferences about the interlocutor's communicative intent are made, and conclusions are drawn in terms of personal characteristics and attitudes. If over time, miscommunication of this type re-occurs in encounters with members perceived to belong to the same ethnic, cultural, or racial group, such individual characterizations may be elevated to stereotypic characterizations of the entire group. Through this mechanism, cultural stereotypes can grow and existing stereotypes can be reinforced.

In this reasoning, we can detect a strong acknowledgement of the constructive role of face-to-face interaction with regard to the social order. Situated linguistic practice is considered to have an important place in the (re)production of systems of sociocultural knowledge and social structures in general. This acknowledgment clearly manifests the influence which several disciplines within the broader field of sociolinguistics have had on interactional sociolinguistics, such as the ethnography of speaking, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, and discourse analysis.³ The influence of these disciplines' understandings of the importance of concrete face-to-face interaction for the construction of the social order is, however, not restricted to the interactionalist view of the conversational embedding of stereotypes alone. It is also exemplified by the strong stress on micro-level situational analysis characteristic of the interactional-sociolinguistic study of intercultural communication in general. Intercultural communication research

Roberts & Sayers (1987); Scollon & Scollon (1981, 1983); Valentine (1988); and contributions to Gumperz (ed.) (1982).

³ This is not to deny, of course, that other traditions which stress the social-constructive nature of linguistic practice have been influential as well. Examples are speech act theory, with its roots in Austin's work on the performative force of language, and traditions within social psychology. It should also be noted that recognizing the considerable impact the disciplines mentioned have had on the interactional-sociolinguistic approach does not imply that these disciplines have been adopted unquestioned in all their assumptions.

within this tradition focuses on ethnographic case studies of situated face-to-face interactions and is aimed at the examination of the communicative mechanisms that are directly available through observation. In this sense, the interactionalist "fine-grained analyses" of "the processes that generate and reinforce the negative racial stereotypes which lead to prejudice and discrimination" (Chick 1985: 300), i.e. the conversational embedding of stereotypes, must be seen as one of the manifestations of the general interactionalist orientation towards the micro-level analysis of 'tangible' conversational structures.

Starting from an analogous case study of the relationships between conversational incidents and cultural stereotypes, the present article intends to show that the dominant stress within the interactionalist tradition on what is readily observable in the discourse has to be supplemented with a consideration of the way in which factors of the societal, extra-situational order mediate communicative processes. As a matter of methodological preference within interactional sociolinguistics, rather than as a theoretical construction, studies of the influence of extra-situational parameters on the conversational structure are strikingly absent in the majority of the interactionalist research on intercultural communication. Not only does the dominance of such a research trend run the risk of blinding us, in the end, to the mediating role of situation-transcending structures; in time, it can also give rise to a misleading view of the notion of 'context' as limited to what is materially observable in micro-level structures.⁴

I start my discussion from an analysis of a recorded case of intercultural communication between nonnative speakers of English, i.e. Tanzanian, South Korean, and Flemish engineers (section 2). I will discuss the ready use of explicit negotiation of meaning and repair in these NNS-NNS interactions. In this respect, the notion of 'communicative leniency', as opposed to 'communicative testiness', will be introduced. In the third section, I will present an interpretation of the findings in terms of Michael Clyne's dichotomy between 'communication breakdown' and 'communication conflict'. This typological interpretation contrasts with unproductive and overgeneralizing criticisms of cultural background as an explanation for intercultural communicative difficulties. In section 4, the findings presented in the two preceding sections are then considered in light of the results of assessment interviews in which the Flemish instructors participated. This 'comparison' revealed a striking incongruity between the stereotypes expressed in the interviews and the conversational interactions. Rather than rebutting, on the basis of this incongruity, the view that stereotype formation is *necessarily* or *exclusively* situated in immediate interaction, a claim interactional sociolinguistics has never wanted to make, the incongruity will be discussed in terms of the need for a more concrete and applied assessment of the active role situation-transcending, macro-level features play in intercultural interactions (section 5). This will involve an evaluation of ideological issues related to the interactionalist approach to intercultural communication. I will

⁴ As will become clear in the course of this article, the claim for a genuine appreciation of the mediating role of extra-situational features has been aired before, both by (some few) interactionalist researchers and by students who approach intercultural or intracultural communication from other perspectives. It must be stressed, in this regard, that the present article particularly wants to specifically frame this claim around a discussion of ideological matters and of the notion of 'context' in interactional sociolinguistics.

argue that, in contrast to a number of other criticisms of this school, such an evaluation is best addressed in terms of possible effects rather than alleged intentions. Finally, the discussion will be related to a caution against potential misconceptions about 'context' in interactional sociolinguistics.

2. Repair, 'silent repair', and 'leniency' in intercultural communication

Between March and December 1990, junior engineers from Tanzania and South Korea stayed in Antwerp, Belgium to attend a training program given by Flemish engineers. The training program, the topic of which involved the computerization of telecommunication systems, was conducted in English. The program was divided in theoretical and practical sessions. In both these session types, groups normally consisted of ten to fifteen either exclusively Tanzanian or Korean students. At other times, only two students attended the session. Between October and December 1990, twelve sessions were recorded on video- or audiotape, resulting in almost 16 hours of recorded material, and were subsequently subjected to analysis.

In a first step, the analysis of these NNS-NNS interactions concentrated on communicative problems, for which possible explanations were sought in the realm of (perceptive and productive) transfer from the mother tongue or in the realm of more developmental aspects of nonnative linguistic realizations.⁵ Let me, as a starting point for the discussion to come, present only one example of such misunderstanding.⁶

(1)

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01  FT:  it's not necessary to to stress the syntax hè ?
02  KS1: it's necessary/
03  FT:  it's necessary ?
04  KS1: yes
05  KS2: yes because the syntax is very hard to understand {[p]for
06      us}
06  FT:  yeah but it's not enough with the example ?
07  KS1: =yes=
08  KS2: =yes=
09  FT:  [proceeds with the next matter]
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⁵ Meeuwis (1994) is a first and much more complete report of this analysis (see also Meeuwis 1993).

⁶ In the transcriptions, FT refers to Flemish teacher, TS to Tanzanian student, and KS to Korean student. In addition, the following symbols are used:

...: pause (number of dots according to duration)

/: falling intonation

?: rising intonation

*: stress on syllable or word to follow

{[dc] text}: text within curly brackets is slow

{[p] text}: text within curly brackets is soft

[info]: added information

==: interruption, latching

=text1=

=text2=: overlap

10 KSs: [[p]talking to each other in Korean]

In lines 07 and 08, the Korean students want to affirm the negation in 06. They want to express that the example in the manual is indeed insufficient. In framing their answer, they use an 'agreement-disagreement' answering system, which is the preferred system in Korean (Pope 1973). In languages favoring this system, such as Korean, answers are based on the respondent's agreement or disagreement with the statement form (negative or positive) of the question, in such a way that a 'yes'-reply to a negative question confirms the negation. Dutch, the mother tongue of the Flemish teacher, mostly adheres to a 'positive-negative' answering system: a positive response is used if the statement form of the answer's sentence is positive, while a negative response is used to introduce a sentential negation. Here, a 'yes'-reply to a negative question eliminates the negation. As a case of intercultural 'yes/no confusion', the Flemish teacher interprets the answers in 07 and 08 as conveying that the example is indeed enough. Her reaction in line 09 clearly leads to communicative frustration on behalf of the Koreans (e.g., line 10). To state, however, that mother-tongue transfer of the answering systems is the only cause of this misunderstanding would certainly oversimplify the complex of factors involved in this interaction. In line 06, for instance, the Flemish teacher, who has the procedural power in this context, could have used inverted constituent order or could have put the question in a 'that'-clause following a main clause such as 'But don't you think that...', in order to facilitate understanding. Without doubt, this failure on behalf of the Flemish teacher contributes to the students' difficulties in distinguishing the intended statement form of the question.

Consider, next to this case of misunderstanding, the following example.

(2)

01 FT: **what happened to the other group**
 02 **you don't know ?**
 03 KS₁: **yeah/**
 04 FT: [looks up, puzzled]
 05 KS₂: **yeah we don't know/**
 06 FT: **you don't know?**
 07 KS₂: **mm/**

Here, we can notice how the same phenomenon as in (1), yes/no confusion, does *not* lead to persistent misinterpretation. In this intercultural confrontation of divergent nonnative English discourses, the meaning of differing answering systems is manageably negotiated so as to allow the conversational exchange to proceed smoothly. In 05, the Korean student traces some problems in the Flemish teacher's attempt at inferring the correct meaning. By line 07, the two parties have managed to solve the disagreement and attain comprehension.

Explicit negotiation of meaning and repair were strategies frequently used in these NNS-NNS interactions. Other representative examples of this communicative phenomenon are (3) and (4). In these interactions as well, the mutual quest for a consensus can be linked to an initial misunderstanding due to cross-cultural pragmatic differences.

(3)

01 FT: the SSM has different procedures/ which *types of
 02 procedures ? . remember ?
 03 KS: yes/
 04 FT: yeah ? .. you tell me ?
 05 KS: [gives the answer]

(4)

01 FT: init is {[dc]urgent}/ do you know the meaning of that ?
 02 KS₁: yeah/
 03 KS₂: yeah/
 04 FT: you tell me ? ...
 05 you know what the meaning is ?
 06 KS₁: yes/
 07 FT: yes ?
 08 KS₂: [gives the answer]

In sequence (3), the teacher intends her question in lines 01-02 as a display question, i.e. as a request to formulate the information in full. The student initially fails to reconstruct the teacher's speech act type, and rather interprets it as a yes/no question (line 03). The same seems to occur in selection (4), where the misinterpretation occurs twice (lines 02-03 and line 06). One of the causes of these (initial) communicative problems is the teacher's use of 'unusual' formulations to signal the display question, such as "remember" in (3), and "you tell me" and "you know what the meaning is" in (4). In addition, contributing causes can be found in the realm of differing 'scripts for schools' (Saville-Troike & Kleifgen 1986), i.e. differing expectations about the practice of teacher-student interaction in classroom settings. As we learn from Riley (1984); Tyler & Davies (1990); and Scarcella & Lee (1989), lessons in a South Korean classroom or lecture hall usually consist of a monologic speech by the professor. Interventions or replies by the students almost never occur and are generally discouraged, while questions in the lecture discourse of the professor are at best given the status of rhetorical strategies. It can be argued that in the above interactions, the South Koreans are not used to the Flemish interactive, workshop-like form of instruction and thus fail, initially, to recognize the teacher's request type immediately.

As the interactions show (line 05 in (3) and line 08 in (4)), these misinterpretations are remedied in a mutual endeavor to arrive at understanding. The meaning negotiation consists, among other things, of the presentation of alternative wordings and insistence in general by the teacher. She traces a certain misinterpretation, and, rather than react defensively, she is ready to overcome the misunderstanding by reshaping the speech act.

But the cases of repair and negotiation of meaning should not be characterized exclusively as explicit means, i.e. means that are situated at the level of linguistic production. There are always 'tacit' strategies at work as well in this type of processes. Kandiah (1991: 355-356) points out how the literature on repair

is dominated by a focus on what *speakers* perform to initiate or complete repair⁷, i.e. on what is actually 'visible' for the analyst in the speech of the interactants, while slighting what *hearers* do with the actual utterances 'within themselves'.⁸ Communicative interactants excuse, repair, rephrase, negotiate, etc. at the purely receptive level as well. This is exactly what the Koreans are engaging in in interactions (3) and (4). The teacher's insistence alone cannot account for the successful continuation of the conversation. This continuation would not have been successful without the 'receptive' negotiation the interactants are ready to perform. They negotiate their expectations concerning 'scripts for schools' against the teacher's insistence.⁹

We can also trace 'silent' repair on behalf of the teacher (line 03 in example (3), lines 02-03 and 06 in example (4)). Whereas replying to 'Do you know what time it is?' by a simple 'yes', as occurs in these lines, would certainly be interpreted as ridiculing or even offending communicative behavior in a NS-NS or NNS-NS context, this is definitely not the case in these interactions. The teacher thus excuses and negotiates the utterances 'within herself'.

Consider, also, the following instances of 'silent repair' in (5) and (6).

(5)

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01  KS1:  how can i change the color text ? [discontinuity] i
02        mean this area/ only *this area/
03        [is typing] ..
04        i mean this area/ i wanted to change the color
05  FT:   {[p]hmm}
06  KS2:  only *this area
07  KS1:  only *this area
08  FT:   yes/ {[dc]i under*stand the *question}/
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(6)

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01  KS:   what kind of system is used ?
02  FT:   *how do you mean ? what kind of system/
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Tannen (1981: 226) and Thomas (1984) have indicated how NNSs intending to formulate a metalinguistic statement often fail to see the metapragmatic force of the

⁷ I do not want to dwell, in the discussion of my data, on possible typological classifications of these repairs, referring to the well-known labels 'self-initiated', 'other-completed' and the like. More important here is the mutual, cooperative character of the accomplished repairs.

⁸ Although Kandiah does not directly draw on the insights of M.M. Bakhtin, his position reminds us strongly of Bakhtin's critique of classical linguistic theory as holding an overall passive view of the hearer. Bakhtin frames his plea for an integration of the active role of the hearer around the concept of "addressivity" (i.e. the receiver-oriented quality of communication), suggesting notions such as "actively responsive understanding" and "passively responsive understanding" (Bakhtin 1986: 67ff.).

⁹ As these observations show, the only possible way to conceive of the scripts for schools is to interpret them in terms of concrete experiences in social practices that represent negotiable, dynamic expectations rather than some static, reified cultural essence.

expression, which is quite likely to lead to communicative frustrations in NS-NNS communication (and certainly in NS-NS communication). One of Thomas's fine illustrations relates how a Russian speaker of English asked the meaning of her British interlocutor's preceding turn with 'What do you mean by saying that?' (1984: 232). This was perceived by the British NS as a challenge and criticism of his words. In contrast, the metalinguistically intended questions with metapragmatic force in examples (5) and (6) did not cause any friction between the interlocutors. The Flemish teacher's statement in line 08 of example (5) is not taken to convey any challenge or piqued reaction, which would be possible to assume in a NS-NS or NS-NNS interaction. Also, a native speaker of English would be likely to think s/he is being criticized about the value and pertinence of his or her question by the metapragmatics of the utterance in line 02 in example (6) ("how do you mean?").

This suggests that an interpretation of the ready occurrence of explicit negotiation and silent repair in examples (2)-(6) can conceivably be found in the specific status of the interactions as conversations in which all the parties involved are NNSs. As Varonis & Gass (1985: 84-85) remark, in this type of communication, the parties are likely to "recognize their 'shared incompetence'" or to "admit a language difficulty". The risk of losing face can be considerably lower, and meaning can thus be negotiated without too much embarrassment (see also Gass & Varonis 1989; Schwartz 1980; Takahashi 1989). The mutual recognition of nonnativeness allows for a smooth continuation of the conversation that would be unlikely in any type of conversation involving a native speaker.

I have argued so far that explicit (productive) and silent (receptive) repair frequently occurred throughout the interactions of my case study. I consider these restitutive operations to be manifestations of one and the same communicative attitude, which I will define as 'communicative leniency'. In the following section, I will try to show how Michael Clyne's dichotomy between 'communication breakdown' and 'communication conflict' can offer a more refined insight into how interactants demonstrate communicative leniency. Before opening that discussion, however, two further remarks concerning the specificity of NNS-NNS communication as 'lenient' are in order.

First, it cannot be concluded from the findings that leniency is typical of NNS-NNS communication with respect to *all* levels of linguistic structuring. Although the above examples show that the specificity of NNS-NNS communication as potentially lenient communication applies at the elementary level of yes/no confusion and at the level of indirect requests, the examples do not imply any generalizability beyond these levels. Second, I would not claim that NNS-NNS intercultural communication is *invariably* characterized by participants' leniency. It will, actually, be the point of my discussion in sections 4 and 5 that conditions of the extra-situational order, such as structural inequality and historically institutionalized prejudice, are able to override leniency in NNS-NNS conversations. We are in a legitimate position, rather, to interpret the specificity of NNS-NNS interaction in terms of enhanced leniency potential.

3. Repair and 'communication breakdown' vs 'communication conflict'

In the foregoing discussion, I have concentrated on how interactants dispel communicative misunderstandings, which, in fact, involved 'promoting' the very absence of problems in intercultural communication as a worthy research topic in its own right. I have thus wanted to counter a general reluctance in intercultural communication research to deem the joint construction of communicative success interesting enough for scholarly examination.

But in what sense can we talk of an 'absence of communicative problems' here? If we consider interactions (1)-(4), we notice that erroneous inferences of intent (yes/no confusion and misconstrued speech act type selection) initially *did* occur. Referring particularly to intercultural situations, Clyne (1977: 130) has introduced the distinction between 'communication breakdown', where communicative intention is missed, and 'communication conflict', where missed intentions lead to interpersonal friction. Bearing on this distinction, we can interpret the above cases of repair as preventing 'communication breakdown' from turning into 'communication conflict'. 'Absence of communicative problems' thus refers to these bypassed communication conflicts.¹⁰

Recently, some critics of the Gumperzian approach to intercultural communication have contested the explanations which this approach suggests for intercultural communicative difficulties (i.a., Kandiah 1991; Singh & Martohardjono 1985; Singh et al. 1988). Reinterpreting the conversational disturbances analyzed in the interactionalist studies, these critics want to deny that interculturally contrasting discourse conventions are the causes of the disturbances. As will appear from my discussion below, I am in favor of giving more prominence, though not exclusive value, to the alternative explanations suggested by these critics. These are mainly situated in a consideration of more structural, macro-level parameters such as power imbalance and dominance, as well as in the recognition of historically institutionalized modes of prejudiced perception. The critics argue that the cases under investigation in the Gumperzian framework represent intercultural 'conflict' (frictional communication) without intercultural 'breakdown' (linguistico-cultural difficulties). My data nevertheless lead me to conclude that differences in culturally-anchored pragmatic strategies between varieties of the same language do constitute possible sources of miscommunication. Even if it is breakdown without conflict, it is still breakdown, however negotiable its nature may be.

The problem seems to be one of underspecification of 'communicative problems'. The critics I refer to tend to subsume the entire continuum of communicative interference under the label of miscommunication, ranging from minor and momentary failures of inference at the level of turn-taking pairs, to paragraph-length misunderstanding and communicative frustration, as well as the overall collapse of the conversational house of cards, including profound interpersonal rancor and bitterness. Singh et al. exemplify this overgeneralization when they write that "it is not evident that these differences [= rhetorical

¹⁰ Repair of communication breakdown is not the only way of preventing communication conflict. Communicative leniency can actually provide that even unrepaired breakdown does not lead to conflict, as was the case in interactions (5) and (6).

differences across languages] are the cause of *misunderstanding and the resulting friction* among ethnic groups as most interactionists would have us believe" (1988: 46, emphasis added). I believe that an assessment of miscommunication in terms of the differentiation of Clyne's dichotomy offers us a more refined picture of culturally-anchored discourse strategies as possible origins of communicative disturbances. As my data show, difficulties in inferring the interlocutor's intention at the level of turns often do have causes in the realm of cross-culturally contrastive discourse strategies. The same data, however, have also shown how such 'communication breakdowns' can be renegotiated through leniency and can thus be avoided from turning into 'communication conflict', i.e. ensuing interpersonal friction.

4. An incongruity between conversational incidents and stereotypes

In January 1991, immediately after the closing of the training program, the Flemish instructors were invited to an assessment interview. With very general questions, they were invited to give their opinion about the training program and the trainees. An overall picture emerged in which the answers nicely followed the borders of the two ethnic groups, i.e. the South Korean group and the Tanzanian group. The differences in the instructors' evaluations for these two ethnic groups were sharply divided. The Koreans were evaluated as being more interested, more devoted, more motivated, and more intelligent. The Tanzanians, on the other hand, were said to be uncooperative, boorish, and indifferent. Occasionally, they were even called dull. They were said to suffer more from 'culture shock' than the Koreans, who were perceived to be endowed with a higher degree of flexibility in this respect. In the case of the Tanzanians, attitudes and potential were also tied in with the manner in which they dressed, which was perceived as sloppy.

As argued, in the conversational data between the Tanzanians, South Koreans, and Flemish, communication conflict, i.e. interpersonal friction, could often be avoided by means of repair or negotiation. In addition, the data revealed strikingly comparable types of communication breakdown for both the South Korean and the Tanzanian groups. Moreover, all the breakdown types that appeared to affect the communications between the Flemish trainers and the Korean trainees could be observed to affect the communications with the Tanzanians as well, but not vice versa. For instance, the cases of yes/no confusion and misconstrued speech act type selection due to differing — but negotiable — 'scripts for schools' which could be observed in the interactions with the Koreans, also led to cases of misread intention in interactions with the Tanzanians (see Meeuwis 1994 for empirical details). On the other hand, some syntactic and pragmatic characteristics typical of Korean as a topic-prominent language appeared to lie at the heart of additional communication breakdowns and technical failures in the Korean-Flemish encounters. In general, the tapes unmistakably indicate that the Tanzanians' English deviated to a far lesser extent from what the Flemish are used to as standard

English than the Koreans' English did.¹¹ The Koreans' English showed many more sources for potential breakdowns and for the development of these breakdowns into conflicts.

As demonstrated in examples (2)-(4), repair prevented the perseverance of breakdowns; or, as in (5)-(6), breakdown and conflict were avoided concurrently. One of the relevant backdrops was the interactants' capability of appraising the interactions as NNS-NNS communication. In other words, an assessment of the prevailing context informed interpretations and moves at the level of direct conversational exchanges. We can interpret this in terms of top-down processing, where 'top' includes contextual aspects, general beliefs and attitudes, etc., and where 'bottom' includes the systemic elements of the code. It was this top-down processing that allowed for communicative leniency, in the form of productive and silent repair, to affect the systemic-linguistic order processes.

But communicative leniency did not apply in exactly the same way for the Tanzanian and South Korean groups. The interactions between the Flemish and Tanzanians, whose nonnative discourse, as noted, showed even less potential causes for communicative problems, were marked by a much lower degree of communicative leniency on behalf of the Flemish. Occasional pragmatic differences and breakdowns were selectively highlighted. In terms of Flemish expectations, the discourse of the Tanzanians was sometimes characterized by a striking lack of backchanneling signals or questions — a lack which again can be accounted for in terms of customary practices in lecture settings (cf. 'scripts for schools'). It was this diverging behavior to which the Flemish instructors referred in their evaluation of the Tanzanians as 'not committed'. Their commentary that this interactive behavior irritated them points in the direction of communication 'conflict'. Apparently, these interactions were marked more by what could be called communicative 'testiness', than leniency. And while pragmatic differences were highlighted, positive indications were slighted. Testiness blinded the instructors to the numerous metacommunicative comments the Tanzanians made about the training lessons, which could at least have inspired the instructors to reconsider their evaluation of indifference. Selections (7) and (8) are instances of such comments:

(7)

01 TS: y' see we were *never ? *told these things/
02 FT: [no reaction, proceeds with the next matter after 12 sec.]

(8)

01 TS: sometimes to make a .. a mistake it's good because you ..
you

¹¹ In Tanzania, English is the medium of instruction in higher education. For those Tanzanians who have made it to higher education, which includes the subjects in this study, English can be said to be a *second* rather than a *foreign* language. It is to be situated, at the least, in a transitional phase between the two types (Blommaert 1992). For the South Koreans and the Flemish, English is never used as a medium of instruction and is clearly a foreign language *stricto sensu*.

What can possibly account for the difference in 'application' of communicative leniency for the two ethnic groups and for the resulting discrepancy in evaluations contrary to the similar sets of breakdown types? A dominating Belgian and Western European public opinion still holds to a deeply-rooted perception of Africans as intellectually retarded, underdeveloped, uncivilized in manners and social conduct, and poor in cultural history and achievement. The Far East, on the other hand, typically enjoys fame as possessing an ancient cultural, intellectual, and artistic tradition. The modern Far East is the birth place of bright mathematicians, computer experts, and theoreticians of the natural sciences.¹² As an industrial and economic power, its character as a First World region sharply contrasts with the perception of Africa as the Third World. As such, it is safe to assume that the contrast in these group images was accentuated by the fact that the two groups were evaluated against each other in the same context. There is evidence to conclude that this combination of historically rooted ethnic prejudices and stereotypes mediated the conversational situation as extra- or pre-conversational factors, or, as Hinnenkamp (1991: 92) labels them, "pretexts". The positive attitudes and preconceptions towards the South Korean group allowed failures or divergences in their English to be tolerated and excused. This kind of communicative leniency was negatively determined by the prejudiced attitudes towards the black Tanzanians, whose English, ironically, showed even less potential causes for communication breakdown, let alone conflict. Or, in terms of the top and bottom terminology introduced above, it can be said that the immediate interactive processes are *top-down* informed.

My findings corroborate studies by other researchers in the field of intercultural communication. Lalljee (1987) warns us that the attribution of communicative incidents and acts to personal or ethnic characteristics does not operate in the same way for different target groups. Apitzsch & Dittmar (1987) have found how Germans' a-priori conception of Turkey and its inhabitants strongly influenced intercultural interactions with Turkish migrants in Germany. What all these observations seem to suggest is that we have to take Murray & Sondhi's (1987) warnings very seriously. They argue that intercultural encounters do not occur in 'neutral territory': Deeply-rooted ideologies and attitudes, generated by centuries of tradition, necessarily determine the context of such encounters, "in which there is no possibility of an equal exchange between black and white" (1987: 23).

¹² This typical positive regard may be unparalleled in North America, where the discourse in which Asians are held in low esteem (cf. the pejorative term 'economic animals') is perhaps more prominent.

5. 'Pretext', context, and ideology in the interactional-sociolinguistic approach to intercultural communication

5.1. 'Pretext' in the interactionalist approach

Pretexts do figure in the interactional-sociolinguistic approach. Gumperzian studies do not assume that intercultural encounters occur in vacuo. Nevertheless, in the vast majority of the cases recognition of pretextual attitudes is limited either to new ones being generated or to existing stereotypes that can be fed, confirmed, reinforced, substantiated (e.g., Gumperz & Roberts 1991: 47; Chick 1985: 300). In themselves, pretexts are hardly ever examined for the *active* impact they can exert on the interaction. The interactionalists' concern with the direction from conversation to ethnic stereotype formation and confirmation (bottom-up) goes hand in hand with a striking absence of considerations of the mechanisms through which the stereotypes can themselves impinge on the situated conversation (top-down). The one-sided interactionalist documentation almost leaves the impression that all pretexts do is at best passively await confirmation. In this sense, the Gumperzian study of stereotype formation and confirmation exemplifies the more general inclination in interactional-sociolinguistic research practice to limit the scope of explanations and causes to what materializes at the surface levels of the immediate interactional structure.

But this strong accent on factors that are readily observable from the surface of the discourse structure does not represent an interactionalist theoretical position that would construct pretext as in principle impotent. Albeit not always in an elaborate form, recognition of the active role of pretexts does sometimes occur in theoretical formulations of the interactionalist approach. Already in one of the earliest contributions to the field, Gumperz made the following remarks:

"Because of the elements of power and economic inequality that prevail in minority-majority contact, it is generally the minority group member who is judged and evaluated and therefore has most to lose if communication breaks down in such gatekeeping situations. (...) Interethnic situations (...) are conducted within a context of mutual suspicion, or at least without the predisposition to assume cooperation on the part of the other. Finally, the very situations in which minority and majority groups most often interact are such that the power relationships prevent misunderstandings from being recognized." (Gumperz 1978: 29-30)

Also, as part of the conclusion to *Discourse Strategies*, we learn that "not all problems of interethnic contact are communicative in nature. Economic factors, differences in goals and aspirations, as well as other historical and cultural factors may be at issue" (Gumperz 1982: 210). Keith Chick (1985: 317), whose research on communicative patterns and their relationships to racism and prejudice in South Africa is very clearly situated within the Gumperzian tradition, makes clear in one of his earlier studies that cultural differences "predispose people to selectively perceive whatever reinforces the stereotypes and ignore whatever does not" — which is exactly what seems to occur in my data. Finally, the recent contribution by Celia Roberts, Evelyn Davies, and Tom Jupp (Roberts et al. 1992) persuasively demonstrates the compatibility of a micro-centered approach with the consideration of objective power relations, dominance, and social inequality. Their ethnographic

study of racial discrimination in multilingual and multi-ethnic workplaces fruitfully combines both micro and macro approaches.

Considered in this light, a number of arguments addressed by critics of the interactionalist approach, such as Singh & Martohardjono 1985; and Singh et al. 1988, seem to miss the point. In their review of *Discourse Strategies*, Singh & Martohardjono (1985: 196) state that Gumperz's examinations of intercultural misunderstandings "deliberately avoid such fundamental questions as institutional racism" and are marked by a "refusal to acknowledge the role of power imbalance and social hierarchy". The preference in Gumperz's approach for empirically observable discourse features is said to betray "how seriously he takes his task of the spokesman of the system" and is taken to show how "his premises are at best those of a pseudoliberal, and even that is being charitable to him" (1985: 196). The criticism Singh and colleagues frame in terms of interactionalist *theory* and *intentions* would gain much of its pertinency and fairness if cast in terms of the possible dangerous *effects* of a preferred research *practice*.

The focus on the conversational situation and the scarcity in reportings of the mediating role of pretextual factors can be better clarified by situating interactional sociolinguistics itself within its 'scientific pretexts'. As a reaction to group-oriented, quantitative, and survey-based sociolinguistic paradigms, interactional sociolinguistics wanted to give a solid basis to the "assumptions about the relationships of statistically analyzed sociolinguistic indices to individual behavior" (Gumperz 1982: 32). To this end, it modeled its methodology along the strong version of conversation analysis which grounds all statements in the 'hard facts' that derive from what is materially 'visible' in discursive surface phenomena (cf. Auer 1991). This preference in research practice addresses research questions and target objects of inquiry that preoccupied analysts at a specific point of development in the sociolinguistic disciplines. The volume by Celia Roberts and her colleagues, as well as the recognitions cited above by Gumperz and Chick, prove that the interactionalist approach has both the ideological readiness and the theoretical compatibility to integrate pretext as a determining factor in the analysis of intercultural communication.

But as the results of my case study suggest and for reasons I will specify below, it is necessary that this latent compatibility be put into more elaborated practice; in other words, the potential in interactional-sociolinguistic theory for a fruitful combination of micro and macro approaches should be adequately exploited.

5.2. Ideology and 'context' in the interactionalist approach

In the interactionalist view of the conversational embedding of group perceptions, the generation and confirmation of negative stereotypes are presented as if they were totally independent of the speaker's will. The objective linguistic technicalities in the realm of nonnative discourse strategies and the correlated miscommunications are situated at such subtle, implicit, and elusive levels of linguistic production, that resulting interpersonal frictions and stereotypes are automatic, nomic effects ensuing from unconscious processes. The question to ask, then, is: Could the references to the analytic objectivity of transfer from mother tongue and cultural background and the ones to the unconsciousness of the process not serve to extenuate the bigot's

behavior? Since Gregory Bateson (1972, 1979), we know that communicative success is not so much a function of the absence of (socio-)linguistic differences at whatever level, but that it rather depends on the mutual recognition of the differences. From my analysis of NNS-NNS intercultural communication, I am inclined to believe that the occurrence of 'communication breakdown' in the sense of misread communicative intention is not problematic per se, because of its negotiable character. (In addition, I contend that some breakdowns can indeed legitimately be attributed to cross-culturally contrasting discourse strategies.) What needs to be accounted for, however, is the way in which interactants exploit these breakdowns (and their discourse strategies) in order to achieve goals of social exclusion. The selective application of communicative leniency, in which speakers from some communities are allowed to show pragmatic deviations in their speech while others are blamed, should lead to a reconsideration of the attitude adopted by the powerful, the privileged, the bigoted in intercultural communication — not in individual terms, but in terms of socially confirmed ideology and behavior. The inclination in the interactionalist research practice towards materially available surface data for locating the causes and determinants of what is going on in the interaction does not readily allow for such consideration; a more elaborated investigation of the way pretexts mediate communicative processes is needed.

The need to turn to a closer examination of the communicative role of pretexts also has implications for elements of sociolinguistic theory formation. First, there is the obvious fact that, as Auer (1991: 185) remarks, "there are phenomena and categories every competent member of a society knows of although they fail to manifest themselves on the surface of actual discourse". Auer warns that these phenomena and categories are equally socially real, and that a methodological restriction to what materializes in interaction can leave rather large provinces of knowledge inaccessible (Auer 1991: 186).

But secondly, the interactionalist insistence on discursive surface features suggests a notion of 'context' which is limited to the immediate structure of the conversational situation. The impression, mentioned above, that in the interactionalist approach pretextual features are at best extra-contextual, passive 'observers' (cf. the 'confirmation' or 'reinforcement' of stereotypes) exemplifies this limited view of context. In such a view, the micro context is granted an autonomous sovereignty, in that discourse-internal features are taken to accomplish more than they actually are capable of, and, to the detriment of pretext, are assumed to be far too responsible for determining what is going in the situation. 'Context', in this view, equals 'micro context'. Interactional sociolinguistics not only runs the risk of being misunderstood concerning its own view of 'context'; it is not inconceivable that the dominant micro-oriented trend in this influential tradition can ultimately lead to a misleading object construction in sociolinguistic theory formation in general. I think, therefore, that a more concrete and elaborate investigation into the active role conversation-external features play in the situational locus of (intercultural) interaction is needed at the present stage of disciplinary developments. The discussion I have presented in this article is an attempt at extending the small existing number of calls in this direction.

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