

DEALING WITH COMMUNICATIVE PROBLEMS IN ENGLISH AS A *LINGUA FRANCA*

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1. *Lingua franca* communication in conversation analysis perspective

The aim of the article is to discuss, first, how the differences in socio-cultural interaction styles can influence communication, second, what is interaction participants' orientation to the problems originating in those differing styles and finally, how such troubles are negotiated, and more specifically, repaired in communication. Conversation analysis (CA) will be used to analyze an illustrative excerpt of interaction in English.

In CA perspective, English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) communication is defined as a spoken interaction in English used as a contact language between persons who do not share either a native tongue or a common national culture (Firth 1996, 239-240). Even though the definition serves as a reference point for CA study of LF communication, it seems to be somehow static in the sense of not taking into account the dynamic context of the interaction, its locality and interactional relevance of such macro concepts as culture. The assumption of stable cultural differences between interlocutors seems too far-fetched, since ELF can be as well used between the persons who share a common culture, for example, two Polish students of English communicating during class or both taking part in a conversation with a foreigner. Besides, in the process of language socialization, enculturation or simply school learning, the degree of the sharedness of cultural/discourse norms can change and the so called non-native speakers can reach a very high level of communicative competence in their second language. The main point, however, is that in the perspective of CA, the cultural aspect of communication does not need to coincide with its *lingua franca* aspect, since it appears that it is interaction participants' orientation that allows us to define communication in their perspective as either intercultural or simply *lingua franca* or both. Interactions can happen in *lingua franca* but it does not automatically entail their interculturality in terms of participants' orientations to "intercultural" subjects and differing socio-cultural identities, because interactants may or may

not show the orientation to cultural norms as shared or divergent in a varied degree. If however, they orient to themselves and other interactants as representatives of different national cultures, then such orientation allows the analyst to define communication as intercultural. While in lingua franca communication (Firth 1996), these are the orientations to differences in linguistic competence that become relevant in determining the lingua franca nature of a given exchange.

CA used to focus on analyzing monolingual conversations and mainly on intersubjectivity, that is on how social actors maintain mutual, shared or “collective” understandings and on the common reasoning procedures driving understanding in interactions, that is how participants respond to or interpret each other’s turns at talk (Heritage and Drew 2006: 4). The above quoted concept, since it concerns endolingual communication, assumes a great degree of stability as far as interaction participants’ shared competence is concerned. While in ELF or any LF communication, interaction participants can differ as far as communicative competence (pragmatic and strategic one) and linguistic competence are concerned to a greater extent than in monolingual contexts (Firth 1996, House 2003). Hence the question arises to what extent can CA be used in analyzing LF talk. The point is that such degree of competence sharedness that CA refers to concerns mainly everyday endolingual conversations, while when it comes to other and less primary genres, especially in institutional discourse range, competence differences between interactants can be frequently observed. There are for example journalists who are better trained in discussion moderation than other journalists. On top of that, there are ELF interactions in which interactants do not show any critical competence deficiency or just competence differences. Despite possible personal competence differences, however, there exists a common culturally shared core of understanding of social categories. More specifically, persons socialized in the common socio-cultural and historical context must share certain assumptions concerning social categories and situational activities in the interaction. Those assumptions as well as social categories, however, are of an interactional and situated nature, so they need to be locally “activated” and negotiated in an interaction as relevant to participants for understanding what is going on in a given interaction.

All in all, as Firth claims, analysts of LF cannot unproblematically assume the same degree of stability and systematicity in the use of conversational objects as when analyzing monolingual data. So in CA perspective what makes a communication lingua franca one is participants’ lack of competence made relevant in talk (Firth 1996: 253). In any case, for the communication to take place, some sharedness of communicative competence has to be both presumed and further negotiated locally in discourse by speakers, whether in LF communication or in monolingual talk.

LF research as well as second language learning research have long perceived the concepts of nativeness and nonativeness as predetermining competence in LF talk, in a way that nonativeness was for a long time treated as a determinant of lower competence. However, in CA perspective the notion of nativeness, depending on participants’ interactional orientation, may but does not have to become a relevant, conversational resource that might influence communication. The same concerns the notion of troubles that have

to be clearly marked as such by interaction participants to be relevant for the analysis of meaning in an interaction (Wagner and Firth 1997).

So far many researches in LF communication, as discussed by (Kasper and Rose 2002), drew heavily on the assumption that differences in interlanguage pragmatics and specifically FL users' lack of pragmatic and linguistic competence must lead to an unavoidable communicative failure. The research was mainly based on native speaker (NS) – non-native speaker (NNS) interactions and proposed a somehow abstract competence of a NS as the main reference point and a model, target competence for NNS. Yet, in the light of CA, LF research as well as socio-constructivist trends in FL teaching and learning research, such an assumption seems to be an overstatement, as research shows that many of the troubles are treated by interaction participants as inconsequential for reaching communicative goals and intersubjectivity, and only some of them call for attention, in which case, speakers even with very limited resources somehow manage to communicate and overcome problems that appear in the interaction without running into any serious communicative breakdowns.

As it was first discussed by Jordan and Fuller (1975, quoted after Firth 1996), LF interactions are primarily characterized by “let it pass” strategy, meaning that interaction participants tend to delay repair initiations of a misunderstanding that is judged to be inconsequential for the course of the interaction. They let troubles pass and wait for a misunderstanding to clear up further in interaction. Interaction participants only attend to troubles if they notice a danger for the communication to break down. Intensified repair of troubles takes place in such events as “spelling names” in which misunderstandings cannot go unattended to. In this case interaction participants engage in initiating repairs and corrections of misunderstandings (Firth 1996, 240).

The examples studied by Firth concern mainly speakers' problems with linguistic encoding and decoding, that is grammatical forms and lexis and their influence on repair system. There are, however, other CA universals in conversations such as: openings and closings, turn taking, back channel signals that can be analyzed both in reference to encoding problems or as trouble sources in themselves, especially, when differences in their realization give rise to interaction problems.

All in all, the most important feature of lingua franca interactions is based on participants' efforts to normalize the conversation and make it ordinary in local discursive practices. In other words, such a normal character of talk is a locally managed interactional, interpretative and linguistic work of interaction participants (Firth 1996, 242). In the light of this, lingua franca interactions should be analyzed as ordinary communication and as Koole and ten Thije propose, researchers should move away from the collision perspective on ELF talk and analyze it as aiming at construing or regulating the common ground in which misunderstandings can but do not need to happen (2001, 571). One can usually observe participants' tendency to normalize communication. This means that speakers resort to “let it pass” strategy and initiate repairs and repair only these troubles that need to be resolved for the interaction to proceed or to solve the business at hand and reach normalcy.

The problems that can happen in LF may stem from deficiencies in universal conversational system, for example, a lack of backchannel voices and discourse markers which can be a result of schooling transfer in which normal interactive procedures are not transferred from the native language and instead school discourse forms and communicative actions are used (Kasper and Rose 2002, 21-22, Mehan 1998). There are also other cases in which discourse patterns are indeed transferred but they differ from the target ones. Thus if somebody has really developed the competence in target forms or somehow adapted target cultural norms, he or she still needs strategic competence to notice problems and deal with them locally to reach a common ground in communication in ELF with somebody who does not subscribe to those norms. The problem does not seem to concern only exolingual but also endolingual communication, for instance between any NS and NNS of a given language, and more precisely, the so called native speaker may also need strategic competence - the skill of negotiating meaning and solving communicative troubles - when communicating with a less competent communicative partner.

2. Data analysis

Data description: the elicited interview was recorded by advanced students of English as an academic task for FL class. Interviewers are Polish students of applied linguistics and their interviewee is a Chinese teacher of English on a university scholarship in Poland.

In the discussed example, differences in topic development occur. The Chinese interviewee develops the topic inductively, which is typical of a Chinese discourse style of reacting to problematic and argumentative questions. Inductivity means delaying the introduction of the main topic point until the end of one's utterance, and in this example, at the end of a series of utterances (Scollon and Scollon 1995: 75-85). Although such delays and other mitigation tokens appear also in the so called western discourse, in which inductiveness also seems to be one of mitigation devices, the difference is that the main point of an utterance is usually produced much earlier and in a more explicit manner than in Chinese discourse.

Those differences are not visibly oriented to by participants as socio-cultural differences. They are attended to since they are consequential for the interaction. The Chinese interviewee develops the topic inductively since he interprets interviewers' questions as probably too direct or simply argumentative and consequently, treats answering them as a delicate matter that needs mitigation, while Polish participants perceive his answers as problematic or as straying away from the topic or evading answers. As a result, they use journalistic meta-strategies to recycle and direct the topic.

At lines 3, 5-6, B responds to the question more directly and with less hesitation than later on in an interview as he does not treat the question as too problematic, probably, since it calls for a positive assessment. Later on however, when D asks the question about other nations, at line 11, B realizes his answer in an inductive manner and precedes it with hesitation, mitigating discourse markers and hedging to signal the upcoming evaluation as a delicate matter (Schegloff 2007, 58-96; Pomerantz 1984).

1 D: and would you say that eh (.) the Chinese are generally ha:rd↑ working
 2 (0.5)
 3 B: yeah::
 4 D: yeah↑ =
 5 B: =you kno::w (.) we s- we have a saying that Chinese people are::↑ (.)
 6 industrious and hard working
 7 D: mhm
 8 B: people yeah
 9 D: mhm=
 10 B: =yeah
 11 D: and and what about other nations how do you see others
 12 B: (well:) I think (.) uh (..) well we s- say it this way but no- uh other
 13 nation when you:: (.) l-uh:- I think they're y'know (.) the people (.) who
 14 want but di- di- different th:: you know even in one nation (..) .hhh most
 15 generally speaking you know: some most people are:: ha:rd wo:rki:ng and
 16 industriou:s y'know (.) but maybe there is eh [s-] some other people
 17 D: [mhm]
 18 B: I don't know they rely on [the government]
 19 D: [(ok but)] mhm
 20 B: on the social welfare (.) but you know in China the social we:lfare: (..) (it)
 21 still has a long way (.) to be perfect(.).hhh so:: some people
 22 don't (...) rely on social welfare: (.) very much (.) so (they) (.) the
 23 only thing rely on themselve (..) this (.) we have in China you know (.)
 24 even in the(..) i- in the past people say a self reliance (..) the the
 25 saying the old slogan is self reliance (.) we we rely on ourselves (...)
 26 (xxx)

At lines 18 and 19 overlapping turns appear but they are not cooperative since D tries to interrupt B to reintroduce the topic which B in her opinion strayed from. She produces her turn at the TRP (transition relevance place), at the end of a turn construction unit, at the place where in the so called European-American discourse style the topic upshot should be realized. D intends to take a turn since she notices that B does not answer the topic and her role as an interviewer is to keep the topic on track. However, B treats her turn-taking as an interruption and tries to maintain his turn because in his perspective, he still did not finish the subject and did not reach the main topic point of his utterance, which comes in his next turn at lines 20-26 and is anyway realized indirectly.

This happens because D and O have a problem with B's different discourse style and specifically with localizing the main point or topic conclusion in B's utterances. This is due to B's realizing assessments in an inductive manner, in a series of utterances, completed only by listeners' attention markers. As a result, interviewers' comments come prematurely and are treated as interruptions. D and O display problems with the fluent control of the subject and understanding B's answers.

They display the understanding of B's actions as evading answers and they show prob-

lems with understanding the main point in his answers to their questions. In consequence, their strategy is to keep recycling the topic, by providing examples and reformulating the topic, and reintroducing actually the same problem over and over but in an increasingly direct manner.

Fragm. 1B

- 27 D: OK [but let's get back to]
 28 B: [xxx mh: mh:]
 29 D: this topic of other nations
 30 B: OK
 31 D: I wanted to:: yh: concentrate on some s:stereotypes for example in
 32 [Po:land (..) eh::]
 33 B: [mh: mh:]
 34 D: very often believe that eh:: (.) Germans are: (.) extremely hard
 35 working
 36 B: mhm
 37 D: and perhaps you have also (.) some example
 38 B: mhm
 39 D: oah I mean some:: (...)^oeh^o I would like you to name some examples eh:
 40 B: mh:
 41 D: of some nation and (..) [eh:] tell:
 42 B: [mh: mh:]
 43 D: eh:: what's the attitude of Chinese [people]
 44 B: [mh: mh:]
 45 D: towards eh:
 46 B: mhm mhm
 47 D: that nation
 48 B: mhm (.) you mean other nations eh::=
 49 D: =yeah for example you consider somebody extremely lazy or::=
 50 B: = mhm
 51 D: is there↑ (.) a nation↑ which you consider to be lazy↑
 52 (2.5)
 53 B: .hhh maybe I think some of the ve:ry wealthy (..) (xxxxx) the countries
 54 (..) you know (.) because you know in the countries >where the ec< the
 55 economy is: going well (.) y'know they can enjoy: (.) so::cial we::lfa::re
 56 they can enjoy:: (.) a lo::t o::f a good facilities in life (.) y'know
 57 O: mhm
 58 B: they s- so maybe some people you know are afraid to work (.) they enjoy
 59 li:fe y'know (.) everyday y'know
 60 D: [so would you say] that
 61 B: [maybe]
 62 B: but it's difficult to to to say: which which nation in this wor:ld
 63 D: mhm
 64 O: so there's talking about [Polish people]
 65 B: [but you know I do still think](.) that social
 66 wel:fa:re (.) y'know too much social welfare (.) does not encourage people
 67 (.) to work hard ha:rder
 68 D: mhm
 69 B: but

In Fragment 1B, at lines 27, 29 and 31-32 D reintroduces the subject using the meta action to direct the topic and make it more specific for B. This might be treated as other-initiated topic repair, which in fact is also common in monolingual interviews on interviewer's part. At line 27, D takes up a turn after B's pause and another overlap appears as B tries to continue his turn at line 28.

At lines 31 and 34, D uses a meta action to direct the topic, she provides examples to narrow down B's answer possibilities and at lines 37 and 39 directly asks him for specific examples.

She recycles the question formulation at lines 41, 43, 45, 47, while B does not take up the topic since he probably waits for the main point of a series of D's formulations or just waits for D to specify what trouble his answer might pose for her. Additionally, both interviewers' questions become increasingly more direct, which makes answering them even more problematic for B.

Finally, at line 48, saying: "mhm (.) you mean other nations eh:?" B uses a recast and a repair initiator at the same time to make sure he understands interviewers' questions and acknowledges a trouble with the topic. At lines 49 and 51, D provides a repair that is a formulation reintroducing the topic. However, the situation repeats itself, as B treats the question as equally problematic or argumentative and calling for mitigation as previous ones. He makes a long hedging pause at line 52 before he takes a turn to answer the question at lines 53-56, 57-58. At lines 60, 61 and 64-65, interviewer's and interviewee's utterances overlap, as D takes a turn twice at the places she interprets to be TRPs, thus thinking that B finished the topic, again without answering the question. B treats her turns as interruptions and continues his turn to provide the utterance upshot. Contrary to what happens in case of most overlaps in conversations, here, there appears no repetition of turn-initial overlapped phrases, O's turn is simply ignored.

However, neither of the party orients to the discussed troubles as an intercultural discourse difference. Consequently, one might pose a question what can be a lingua franca or intercultural specificity of the interaction. Here the problem is most probably interpreted, as interviewee's individual action, but mainly, as the topic development problem. B's actions are understood as a refusal to fulfill the conventional duties of an interviewee to answer questions to the point. Interaction participants do not show as well any orientation to any problems with language encoding that might need repair. Non-native usages including non-native pronunciation and less frequent use of idiomatic language can be observed but they are not treated as influencing mutual understanding. Instead, interactants orient to troubles with topic management that are repaired over and over in the course of the interaction. The troubles recur and have to be regulated repeatedly, still, participants manage to reach a certain level of intersubjectivity. They try to reintroduce the topic which B, in their opinion, strays from and do so by using meta-steering actions such as: "yes but let's go back to the topic of..." "I would like to discuss now..." etc. All in all, what might make the interaction lingua franca in participants' view are topic troubles which need to be attended to for the interaction to develop, and consequently, repair initiators and topic repairs which appear in perhaps greater quantities than in monolingual discourse in which

discourse conventions such as those concerning topic development seem to be more widely shared. Thus, what seems different from regular monolingual discussions is a greater degree of topic development repair. In consequence, speakers develop an interactive format in which interviewers' keep on recycling the topic and produce topic repair initiators and actual repairs, while the other party seems to react to topic repair initiators by ignoring them or reacting with minimal reception tokens to produce repair initiator at the end of a series of interviewers' actions.

Perhaps the knowledge of discourse styles on both sides would make the conversation smoother, but there would still remain a problem for an interaction participant to accept such a radically different style and develop strategies to adjust to it. Instead, since they cannot "let problems pass," as problems concern the basic interaction format and topic development (answering questions and sticking to the topic in the interview), they resolve troubles locally by using meta-strategies and recasts as repair initiators and repairs to make B come back to the topic and answer the question.

3. Conclusions

From the etic, that is external analyst's point of view, these are differences in cultural discourse styles that cause problems in interaction. However, from participants' emic point of view those problems seem to be of a different nature. They are treated most probably as problems of participants' idiosyncrasies, not as intercultural ones, so both the troubles and their repairs can be interpreted without referring to discourse differences of which speakers seem to be ignorant but as an individual accomplishment of interaction participants. Those actions are mainly initiated by interviewers since in an interview it is conventionally their task to control the topic. This kind of macro reference to discourse style differences helps us interpret what is going on in LF interactions, or what can be general socio-cultural differences in discourses, however, it is not sufficient to explain how the troubles and their repairs are organized interactionally in lingua franca talk, that is how interaction participants interpret them and cope with them to reach a mutual understanding despite local troubles in talk.

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TRAITER LES PROBLÈMES COMMUNICATIFS EN ANGLAIS CONSIDÉRÉ COMME *LINGUA FRANCA*

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Résumé

De nos jours, l'anglais est l'une des langues les plus utilisées dans la communication internationale. Les locuteurs qui recourent à l'anglais en tant que lingua franca maîtrisent cette langue de façon inégale. Cependant, dans ce type d'échanges les locuteurs ne sont pas confrontés uniquement à des problèmes d'origine linguistique. Notre but, dans le présent article, est de réfléchir, tout d'abord, à la question de comment les différences socio-culturelles, au niveau des styles d'interaction, peuvent influencer la communication. Ensuite, on se focalisera sur les différentes façons dont les locuteurs réagissent aux problèmes de cette nature lorsqu'ils apparaissent dans l'interaction et, finalement, on démontrera comment ces problèmes sont négociés par les locuteurs. Nous recourons à l'analyse conversationnelle afin d'analyser des extraits d'interactions en anglais qui serviront d'illustration.

Mots-clé : anglais considéré comme lingua franca, différences socio-culturelles au niveau des styles discursifs, analyse conversationnelle, problèmes communicatifs, réparation.

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