

Collaboration on Reaching Understanding: Interactions in a Japanese Manufacturing Plant in the USA.

Yukako Sunaoshi

University of Texas at Austin, USA

Aims of the research

The traditional approach to intercultural communication assumes a 'mismatch' model: people from different speech communities often have different norms for contextualisation cues (Gumperz 1992), which may cause miscommunication. While this approach suggests how interlocutors may misinterpret each other's intentions, it does not account for any other consequences of such interactions. For example, what would happen as a result of each group's learning about the others' communication patterns over time? What might be the differences between a brief one-time encounter and long-term highly task-oriented interactions? The present research attempts to answer some of these questions by analysing interactions between Japanese die makers and American workers on the factory floor.

Method

The data for this study (Sunaoshi, forthcoming) are drawn from fieldwork conducted at a Japanese manufacturing plant which produced auto-bodies in a southern state of the USA. While hired as a liaison person, I gathered both ethnographic and discourse data through observation, interviews, and videotaping of interactions on the floor. Of the workers in the plant, those in the Die and Maintenance area were chosen as the main informants for the study. They were Japanese technical support members, who were in either a long- or short-term assignment, and American workers, who were hired locally. The most demanding and complex projects took place in this area, and the two sides were constantly communicating with each other.

Analysis

The Japanese workers' overall competence level of English was low and the American workers had no previous experience working with the Japanese. They nonetheless managed to communicate with each other in a simplified register, into which both groups became socialised over time and which they felt comfortable using. By investigating the processes of clarification at a sequence and at a larger interactional level, several linguistic, paralinguistic, and nonlinguistic communicative strategies were identified as important in order to effectively reach sufficient understanding in their interactions. These strategies included verbal and non-verbal repetition, accompanying gestures, and use of the physical objects the interactants had in front of them on the floor.

Some factors positively contributed to the success of communication.

First, both groups shared similar work knowledge and context. Although their knowledge level and skills differed, and the Japanese were more experienced than the Americans, they nevertheless worked on the same die issues and problems together every day. Second, they were in a highly goal- and task-oriented environment. They were always pressed with deadlines on top of emergency trouble, which needed to be taken care of immediately for the production to continue. Third, at the time of the fieldwork, they had had experience of working together for eight months. Furthermore, the informants were also in a balanced power relationship to each other. That is, unlike most previous research done on institutional talk (e.g. Drew and Heritage 1992), where the person with the institutional power was also a member of a language and cultural majority, in the present setting, the Japanese, who were the language and cultural minority, occupied the supervisory position. The Americans were the language majority, but needed to learn skills. As a result, both the Japanese and the Americans collaborated on understanding each other.

In sum, although linguistic and cultural differences complicated the communication process, there were also other positive factors which helped the two groups reach understanding by leading to persistent, patient, and collaborative interactions. These results demonstrated the workers' maximum use of every possible communicative strategy available to both groups even though so little was shared linguistically. As seen, intercultural communication has to be carefully examined in each context. Additionally, accounts of successful processes of intercultural communication deserve as much attention as miscommunication.

References

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