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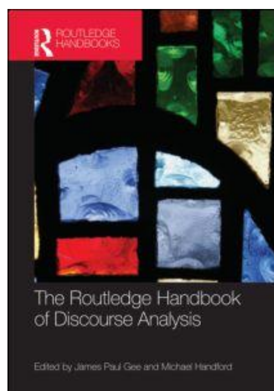

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Interactional sociolinguistics and discourse analysis

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10

Interactional sociolinguistics and discourse analysis

Jürgen Jaspers

What is interactional sociolinguistics?

Interactional sociolinguistics (IS) studies the language use of people in face-to-face interaction. It is a theoretical and methodological perspective on language use with eclectic roots in a wide variety of disciplines such as dialectology, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, pragmatics, linguistic anthropology, microethnography and sociology. Basically IS starts from the finding that, when people talk, they are unable to say explicitly enough everything they mean. As a result, to appreciate what is meant, they cannot simply rely on the words that are used but must also depend on background knowledge, to discover what others assumed the relevant context was for producing words in. In fact people can get very angry when they are put to the test and asked to explain precisely what they meant. Imagine telling a colleague that you had a flat tire while driving to work, after which that colleague replies: 'What do you mean, you had a flat tire?' Or suppose you ask an acquaintance: 'How are you?', and you are being asked in return: 'How am I in regard to what? My health, my finance, my school work, my piece of mind, my …'. In both cases you might experience surprise or confusion because you feel no extra explanation is necessary. You may even consider such questions improper and angrily retort: 'Look! I was just trying to be polite. Frankly, I don't give a damn how you are!' (see, for these examples, Garfinkel, 1963: 221–222). Such reactions indicate that people expect each other to treat talk as incomplete and to fill in what is left unsaid; but also that people trust each other to provide a suitable interpretation of their words, that is, they expect one another to be aware of the social world that extends beyond the actual setting and of the norms for the use of words that apply there.

Put in another way, IS holds that, because of the incompleteness of talk, all language users must rely on extracommunicative knowledge to infer, or make hypotheses about, how what is said relates to the situation at hand and what a speaker possibly intends to convey by saying it. Interactional sociolinguists in principle try to describe how meaningful contexts are implied via talk, how and if these are picked up by relevant others, and how the production and reception of talk influences subsequent interaction. As the examples above show, misinterpreting or failing to make hypotheses frustrates others' expectations that you may be willing to share the same view on what background knowledge is relevant, and this may cost you a friend. Below, we will see that misinterpreting may result in even greater social damage, but before we go into this it is necessary to take a closer look at how speakers flag, or index, meaningful contexts by using only a limited but suggestive set of tools.

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If talk is incomplete, interactants need to do completion work. They have to find out what unstated context a certain word flags or points at for it to be made sense of. Consequently words can be said to have indexical meaning, and it is this meaning that interactants need to bring to bear when they interpret talk. This is obvious with terms such as 'this', 'there', 'you' or 'soon', terms that have been traditionally called indexical or 'deictic' in linguistics: every 'this' and 'soon' points at the specific context in which it is used, where each time one has to complete its new and specific meaning. But other words can be considered indexical as well. An utterance like 'That's a really awesome dog' still leaves interactants the work of discovering the precise meaning of 'awesome' (is the dog frightening? beautiful? can it do tricks and is it particularly friendly? or what else was said about the dog just before it was called awesome?), which can only be grasped by drawing upon contextual knowledge of who utters the words when and where (see Heritage, 1984: 142–144) 'Far from introducing vagueness', Verschueren therefore argues (1999: 111), 'allowing context into linguistic analysis is a prerequisite for precision'. In addition to words, whole utterances can be indexical of a contextually specific non-literal meaning that needs to be discovered for (polite) communication to succeed: 'It's a bit cold in here' often means: 'Is there any chance you could close the window?' (see Grice, 1989; Gumperz, 2001). Simply put, in order to describe and explain meaningful communication, we need to look at what indexical meanings are implied by the words in a particular context rather than only at the words themselves. Naturally, it's not impossible to work out the wrong meaning of 'awesome' and to realize your first inference was wrong. Inferencing thus inevitably entails improvisation and uncertainty, so that the meaning of a word can shift over the course of an encounter at the same time as the context it was thought to make sense in is adjustable, 'plastic and contestable' (Chilton, 2004: 154). Finding out what unstated extracommunicative knowledge contributes to or disambiguates the meaning of what it said, or the process of selecting, rejecting, moulding and/or (re)negotiating the relevant context is what is called 'contextualization' (Verschueren, 1999: 111).

If this makes you wonder how people manage to make the right inferences at all, it is necessary to know that much talk is quite conventional, or that it tends to produce typical sequences of words and appropriate contexts for producing them in. There aren't dozens of ways of casually greeting one another, so you can be safe to assume that 'how are you?' indexes just that and is not to be regarded as an invitation for starting up a lengthy monologue, unless of course the question is asked at the beginning of a therapeutic session. Knowing that a general question on someone's well-being can be used for casual greeting is itself learned through socialization. Next to this, one of the important contributions of IS to the study of language and social interaction is its finding that interactants employ many other signalling channels than words to make aspects of context available. These channels are used in co-occurrence with words and can be vocal (prosodic features such as intonation or accent, code-switches, style-shifts) or non-vocal (gaze, gesture, mimics, posture). Their signs are typically called 'contextualization cues', hints or signals that help put the talk in context, or that 'steer the interpretation of the words they accompany' (Auer, 1992: 3).[1] For example, when we intend to say something ironical, we often make a contrast between the words of our utterance and the 'colour' of our voice by using a different accent, an unusual pitch level or a particular intonation pattern, maybe in concert with a raising of the eyebrows. In musical terms, contextualization cues provide extra staffs on the score of conversation, as if they orchestrate the verbal activity (see Auer, 1992). These cues are not necessarily contrastive. Often they are in harmony with words, as when a formal accent, a loud(er) voice and a raising of the hand cluster together and accompany a public announcement. In this way, cues create a redundancy of meaning and so facilitate interpretation. It would be tiresome and inefficient to put all of this indirectly given information into explicit words.

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In principle, contextualization can be flagged explicitly and directly, as when people say 'I'm only joking' or 'Welcome to this meeting.' But IS has been drawn to the implicit or indirect (and usually only vocal) signalling devices, given their much more subtle character, high user efficiency and complex interpretive consequences.[2] After all, loudness, intonation, pitch or articulation rate do not mean anything by themselves, but they acquire meaning when interpreted in a specific context – a long pause can hint at deference, modesty or possibly anger. Even so, these interpretations depend on the fact that most cues, just as 'how are you?' questions, have a conventional social indexicality due to their frequent use in specific places, communities, relationships or activities. A final rising intonation for example, at least in the West, is conventionally associated with tentativeness, whereas a falling intonation usually invokes definiteness and finality (Gumperz, 1982a: 169). Consequently, in the same way as 'how are you' is available for indicating the opening of a brief chat, cues can signal social contexts and the identities, relations or stances they involve: tentative intonations are convenient for suggesting friendliness and politeness, while a definite intonation is handy for issuing commands. Likewise, accents or whole languages may point at localities or educatedness, such that a shift to a standard accent may suggest that one wishes to shift from personal communication to taking up a public or professional social role, whereas a code-switch to a common heritage language may hint at the reverse. Usually words and cues operate in clusters to help build a social persona or a social role, as with the public announcement above. It enhances the chance of getting recognized as a persuasive announcer, a really friendly person, an authentic resident or a tough manager. The continual operation of such clusters eventually gives rise to what we call registers or styles, such as manager talk, youthful talk, local talk, etc. These registers in their turn colour the words and phrases that are typically used in them, such that 'perpetuate', 'gangsta' or 'LOL' hint at their typical users and user contexts. Needless to say, these social personae and styles can be produced both for real and for pleasure.

It should be added, however, that social personae, styles and the indexically meaningful resources they are made up of are not free-floating but are part of a longer-standing but thoroughly hierarchized social world, where elites are distinguished from non-elites and semi-elites (Blommaert, 2007). These distinctions are made according to widespread and ideologized standards of appropriateness, articulateness, educatedness and beauty, which assign all available resources and their users a higher/lower, better/worse place vis-à-vis the standard; and this exerts a formidable influence on what it means to talk like (and be recognized as) 'a woman', 'a lecturer', 'a job applicant', 'a manager', 'a local'. In particular, it sets limits to the freedom one has to employ words and cues and it imposes penalties for those who are seen to use resources inappropriately or over-ambitiously: one may laugh at a lousy attempt at producing hip hop style, or a tough female CEO may find that what she does to index the suitable context for others to interpret her words in – namely a frequently falling intonation in combination with directives, a hard gaze, a lower or loud voice, and so on – gets interpreted by her male staff as unsexy, since dominant views picture women as submissive and insecure, which needs to be flagged by using rising intonation, a high pitch, and by smiling invitingly – among other things (see Jaspers, 2010). Thus, even if interpretation poses no problems, one may be understood as going off the standard and be presented with the consequences.

In sum, making inferences on the basis of talk is inextricably bound up with evaluation and identity in an unequally rewarding social world. We've already seen that there are social repercussions when misunderstandings occur: one may be found unintelligible or impolite. These repercussions only magnify when interactants find themselves in unequal social positions (imagine saying 'How am I in regard to what?' to your boss's friendly greeting) and in stressful situations such as job application interviews. Things start to look even bleaker when interactants

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have culturally different inferencing habits or contextualization styles, in other words when they interpret cues differently or produce cues that the other party does not pick up. It is with such recipes for disaster that a number of classic IS studies have been concerned with, and I turn to these in the next section.

What are the key studies in the area?

A central theme in IS has been (mis)communication in western urban workplace settings. Specifically, a lot of attention has been devoted to gatekeeping encounters between people with different ethnic backgrounds, in which clients or lay people have to interact with interviewers and experts who have different interpretive premises. Key studies in this regard are Gumperz (1982a, b) and Roberts *et al.* (1992). Here is an example from a mid-70s selection interview where an applicant applies for paid traineeship and training in skills that were in short supply on the labour market (Gumperz, 2001: 224):

a. Interviewer: and you've put here, that you want to apply for that course because there are more jobs in … the *trade*.
b. Applicant: yeah (low).
c. Interviewer: so perhaps you could explain to Mr C. *apart* from *that* reason, *why* else you want to apply for *electrical* work.
d. Applicant: I think I like … this job in my-, as a profession.
e. Instructor: and *why* do you think you'll *like* it?
f. Applicant: why?
g. Instructor: could you explain to me why?
h. Applicant: why do I like it? I think it is more job *prospect*.

As Gumperz notes, by emphasizing the word 'trade' in (a), the interviewer is asking the applicant indirectly to say more about what he wrote in a questionnaire he filled out before the interview in reply to questions about his interest in electrical work. Yet the applicant seems to treat what the interviewer says as a literal yes/no question (b). The interviewer goes on and uses the same device – stress – to draw the applicant's attention to what needs to be gone into detail about, but the applicant simply rephrases the information he has already given in the questionnaire (d). Then the instructor takes over (e), using the same accenting device to elicit extra information, but again the applicant does not recognize this as an invitation to comment on what he wrote. Rather the applicant appears to be perplexed and once more paraphrases what he has already said (h). In sum, he does not recognize the interviewers' verbal tactics, which employs emphasizing to draw attention to issues she thinks need to be elaborated, and he is not seen to speak as a suitable candidate. Such misunderstandings are not uncommon, Gumperz remarks. Research among British-resident South Asians bears out that, 'as native speakers of languages that employ other linguistic means to highlight information in discourse, South Asians often fail to recognize that accenting is used in English to convey key information, and thus do not recognize the significance of the interviewers' contextualization cues' (2001: 224). Furthermore, ethnographic data also show that South Asians have been socialized to enter interview settings 'as hierarchical encounters, where candidates are expected to show reluctance to dwell on personal likes or preferences and avoid giving the appearance of being too forward or assertive' (2001: 224). This is only one fragment of the interview, which contained numerous other miscommunications. But it comes as no surprise that the applicant eventually did not gain admission, in spite of the fact that he did possess a reasonable skill in doing electrical work.

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To the extent that such conversations shipwreck, it is easy to see how different inferencing habits may disadvantage certain social groups, damage workplace relations and confirm dominant stereotypes and race inequality. All the more so as the interpretive processes involved are highly automatized and difficult to name or remember, which is the reason why participants usually do not ascribe their misunderstanding to contextualization styles but to the other's attitude or personal characteristics. In fact IS has maintained that indirect contextualization cues, such as emphasis, are extremely susceptible to (sub)cultural influences, since the meanings attached to them are usually learnt in close-knit networks (peer group, family) where speakers can be sure that background knowledge is shared and indirect signalling will be picked up and understood. They are therefore extremely vulnerable for misinterpreting and subsequent social or intercultural conflict (see, e.g., Scollon and Scollon, 1981). In this regard also the multi-ethnic classroom has been pointed out as a place where misinterpretation can be far-reaching. Consider a primary school pupil responding 'I don't wanna read' to a teacher's invitation to do so, after which the teacher gets annoyed and says: 'Alright then, sit down.' Obviously, the teacher interpreted the pupil's response as a refusal, but when such interactions were played to others, it emerged that, for black informants, the (black) pupils' rising intonation suggested that she wanted encouragement – and it was added that, if she had wanted to refuse, she would have emphasized 'wanna' – whereas white informants followed the (white) teacher's line of interpretation (see Gumperz, 1982a: 147). Comparable differences in cueing and inferencing in the classroom have been noted with regard to gaze (gaze aversion as a sign of deference versus a display of non-involvement) or information organization during story-telling (attunement to chronological coherence versus topical coherence; see Erickson, 1996; Gee, 2004; and see Michaels 1981 in Schiffrin, 1996).

An important strand in IS has pointed out, however, that misunderstanding does not automatically follow from contrastive cueing habits. Thus Erickson and Shultz (1982) have described that 'situational comembership' may prevent trouble occurring between two interlocutors from different backgrounds: when both parties in the interaction decided to make relevant a shared identity (both being football fans, classical music devotees or coming from the same town), 'the interviewer and interviewee seemed willing to overlook the momentary difficulties in understanding and negative impression that may have been due to cultural differences in communication style. In the absence of comembership, communication style difference often became more and more troublesome as the interview progressed' (Erickson, 1996: 296). Even the relation between miscommunication and stereotypification can be less than straightforward. In non-native communication the parties involved often recognize their shared incompetence and easily volunteer to negotiate meaning beyond first-level incomprehension (Varonis and Gass, 1985). And in his discussion of non-native communication in English between Flemish engineers and groups of Korean and Tanzanian students, Meeuwis (1994) shows that, although many more communicative problems arose with Korean students, the engineers were much more forthcoming towards the latter than towards Tanzanian students, and also looked least favourably on Tanzanian students after the training course. Findings such as these point to the fact that differences, diverging habits and communicative problems are still negotiable and do not inevitably lead to conflict and stereotyping. Specific community memberships are, in other words, not omnirelevant or inescapable, but can be put on hold or ignored in favour of a situational construction of belonging. These studies also show, however, that stereotypes that exist before the actual interaction may help communication go awry even in the absence of real problems, inviting us to consider the strongly shaping influence of extra-situational orders and relations on how micro-interactions are worked out (compare the ideologized standards mentioned in section 'What is interactional sociolinguistics?'; for a similar perspective, see Gee's distinction between 'Discourse' and 'discourse' in Gee, 2005).

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This invitation has been accepted by much interactional sociolinguistic work of the last 10 or 15 years. In this work, interest has not been so much in miscommunication or in invisible, routine cues that may cause confusion, but rather in how small-scale interaction reveals a constant tension between people's here-and-now concerns and more established routines and views on how things should be done. Analysts usually study friendship groups or practice communities both in leisure time and in school contexts where the potential for shared background knowledge is high, and they have a critical interest in how people in these contexts 'invoke, avoid or reconfigure the cultural and symbolic capital attendant on lines and identities with different degrees of accessibility and purchase in different situations' (Rampton, 2001: 97) and in how, as a result, they position themselves in a group and in wider-scale contexts. This has led to various descriptions of playful, creative and resistant-like practices that reconfigure and challenge widespread conventions or put them temporarily on hold (see e.g. Rampton, 1995, 2006; Heller, 1999; Jaspers, 2005; Reyes and Lo, 2009). This attention for the relation between micro-interaction and its reproduction of, as well as its possible challenge to, wider or dominant social contexts is indicative of how current IS helps to approach discourse.

How does IS help to approach discourse?

IS is greatly inspired by a social constructionist view of discourse as an arrangement of habitual social (rather than only verbal) practices. Principally within this line of thinking, people are seen neither as the victims of powers they do not comprehend or understand nor as omnipotent creators of their own circumstances, but as intensely socialized beings who at least partly create or actualize their (unequal, socially stratified) societies anew in their daily interactions. Rather than the mere reflection of pre-existing social structures, language use is seen as one of the primary resources for social actors to shape and re-shape their social surroundings actively and creatively. A crucial point is that these interactions do not take place in a vacuum. They are streamlined by longer-standing and larger-scale habits that restrict the range of possible new interactions. A potent motive for this is that habits provide recognizable frames, identities and relationships and so assure the ontological security – that is, the sense of stability and continuity about one's experiences – of those involved (Giddens, 1984). Conversely, as we have seen in Garfinkel's examples at the beginning of this chapter, deviating from routine behaviour causes confusion and indignation; it puts existing knowledge (such as knowing what a flat tire is, knowing how to greet someone casually) and identities (being a knowledgeable colleague or an acquaintance) under pressure and suggests they cannot be taken for granted any longer. The work of Garfinkel and also Goffman (1967) has shown that those who (potentially) deviate tend consequently to be held in check, over and above mere indignation, with a variety of delicate reproaches but also less subtle social penalties, as was the case for the female CEO above. Of course, those at the top of social hierarchies will applaud the reproduction of the world as it is, while those with less influence may often feel ill at ease or apprehensive about leaving the social paths in which they have learned to think, feel and act, so that, although social actors are constantly re-creating the social world, they will mostly (feel encouraged to) reproduce established discourses.

Yet, even though social interactions gravitate towards reproducing them, the fact that these established structures need to be actualized in interaction means that they are inescapably influenced by interaction and so constantly vulnerable to innovation and potential change. There is thus a two-way connection between local happenings and larger-scale processes. For, if social interaction is a construction zone (Erickson, 2004: 143) where it is necessary to keep other builders in check and to restrict the range of new creations, this means that habits do not totally determine what social actors can do but they still allow for actions that deviate, resist, question,

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by-pass or negotiate these habits. Needless to say, from this perspective social interaction becomes a privileged site for the study of society. It is the arena where customary ways of doing are confronted with the unpredictability of interaction, or the window through which we can observe social actors maintaining their own and others' identities at the same time as they are creatively reworking older or past traditions, which may eventually impact on larger-scale social patterns. Daily interactions could in this way be viewed as the small cogwheels of the broader social (and also linguistic) mechanism that interactants, through their talk, constantly grease or may throw sand into. For these reasons, and following Goffman (1983), IS argues that social interaction needs to be viewed as a distinct and intermediate level of organization, the workings of which cannot be explained by the rules of grammar alone, nor from a macro-social viewpoint. In sum, IS approaches discourse 'through the worm's eye, not the bird's' (Rampton, 2001: 84). It looks at small-scale interaction (rather than at public texts such as newspaper language or advertising) in order to provide a microscopic and insider view on larger social processes that crucially depend on these small-scale actions.

One danger here is to prioritize recordable verbal interaction or conversation as the only reliable empirical basis for studying how interactants 'do' discourse, as is often the case in conversation analysis, and to neglect the contextualizing procedures mentioned in sections 'What is interactional sociolinguistics?' and 'What are the key studies in the area?' (see Coupland, 2001: 12–15). Another danger is that analyses of interaction may remain at micro-level and may fail to situate it in larger-scale processes. In such cases, there is the risk that analysts describe how established practices and meanings are evoked in local interaction and possibly reworked or playfully contested, but they overemphasize the resistant quality of actions that in the end do not even ripple the surface of larger scale discourses. The challenge is thus to provide an intimate view of the interplay between reproduction and creativity in small-scale interaction, but also to relate what goes on at microscopic level to the determining influences of higher-order social processes – among other things, by exploring how local interactions are linked to others and by investigating what visible or non-visible traces they leave on institutional or other public records (Meeuwis, 1994; Heller, 2001; Rampton, 2001)

How do you make an IS analysis?

If you want to make an IS analysis, you will need first-hand data that are as rich as possible. This usually implies doing long-term ethnographic fieldwork in one setting during which you familiarize yourself with the local communicative ecology, appreciate how it is related to broader social structures and assemble as much commentary from participants as possible. Without this ethnographic knowledge, it will be difficult to pick up the background knowledge that interactants in that setting only display via subtle references. Recordings (digital or otherwise) of naturally occurring speech are a must-have, since it is next to impossible to reconstruct interactions from memory in the amount of detail you need in order to discover their moment-to-moment organization. It is not always easy to make recordings, but, once you have them, they will allow you to revisit the recorded scene as much as you like so as to check hypotheses. Making a transcript of your recordings is the following indispensable and quite time-intensive step. It is possible to leave this step out, but it will usually be much more practical to mark off important extracts on paper (see Schiffrin, 1996; Rampton, 2001).

Which extracts are important clearly depends on your research goals. But it is typical for ethnographic research that these may sometimes slightly shift focus when you arrive at the scene. This was also the case in my own research, in which I have been interested in the linguistic behaviour of students at a multi-ethnic secondary school in Antwerp, Belgium (Jaspers, 2005).

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Initially I expected to find adolescents from different ethnic backgrounds playing around with each other's heritage languages and finding an interactional common ground in spite of their ethnic differences (cf. Rampton, 1995). But such behaviour was hard to find, and instead I noticed that ethnic minority students dominated the classroom floor and silenced most other voices by excelling in what they called 'doing ridiculous', that is, slowing down and parodying the lesson (and later on also research interviews) in not entirely unruly ways. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that these students are widely noted in Belgium as incompetent or unwilling speakers of Dutch, it turned out that they regularly switched from one Dutch variety to another for special effect, and I felt that bringing out such versatile language skills would help me to rub against common stereotypes. Therefore I started identifying all occasions in my data where such playful behaviour could be found and then categorized them according to variety (examples of playful Antwerp dialect, Standard Dutch, mock English, mock Turkish, etc.). I replayed extracts to these students for retrospective commentary, and I worked on the analysis of extracts, keeping an eye on how interaction and language use related, challenged, or diverged from widespread interactional conventions.

Here is one (translated) data-sample (see Jaspers, 2006, for more details). It is from an interview with Mourad, Adnan and Moumir (20, 19 and 21 years of age, respectively), all of Moroccan descent and in their last year of secondary education. I've just asked them in which cases they think they'll be needing Standard Dutch.

1	JJ:	and what exactly will you be needing from it?
2	A:	(you learn) to talk better or something [.] when you go
3		and apply for a for a job or something [..] then at least you
4		won't be making a fool of yourself
5	Mr:	that was last year () also uh [..] could write a letter
6		like that I've done such- such such an application letter [..]
7	JJ:	yeah
8	Mr:	and uh [.] and this year we're also going to be seeing this
9		isn't it? [viz: the letter] [..] isn't it guys? and uh [.] so uh [..] yeah
10	Md&A:	[laughing] [2.0]
11	Md:	[close to microphone, smile voice:] **so you are a repeater**
12		[laughter]
13	A:	Moumir Talhaoui [laughs]
14	Mr:	( )
15		[laughter]
16	Md:	22 YEARS OLD
17	JJ:	| (and do you have)
18		[laughter]
19	JJ:	but [.] but [.] right when you uh when you take a look at [etc.]

There is no miscommunication here, except perhaps between Moumir and his friends as to whether the latter know what Moumir is talking about. We notice Moumir suffer face-loss, having his nose rubbed into it by Mourad and Adnan, who find this highly amusing, and after a short while I try and put the interview back on track. If we look more closely, we can see that in lines 8–9, Moumir is seeking confirmation for his story ('isn't it guys?'), but then seems to realize that they are not repeating the year as he is, and thus cannot confirm if they are going to write a job application letter. This realization is clear in Moumir's second question for confirmation, which this time also involves an address ('guys'), whereas before he only used a 'we' to which he also counted himself. Moumir is in other words putting himself in a different position than his two

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classmates, and suddenly becomes someone who's addressing them about what they can expect this year in class. Moumir's story halts in line 9 and is followed by laughter in line 10, which suggests that Moumir is suffering face-loss and stops speaking because of this. Mourad discloses the precise content of Moumir's face-loss quite explicitly in line 11: the latter has unexpectedly and much to the amusement of his mates given himself away as a grade repeater, and as someone who is ashamed of this (or who is biting his tongue, since he has now given his classmates the opportunity to start teasing him about it again). Mourad does this in a stylized Standard Dutch: he uses careful pronunciation and the formal pronoun 'u' [you],[3] and in this way provides the other participants with a sudden piece of showcase behaviour that acts as a special cue for the others to appreciate the relevance of.

What could this relevance be? Obviously, it is not impossible that Mourad's stylization was invited by the interview questions on the use of Standard Dutch. But categorizing it as mere sound play would overlook the fact that the interview itself formed a special occasion, given that I diverged from my typical bystander or onlooker role and was now visibly taking up the position of a question-asking and turn-allocating authority who was taping everything they said. The unexpected focus on Moumir's status as a grade repeater only added to emphasizing the differences between them and myself, given our quite dissimilar educational histories (a university researcher versus students on a less than prestigious educational trajectory). Unusual moments such as these are what Goffman calls ritually sensitive moments (1967). Quite often, on such occasions people increase the symbolic quality of their behaviour and use special linguistic material, which has significance beyond the practical requirements of the here-and-now (Rampton, 2006). Here we find Standard Dutch, the variety in comparison to which all other varieties are 'lower' on the social ladder and which, for these students and in society at large, is strongly associated with high educational success and intellectual authority (and thus, for these students, also with nerdiness). In addition, this linguistic material is produced by Mourad right at that sequential position (line 11), a self-selected turn after Moumir's answer, which is usually only the prerogative of turn-allocating authorities such as teachers and interviewers (see Sacks *et al.*, 1978: 45; Macbeth, 1991: 285).

It is therefore not unreasonable to claim that Mourad, aptly and humorously – or at least to his own and Adnan's enjoyment – rises to the occasion to disclose a failed school identity we all already know of in a teacher-like, educationally successful, voice – which, because of its sequential position, seems to ventriloquize that I would presumably find this important or worth mentioning in the interview; which is perhaps why Mourad assures the acoustic audibility of his stylization (by speaking very closely into the table-top microphone) and why we find the extra, but unnecessary, biographical information about Moumir in lines 13 and 16. Hence, in this extract we find (1) a playful reconfiguration of the interview's intentions (registering school failure rather than opinions on language); (2) inauthentic use of Standard Dutch, which throws its ideologically neutral character into comical relief; and (3) an intuition of how small-scale interactions at school, such as a research interview, can contribute to more macro-discursive processes that position people differently in hierarchical social patterns.

Why is IS important?

IS is important because it draws our attention to the existence of subtle cultural differences in the systematic combination of verbal and non-verbal signs which signal contexts and construct meaning, differences that are often hard to pin down by those who use them. IS can claim credit for having shown in great detail that disastrous consequences may follow if such different styles remain hidden and lead to miscommunication in gatekeeping encounters: applicants do not only fail to get a job or admission to a course, but often find their personal and ethnic background targeted as

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the cause for communication failure. IS has thus managed to uncover meaning and reason behind communicative styles that are regularly identified as inarticulate and incoherent, and the social relevance of this cannot be underestimated. It has shown that seemingly unintelligible job applicants or uninterested children are in fact sensible and involved if you (are willing to) read their contextualization cues in an appropriate way or you are prepared to accept their different cueing habits.

IS has also illustrated that technically differing styles do not necessarily lead to miscommunication, just as miscommunication itself does not automatically lead to conflict or stereotyping. As mentioned above, a readiness for observing and acknowledging differences can overcome even seriously diverging communication styles, or, conversely, the absence of difference does not always prevent negative identification or wilful misunderstanding from taking place. These findings invite us to look beyond the actual interactional setting and observe how interactants approach and evaluate one another as differently positioned social beings who may, depending on the circumstances, see each other as problematically or delightfully different. Even when the odds are unfavourable, interactants may find other identities, qualities or actions of a person valuable that may overrule communication difficulties and the effect of stereotyping (a talented football player's almost non-existent English will be passed over much more easily than that of an illegal refugee, who in her turn may find that her English is found cute and perfectly acceptable by her neighbours for whom she does babysitting). In other words, IS shows that communication is irrevocably a social happening where identities and relations matter, and which as such stands in close connection with wider social patterns and conventions that are also affected by it. This brings me to a third reason why IS is important.

IS offers an excellent tool for analysing the tension between here-and-now interaction and more established discursive practices. In putting a microscope on interaction, IS makes clear that communication can never be taken for granted but always involves collaboration, collusion and negotiation. As the discussion in section 'How do you make an IS analysis?' illustrated, traces of these processes can be extremely subtle and may go unnoticed when looked at from a further distance, or their relevance may not be fully appreciated when discussed in isolation from the established practices that facilitated their production. IS, on the other hand, is well capable of attending to such subtle traces and to the accompanying perspectives of 'participants who are compelled by their subordinate positions to express their commitments in ways that are indirect, off-record and relatively opaque to those in positions of dominance' (Rampton, 2001: 99). Consequently, IS can help to pinpoint those moments when established frames are called into question, reconfigured or otherwise transformed, and in this way it can also indicate when creative restructurings give rise to emergent and potentially habitualizing social configurations. In short, IS can contribute to our understanding of larger social evolutions.

Further reading

Auer, P. and Di Luzio, A. (eds.) (1992) *The Contextualization of Language*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.

This edited volume is often referred to because it critically revisits Gumperz' concept of contextualization and also contains a number of interesting empirical studies on gesture and prosody (rhythm, tempo and intonation).

Erickson, F. (2004) *Talk and Social Theory: Ecologies of Speaking and Listening in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Erickson in this book re-analyses examples of everyday linguistic behaviour from his earlier work, before reviewing key perspectives in social theory. It is a very accessible book: the first chapter is in lay language; the following ones gradually introduce technical and theoretical terms necessary for reading the chapters on social theory.

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Gumperz, J. (1982a) *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This book is a landmark in interactional sociolinguistics. It is an eloquent introduction to Gumperz' main theoretical and methodological concepts. A must-read for any student of interactional sociolinguistics.

Rampton, B. (2006) *Language in Late Modernity: Interaction in an Urban School*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This book is referred to in many works because of its impressive empirical depth and theoretical width in describing adolescent linguistic practices in relation to various topics (popular culture, foreign language, playful and less playful uses of Cockney and 'posh' English).

Notes

1 Although words themselves can of course also function as cues.
2 Non-vocal cues (body posture, gesture, mimicry) have been given a lot of prominence in micro-ethnography (see McDermott *et al.*, 1978; Erickson, 2004).
3 Dutch has two forms for second person address: 'jij' [you] in informal situations, 'u' [you] in formal ones (cf. *tu* and *vous* in French).

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