

## NEW DIRECTIONS IN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: MISCOMMUNICATION

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this paper is to provide a contrastive analysis of two articles relative to the matter of “miscommunication”. In this respect, Jenny Thomas’s “Cross-Cultural Discourses as ‘Unequal Encounter’: Towards a Pragmatic Analysis”, from a revised paper presented at First Annual Workshop on Pragmatics and Second Language Acquisition, Toronto, Canada, March 1983 and Srikant Sarangi’s “Accounting for Mismatches in Intercultural Selection Interviews”, from *Multilingua* 13, 1-2, 163-194, 1994 will be focused on. Mention should be made at this point that manifestations and evidence of ‘miscommunication’ in both articles involve only non-native speakers, in their social encounters with native users of English. The chronological distance between the years of publication of these two articles may, again, be of relevance when judging the authors’ standpoint towards the topic of “miscommunication”.*

**Key words:** *miscommunication, metapragmatics, intercultural communication, discourse analysis*

### 1. INTRODUCTION. SUMMARIES OF ARTICLES

**1.1.** Jenny Thomas: *Cross-Cultural Discourses as ‘Unequal Encounter’: Towards a Pragmatic Analysis*. Jenny Thomas, in the beginning of her article, makes reference to two of her previous strands of research, respectively, the first dealing with the pragmatic aspects of cross-cultural miscommunication, and the second with the language of asymmetrical discourse (‘unequal encounters’).

The author argues that the pragmatic force of a non-native speaker’s utterance may not be what the speaker intended if he or she adopted forms which, in English, are used by dominant speakers only. Furthermore, Thomas focuses particularly on the way English is used by Soviet citizens who have little contact with native speakers of English and who, despite their good command of the language, appear domineering due to some discursive features existent in the Russian language.

Three metapragmatic acts are then identified by the linguist in the speech of Soviet speakers of English, which may explain their ‘dominance’ in speech acts.

These are the Illocutionary force Indicating Devices, the Metapragmatic comments and the ‘Upshots’ and ‘Reformulations’.

The common point of these features is that, by using them, the dominant participant impedes interlocutors from having any possibility of taking refuge into the “pragmatic ambivalence”, that is, leaving the illocutionary intent of the utterance ‘diplomatically’ unclear (Thomas: 227).

The coined phrase of ‘unequal encounters’ includes, in Thomas’s perspective, discursive relationships between a dominant participant and a dominated one: for example, between a teacher and a pupil, a police officer and a suspect, a judge and a trialed person etc.

The inappropriate use of illocutionary force indicating devices and metapragmatic acts may be an indicator of pragmatic failure when a non-native speaker uses in L2 a structure which is semantically or syntactically equivalent to the L1 structure but has different pragmatic force in L2 (Thomas: 231).

This would explain why utterances intended to be requests for information about the linguistic meaning of a native speaker’s utterance might be taken as challenges by the latter.

In conclusion, the existence of unmarked forms in L1 risk to appear as marked for '+power' forms in English due to misinterpretation of L1 illocutionary force indicating devices and/or metapragmatic acts.

**1.2. Sarangi, Srikant:** *Accounting for mismatches in intercultural selection interviews.* In this article the author examines the strengths and weaknesses of two explanatory frameworks: Levinson's (1979) 'activity type' and Gumperz's (1978, 1982) 'discourse strategy'. The author compares these two analytical frameworks to show the differential treatment of evidence of miscommunication. His standpoint differs slightly from the cited linguists in that he considers that while one framework (activity type) does not take into account the cultural component and the individual choices, the other framework (discourse strategy) pays little attention to the rule-governed nature of the immediate communicative situation. In his attempt to demonstrate the role which cultural background plays in mismatches occurrences, Sarangi focuses his attention on the selection interviews in the intercultural settings.

Examples are provided to illustrate his viewpoint.

In the next part of the article, the author examines linguistic breakdowns caused by different cultural assumptions (for example, the Asians' way of answering questions in an indirect manner, starting from the general and going to specific information, since a very direct answer is considered inappropriate or impolite in their culture). In Sarangi's acceptance, nevertheless, cultural difference should not be used as an excuse for deviated answers.

The authors believes that the interviewees' consciousness related to the formal framework of an interview taking place in a setting different from their native one should be taken into consideration at all times and it should be the non-native responsibility to become aware of such realities.

The author concludes by saying that in both frameworks 'culture' is perceived as a fixed entity, despite of the dynamic aspect of the 'culture mix'.

He mentions on the other hand that 'intercultural communication is as much about miscommunication as it is about communication and that researchers should continue to account for mismatches and breakdowns since they offer insight in the process of intercultural communication.

## 2. CLAIMS

The claims of these two articles appear to be both theoretical and empirical, given the fact that the articles are dual in their nature. The theoretical feature owes to theoretical references employed by both authors in their attempt to justify a new or different position relative to the topic in discussion whereas the empirical characteristic is awarded due to research made by authors and their findings as a result of this research.

Consequently, Thomas claims that 'unequal encounters', in terms of dominant and dominated participants, exist due to a misinterpretation or ignorance of cultural manifestations in L1, while Sarangi claims that mismatches in intercultural selection interviews occur due to superficial engagement in understanding L1 users, on the part of the interviewers, on the one side, and an unawareness of the interviewees with regard to both their 'rights' and their commitments. The common point of these claims would be the role of the cultural features in the native – non-native encounters and the existence of the dominant position assumed by the native speakers in their relationships with non-native interviewees.

## 3. PERSPECTIVES ON CONCEPTS

Thomas and Sarangi share a common viewpoint with regard to the importance of taking into consideration L1's cultural and pragmatic features. Both authors attempt to justify their new perspective on the topic of 'miscommunication' starting from a general, theoretical framework – citing the works of other authors involved in the same endeavor, and later on making reference to their empirical finding and illustrating their assumptions with conclusive examples (samples of interviews are provided for illustrations).

The difference in perspectives is given mainly by the focus of the authors' approaches towards intercultural mismatches: for Thomas, the pragmatic aspect of L1 is more important, whereas for Sarangi, the analytical apparatus researchers use to identify occurrences of miscommunication and how precise their argument is as to what linguistic and contextual factors contribute to that miscommunication counts more. Again, both authors add their personal interpretation or findings to the already existent theories in the area of miscommunication.

#### 4. POSITIONS IN RELATION TO OTHER AUTHORS

Jenny Thomas continues her theoretical assumptions expressed in her previous papers, relative to the pragmatic failure (Thomas 1981, 1983a, 1983b). She agrees with the findings of the researchers at the University of Lancaster engaged in the treatment of 'unequal encounters'. However, different from them, Thomas concentrates her attention on "those pragmatic discursive strategies employed by the "powerful" participant in an interaction and which seem to enable him or her with the clearest examples (...) of the way they operate, taken from a variety of unequal encounters" (Thomas:227). Furthermore, she cites many linguists dealing with the theory of 'pragmatic use' of the language and applies such theoretical perspectives in order to demonstrate pragmatic failures. There is no evidence, in this article, of her denial of previous concepts from other authors, it is only a clearer explanation of how theoretical concepts function in her illustrative examples (i.e. videos of interviews).

Srikant Sarangi bases his theoretical approach toward mismatches in intercultural selection-interviews on the previous findings of Levinson's and Gumperz's mainly, although he does not totally agree with their theories. Sarangi finds some shortcomings of Levinson's notion of 'activity-type-specific behavior, namely, that "it may appear a difficult proposition particularly in the intercultural situation where there may not exist a set of norms which could be taken as given by both parties (...), therefore, Levinson's notion of 'activity-type' has to be recast as a more flexible construct." (Sarangi:185).

Gumperz's view of 'rhetorical strategies' will be further considered in Sarangi's detailed discussions of 'shared rhetorical strategies' in the job interview setting (Sarangi:189), and will open up "a hitherto neglected aspect of intercultural communication studies for further scrutiny: intercultural communication is as much about 'miscommunication', as it is about 'communication'" (Sarangi:190).

#### 5. METHODOLOGY

As mentioned previously, in this paper, both articles under analysis combine the theoretical consideration with empirical findings. Nevertheless, although there is indication of the methods used to collect data, specifically, interviews and videos of interviews, there is not a clear indication in terms of number of interviews, number of participants involved in interviews, which is, information regarding the sample to be analyzed. Readers of these two articles may imply that, both authors (already known in the area of linguistics and pragmatics) are cognizant of the research requirements (i.e. a valid sample, research questions, valid interpretation of data etc.), therefore, may take for granted the validity of their claims and interpretations.

From the readers' perspective, the examples provided by both authors to sustain their claims are enlightening, whereas the explanatory theories come to help readers understand better the topic under discussion.

The interpretation of findings, thus, leaves no place to ambiguity, since it is sustained by both theoretical and practical support.

#### 6. TYPE AND STRUCTURE OF ARTICLES

Both articles under consideration are theoretical, in essence, but provide empirical evidence. Their structures appear almost identical, also: they begin with an introductory part in which the authors give justification for their writing, although in Thomas's case, there is not a clear mentioning of the 'introduction' paragraph.

Furthermore, the content of the articles pursue the logical sequence of argumentation and even a common pattern: theoretical approaches (the authors' and others') followed by illustrative examples, that is, going from general to particular. Conclusions, in both cases, come to strengthen the claims and to draw attention on the personal contribution of the authors. In terms of length, Thomas's article is shorter and makes reference to her previous paper related to the same subject matter, yet, the shortness of the paper does not impede understanding on the reader's part and the claims are sustained in the end. Sarangi's article, on the other side is ampler and tries to cope with every possible aspect of the topic and to support the initial claim with pertinent examples.

### 7. STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The style adopted by the authors is the direct one, in both cases. The personal style is reflected by the use of first person singular, even though, in Sarangi's case, the mentioning of the plural "we" suggests the writer's inclusion in a research team dealing with the same topic. The language of the articles is given strength by the use of the present tense, which is an indicator of the pertinence of the claimed (and sustained) theories.

### 8. FURTHER RESEARCH

In the beginning of this paper there was mentioning of the distance between the times when the articles had been written: approximately ten years. Therefore, in Thomas's case, further research might have become 'previous theories' to Sarangi. Anyway, both writers agree that the research they have been involved in, is still far from being ended up and they both welcome new approaches to the apparently endless subject of interculturality when it appears to be the reason for miscommunication.

## CONCLUSIONS

Given the notoriety of the authors involved in this analysis in the field of linguistics and pragmatics, a student, considered to be a novice in the area of language theory, may only benefit from their research. From a personal perspective, their articles have come to enlighten the intricate facet of miscommunication from a different standpoint: that of the intercultural approach, thus, benefiting further understanding of the reasons that may produce such mismatches, apart from miscommunication produced by the poor use of linguistic devices or inappropriate language behavior.

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