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## *Research and Teaching Notes*

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### **Understanding Language Practice in Intercultural Contexts:**

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#### **A Methodology**

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*A methodology is sought for the task of understanding the influences on the practice of a world language (English) in an intercultural workplace of predominantly non-native speakers, an increasingly predominant venue for language (especially English) use. First, there is a discussion of the proper theoretical orientation to this task, with the conclusion that a “grounded” theory-generating approach is preferable to a hypothesis-driven approach. Next, a two-step methodology is proposed: the first step is an ethnography that aims to construct a characterisation of the social/cultural context of the workplace; the second step is an analysis of real language data according to categories uncovered in the ethnography. A recently completed study is used to exemplify this methodology.*

#### **The Task**

Louis-Jean Calvet, in *Guerre des langues et les politiques linguistiques*, discusses the metaphor of language as organism—being born, living, dying—and notes that this metaphor is misleading if “the causes of this life of language [are looked for] in language alone.” (Calvet, 1998: xiii) This is because language can only be said to live when it is practised in a social group (and indeed those languages that are not are commonly referred to as “dead”), or as Calvet later explains: “There is a close relation between the communication needs of a group (what there is to be said, to use a trivial expression) and the means of communication the group employs (the way in which it is said).” (1998: 4)

All of this seems rather obvious, yet a remarkable feature of most linguistics in the past century is that this social “life” of languages has been ignored in the interest of constructing a (universal) theory of language as a formal system, so much so that functional approaches—those which take seriously Malinowski’s claim that “the fundamental outlines of grammar are due mainly to the most primitive uses of language” (1923; cited in Halliday, 1973: 19)—are marginalised.

There are two sets of “why?” questions to be asked about language. One is, “Why does language exhibit the form that it does?” (and following, “Why does its form change?”, etc.). The phrasing of this first set of questions predisposes the researcher to look for factors in tangible forms, such as the body and mind where language is said to reside. However, if we accept that less tangible factors such as the social “life” of a language (that is, its functions and uses in social practice) are at least plausibly determinants of a language’s form (along with physiological and psychological factors), we see that another set of questions are equally pertinent. That is, “Why is language practised as it is?” and “Why does this practice change?”, etc. Moreover, the target of explanation itself (language) can be seen not only as form but also as practice. Which is primary and which is secondary?—Does language exhibit certain forms because of the kind of practice it is, or is language practised the way it is because of the form it has?—are probably questions better left undiscussed here. The questions are probably

moot; there is a dialectic relationship between form and practice. For a full understanding of the phenomenon of language in any context, both must be considered.

The context of the study that forms the background of this paper is an intercultural workplace where the working language (English) is one with which speakers are variably familiar. The task, simply stated, is to find ways to explain the distinct features of the language of that workplace in relation to the context. "Context" is construed very broadly to include the participants in the workplace, the organisation of the workplace, the participants' background experiences and assumptions regarding language and work, and the workplace languages themselves. Because of the all-inclusiveness of this "definition", and at the same time a reason for choosing it, I found that it becomes very difficult to investigate language as a solely formal phenomenon, except as a set of deviations from a norm. Several approaches have indeed tried to explain the deviations, or "errors" of "non-native speakers" in such contexts. Some explain the forms as "learner language", acquisitional stages on the way to proficiency in the language, or as fossilisation (solidified non-developing, or even decaying, "learner language"). Other approaches have been to describe the code-switching that often occurs in such contexts—switching between two or more varieties of language that can be described formally. Even studies that characterise variation in English as nativisation focus more on forms—native-speaker forms versus the forms that have evolved in the "new English" context. (Two exceptions might be studies that attempt to explain the deviations as accommodation to speakers less proficient, or as vehicles of expressing identity. In those cases, the activity of the language user in a social context is taken into account.)

Recent studies in intercultural communication have given much more emphasis to language as a social practice, and have drawn attention to the negotiation of meaning that occurs in intercultural situations, that is, the practice of language, and the influences upon that practice. Following their lead, and while not discounting the important insights drawn from formal language studies, I prefer to look at the practice of English in intercultural situations. The task therefore is to answer the question: "Why is English practised as it is?" That is, in addition to the factors involving acquisition, accommodation, and nativisation, what social and cultural processes and relations influence the practice of English within a diverse group of practisers with variable proficiency in English and various cultural predispositions to the activities of which language is a part?

Returning to Calvet's assertion that "There is a close relation between the communication needs of a group and the means of communication the group employs," another complication arises when one considers the make-up of the group at an intercultural workplace. There are obviously several criteria by which these language practisers can be grouped—some within their "home cultures" (family, socio-economic group, educational peers, etc.) and also at the level of the group whose definition is the workplace, or the group that is represented by their profession. There are thus plural cultures that determine the "communication needs of a group". None should be dismissed, but at the same time some may be more determining of language practice than others. It would seem ill advised, therefore, for the researcher to come into such a context with a pre-ordained set of categories or social variables. What is needed, rather, is a characterisation of the cultural complex that is as consistent as possible with the views and accounts given by the participants in that context, whose language practice is the object of study.

### **Grounded Theory vs. Hypothesis-testing**

Attention to the relations between language and context are not restricted to researchers. Most participants in intercultural settings develop an intuitive set of theories, protocols, or frameworks to guide their language practice, theories which emerge from experience and often reflection. These

theories often involve informally observed interdependencies between context and language practice, as well as experienced conflicts between, on the one hand, the participants' worldviews and conventions when using language, and on the other, the assumptions and conventions which the social setting seems to suggest for language use (or that a language seems to suggest for itself).

However, despite the obvious fact (for the participant) that such interdependencies and conflicts exist, the nature of these relations is usually very difficult to express immediately in verbal propositions and testable hypotheses. When these emerging theories are put to the test, the evidence which led the participant (or the researcher) to form them often disappears under such controlled procedures. While it is possible that this is because the relations were in fact more imagined than observed, it is just as possible that the factor which was thought to be influential was only one of many factors in the whole context. Thus, when an experiment is devised to isolate the effects of this one factor, the results are inconclusive. Those who were skeptical of the theory use the results to support their contention, while those who still believe there is some truth behind the intuitive theory maintain that the relation exists, but not in laboratory conditions. Regardless of the results, the experimental exercise is viewed as a worthwhile endeavour according to the dictates of the normal scientific method (a testable hypothesis has been found inadequate due to inconclusive evidence, forcing the proponents to revise it, to modify it with subsidiary hypotheses, such that it predicts experimental results). Yet it is questionable whether this is the best method for coming to a full understanding of the relations that were thought to exist, whose informal observation prompted the investigation.

Thus, theories that seemed promising explanations were not given enough time to develop before being tested and disconfirmed. Such was the complaint of several researchers in sociology a few decades ago. Glaser and Strauss, mentors of this group, decried "an overemphasis in current sociology on the verification of theory, and a resultant de-emphasis on the prior step of discovering what concepts and hypotheses are relevant for the area that one wishes to research." (1967: 1, 2) They called on researchers to direct their efforts more toward the generation of theory from their data, and not to be pre-occupied with verifying theories that were logically deduced from *a priori* assumptions, or from formal theories that were supposed to subsume the area under investigation. The approach they suggested was "an initial, systematic discovery of the theory from the data of social research," (1967: 3) called "grounded theory".

The main advantage grounded theorists see in this approach is that the theory will always fit the data; it will say no more than the data say. Glaser and Strauss contrast this with what they call the opportunistic use of logically deduced or formal theories, where either an explanation for the data is provided from a pre-existing storehouse of theories, or data is found to fit a logically deduced theory, a practice of "examplimg" of which they are especially critical. Grounded theory thus provides a method for the guideline that qualitative researchers "do not approach the research with specific questions to answer or hypotheses to test" (Bogdan and Bilken, 1992: 2). Instead, theories begin with data, and questions grow out of these theories. Moreover, these questions are usually open-ended, not hypotheses in "yes"/"no" form, neither are they stated in terms of predetermined categories or variables.

A second advantage is that all data gathered will be useful for the generation or modification of theory. Theories can start modestly, with the conceptualisation of relevant categories first, and later, when more data are gathered, the formulation of relations among the categories. Glaser and Strauss stress that the nature of theory is a "discussional" process as much as it is, at any one point, a propositional product. This "gives a feeling of 'ever-developing' to the theory, allows it to become quite rich, complex, and dense, and makes its fit and relevance easy to comprehend." (1967: 32) Theory *can* be cast in propositions, but such a formulation does not show how the theory got there,

nor does it easily lend itself to further refinement and evolution; instead, it tends to “freeze” the theory and offer it up for immediate verification. Of course, propositional theories also are often refined if found inadequate. However, this difference in the way of viewing theory does lead to a distinct procedure for conducting research.

A common protest regarding grounded theory has to do with the idea of “discovery”. Grounded theory cannot start from zero, and, prior to gathering data, it is inevitable that there has been some informal observation of the phenomenon, and it is very unlikely that the researcher has not come across theories relating to the phenomenon, and found some that he/she prefers. This is bound to produce some preconceptions regarding the categories and relations that are relevant.

Aware of such concerns, Husserl asks researchers to “set aside all previous habits of thought, see through and break down the mental barriers which these habits have set.... These are hard demands, yet nothing less is required.” (1960; cited in Hutchinson, 1988: 123) This sounds more like a qualitative research pep-talk than serious and sensible advice. Such exhortations seem to reflect little awareness of the subjectivities that researchers bring to their work. Thus, a caution that post-structuralist theorists would bring to grounded theorists is that the socialisation that Husserl and others acknowledge but dismiss is an extremely important factor in the generation of theory, which, like all thought, operates within the cultural, political, and theoretical conditions of possibility, or the discourses, of a certain domain (Foucault, 1980). Some broad theoretical choices are inevitable in the choice of what to investigate.

In the case of the study with which I will illustrate the methodology laid out in this paper, some choices are as follows: identifying the target of research as language practice, not language as a knowledge system; characterising cultures and language practices (primarily) in terms of meanings (from Hallidayan systemic-functional grammar); assuming that cultures and language practices exist only in social groups (speech communities). Also, some *a priori* assumptions and categorisations are ruled out: I have refused to label some speakers as native and others non-native (although for convenience these labels are often used to quickly identify the context of my study), and only recognised that there are various levels of familiarity with the language; also, I have rejected the idea that national groups are the prime unit of analysis for culture and language (i.e. that there is a Japanese culture and a Malaysian culture, and that urban Japanese mobile-phone-surfing high school students have more in common with rural Japanese farmers than they do with their Malaysian counterparts).

Thus, theory can only said to be grounded in the data *and* in the researcher. (As it is, too, in hypothesis-driven research.) The researcher’s worldview becomes a part of the research—but does not overwhelm the data in the best cases—and bias in research is mitigated only through the discussional process with other researchers who have conducted their studies with different worldviews, among them positivistic hypothesis-testing.

To summarise the methodological predisposition so far outlined: there does exist some pre-existing theoretical framework, but this is rigorously pared down and continually examined and modified; further, there is a recognised benefit to comparative analysis, which adds to and modifies (one might say, tests) emerging theory.

How then can this approach be used to answer the question given in the first section of this paper? How can the influences upon language practice be discovered? I propose a two-strand investigation, looking at two sets of data: the actions, accounts and attitudes of language practisers in the intercultural workplace (gathered by observation and interview), and the actual language that they employ (gathered by means of audio recordings). The first is investigated through an ethnography, the second by a discourse analysis based on the categories and relations revealed through that ethnography.

Ethnography is a method that has been developed precisely in order to diminish the researcher's preconceptions and discover the theory that participants data. Agar characterises the task of ethnography thus:

(it) sets out to learn meanings and contexts which lie outside the concepts and habits of prior experience, to construct and test representations of this new knowledge, and to offer those representations as a characterization of culture. (Agar, 1995: 583)

Through an ethnographic study consisting of interviews and observations, the researcher can learn the categories and concepts that participants in the context under investigation feel are relevant. Participants can be asked to give their accounts of the social and practical organisation of the workplace, of the meanings that are important to them and to others in the workplace, and of the language use within it. Then, with this new characterisation of culture, and the categories and relations that comprise it, the language practices that are produced there can be explained. Further, in a reciprocal process, the explanations (theories) that are emerging can be evaluated by the participants.

In the remainder of this paper I will outline the methodology that is being used to carry out these two interwoven "strands" of inquiry.

### **The Ethnography**

In both of the techniques employed in the ethnography, observation and interview, the preconceptions of the researcher need to be recognised and de-emphasised. Also, overall, there is the need to recognise that the data collection process itself is part of the data—unavoidably part of the context and processes being investigated. De-emphasis of the researcher's bias can be attempted by having the two techniques inform each other (for example, asking the participants to describe their workplace, and letting their descriptions influence the researcher's), and by letting the participants determine, to a degree, what is observed and asked.

That such a method replaces the bias of the researcher with the bias of the participants is only partially problematic. In effect, it is the participants' perceptions of the phenomena in their workplace, and the meanings that they attach to those phenomena, that are being recorded. This in and of itself is not a problem as it is these perceptions and meanings that are the influential factors in their social practice, not those of the researcher. Nevertheless, it is plausible that participants are not aware, and thus not able to report, some less salient perceptions and meanings. To attempt to discover these, observations made by the researcher were put to the participants, and interview questions were designed such that responses might indirectly reveal underlying attitudes (examples will be given below).

Observations and interviews were conducted by an overlapping schedule, so that each could inform the other. Additionally, interviews were conducted after the recording of oral interactions so that participants could give accounts of their aims of and attitudes towards their language practice.

### **Observation**

The objects of observation included the physical, procedural, and social aspects of the workplace—to give examples, the size and orientation of meeting spaces, the steps followed in a group work session, and the direction of requests, respectively. As researcher, I noted the minutiae of the activities at which I was invited to be present, as well as those in which I was included, such as an introduction to a participant.

The participants help was also employed in observation. I would ask participants for accounts

of aspects of the workplace that I had already noted, such as what was happening in an ongoing activity, or the layout and staffing of their workplace. I would also relate observations to them (for example, my count of the number of “native speakers of English”) to gauge the dependency of observations to preconceptions.

### Interviews

To learn the meanings and contexts embedding the language practice of that workplace, interview questions were designed with three objectives:

- 1) discerning the participant’s background, education, contact with other cultures, history of English use
- 2) discerning the organisation, social relations, roles of language, kind of projects, kinds of tasks, kinds of communication in the workplace
- 3) discerning the attitudes, target meanings, presuppositions language practisers bring to the communication context, and their predispositions to act in certain ways in relation to the sociolinguistic context

The first and second objectives were achieved by fairly straightforward questions, but with checks for researcher’s and participants’ bias as was done in observation. The third objective required a less direct method. To reveal attitudes towards English, or their preferences for language use, in certain situations and for certain meanings, interview questions probed the roles of English versus Japanese, or the relative difficulty of doing various activities in English, or their own judgement of their ability in English.

In the case of all questions, an open interviewing technique was used. I would ask follow-up questions, or simply use pauses and encouragers (back-channeling and nods), to elicit responses that were not direct answers to the question.

Some interview questions are listed below (in English<sup>1</sup>). These were rarely asked exactly as they are written here, but instead they served as a guide for the conversation of the interview.

- What kinds of things do you do in English at work?
- Can you identify certain situations where English is more often used?
- Are there certain people with whom you use English more regularly? not at all?
- What do you think about the use of English in your workplace?
- How do you judge your level in English? In what situations are you most/least comfortable?
- Are there some topics, ideas, or activities that seem more natural in English than Japanese? (*vice versa*)
- What features, or conventions, of English do you find most difficult, or hard to get used to?
- Do you think your English differs (in style or expression) from others in your workplace?

### Constructing characterisations of culture

From observation and interview data, categories and relations of meaning that make up the micro-culture of the workplace were uncovered. This was done mainly by noticing frequency and associations, using qualitative data analysis software and “by hand”.

Frequent repetitions of meanings that were not a reflection of the question (such as, most obviously, “English”) were given highest priority for analysis. For example, the frequent mention of “above”/“*me ue*” revealed that social hierarchy was a prominent aspect of the context, and possibly an influential factor in language practice. Associations were sometimes quite leading in their implications: the co-occurrence of “above” and “strange” in responses regarding the use of English suggested that there was heightened attention or reserve in using English with superiors. Other associations were more difficult to interpret on their own, such as “everyday” and “Japanese”, but when the contexts of these meanings (words) were examined (“everyday” indicating the regulatory

and phatic functions of language—requests, leave-takings, etc.—as opposed to the informational functions), the associations became more suggestive.

After compiling data on the frequency and associations of meanings, some propositional hypotheses *could* be made (e.g., “In this workplace, Japanese use consists of proportionally more expressions of regulatory and phatic function than does English use”), but this is not the intent of a grounded theory approach. Rather, these ideas are used as tentative, interpretative guides to the analysis of the actual recorded language data. That is, the concept of regulatory or phatic function (expressed as “everyday”) and the meaning “above” become relevant categories that should be given prominence (or at least priority) in analysing the recorded data.

### Analysis of Language Data

In the case of language data, the grounded theory approach is very difficult to apply. If the language practice of participants is analysed against a grammar (namely, the researcher’s understanding, tacit and deliberate, of the grammar of English), then that grammar is acting as an *a priori* theory in the interpretation of the data. However, the spirit of grounded theory can be followed in two ways: (1) in deciding which features of the participants’ language practice to treat as most significant, and (2) in interpreting the relations between language practice and the contextual factors (the cultural characterisation) constructed by the ethnography. In both of these ways, the progressive accumulation of data creates a growing, ever-developing theory of English language practice in intercultural contexts.

First, the features of language that were treated as most significant were those that were mentioned during interviews with participants, and then only in the later stages, the features that the researcher saw as distinct (from the viewpoint English language practice with which I am familiar, i.e. my tacit grammar). This is similar to the approach taken in observation and interviews, in that the participants’ accounts of language practice were the first to be considered, but with the addition of the researcher’s intervention to uncover features of language practice of which the participants may not be conscious.

These features were then interpreted with reference to the meaning categories that were present in the context of their mention. Again, since both the meaning categories and the mention of language features were drawn from the participants, data are being allowed to form the early outlines of the theory. Yet again, the researcher’s predispositions cannot be avoided: In this case, several fundamental concepts of systemic-functional linguistics (Halliday, 1985) were influential in deciding *how* to interpret the relations between co-occurring meaning categories and language features. The most important concept used was the categorisation of meaning in language into three types: interpersonal (to do with the orientation of the utterance to the persons involved in the speech act), ideational (to do with the representational function of the utterance), and textual (to do with the relation of the utterance to those that precede and follow it).

The generation of theory, to explain why English is practised as it is in this context, began with the simplest interpretation: that the meaning categories present in the context of the mention of a feature of language, when salient, give rise to that feature of language. Thus was a discussional process, however, and interpretations shifted with additional evidence. I will illustrate in the following paragraphs with an observed and reported complex of meanings and language features.

The meanings “English”, “straightforward”, and “equal” were closely associated. Also, the following language features—address forms, pronouns, and modals—were mentioned by several participants in the immediate context of these meanings. The recorded language data indeed revealed that address forms and pronouns that signal “equality” (e.g., “-san”, and “you”, respectively) were

more frequent in English interactions than they were in Japanese interactions (where “-sensei” or “-katyou”, and avoidance of “pronouns”, were preferred). The first interpretation was that English was perceived as—or carried the meaning of—egalitarian, and that speakers paid less attention to social hierarchical relations that they did when speaking Japanese. Indeed, it was subsequently noticed that modals (“could”, “might”, etc.) were conspicuously rare in these English interactions, adding weight to the interpretation, and suggesting additionally that the English language practice in the workplace had fewer expressions for marking social hierarchy than in societies where English is the main and dominant language. A theory began to evolve that, if cast in propositional terms, would be:

*Theoretical proposition:*

A reported (in the interviews) perception of English, that it is more egalitarian, is influencing actual practice.

However, further data showed repeated cases where pronouns were noticeably avoided, by deviant structures (“Could this copy by tomorrow.”), distinct expressions (“Is it possible that it will rain?”), instead of “Do you think...?”), and by switching to Japanese (see below).

K: I think I will use this one in the future.

*H-san wa dou shimasu ka?*  
(What will H-san do?)

In addition, in the interactions that showed pronoun avoidance, there was a greater occurrence of modals than in other English interactions. Further, there was the already noticed association of Japanese language use and things of an everyday nature (including regulatory and phatic talk, where the interpersonal element of meaning is prominent).

These data led to a revised (or more accurately, complicated) interpretation: When the interpersonal aspect of the interaction is salient (a request, small talk, etc.) or when the speaker is Japanese, pronouns (especially “you”) tend to be avoided *and* modals are more frequent. In turn, the theoretical proposition became:

*Theoretical proposition:*

The reported perception of English, that it is an egalitarian, straightforward medium of information exchange, influences actual practice in settings where information exchange is the primary goal (in addition, English is somewhat restricted to this role).

This example of the modification and “ever-developing” of a theory is reminiscent of the intuitive theories that practisurs themselves have of the activities they are engaged in. It is very unlike the technique of “examplng”, where language data are found to show the distinct features of a given language practice according to a pre-existing theory, whether that theory be acquisitional, identity-based, or one of linguistic interference. When such a grounded interpretation of language practice is developed sufficiently so that it can be offered up for comparison to other interpretations based on these pre-existing theories, a fuller understanding of the phenomenon may be possible.

## Conclusion

I have attempted to elucidate an approach towards the study of language practice in context that is based on the “grounded theory” approach, with the aim of providing an alternate, and hopefully participant-centred, mode of explanation. While this explanation, in a given study, may appear eclectic—in this study the identified influences included participants’ ethnic *habitus* (Blommaert, 1991), regional cultural commonalities, Japanese work culture, and perceptions of standard English,



among others—it is given unity by the unity of the data, being from one workplace during a limited period of research. As such, the explanation arrived at cannot be immediately generalised to all intercultural workplaces where English is the working language, or even to a smaller set of workplaces, but, in part by confirming some pre-existing theories, and revealing where theories still need to be generated, it can usefully add to the academic discussion of English as a living and changing language in its intercultural context.

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### Notes

1. Interviews were conducted in English or Japanese, or bilingually, according to the preference of the participant.

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