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Pragmatics and intercultural mediation in intercultural language learning

Abstract: This paper examines the role that pragmatics plays in language learners' practices of mediating between their own cultural understandings and those of the target culture. It will examine learners' experiences of cultural differences in language use and the ways in which learners develop insights into the culturally determined nature of language in use. It investigates the ways in which learners articulate their awareness of the meaningfulness of pragmatic differences in contexts in which language use shows cultural variation – speech acts, social deixis, politeness, etc. The paper examines ways in which language learners construct awareness of cultural variation in pragmatics both for themselves and for their interlocutors. In both mediation for self and mediation for others, there is a similar process of developing an interpretation of cultural behavior that takes into account both a culture internal perspective and a culture external perspective. The analysis details how language learners use pragmatics as a starting point for intercultural mediation and shows how analysis of language in use can provide an entry point into understandings of culture, and of the connection between language and culture. The behavior described is fundamentally an intercultural one. It is not simply the possession of knowledge about another culture as this is manifested in pragmatic differences but rather the ability to reflect on pragmatics differences as culturally meaningful to formulate positions between cultures as a mechanism to develop and express understandings of another culture. Learners demonstrate that intercultural mediation involves awareness of one's own cultural practices and expectations in relation to the aspect of language use being mediated as well as their knowledge of the target culture.

Keywords: intercultural mediation, language acquisition, metapragmatic awareness, French, Japanese

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1 Introduction

In language teaching and learning, the concept of intercultural mediation¹ has become an important concept, and much literature has argued that the ability to mediate between cultures is one of the fundamental components of intercultural competence (Buttjes and Byram 1991b; Byram 2002; Zarate et al. 2004; Liddicoat and Scarino 2013). Intercultural mediation is a form of bringing languages and cultures into contact for individuals and groups through a sharing of understanding of cultural practices, values, norms, etc. It differs from intercultural awareness in that awareness refers primarily to an interior state – a knowing of cultures – that than an active capacity the interpretation of cultures and the articulation of awareness. Byram (e.g., in Alred and Byram 2002; Buttjes and Byram 1991a) has explained the fundamental nature of mediation as the capacity for explanation of cultural phenomena and that involves critical comparison of cultural phenomena, a recognition of the relativity of cultural concepts and the negotiation of meaning within and across cultural frames. Intercultural mediation is therefore a fundamentally interpretative act in which explanations are developed and articulated as a critical activity.

The way that intercultural mediation is understood in the literature on language education has changed since the term first gained currency in the 1990s. Its original sense emphasized the need to resolve problems of communication between people of different cultures. For example, one early formulation of intercultural competence constructed the mediation component of intercultural competence as

an awareness of differences between one's own and the foreign culture and the ability to handle cross-cultural problems which result from those differences. (Meyer 1991: 137)

Thus, intercultural mediation was constructed in terms of solving the problems of intercultural communication, and problems were often seen as the core features of any communication across cultures (Fitzgerald 2002). The act of mediation involves not only the resolution of problems but also particular capabilities that are brought to the process of mediating. For example, Buttjes (1991) identifies three significant components of mediation: an awareness of the relativity of cultural concepts, the capacity to make critical comparisons of cultures, and the ability to negotiate meaning. This implies that intercultural mediation involves both analysis and performance (Liddicoat and Scarino 2013), or as Meyer (1991)

¹ Also called “cultural mediation” or “cross-cultural mediation.”

argues, interpretation and action go together. More recent understandings of intercultural mediation have moved away from the idea of problem solving to emphasize more the role of interpretation – intercultural mediation has come to be seen as a form of sense-making, in which people make sense of diverse cultural realities. Iriskhanova et al. (2004) see mediation as the ability to develop a shared understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds and intercultural mediators are involved in processes of understanding, explaining, commenting, interpreting, and negotiating phenomena. Liddicoat and Scarino (2013: 54) argue that intercultural mediation is “an active engagement in diversity as a meaning making activity that involves interpreting the meaning of diverse others for oneself and for others.” Intercultural mediators both analyze the meanings of others constructed within cultural framings and provide those who do not share a cultural framing with the means to understand diverse others (Gohard-Radenkovic et al., 2004b).

One important feature of this interpretive process is the ability to decenter from existing cultural perspectives and to see cultural phenomena both from an external and an internal perspective (e.g., Kramsch 1999; Byram et al. 2002; Abdallah-Preteuille 2003; Liddicoat and Scarino 2013). The intercultural mediator needs to decenter from his/her own cultural and linguistic framework in order to see the world from alternative perspectives. Byram et al. (2002: 19) describe this as the “ability to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange.” Decentering therefore involves the capacity to understand multiple perspectives and to search for and accept multiple possible interpretations. Thus, mediation is no longer seen only in terms of the resolution of communication problems but rather is an interpretation of language in use, although problem solving remains one possible application of such interpretations.

The ways in which intercultural mediation is discussed in the literature have tended to focus on things that lie outside language and this creates a disconnection between intercultural mediation as a goal of language learning and the necessary focus of such learning on language (Dervin and Liddicoat 2013). In particular, much work on intercultural mediation has emphasized the role of representations of others as a key feature of mediation (Gohard-Radenkovic et al. 2004b). That is, the key element of mediation has been understood as the ways in which an individual perceives others and their culture and this locates the processes of interpretation required for mediation outside language and in the conceptual sphere. There has been some research (e.g., Egli Cuenat and Bleichenbacher 2013) that has argued that the ability of mediate between cultures is dependent on the acquisition of an adequate level of language in which to mediate, and, while such research does connect language and mediation, language tends to be understood as a tool for mediating rather than as a constituent act of

mediation. It also represents the idea that mediation as a language activity is a *second* language activity, rather than something that can take place in any language that forms part of a speaker's repertoire. Thus, the association between mediation and proficiency is one that continues to locate mediation as something outside language itself and place it in the context of content. Additionally, some research has considered the ways that reflection on pragmatics is implicated in understandings of culture (e.g., Liddicoat 2006; McConachy 2013; McConachy 2009), but has not tied this to the notion of mediation.

A view of language simply as a tool for intercultural mediation misses the reality that language is itself a site of intercultural mediation in that it is shaped by the cultures within which it is used and is a constituent part (Liddicoat 2009). Language is then not a tool lying outside culture that allows cultures to be mediated, but rather the act of mediation involves an interpretation of language itself as a culturally contexted, culturally shaped phenomenon. For many foreign language learners separated from communities and individuals using the target language, in fact, language itself may be the primary site of intercultural encounter and so a significant site for intercultural communication. In such cases, Gohard-Radenkovic et al. (2004a) argue that semantics and pragmatics are of special importance as it is in the practices of language in use that the relationship between language and culture becomes most salient.

This article takes as its aim understanding how language itself can be a constituent part of what is mediated rather than just a vehicle through which mediation occurs. It takes as its starting point language learners' engagement with the pragmatics of an additional language and examines the ways in which they make sense of language for themselves and others. In so doing, they are not approaching language simply from the perspective of linguistic form, but viewing language use as culturally contextualized and as revealing elements of cultural understandings. The analysis that follows will examine how language learners use pragmatics as a starting point for intercultural mediation in order to show how analysis of language in use can provide an entry point into understandings of culture, and of the connection between language and culture. It seeks to examine the nature of an interpretative process in which they engage to develop interpretations of language and culture for themselves and for others that make sense of experiences of language as culturally constructed.

2 Data

The data for this study is drawn from two data sets, neither of which was specifically designed to capture instances of intercultural mediation, but which rather

Table 1: Interview participant details (French and Japanese)

| Student | Age | Gender | Prior language study | Current language study at university |
|------------------------|-----|--------|--|--------------------------------------|
| French cohort | | | | |
| Fr1 | 18 | F | None | French |
| Fr2 | 17 | F | 4 years of Chinese in primary school; 2 years of Indonesian at high school | French; Chinese |
| Fr3 | 18 | M | 3 years of Japanese at high school | French; Japanese |
| Fr4 | 25 | M | 2 years of Italian at high school | French |
| Fr5 | 19 | M | 3 years of German at high school | French |
| Japanese cohort | | | | |
| Jp1 | 19 | F | 3 years of French at high school | Japanese |
| Jp2 | 20 | F | 1 year of Korean at first year university level | Japanese |
| Jp3 | 19 | M | 3 years of Japanese at primary school; 2 years of German at high school | Japanese |
| Jp4 | 20 | M | 4 years of Greek at high school | Japanese |

represent examples of students' mediation work in discussing their experiences of differences in pragmatics between languages.

The first data set comes from a series of one-on-one interviews with students of French and Japanese (see Table 1 for details) that focused on aspects of language learning, their perceptions of the issues that emerge from their learning and their perceptions of their own learning. These interviews were semi-structured and encouraged students to identify their own issues in relation to their language learning. In framing these issues, the students were often involved in interpreting the linguistic and cultural realities of their experience of encountering new language forms and their use in context – that is, they were involved in intercultural mediation activities in which they constructed interpretations as part of the activity with which they were engaged.

The learners of French were five beginning-level students of French at the university level (three male and two female). The participants were volunteers and so were a self-selecting group. The students were aged between 17 and 25 years, and were enrolled in an introductory French program. The students were all native speakers of Australian English, and all identified culturally as Anglo-Australian. None of the students had a prior history of French study nor had they spent time in a French-speaking country. Some of the students had studied other languages at high school, especially in the early years of high school study when a language in some form was compulsory; only one had continued language study (Fr 5) to the end of high school. Two of the students were enrolled in two

languages in their first year at their university, and in each case, the other language was a language previously studied at school.

The learners of Japanese were four post-beginner learners (two males and two female) who had completed one year of beginner-level study at university level and had begun a second year of language study. Like the learners of French, these participants were volunteers and so were a self-selecting group. The students were aged 19 or 20 and were enrolled in a second-year Japanese program. The students were all native speakers of English, and three of the four identified culturally as Anglo-Australian while the other (Jp2) identified as British but had lived in Australia for the past seven years. All of the students were studying only Japanese at university, although all had had prior language-learning experience another language at high school or in their first year at university, but had discontinued this language.

The second data set is drawn from recordings of small group interactions one made in a post-beginner level Japanese class and the other made in a first year university linguistics class.

The interaction recorded in the Japanese class involved two students (Jp5 and Jp6) working on a paired task in which they were discussing a reading text in order to answer comprehension questions. Both students were aged 19. Jp5 was female and Jp6 male. Both were native speakers of Australian English and identified culturally as Anglo-Australian. They had both studied Japanese for one year at university level from the beginner level. Jp5 had never visited Japan but Jp6 had spent one month in Japan as an exchange student in high school, although both were planning to participate in an exchange program later in the year. Both had studied a language in high school, although both had discontinued their study. Jp5 had studied French for two years and Jp6 had studied Japanese for four years, but had had to discontinue when the Japanese teacher left the school and was not replaced.

The group recorded in the linguistics class included an exchange student, who was an advanced level second-language speaker of English, working together with native speakers of Australian English. The group consisted of three people: a female Chilean student working with two female Australian students. The Chilean student was 20 years old and studying sociology at her home university in Chile. She was on exchange in Australia for a semester and participated in the linguistics class as one of her courses for credit. She had been assessed at level 6 on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test before beginning her exchange in Australia. Her exchange in Australia was her first visit to an English-speaking country, although she had traveled widely in South America. In addition to Spanish and English, she also spoke Portuguese, which she had studied at university level in Chile. The Australia students were both 19 years old,

and identified culturally as Anglo-Australians. Neither was studying a language at the university level, although both had studied a language in high school, but had not continued this to the end of high school. Neither had traveled outside Australia. In the small group interaction used for this study, the students were discussing thanking behaviors.

3 Aspects of mediation in the performance of language learners

3.1 Mediation for self

One aspect of the process of mediation for language learners is to formulate and express understandings of the culture they are learning for themselves. This involves developing an interpretation of language practices as culturally based, both in their own cultural context and in that of the language they are learning. The following extracts demonstrate students developing interpretations of pragmatic phenomena that reveal attempts at intercultural mediation.

In Example 1, a student of French is talking about his understanding of the ways the pronouns *tu* and *vous* are used to construct interpersonal relationship.

Example 1 (Fr5)²

The way people talk to each other in French is complicated. There's a lot of subtlety. I don't really understand it, it seems like you can show a whole lot of stuff about your relationship to someone by choosing names or pronouns. It's like there's a real code they know, and I can get bits of it. We don't do that here. We just have "you" and you don't have to think about it and we usually just use our first names. I know lots of people whose surname I don't know. I mean I don't use surnames much at all, just with someone you don't know or it's official or it's your teachers at school. I wonder what French people would think of that. I guess they wouldn't know what sort of relationships you have here: Like are you friends, or you just work together or whatever? I can imagine that it gets hard to tell with us, because we treat everyone the same. You might think someone is a friend but they don't really mean that because we don't have tu and vous. Or they might think we're too friendly, you know inappropriate. Here at uni we call our teachers by their first name and in French we use tu. I wonder if they do that in France. I think it might be different. I don't think teachers and students would have such a close relationship.³

² For a different analysis of this example see Liddicoat (2006).

³ The extracts of the texts of the interviews with students have not been corrected.

In Example 1, the student is constructing an interpretation of the cultural practices of person reference and the contrast between the French practice of social deixis using *tu* and *vous* and the English practice of using only *you* (see also Liddicoat 2006). He begins by framing his understanding as limited and partial (*I can get bits of*), displaying his understanding of himself as a learner developing his own personal interpretation of and response to French language and culture. His starting position is to characterize the nature of interaction in French, and in so doing he appears to be creating a contrast between what happens in French and what happens in his familiar (English-speaking context). French is *complicated* and *subtle*, with the implication that English is not (*We don't do that here; we just have "you"*). In these formulations, he is seeing French practices from his own culture-internal perspective and seeing them as departing in some way from his own way of interacting. After presenting his interpretation of his own Australian practices, he then decenters from his starting position to view his own practices from outside. He goes further than constructing the use of personal address forms (names, *tu*, *vous*) as problematic for himself and sees the ways in which his own understanding of address terms is likewise problematic from a French perspective (*I wonder what French people would think of that. I guess they wouldn't know what sort of relationships you have here*).

In constructing this interpretation from the perspective of the other culture, he is interpreting his own practices through a different cultural perspective and identifying differences in language use as indexing significantly different interpretive resources for negotiating the social world. In so doing, he is constructing his own interpretation of the cultural realities with which he has to deal as an Australian student learning social deixis in French. For this student, personal address forms are constructed as a problem of significant differences in the signifying effects of culturally based patterns of language – that is, he has not formulated a personal solution to the problem, but rather an interpretation of the problem. His mediation in this case takes the form of a personal formulation of a problem of language use as intercultural and one in which he is positioned as having to resolve the problem from his perspective as a participant in one culture and learner of another.

In Example 2, the student is discussing something she has seen in a video in class that she noticed and that she had difficulty in understanding.

Example 2 (Fr 2)

Fr2: We watched this video in class a few weeks ago. It was a scene from some French show, like a sitcom or something I think. It was like about a family, just talking and getting ready for dinner. And I thought the way they're talking is funny. It's not like, you know, not like we'd talk. I mean they were giving each other orders while they did things and

no one was saying please of thanks or anything like that . . . You just couldn't talk like that at my place. My mum'd go ballistic! But like, they were just a normal family. It didn't look like there was a problem or anything, so I thought, "hey this must be the way people really talk" and that made me think. How come we have to do all this "please" and "thank you" and "could you do whatever?" and they don't.

R: *And what did you come up with?*

Fr2: *Well, like, I'm not too sure. I guess I was thinking that we need to be a lot politer when we speak. You know, like we speak like that to everyone, your parents, your friends, strangers, anyone. Like we don't make big differences in how we do this stuff. So uhm perhaps in French, you don't have to do this. You do different things with different people. Like with your family you don't have to make so much like effort . . . 'cos you're close, you live together and that.*

The politeness practices that she had observed in the French video did not connect either with her understanding of family interactions in her own cultural context nor with how she understood the dynamics of the family she was observing – that is, there was a mismatch here that needed to be understood. She begins by focusing on the mismatch between what she had noticed in the video and her own lived experience and from her own cultural perspective she sees the ways of speaking in French as deviant (*You just couldn't talk like that at my place. My mum'd go ballistic!*). That is, French ways of speaking were so different from her own ways of speaking that such behavior would be sanctioned; that is, it is socially problematic. Her observation of the video, however, did not fit with this analysis – the family was not deviant, it was normal. She therefore realizes that her interpretation from within her own cultural perspective cannot work to interpret the behavior that she has observed and that she has to reanalyze the observations from another perspective – she needs an interpretation located within some other cultural perspective.

To develop her interpretation within this new cultural perspective, she positions herself outside her own culture and questions the practices with which she is familiar. She frames the problem in terms of why one cultural context requires one form of linguistic behavior and another does not. That is, she constructs the difference as one that is meaningful and that the meaningfulness of the difference is available for analysis and reflection. She is effectively problematizing the practices of each culture and seeking to understand what underlies this behavior.

In response to the researcher's question, she develops the interpretation she has made for herself as a way to understand the differences she notices. As with Fr5 in Example 1, she frames her understanding as tentative – the analysis is still open and needs further development. In understanding the differences, she develops an interpretation of the rationale for her own familiar practices – that Australians tend to interact with family members in very similar ways to those

outside the family and that her impression of Australia is that politeness behaviors are relatively undifferentiated (c.f. Goddard 2009). She understands the differences in the French interaction she has observed as indicating a difference in the ways that language used with different types of interlocutors. She is therefore seeing differences in language use as being consequential on different understandings of the social context. She then attempts to develop an interpretation of what her emerging understanding would show about French politeness as a culturally contexted practice – that families have a particular form of relationship that may not need to be maintained through the same linguistic practices as other relationships. At this point she has decentered from her original cultural perspective and attempts to understand what had been surprising patterns of interaction from within the cultural perspective of those who use the language.

In Example 3, the student describes the process by which he has made sense of a culturally embedded grammatical construction in Japanese involving the use of verbs of giving.

Example 3 (Jp1)

Jp1: The toughest thing for me to get my head around this semester has been the giving verbs. It was hard enough when we had to work out which one to use. You had to think about whether the person doing the giving was higher or lower, whether they were your in-group or not, and who you were talking to. But this semester we did them where you do something not where you give something. I found that really hard to understand at first.

R: What was hard to understand?

Jp1: Well, uhm, in English we say things like “he bought me a book,” right? Well in Japanese you put the verb to give on the end like uhm we had an example Hanako wa watashi ni nihongo o oshiete agemashita⁴ so you’ve got all the bits you have in English and then this verb on the end. And why is there this verb?

R: What do you think is going on there?

Jp1: Well now – I think I’ve got it now. You need to see the whole thing differently. In English we give things to people or we do things for people and that’s different. If you give something it’s got to be a thing. So giving an action seems really weird. But in Japanese it’s like actions get treated like things and so you can give them like you can give real things. It all makes sense if you see it like that. So you sort of think that Hanako gave me a gift and that was teaching me Japanese. Once you see the action as a thing you can see that you can give it and then you can see that doing something for someone is like giving them a gift. It makes sense, just not like I normally think about it.

4 Hanako wa watashi ni nihongo o oshiete agemashita
 H-TOP I-PRT Japanese-PRT teach-TE give-PAST
 ‘Hanako taught me Japanese.’

In this example, the student describes a new understanding he has been able to develop in order to map the Japanese construction onto his existing perceptions of acts of giving derived from his English language-based understanding. He begins by indicating that for him, the learning of verbs of giving in Japanese involves two problems. The initial problem was the ways that Japanese verbs of giving reflect social deixis (inferior gives to superior: *ageru*, *sashiageru*, superior gives to inferior *kureru*, *kudasaru*) (Wetzel 1985). The second problem, and the one that he is dealing with here is that these verbs are used in contexts where there is, for him, no obvious act of giving. His initial interpretation is that the Japanese utterance has something additional to the components of the English sentence and that this additional component is represented by the verb of giving. The problem as he sees it involves understanding the nature of the additional element because it is not readily apparent from his initial starting point.

In developing his interpretation of the differences between English and Japanese, he reconceptualizes the act of giving and develops the idea that giving is constructed differently within each culture, and that it is this difference in constructing the act of giving that has created his interpretative problem. Viewed from his English language perspective, the use of giving verbs in Japanese does not make sense; however, when viewed from a different perspective it does. In coming to understand the grammatical construction, he has attempted to reconstruct his view of giving and what can be given and has used the Japanese language as a way of reanalyzing his own cultural assumptions about the nature of the act. In reanalyzing his own assumptions about the nature of giving and gift, he has moved from a view of the Japanese grammatical construction as *really weird* to seeing it as a different representation of giving. The nature of giving has become for him a culturally complex set of practices in which different cultures construct different things as gifts and this gives him an insight into a different linguistic construction of reality.

In these examples, the students as language learners have needed to mediate between cultures for their own understanding of the language they are learning. In each case, they have noticed some difference in language use between their first language and the new language and that this difference has been conceptually problematic for them. In attempting to resolve the conceptual problem, they begin from their own cultural assumptions and seek to articulate their own understanding of the aspect of language use that they are trying to interpret. This provides a comparative perspective that provides a basis for reflecting on the nature of the differences they have observed. This in turn allows them to come to see a different linguistic practice as having its own internal cultural logic. This requires them to decenter from their original starting points and come to see the new practice from a new perspective, and at least in some cases, to see their own

practices from outside. In this way, pragmatic differences between languages have come to be seen not simply as differences in language use, but as differences that are consequential for understanding and interpreting the cultures of speakers. As mediator of languages and cultures for themselves, they thus move through a process of noticing, comparing and reflecting to make sense of cultures in order to develop an interpretation of difference (c.f. Liddicoat and Scarino 2013).

3.2 Mediation for others

Mediation for others refers to situations in which cultural differences need to be clarified for people who have limited or no experience of the culture being mediated. In such situations, there is no shared knowledge of the target culture of the mediation that can be used as a way of interpreting particular experiences of language and culture. Instead, sets of cultural assumptions about language in use need to be mediated within a framework in which points of contact with the target culture cannot be activated by a mediator who is the sole participant with knowledge of all the relevant cultures and their ways of interacting.

In Example 4, two students of Japanese are reading a text in which a woman refers to her husband as *otoosan* ‘father.’ This creates a problem of understanding for student Jp5, which is mediated by student Jp6 on the basis of his experiences while living as a home stay student in Japan.

Example 4

1. Jp5: *I don't get this. She's talking about otoosan ((father)), but why is she talking about her father?*
2. Jp6: *I think it's what she's calling her husband.*
3. Jp5: *Is that the word for husband?*
4. Jp6: *No it's just that's what she calls him. Like, when I was in Japan the mother did that a lot: she would say otoosan to him all the time. Not his name. She'd go "otoosan otoosan" and she meant him.*
5. Jp5: *and what did he call her?*
6. Jp6: *Okaasan. ((mother))*
7. Jp5: *That's so weird.*
8. Jp6: *It's just what they say. It's like it's their position in the family and that's how they talk about each other. He's the father and she's the mother. We use "dad" and "mum" just for our parents but they use them differently. Mariko used to call her brother oniisan ((older brother)) too. It's like using titles instead of names. And when they talked about them too they'd do the same. Like mum would say to Mariko, go get oniisan or something. So you say what they are in the family.*
9. Jp5: *Oh I get it, she calls him father because he's a father for the family.*

The example begins with Jp5 indicating that she lacks knowledge of the relevant cultural conventions for naming and that this is causing her not to understand what is happening. In turn 2, Jp6 offers an interpretation of the word *otoosan* in terms of its referent without comment and Jp5 interprets this as a correction of her understanding of the word (*Is that the word for husband?*). Jp6 then explains the cultural context in which *otoosan* is used based on his current level of knowledge. At turn 4, he provides a description of a pattern of observed behavior, but at this point does not provide an interpretation of that behavior. It is not until Jp5 makes a negative evaluation (*weird*) that he begins to interpret rather than describing the behavior. That is, it is not until Jp5 makes a negative evaluation of a Japanese cultural practice when viewed from her own culture-internal perspective that Jp6 takes up the role of cultural mediator to deal with a problem of language in use.

In responding to the Jp5's negative evaluation, he seeks to develop an interpretation of the behavior from a Japanese cultural perspective – as an Australian he is attempting to interpret a Japanese reality for another Australian. In framing his explanation, he invokes the idea of family position and locates the use of *otoosan* within a broader understanding of family membership. He focuses on family based patterns of naming that give a cultural rationale for the observed pattern of language use. In developing his interpretation, he frames language use within its own cultural context and attempts to make explicit the cultural frame in which the behavior is reproduced. At the same time, he is attempting to make this interpretation comprehensible to someone outside the culture he is attempting to explain. To do this, he needs to invoke both the cultural frame of his interlocutor and also that of the cultural group.

In Example 5, the student from Chile (A) is explaining her understanding of thanking behavior in Chilean to two Australian native-speakers of English (B and C). In this case, the Chilean student, as a student living and studying in Australia, has access to both the cultural assumptions of her own home culture and to that of her interlocutors. Her interlocutors, however, have no direct contact with the Chilean culture she is mediating and so the student needs to reformulate her understanding of her own culture using only the culture she shares with her interlocutors as a point of reference.

Example 5

1. A: *Where I come from, I don't say "thank you" if my mother cooked dinner for us. It would not sound good to her. It's like she does something unusual. My mother always cooks dinner. If I say thank you, she might be sad.*
2. B: *You mean she – if you said thank you she wouldn't like it?*
3. A: *Yeah. She think I was saying she was bad mother.*

4. C: *But you're just being nice.*
5. A: *It's nice here. I think you thank people for more things. You tell people you like what they do. You thank for everything not just special things.*
6. C: *Like saying thanks to the bus driver.*
7. A: *We don't do that. They just drive a bus. They're supposed to do that. It's not they're doing you favor.*
8. B: *It's their job.*
9. A: *Yeah. We don't thank for doing a job. That's not special. If they just do what they're supposed to.*
10. B: *What if they're especially nice.*
11. A: *If they do something good. Something not usual. You would say thank you. Not just for the driving. For something else.*
12. B: *So if I thank my mother when she cooks dinner that is like I say she did something unusual.*
13. C: *Like she doesn't cook for you. She did it specially this time.*
14. A: *Or I am guest not part of family. She does it special because I am guest. She's not my mother.*
15. B: *So what do I do? Do I say I like what she cooked?*
16. A: *I think if I say "dinner is nice" she says "isn't it always?" We say is nice, when is special, when is different. If she make my favorite, I say that.*
17. B: *So how do I say that I like – what's the same as thank you in Australia?*
18. A: *We don't say something. We eat food, we are together, we talk. My mother likes that. We don't eat in five minutes and go away.*

In Example 5, A's talk follows on from a discussion of things that the Australians would thank for in a family context, including thanking for cooking a meal. A formulates a version of her understanding of the cultural practices of thanking in her cultural context: *Where I come from, I don't say "thank you" if my mother cooked dinner for us.* She characterizes this behavior not just as something which is not done, but provides an explanation of what the behavior – that it would not be heard as a simple appreciation but rather send a different message. B reformulates A's explanation at turn 2 displaying an understanding of A's perspective and A responds by a further reformulation of the effect of thanking in her context. C, in line 4, rejects A's interpretation of the interpersonal effect of thanking in this context with a restatement of her own Australian position: that thanking is simple appreciation, a polite action. A now explicitly contrasts her understanding of the situation in Chile and Australia framing C's understanding as culturally contexted and valid only from C's cultural perspective. A then presents her perception of the cultural practices around thanking in the Australian context of her interlocutors, a perception that C ratifies at turn 6 by providing an example. A then discusses C's new example from her Chilean perspective – as a further example in which thanking would not happen. B displays understanding of A's position, which A then accepts and expands further. B's turn 10 adds some complexity

to the situation, although *especially nice* is ambiguous here. C interprets this as doing something beyond the expected norm and indicates that thanking would be appropriate here.

Throughout Example 5, A has made an argument that connects thanking with actions that are outside the usual behavior expected of the individual, as unusual, in some way. At turn 12, B uses this characterization of Chilean cultural practices as a way of understanding the communicative effect of their starting example from turn 1, expressing now a Chilean formulation of the act of thanking in context. This interpretation is reiterated by C, who now seems to have moved away from her position at turn 4. Turns 12 and 13 are constructed as a collaborative co-construction (Sacks 1992: I: 144) of a single formulation in which C's turn begins as a grammatical extension of B's prior talk. This formulation is further expanded by A's turn, which adds further detail to the formulation being constructed by B and C. This complex series of turns is constructed as a single shared version of A's cultural understanding of acts of thanking. On the basis of this formulation, B raises a further complicating issue: If the speech act of thanking is not relevant for signaling appreciation in this context – how an equivalent effect could be achieved – and proposes a candidate solution in the form of a compliment, presumably based on her pre-existing cultural repertoire for showing appreciation. A rejects complimenting here as well and indicates the communicative effect such a contribution is likely to have. She frames complimenting here in similar ways to thanking: It is reserved for something beyond the ordinary. B again attempts to find a way of constructing an appreciation equivalent to her Australian interactional patterns. A rejects the possibility of there being an equivalent speech act. For her, such appreciations are not expressed; rather, the way of displaying appreciation for food is through participation in the social event of the meal rather than being linguistically accomplished.

Throughout Example 5, A is pursuing a project of interpreting Chilean cultural and linguistic practices within the framework of Australian understandings of the act of thanking. In so doing, she engages in explanations of the behaviors found both in the target Chilean culture that she is interpreting and of the behaviors found in her interlocutors' culture. In this way, A acts as the conduit through which interpretations of both cultures are made available to her interlocutors. She also problematizes Australian responses in the Chilean context, notably in turns 1, 3, and 16. In so doing, she constructs normal Australian responses as abnormal in these contexts and as communicating messages other than those communicated by their Australian counterparts. As an intercultural mediator, A displays the capacity to explain an experience of one language and culture to someone who operates using a different set of underlying assumptions. In order to do this, she needs to be able to identify and convey to others the cultural

constructedness of related episodes in both of the relevant cultural contexts – neither her own culture nor that of her interlocutors is treated as a normal or natural lens through which to view the situation. At the same time, she needs to be able to locate points of connection between these contexts, which, in this case, she does through indicating the communicative effect of Australian contributions in the Chilean context. In developing these points of connection, she is assisted by B's questions in turns 15 and 17 in which she seeks to determine cultural equivalents for her Australian interactional practices. Finally, A is involved in a process of reinterpreting one cultural context into another, which she does here again by framing the communicative effect of utterances in context.

In these examples, the intercultural mediator in each case attempts to explain a cultural reality from one culture to someone who does not know or understand that cultural reality. They do this in response to a problem of understanding initiated by their interlocutors and attempt to move the interlocutor from seeing the situation from within their own cultural context to seeing it from the perspective of others. In so doing they are opening up new perspectives on language in use for their interlocutors. In these contexts, it is the interpretive problem of the interlocutor that constitutes the noticing of an intercultural difference that needs resolution, which is achieved through a comparative process that invokes elements of the interlocutors' cultures and those of the target culture. This comparison provides a basis for a reflective interpretation of the significance of the differences in their cultural context. That is, it involves a process of noticing, comparing, and reflecting that is achieved through interaction about pragmatic differences.

4 Conclusion

Both mediation for self and mediation for others involve similar processes of developing an interpretation of cultural behavior that takes into account both a culture internal perspective and a culture external perspective. The activities here constitute a process for interpreting another culture and it is important to acknowledge that learners' interpretations are not necessarily accurate interpretations of cultures, but rather represent attempts to understand linguistic experience that is only ever partial. The process of intercultural mediation should not therefore be understood as an authoritative process of interpretation but rather as an interpretative engagement with difference that establishes evidenced hypotheses about language and culture relationships and their consequentiality for self and others.

The extracts here show to varying degrees that intercultural mediation involves awareness of one's own cultural positioning and expectations in relation

to the phenomenon being mediated as well as knowledge of the target culture behavior. It is also a linguistic capability in that the examples above show language itself as one site for intercultural mediation and language itself provides the mechanism for achieving the mediation itself. Language becomes a site in which intercultural mediation occurs through processes of noticing differences, establishing comparisons and reflecting on the consequentiality of difference and, in the case of mediation for others, this is accomplished through interaction (c.f. Liddicoat and Scarino 2013; Liddicoat 2002). It can be argued that, even in cases of mediation for self, there is an interactive component in that the understandings are articulated for another (the researcher) and that this process of articulation may in fact be a constituent part of the reflective activity being communicated (compare the role of languaging described by Swain 2006).

As has been argued by others (Byram et al. 2002), processes of decentering are inherent in this mediation. The intercultural mediator needs to be able to develop interpretations both from inside and from outside the languages and cultures at play in a particular situation. The mediation is not an explanation of a particular cultural understanding but rather an act of translation between cultural frameworks in which the values and assumptions of each framework are attended to. Mediating cultures for others also involves being able to integrate the perspective of the recipient of the mediation in the representation of the other culture (note especially Example 5). This behavior is fundamentally an intercultural one that is not simply the possession of knowledge about another culture as this is manifested in pragmatic differences but rather the ability to use reflection of pragmatic difference to formulate positions between cultures as a mechanism to develop and express understandings of another culture. In this way intercultural mediation involves awareness of one's own cultural practices and expectations in relation to the aspect of language use being mediated as well knowledge of the target culture behavior. Central to this process is the ability to decenter from one's own cultural frame and to begin to perceive linguistic behaviors from alternative perspectives. Abdallah-Preteille (2003) has argued that the ability to decenter is not an innate one, but rather one that needs to be fostered through education. From the examples presented here, it can be argued that reflection on observed differences in language use can provide a pathway through which such learning can be developed and that pragmatics can thus play a significant role in developing intercultural competence.

This study is based on a small data set and so the findings here can be indicative only of the process involved in mediation. They do, however, reveal that language itself can be a starting point for mediation work and that mediation can therefore be internal to language. This has particular consequences for language teaching and learning because it indicates that language itself can be the focus of

intercultural learning related to mediation. It shows that pragmatics especially has particular relevance for interculturally oriented language teaching as it represents a fundamental point of interaction between language and culture.

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Bionote

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