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Intercultural Mediation from the Perspective of Linguistic Pragmatics

Introduction

In linguistics, pragmatics refers to the ways that language is used in context to communicate and interpret meaning. Pragmatics recognizes that communication is not simply achieved through syntactic and lexical means, but that context, both linguistic and non-linguistic, is a central part of what and how human beings communicate. Meanings are always constructed, communicated and interpreted within a context and context shapes both what is said or written and what is understood. Context is thus a central element of meaning making practices (Verschueren 2008). In any language, there are multiple ways of expressing similar meanings and such alternatives are not simply synonymous ways of expressing the idea but represent contextually adapted ways of speaking that interact with context to produce elements of meaning beyond the strictly linguistic.

Most work in pragmatics has tended to focus on the ways in which linguistic forms are used to realise actions (e.g., requests, compliments, promises, etc.) and how these realisations differ in terms of their social functions (e.g., politeness/impoliteness) (Mey 1993). There has however been a significant comparative perspective in pragmatics that has compared and contrasted the ways that different languages use linguistic resources to create similar actions (Verschueren 2016). However, this perspective has ended to adopt a with-in language approach to analysis in which the language use of (monolingual) native speakers of different languages is compared. More recently, there been a developing interest in intercultural pragmatics, which studies how language is used in social encounters between speakers who have different first languages and is interested in understanding how meanings are made and interpreted by participants in such interactions (Kecskes 2013, 2016). It is within the context of intercultural pragmatics that thinking has begun to emerge about how differences in meaning-making and interpretation are mediated in intercultural communication. This chapter will explore how meaning making and interpretation are understood in intercultural pragmatics and then discuss how mediation has come to be understood as a form of action within the field. It will then consider the place that meta-pragmatic awareness has in understanding the mediational processes involved.

Intercultural pragmatics

The focus on meanings as contextualised has increasingly led to consideration of the ways in which cultures constitutes a part of this context, and of the ways that cultures are a constituent part of linguistic meaning making and interpretation not simply the backdrop against which communication occurs (Liddicoat 2009). Pragmatics has thus come to be understood as “a form of culturally embedded practice within which patterns of language use represent pathways for meaning established by and for cultural groups at different scales of social organization, from small cultural groups such as families and local clubs to larger scale groups such as national and transnational communities of practice” (McConachy and Liddicoat 2021, 4-5). Pragmatics
provides communicators with sets of norms that they draw on to construct and interpret meanings.

Pragmatic norms do not simply involve normative rules for the construction and interpreting of utterances but also provide resources for presenting and interpreting identities and self-concepts in interaction and is thus closely connected to assumptions, whether explicit or implicit, about social roles and relationships, and the constitution of normal ways of being and doing in the social world. The field of intercultural pragmatics research has increasingly come to show that ways of speaking are not simply judged in terms of the appropriateness of linguistic choices to the linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts in which they are produced and understood but also involve moral judgments about the nature of social conduct and of the people who perform it (Spencer-Oatey and Xing 2019). Pragmatic norms constitute not only descriptive norms – what is likely to be said and how in a particular context – but also injunctive norms – what ought to be said and how (Cialdini 2012). Pragmatics, as a meeting of language and culture in the making and interpretation of meanings, is thus a confrontation between language forms and the moral order of value judgments of speakers based in the wider universe of cultural values and ideologies (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Kádár 2021). This moral order can be understood as the constellation of normative assumptions and principles that members of a cultural group use to construct their perceptions of how things should be and make evaluative judgments of the comportment of others, and of those comporting themselves on such ways (Spencer-Oatey and Kádár 2021). Different ways of constructing utterances, that is differences in descriptive norms, therefore may be associated with different moral judgments about the person using a particular way of speaking. In intercultural contexts, therefore, differences in pragmatic norms are therefore not simply differences in the ways that utterances are constructed and interpreted but may also represent differences in moral judgments about self and other (McConachy 2019).

Recognising that pragmatics norms are not simply neutral constructs for organising linguistic behaviour has significant consequences for how we understand the place of language in intercultural communication. Language is not a neutral vehicle through which communication occurs but a morally laden set of practices that draw social relationships and power relations into processes of interpretation in ways that make possible moral stereotyping of speakers and entire language communities, nations or even supranational groupings (e.g., East-West, Europe-Asia, etc.) (Pizziconi 2021).

In intercultural interactions, although one language may be used to carry out the communication, it is not the case that only one set of pragmatic norms will be in action as pragmatic norms themselves are not closely bound with language forms. Those communicating in intercultural contexts may thus draw on the same linguistic resources to construct their communication but may draw on multiple sets of pragmatics norms to construct and interpret the meanings being communicated (Kecskes 2013). In such contexts, there has been a tradition of privileging one set of norms, those of native speakers, are ‘correct’, over those of non-native speakers and of discounting their interpretations as deviant (Kecskes 2019; McConachy and Liddicoat 2021). However, this view grossly oversimplifies the internal variability within pragmatic norms, the contingency of the application of such norms in any context, and
cognitive, emotional and political realities involved in communicating across languages and cultures. Given these complexities, intercultural communication requires mediation of the norms that are at play and understanding how those norms contribute both to how something is communicated and to how it is interpreted.

The understanding of mediation in intercultural pragmatics

In the field of intercultural pragmatics, mediation is understood in a range of different but interrelated ways (Liddicoat in press) and the term has been critiqued for its unacknowledged polysemy (Piccardo 2012; Tapia 2011) that includes three main dimensions of meaning: 1) resolving conflicts or problems, 2) acting as an intermediary and 3) learning through practices of interpretation. In many discussions of mediation some or all of these may be present and influence how mediational work is understood. The idea of mediation as a process of problem solving is probably the most common understanding of mediation outside the field. This view of mediation represents cultural contact as being largely shaped by problems of miscommunication that result from cultural differences. This view of the relationship between languages, cultures and communication has, however, been widely criticised within the linguistics literature (for example, see Piller 2011; Sarangi 1994). Where culture is viewed as the source of miscommunication, intercultural mediation is seen as needed to restore communication and re-establish understanding between participants (Gohard-Radenkovic et al. 2004).

In many fields, mediation is understood as a specialist capability that is drawn on in the context of solving problems that the participants in the communication cannot resolve for themselves (Rubenfeld and Clément 2012). Mediators are thus understood as intermediaries external to the communication itself, who can intervene to restore problems in communication that have led to communication breakdown. When mediation is applied to language, such mediators may commonly be seen as interpreters or translators who enable meanings created in one language to be communicated to recipients who do not speak that language (Katan 2002, 2004; Pöchhacker 2008). Mediation is therefore conceptualised as a communicative act in which the mediator negotiates meaning between participants as an intermediary between those who are communicating as a third party who re-expresses or re-languages the meanings of others. This view of the mediator as always outside the main communication is problematic in the field of intercultural pragmatics as problem solving is not usually understood as a macro-level communicative problem but rather as a micro level phenomenon that occurs moment by moment in communication and needs to be resolved locally by the participants themselves inside the communication.

Within intercultural pragmatics, while the external mediator remains one possibility within the system of mediation, other possibilities are also brought into the scope of mediational work. Liddicoat (2014, 2017, in press) has argued that to understand intercultural mediation in relation to pragmatics, it is important to consider both external and internal mediational processes because mediation can be for the self as well as the other. Mediation for others involves operating on meanings that are present in the interaction, but which cause difficulties for comprehension by others. This mediation is enacted by someone who understands the
meanings that are involved in the interaction, who may be, and usually is, a participant within the interaction itself. This form of mediational work for others can be seen in Extract 1, where Ana, who is a Chilean exchange student, takes on a mediating role in an interaction with two Australian interlocutors in order to help them come to understand Ana’s own personal meanings.

Extract 1
1. Cara: So I don’t get why- why she is- why she got upset you know. Her son was just being nice.
2. Ana: Where I come from, I don’t say ‘thankyou’ 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.
3. Beth: You mean she- if you said thank you she wouldn’t like it.
4. Ana: Yeah. She think I was saying she was bad mother.
5. Cara: But you’re just being nice.
7. Cara: Like saying thanks to the bus driver.
8. Ana: We don’t do that. They just drive a bus. They’re supposed to do that. It’s not they’re doing you favour.
10. Ana: Yeah. We don’t thank for doing job. That’s not special. If they just do what they’re supposed to.
12. Ana: If they do something good. Something not usual. You would say thank you. Not just for the driving. For something else.
13. Beth: So if I thank my mother when she cooks dinner that is like I say she did something unusual.
14. Cara: Like she doesn’t cook for you. She did it specially this time.
15. Ana: Or I am guest not part of family. She does it special because I am guest. She’s not my mother.
16. Beth: So what do I do? Do I say I like what she cooked?
17. Ana: 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 favourite, I say that.

This interaction takes place in a classroom in which students have been discussing a transcription of an interaction between a mother and a son in which the son has thanked his mother for helping him and the mother has reacted negatively to the thanking (see Liddicoat 2009 for a fuller discussion). While her interlocutors have difficulties comprehending the mother’s reaction, Ana recognises the ways that the thanking has been meaningful for both sets of participants and associates the mother’s meanings with her own expectations about linguistic conduct. As she interacts, she provides interpretations of the meanings at play both from the perspective of her interlocutors and form her own (and the mother’s) perspectives. In her
mediational work makes evident the multiple interpretative possibilities for understanding the talk and brings these into relation.

An example of mediation for self can be seen in Extract 2, which James reports on his experience as a learner of Japanese experiencing an interpretive dissonance that he needed to resolve for himself. While he was outside the interaction in which the communicative issue occurred, it is his own interpretations of the situation and their dissonance with the meaning-making he has witnessed that he must resolve, and he reports on how he worked through these problems in meaning making.

*Extract 2*

1. James: On one of my visits to Japan, I was in a restaurant at Tokyo station and there was this uh older guy at one of the tables an’ he really shocked me.
2. Researcher: What did he do?
3. James: Well um it was a restaurant, right? And he was at a table and they were eating and he just turns around and calls out to the waitress ‘nama::’ (draught beer), just like that. And I was just like shocked. He didn’t even look at her, just called out.
5. James: And I like thought that’s so rude. Um, I mean, you always think of Japanese people as super polite. But he just said ‘nama::’ and he got his beer. And like you know I didn’t think they would do that.
6. Researcher: So why did you think it was rude?
7. James: Well um you know, it’s not the way we would do it here. You can’t just say that. You have to ask and say please and stuff. So, it wasn’t my way. But it wasn’t like what we learn in class either. It’s always ‘oh you’ve got to be so polite’ and ‘Japanese people are all polite’ and stuff. And we spend so much time learning polite stuff.
8. Researcher: mhm
9. James: It was um sorta like the first time I’d seen it. But you know after a while, you seen it happen and you think they’re not all like what we learn in class. There’s other stuff, like a whole range of things people do.
10. Researcher: So how do you understand what he did?
11. James: Well uh it’s like it all depends who’s there. I guess, um like it’s because he’s a man and old and that and she was just a young girl. So I thought it was a bit sexist, you know, when it happened. And that’s something you get in Japan.
13. James: And I’ve seen other times, that people sometimes are polite to waiters and people in shops. They just say what they want or point or something and that’s all. And the waiters and shop people are all like so super polite. Um, it’s like in Japanese they say something like *kyaku-sama, kami-sama* ((the customer [is a] god)). You know, the customer is like a god. So if you’re a
god, I guess you don’t have to be polite. But for me it’s a bit shocking, you know.

14. Researcher: mm. So how do you sort this out for yourself?

15. James: Well in the restaurant I started saying like ‘onegaishimasu’ for everything. Cos I hadn’t ordered yet. Like I was trying to show I wasn’t like that guy. So not ‘nama’. I don’t want people to think I speak like that to them. ‘nama onegaishimasu’. Heh, heh I used to just say ‘kudasai’ cos in class they said it was the word for please. But I wanted to be um politer than that to sorta show, I’m not like that. Now it’s ‘onegaishimasu’, just cos of that guy who said ‘nama’ and not you know wanting to be that person.

In this extract, James is discussing a communicative event in which his own injunctive norms were in conflict with both his understanding of Japanese pragmatics norms and his own norms for interaction in this context. Here James is dealing with the injunctive norms that he understood to be in operation in service encounters in restaurants and relates the judgments he made about the language use he observed and about the speaker. He discusses how he came to understand the injunctive norms here in new ways as he began to understand better the associations between ways of speaking and the expectations and values at play in this particular context. In discussing this event he draws out the ways that he approached the problem of interpreting language in context and how he resolved it, both for understanding the specific event and also for developing a set of pragmatic norms that allowed him to resolve the communicative problem his new understanding brought into being.

**Mediation and metapragmatic awareness**

The approach to mediation discussed here ultimately depends on the mediator’s metapragmatic awareness; it involves language in use itself becoming the object of thinking and articulation (McConachy 2013; McConachy and Liddicoat 2016, 2021). However, in intercultural contexts metapragmatic awareness needs to be conceptualised more broadly than has often been in the case when the concept has been applied to communication in a single language. In such cases, metapragmatic awareness has often been limited to the linguistic aspects of language in use and recognition of the linguistic action being performed by particular utterances in context (Verscheuren 2000; Mey 1993) or to mapping linguistic forms onto context, with an awareness of the contextual constraints on linguistic resources for achieving particular pragmatic acts and in making judgments of pragmatic appropriateness (Safont Jordá 2003; Alcón Soler and Safont Jordà 2008; Kinginger and Farrell 2004). In intercultural contexts, metapragmatic awareness also involves a recognition of the multiplicity of meanings potentially present in interaction, how such meanings come to be present at any moment in communication and how such meanings constitute valid ways of understanding communication. Metapragmatic awareness is not therefore simply an act of identifying speakers’ meanings but rather of interpreting the multiple meanings present for interlocutors (Liddicoat and Scarino 2013; Liddicoat 2021).

In intercultural communication, interpretation is complex as there may be multiple interpretations present for participants that result from different potential understandings and interpretative possibilities that exist in the use of each language available to the participants
and their culturally based assumptions about language use. Mediation this context is not simply finding the interpretation that is the ‘correct’ representation of a speakers’ meaning of the language used in the context (c.f. Schleiermacher 1977) as this would imply the validating on one potential understanding of the mapping of language and context over others, and also assume that the intended speaker meaning was unitary and/or unambiguous at the moment of its production. In any use of language for communication, and particularly in intercultural communication, multiple meanings are potentially present and potentially valid (see Gadamer 2011; Ricoeur 1965). Gadamer argues that reaching a shared interpretation involves a fusion of horizons – that of the maker of meaning and that of its interpreter – through dialogue between different interpretations. For Ricoeur, similarly, the focus of interpretation needs to be placed on exposing multiple possible meanings to highlight the motivations behind and the implications of each. This dialogue of interpretations is thus a central element of the mediational process, and such dialogues can be seen in Extracts 1 and 2 above in which the participants acknowledge and interrelate the various potential meanings they have discovered. Such mediational work involves using metapragmatic awareness as a hermeneutic resource for coming to know the ways that meaning is being made and interpreted. This process of dialogic negotiation of meaning is fundamentally a linguistic act in which the languages(s) of the participants provide a resource though which meanings can be articulated and shared.

However, mediation is not simply an interpretative process that seeks to identify multiple possible meanings but also requires the mediator to work to bring diverse interpretations into relationship. This is a reflective process in which mediators construct the meaningfulness and consequentiality of talk for themselves and/or for others (McConachy & Liddicoat, 2016). Thus, the process of mediating requires an understanding and awareness of, and a reflection on, the process of meaning making itself (see Kramsch, 2006; 2011 on symbolic competence). Mediation involves an intervention into the processes of meaning making and interpretation in which the multiplicity of meanings identified serves to progress communication by giving insight into how linguistic features and context interact to create meanings. Metapragmatic awareness is thus a reflexive form of understanding that involves deeper awareness of how language functions in the creation of interpersonal meaning within and across languages and cultures (McConachy 2018).

**Concluding comments**

Intercultural mediation in pragmatics has developed a particular take on mediation that reflects the needs of interlocutors to manage problems in meaning making and interpretation locally as they occur in communication. Current work in the field has shown that when participants need to make sense of different potential meanings of language in context, they draw on a range of reflective and interpretative resources, most especially metapragmatic awareness, to identify and interrelate different potential meanings. It has also shown that quite similar processes are used by participants in communication to resolve problems of meaning whether they are co-present with their interlocutors or distanced from them, as may be the case of problems of meaning arise in written or media communication. Nonetheless, research on intercultural mediation in the field of pragmatics is new and remains underdeveloped and there is much
work to do to understand exactly what linguistic, conceptual and hermeneutic resources mediators draw on to develop their interpretations, how they manage the diversity of interpretations that results, and how they enact mediational roles.

References


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