

# Interdisciplinary and Intercultural (Mis)understanding: An Ethnography of Communication

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## Abstract

*The following paper examines communication between members of a research team during a two-day meeting in April 2007. The interdisciplinary research team, which was focused on sustainable development in Romania, included members from both Romania and the United States. Using Bakhtin's dialogic approach and his concept of heteroglossia, I identify the multiple discourses influencing various participants in particular conversations. I examine the way that participants' different disciplinary and cultural identities, as well as the language barrier between English and Romanian, resulted in misunderstanding and frustration.*

We sat around a long table in the warm, dimly lit conference room. As Claudia began to present her Romanian data, using her laptop and the projector, Annette became visibly frustrated. Apparently Claudia was not translating everything Annette felt should be translated in order for her to do her economic calculations. Annette grew more upset, at one point swearing under her breath, "What the fuck am I even doing here?" After a few minutes, she pulled herself together and asked Claudia a few questions for clarification. However, this was mostly ineffective because Claudia is not completely fluent in English and because Annette was unsuccessful at explaining what she needed. The subject was dropped. About an hour later, when Claudia finally explained something to Annette's satisfaction, Annette blew a kiss toward Claudia and said, "If I were closer I would kiss you." Claudia responded by saying emphatically, "*Now* do you see why I wanted to show you this?"

How can Annette's extreme turn around from complete frustration to near-elation be explained? Was it a simple miscommunication? Was the language barrier to blame? Or is there something else going on here? The following ethnographic analysis attempts to answer these questions.

### **Interdisciplinary Communication**

The exchanges recounted above took place during a research team meeting in early April 2007. The team was involved in an interdisciplinary project working toward sustainable development in one Romanian county. Interdisciplinary collaboration is becoming an increasingly common method for solving complex problems, especially since "real-life issues hardly ever match traditional disciplinary approaches in applied scientific research" (Uiterkamp and Vlek 2007:175). Diverse specialists are joining together more frequently in order to develop solutions, such as the project considered here which addressed the environmental, economic, and social dimensions of development. In order for collaboration between professionals with various backgrounds and knowledge to be fruitful, participants must be able to communicate effectively with one another. However, in the case of interdisciplinary communication, misunderstandings between speakers can often occur due to participants' different academic and professional backgrounds and thus their different approaches to problems. Because each participant has a unique view and a potential stake in the outcome of the research, miscommunication in these cases is not uncommon (Terrell 2001).

The project described here is especially interesting from a linguistic anthropological perspective because of the communication across both disciplines and cultures. The team of professionals included, on the American side, an ecologist who works in industry, a civil engineer, a mining engineer, a geographic information systems (GIS) specialist, four

professors from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) including an ecologist, a geographer, an economist, and an anthropologist, as well as two research assistants, one in ecology and myself, an anthropology student. The Romanian team included an ecology professor, a woman who works for the Romanian environmental department at the county level, and a man who works for the county prefecture. These diverse actors came together for two full days for a project meeting. Although I had been a participant observer in multiple meetings involving various subsets of these participants throughout the semester, a focus on this particular meeting allows for a more thorough ethnographic analysis. My own position as someone with an interdisciplinary background in civil and environmental engineering as well as anthropology puts me in a unique position to study this issue; however, it is far from a neutral one, as I am also a student, a woman, an American, and for the purposes of this paper, a linguistic anthropologist.

### **Methodological and Theoretical Background**

In his outline of the ethnography of communication, Hymes (1974:4) argues that “it is not linguistics, but ethnography, not language, but communication, which must provide the frame of reference within which the place of language in culture and society is to be assessed.” This method is useful when studying interactions because it recognizes “linguistic practice as social process” (Heller 2003:260). Unlike linguistic approaches that focus on single utterances, the ethnography of communication takes the context of the interaction into consideration and focuses on entire speech events, or activities “that are directly governed by rules or norms for the use of speech” (Hymes 1974:52).

Hymes (1974:62) uses the mnemonic device “SPEAKING” to stand for eight important categories in the ethnography of speaking (situation, participants, ends, act sequences, key, instrumentalities, norms, and genre). Influenced by Duranti (1997), the following analysis focuses

on participants, which entails the use of Bakhtin's dialogic approach. This allows the analyst to see the importance of dialogue in the emergence of language and culture (Mannheim and Tedlock 1995). In other words, dialogue between individuals is a process of continual "creation and recreation" of shared worlds (Mannheim and Tedlock 1995:3). Bakhtin (1986[1952-3]:85) also explains that "each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication." The dialogic approach thus recognizes that every dialogue has a connection to past dialogues and to the participants' social positions; it is this context that the analyst must focus on in ethnographic studies of interaction (Mannheim and Tedlock 1995).

Bakhtin (1982[1935]) argues that language is stratified into multiple socio-ideological languages, such as the languages of social groups and professional languages. Language here is understood as "ideologically saturated...as a world view"; not simply as words and grammatical rules (Bakhtin 1982[1935]:271). The existence of many different socio-ideological languages leads to a condition Bakhtin (1982[1935]) calls heteroglossia. Duranti (1997:75) explains that "the speech of one person is filled by many different voices or linguistically structured personae"; this use of various discourses within a single utterance characterizes heteroglossia. An individual's positioning within multiple discourse systems, each manifested through interaction, can lead to both internal and external contradiction (Scollon and Scollon 2001:544). This problem can be compounded in interdisciplinary encounters when multiple contradictory discourses emerge.

The presence and interaction of so many different voices within the individual creates challenges for communication. Bakhtin (1982[1935]:282) argues that the speaker counts on the listener understanding what he or she is trying to say, but in order for this to happen the speaker must

orient his or her utterance to the “alien conceptual system of the understanding receiver.” To do this successfully, speakers can make use of speech genres, characterized by “relatively stable types” of utterances (Bakhtin 1986[1952-3]:60).

Individuals have access to many different speech genres, and they choose which to use based on variables such as the participants, the type of communication, and the setting.

According to Bakhtin (1986[1952-3]:94), the speaker’s view of the participant, or the way he or she “senses and imagines” his or her audience, is especially important, as “the utterance is constructed while taking into account possible responsive reactions.”

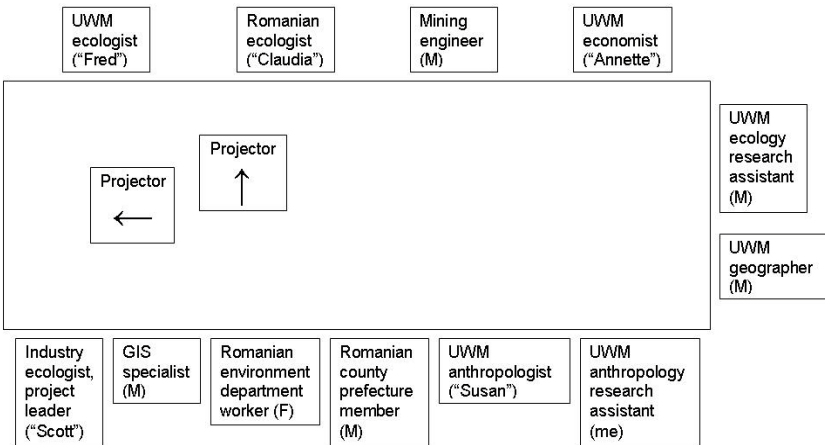
Due to the complexity described above, Mannheim and Tedlock (1995:13) argue that there is “no guarantee that all participants will understand the event in the same way.” This is especially true because each participant is influenced by a large number of different discourses due to his or her multiple social identities. Scollon and Scollon (2001:544) argue that because group identities are “problematical only to the extent that such membership can be shown to be productive of ideological contradiction, on the one hand, or that the participants themselves call upon social group membership in making strategic claims within the actions under study, on the other,” it is best to initially overlook group memberships and instead ask when and how participants come to see these memberships as relevant to communication. In the case of the interdisciplinary research discussed here, team members saw participants’ disciplinary identities as important, because these particular identities were the very reason the various participants were asked to be part of the research. The awareness of these disciplinary identities influenced each speaker in wanting to represent his or her own discipline and in wanting to explain him or herself in terms that the listener would understand. As seen below, however, other identities and thus other discourses also proved to be important for communication between team members.

In the case of interdisciplinary research, as with any social encounter, there must be some consensus as to the goal of the interaction; this necessitates “collusion” between participants (McDermott and Tylbor 1995:218-9). In other words, the various participants, through dialogue, negotiate and renegotiate a framework for interpretation; in this case, a way to understand the goals of the project. As mentioned above, contradictions can occur when various discourses come into contact; for example, various disciplines have different ways of looking at problems, which can lead to contradictory analyses and interpretations. Because the participants have tacitly agreed to collude, they must develop a single interpretation or framework through discourse. However, as McDermott and Tylbor (1995) point out, certain actors within communicative activities are, or are seen as, more powerful and thus have greater access to certain resources. This can create a hierarchy within the group to which the less powerful have colluded but not necessarily consented (Mannheim and Tedlock 1995).

In the case of the research team discussed here, there was an ongoing struggle between disciplines for control of the discourse. This struggle mirrors traditional struggles between disciplines in sustainable development research. For example, ecology has traditionally been associated with sustainability research due to its basis in natural science, but its focus on solutions to environmental problems rather than their social causes or effects has necessitated the integration of a social science perspective (Uiterkamp and Vlek 2007). However, it is apparent here, as elsewhere, that this integration is not always smooth. Similarly, neoliberal economics has long had a significant influence on development projects. The more recent recognition of the need for environmental protection and remediation has led to an attempted integration of the two disciplines that has also been rocky at best (Escobar 1995). The following analysis addresses this issue and the others outlined above.

**Analysis of the Meeting**

The two day meeting between American and Romanian team members took place in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in a conference room on the UWM campus. The following analysis focuses on the morning meeting on day two. Participants sat around a large conference table, with “Scott,” the ecologist in industry who directed the project, “Fred,” the ecology professor who helped to bring the UWM team together, and “Claudia,” the Romanian ecology professor who led the project in Romania and acted as translator at the meetings, at one end of the table (see Figure 1, below). The other UWM team members sat at the opposite end of the table, and the other Romanian visitors and the engineers sat in the middle. As a matter of practicality, the two Romanians who did not speak much English sat across from Claudia in order to aid translation.



**Figure 1:** Diagram of the meeting

This seating arrangement is noteworthy, as the participants divided themselves in numerous ways. First, the three “leaders” of the team, Scott, Fred, and Claudia, all ecologists, sat at one end of the table, thus dividing them from the rest of the group. Due to the traditional association of

ecological science with sustainability research, the connection between ecology and group leadership led to a privileging of this particular approach to the project. The participants also divided themselves in terms of profession. With the exceptions of Fred and Claudia, whose positions as team leaders in this case trumped their professional identities, the team members divided themselves between those in industry or government and those in academia. This could be due in part to group cohesion on the part of the UWM team, which had met on multiple occasions without the rest of the group. Finally, the presence of two projectors, both for displaying quantitative data, illustrates the privileging of quantitative data that soon became apparent.

The meeting was called to order by Scott, and conversation that had focused on such topics as American breakfast foods and the success of various baseball teams on opening day turned to the matter at hand. Fred took over the conversation as he often does (in part due to his perceived role as coordinator), explaining that there had been a miscommunication about the purpose of the meetings, and that today's meeting would focus on the presentation of data collected by and carried to the U.S. by the Romanians. This marks the first case in which the issue of power and control emerged. Claudia, who had been visibly frustrated in the previous day's meeting, felt that she had traveled to the United States to deliver and explain data. When the rest of the team failed to recognize this purpose in the first day's meeting, she made this known to Fred, her fellow ecologist and principle contact in the U.S., who then allowed her to largely control the content of the meeting on day two. Thus, although all of the meeting participants had implicitly agreed to a collusion, or a bringing together of multiple voices to work toward a single discourse, one voice, Claudia's, claimed power over the meeting (with the help of Fred's power to control the course of the meeting). Claudia's voice thus emerged as dominant.

At this point in the meeting, Claudia began to present her data, and the exchanges between Claudia and Annette described at the beginning of the paper took place. These exchanges can be analyzed by examining how these two women expressed their identities, which subsequently came into conflict. Since Claudia, an ecology professor, and Annette, an economics professor, both focus on quantitative data collection and analysis in their work, the disciplinary boundary does not seem to have caused the tension. While the language barrier likely contributed to the friction, it also appears that gender identity played a role, in particular gender identity across cultures. While I would characterize both individuals as strong, confident women in their respective cultures, this identity surfaced differently in terms of their communication styles. First, from my observations, it seems that Romanian women tend to use their femininity as one way to demonstrate power. While this may happen to an extent in the U.S. as well, in Romania it seems to be a much more accepted form of power seeking. A simple comparison between Claudia and Annette's appearances shows that they have different views of professionalism; Claudia wore very fashionable, feminine business attire, high heels, bold jewelry, brightly dyed hair, and heavy makeup, while Annette wore a traditional business suit, flat shoes, and relatively plain hair and makeup. While both women used their appearance to illustrate power according to their respective cultural norms, Claudia did so by playing up her femininity and Annette by wearing traditionally masculine business attire.

In terms of verbal communication, Claudia's word choice and demeanor could be described as bold and slightly dramatic, while Annette's was more straightforward and stern. Many researchers have addressed gender and language use in the U.S.; for example, Tannen (1990) argues that women and men have different communication styles, with women more likely to use tag questions and indirectness, for instance, and men more likely to interrupt and use direct speech. Duranti (1997:211) points out that while these generalizations may be

true in some dialects of English, it is more important to recognize *perceptions* of gendered language; for example, certain language use patterns index strength (or weakness), which in turn indexes masculinity (or femininity). In this case, Annette's use of direct speech indexes confidence and thus may be seen as masculine. Tannen (1990:235) finds that since "male" language use patterns are considered the norm, women typically make more style adjustments in mixed groups than men do. Indeed, the use of "masculine" language by professional women is common in the U.S., where women are often judged in comparison to men and thus must try to be successful by proving through their communication styles, for example, that they are equal to men (Bonvillian 2003:198).

Far fewer studies of gender and language use have been carried out in Romania, though at least one such study finds that Romanians hold similar views of what constitutes "masculine" and "feminine" language (Hornoiu 2002). This is consistent with Claudia's bold, confident speech. However, her dramatic language style suggests that "feminine" language use may be more accepted as a way to demonstrate power in Romania. Thus in terms of both verbal and non-verbal communication, Claudia used more "feminine" techniques to exert power, while Annette used more "masculine" ones. Both women exerted powerful personalities, but through different verbal and non-verbal communication styles according to their respective cultural norms, thus leading to an apparent conflict of personal identities.

Although disciplinary differences did not seem to cause the above communication conflict, such differences did play a role in another instance. During the data presentation, the topic of nature conservation came up, and "Susan," the UWM anthropologist, asked some questions about land set aside for this purpose. Because Susan had an interest in this topic from an anthropological perspective, she was asking for qualitative information. Although the answers she received from Claudia

were undoubtedly useful to Susan, to others in the group they apparently seemed irrelevant. In fact, Annette expressed frustration that we had deviated from the stated purpose of the meeting, the presentation of quantitative data. Susan apologized for causing this divergence, in part perhaps to deflect blame from Claudia (who had been fielding Susan's questions), but also possibly in recognition that qualitative data was taking a backseat to quantitative data, at least in this particular meeting. Thus the disciplinary identities of two team members in this case led to a conflict in discourse.

Up to this point, little has been mentioned about the obstacle of translating between English and Romanian. Translation difficulties did play a role in slowing down the pace of the meetings, and more importantly in influencing the transmission of knowledge. A common occurrence throughout both days of meetings involved one or more American team members asking a question of Claudia, and Claudia either translating the question to the Romanians and then translating their response or answering the question herself in English. However, often Claudia's answer was not what the questioner had wanted to hear. The questioner would then state the question differently, and the process would be repeated, sometimes more than once (and sometimes without resolution). The American team members generally ignored the initial, "wrong" answers. However, it is unclear to me whether Claudia really misunderstood the questions or whether she was just not giving the answers the questioners wanted. Either way, valuable information may have been lost by ignoring these responses. Even if Claudia did misunderstand the questions, her initial, supposedly "wrong" responses could have been very useful to the team, as they could point to previously overlooked variables or even a different approach to problem-solving in Romania.

Ignoring these responses (as well as "re-translating" Claudia's responses into something that the Americans could understand, which also happened frequently) indicates that the American team as a whole privileged their own view of

sustainable development (which, though beyond the scope of this paper, is itself in constant negotiation and renegotiation through dialogue, but nevertheless seems to be largely based in Western science and neoliberal development discourses, as discussed above) over any alternative view possibly held by people in Romania. However, the Romanian visitors' focus on quantitative data supported this approach, so even if the team members had taken Claudia's "wrong" answers into account, they still likely would have privileged a Western scientific discourse.

### **Conclusion**

As seen above, the dialogic approach's focus on participation in speech events makes it very useful in the case of interdisciplinary and intercultural communication. Each participant in the meetings had multiple social identities, some of which became manifest through dialogue with the other participants. During the meetings, participants came together to create a common framework through dialogue and thus the interaction of multiple discourses. In this case, the team privileged a Western science discourse above others because of the power held by the ecologists, in particular the Romanian ecology professor who controlled the direction of the meetings. Due to each individual interlocutor's various identities, multiple discourses influenced each utterance discussed here, illustrating the concept of heteroglossia. However, I identified some of the most important discourses that came into conflict in each instance. Certainly my own position, especially as a former engineering student, a current anthropology student, and a woman, influenced the discourses that emerged in my analysis as the most important. For example, my anthropological training led me to recognize the privileging of quantitative data, while my engineering background allowed me to understand the frustration and lack of understanding by

the other participants when the conversation briefly turned to more qualitative concerns.

It is interesting to note that the difficulties in intercultural communication that arose during the meetings discussed here parallel the difficulties that arose in meetings involving only American participants. For example, difficulties in translating from English to Romanian and back are similar to difficulties in translating concepts from one discipline's language to another. Unfortunately in this case cultural differences, specifically differences in cultural views of gender in the incident described at the beginning of the paper, added an extra dimension to communication obstacles. Perhaps the language and cultural differences made it more challenging for speakers to evaluate their interlocutors and thus to direct their speech appropriately. In any case, communication during the meetings overall was strained, and at least some of the participants left the meetings feeling frustrated.

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