

*Britt-Marie Öberg\**

## **Incipient miscommunication as a resource in international negotiations**

### **Abstract**

This paper presents a categorization of sequences of incipient miscommunication according to their sources and to how they are indicated, thematized and solved in cross-cultural negotiating activities between native and non-native speakers of English. It was found that cross-cultural miscommunicative instances were an intrinsic part of the establishing of consensus and therefore they could be used as a communicative resource. Moreover, the importance of the problems presented by the issues at hand overrides the significance of the problems presented by the participants' language inadequacies. However, miscommunication related to differences in socio-cultural background and to divergent degrees of unawareness regarding the miscommunication often has more serious interactional consequences than a varying or insufficient language proficiency.

### **1. Introduction**

The term miscommunication is used about many kinds of interactional problems. Very often miscommunication is seen as a deviation from the normal, or from some ideal of efficient, appropriate or satisfying communication. By contrast, an alternative "starting point should be that language use and communication are in fact pervasively and even intrinsically flawed, partial and problematic... It is easy to overlook what 'miscommunication' may positively *contribute* to ongoing interaction and social relationships..." (Coupland et al., 1991: 3). Another communication scholar expresses it as follows: "Indeed, salient and perhaps fruitful misunderstandings occur because parties try to understand each other, and hence such episodes may increase the depth of understanding in ways that, without them, would be difficult to come by." (Linell, in press).

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\* *Britt-Marie Öberg*  
*Department of Communication Studies*  
*Linköping University*  
*S-581 83 Linköping*

Miscommunication is a general label that includes the hearer-based *misunderstanding* and the speaker-based *misrepresentation* (misleading word or utterance). Following Bell, there are two dimensions of miscommunication: “referential miscommunication, which occurs when the propositional content is misrepresented or misunderstood and affective or relational miscommunication where the relationship between speaker and hearer is disrupted” (Bell, 1991: 260). Linell defines miscommunication as “talk nondeliberately generating or mobilizing and sometimes leaving discrepancies between parties in the interpretation or understanding of what is said or done”. However, he also points out that “Communication is a matter of degree ... and miscommunication cohabits with communication” (Linell, in press). In this investigation I will follow the above definition of the term miscommunication given by Linell and I will include the two dimensions of miscommunication as defined by Bell. I will also consider instances of miscommunication in an embryonic stage that may develop into fullblown misunderstandings if not reacted to and dealt with.

Cross-cultural encounters are often reported to go wrong communicatively, (Gumperz, 1982; Trosborg, 1987; Wolfson, 1989; Gass & Varonis, 1991) and different instances, from minor difficulties in finding appropriate words to complex difficulties attributed to cultural differences have been investigated. However, in a cross-cultural interaction communicative problems, attributed to a linguistic source, may be more easily identified and solved as the participants probably have low expectations of each other’s language proficiency and also have high tolerance of miscommunication. But is the absence of superficial communicative problems an indication of the absence of miscommunication at socio-cultural levels?

This article attempts to answer the following questions: What types of miscommunication are to be found in a particular type of discourse activity, namely negotiating and how can they be described? How do the participants tackle their communicative problems? Can miscommunication at times be used as a resource?

## 2. Data

The analysis is based on sequences of incipient miscommunication extracted from two data collections of authentic international negotiations. These are:

1) **ECS**. Tape-recordings (10 hours) from an international seminar held in the capital of a country belonging to the former Eastern European bloc. The participants, all male bio-engineers and scientists, negotiated the transfer of medical-technical know-how from Western to Eastern Europe. They came from Bulgaria (1), Czechoslovakia (2), Hungary (3), Poland (2), Sweden (1), UK (2), USA (1), and Yugoslavia (2). The language spoken was English. The meeting lasted for two days and included a general session and two working group sessions. It was audio-taped by one of the participants. The researcher did not have direct access to the meeting but conducted follow-up interviews with five of the participants.

2) **SwE 1 and SwE 2**. Tape-recordings (5 hours) from two sets of business negotiations between Swedish buyers and British sellers, all male. The British tried to sell instruments and spareparts to a large Swedish manufacturing industry and the meetings took place at the Swedish firm. The author was present and held follow-up interviews with the participants.

All tape-recordings have been transcribed. The negotiations differ from each other in several aspects. Firstly, the social status of the participants and the degree of acquaintance between them differ. In the ECS negotiation the participants have equal status but do not previously know each other. In the business negotiations the participants know each other well. They are employees of varying status, middle level managers and junior assistants, from well-reputed firms.

Secondly, the core tasks of the two sets of negotiations differ. In the ECS negotiations the main task for the participants is to get to know each other, find out about the needs and capacities of the East European organisations and then agree on a line of action for cooperation and aid. In the SwE negotiations the English representatives are trying to renew old contracts for selling spare parts and instruments as well as to gain new contracts. However, the Swedish firm has a new top management and the conditions for business have changed and become tougher.

### 3. Unit of analysis

Sheer absence of clear indications of miscommunication at a meeting does not imply that there is complete mutual understanding. However, it is not easy to identify instances of miscommunication. The listener (and the analyst) can detect them only retrospectively as miscommunication is collectively constituted as a result of the ongoing interactional process. Miscommunication is also difficult to distinguish from the more or less 'normal' interactional process, as the same mechanisms (repair, meta-talk etc) can be observed in communication in general. Moreover, multi-party conversation, as opposed to dyadic interaction, provides opportunities for parties to remain silent, and thus participants who cannot express themselves too well or who have problems to understand the conversation, have an opportunity to conceal their problems. These considerations have led to the methodological stance to, as a first step, identify and study interruptions of the discourse flow in which indicators of misalignments, misunderstanding or misrepresentation could be observed. Indicators that miscommunication is sensed by interlocutors would include: repairs or repair initiations, metacomments, explicit negotiations of meaning, incongruent threads of discourse, incoherence and hitches in dialogue, salient silences within topics, and other features that can be taken as signs, vocal or non-vocal, of uncertainty, irritation or discomfort (Linell, in press).

The second step of the analysis was to identify the possible source of each problematic sequence. A distinction was made between local and global sources. A locally situated source is found in the immediately preceding turn or turns, a globally situated source in turns occurring much earlier in the negotiation, or in previous meetings, previous correspondence, faxes, telephone calls etc. Different cultural and social background and the participants' differing preconceptions and preferences account for yet another type of global source.

Two additional, important points have to be considered, namely thematization, that is if the interlocutors recognize a communicative problem and explicitly deal with it or not, and resolution, that is if the interlocutors manage to solve their problems or not.

A typical incident of incipient miscommunication is shown in the following sequence (Ex.1) taken from the ECS discussions<sup>1</sup>. A suggestion that each participant should give a description of the health care system of their country is seconded by the Englishman J. However the Englishman C is uncertain how to interpret the word “centralized” in this context.

Example 1. ECS

- J Eng: 174 What you have said is extremely important,  
because if we have a centralized health system  
it makes sense to have **centralized, clinical** Problem source  
**engineering** system... if we have individual  
private hospitals that doesn't work nearly as well,  
so to some degree , if you know whether there's a  
centralized healthcare system, we have some idea  
what might be the appropriate strategy,  
**centralized, clinical engineering** systems Problem source  
(B.Am: Hm hm)so there is some gem of useful  
information there
- C Eng: 175 **What exactly do you mean** by centralized Problem indicator  
then?
- J Eng: 176 **Centralized serving more than one** Problem solution  
**hospital or more than a small number of**  
**hospitals**
- C Eng: 177 Okay
- J Eng: 178 **Centralized for an area or a district** Problem solution

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<sup>1</sup> Transcriptions are given verbatim, i.e. all audible words spoken are transcribed, including e.g. repetitions, restarts and hesitation noises. Normal orthography is used and the following conventions are employed:

- J Eng: 174 The turns in each negotiation are consecutively numbered
- ... denotes a pause for 1s or longer
- , denotes a pause shorter than 1s
- (.....) denotes omitted words
- denotes a speaker's leaving a linguistic unit unfinished
- = denotes a turn immediately following another i.e. the turns are latched
- :
- denotes prolonged vowel
- underlining marks simultaneous speech
- // marks non-verbal behavior
- : “ “ indicates quotes within turns
- (ABC: I see) indicates back-channelling from interactant not currently holding the floor
- (XX) marks an inaudible word

In this sequence the flow of interaction is halted by C, who has a problem interpreting the phrase “centralized clinical engineering” in J’s turn 174. But he indicates this problem first when J. Eng has emphasized the importance of the meaning of the phrase with the words “there is some gem of useful information there”. Thereby “centralized clinical engineering” has retrospectively become a problemsource as a result of the interactional development and it is jointly constructed as such by the two interlocutors. The problem is then explicitly indicated as a repairable object by a meta comment, “What exactly do you mean by” and is thereby thematized and for the analyst retrospectively identified as the local problem source (175). The phrase, “centralized clinical engineering systems” is explained in two steps, turn 176, ratified by C in turn 177 and reformulated by J in 178. The problem has been averted and the interaction flows again.

#### 4. Types of miscommunication

Three types of miscommunication sequences were identified and analyzed, lexical, discourse structural and socio-cultural miscommunication. They were distinguished on the basis of the character of the problem, the position of the problem source and the degree of the participants’ consciousness of the problem. If the problem was thematized or not, i.e. if the problem was verbally acknowledged or not was also taken into consideration.

##### 4.1. Lexical miscommunication

The instances of lexical miscommunication (Fig. 1) have to do with problems of vocabulary. They are often mistakes that the participants are aware of, which is indicated in the discourse by expressions like “What is the English for...?”. The problem source is to be found locally in the preceding sequence of talk and the problems are mostly solved.

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(XX XX) marks an inaudible sequence of words

*Cursive* marks emphatic stress

**Bold** is used in the examples to highlight those units of talk being discussed in the text.

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 LEXICAL MISCOMMUNICATION
 

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Participants search for appropriate expressions, correct definitions and interpretations.

Indications:	The speaker displays verbal and nonverbal signs of hesitation or uncertainty. The speaker asks for help. The listener corrects the speaker. The listener repeats the speaker's word and asks for a definition.
Problem source	<b>Local</b>
The problem is and	<b>Themmatized Solved</b> either by the speaker alone or by another participant, or often by the two in cooperation.

**Fig. 1. Analytic categories of miscommunication; lexical problems.**

In the lexical category one will find several kinds of problems ranging from minor difficulties in finding appropriate words and instances of momentary forgetfulness that are remedied through word searching, to more complicated discussions of the meaning and the implications of key concepts. The indicators are often explicit. There could be direct questions such as “What exactly do you mean by...?” and there could be sounds of hesitation such as “ehrm, uhm” or phrases such as “How do you say...?”. In example 2 the Bulgarian S signals that he is searching his memory for a word expressing the idea of “funds”, which he retrieves himself, and later in the same turn a word expressing the idea of “components” which he is helped by one of his colleagues to find.

Example 2. ECS

S Bul: 79 I can't say, but for the moment **the main...er...how to say... the main funds...**/later in the same turn/ chemical analytical apparatus is also in a very bad situation because it missing er ... **the th the special urhm...how to say uh the special (Someone: Components) mm components**

In both the instances in this sequence, the Bulgarian is searching for the correct word. The same applies in most of the sequences of word searching. Only a few cases are concerned with hitting upon the right morphological or phonological forms.

That participants agree about key definitions is of vital significance for the negotiation and therefore the uncertainty about the interpretation of a term or a phrase can lead to lengthy discussions. Example 3 is taken

from the ESC talks, where the phrase “procurement processes” is mentioned in a discussion about a course program. The Bulgarian S indicates that he is not familiar with the phrase which triggers a quick exchange of suggestions of definitions by the other participants:

- Example 3      ECS
- A Swe: 1175    **Procurement processes**
- A Yug: 1176      Yeah, yes exactly
- C Eng.: 1177    **Procurement and commissioning processes**
- S Bul: 1178    **Procurement?**
- M Pol: 1179    Management methods nah
- C Eng: 1180    OK, procurement
- A Jug: 1181    Purchasing
- S Bul: 1182    æh
- A Swe: 1183    is that=
- C Eng: 1184    =No, it’s ordering
- A Jug: 1185    Management of purchasing
- M Pol: 1186      Management methods=
- A Jug: 1187    =Management methods
- A Swe: 1188    Ja, but this is er this is a very wide concept maybe procurement (S Bul: Yes) (XX) shall we call day eleven this=
- C Eng: 1189    =But whereas whereas procurement and commissioning isn’t it... because it, **it isn’t just especially *buying it, it, it’s, it’s, it is all the, it’s the information systems you need to set up, to enable you to know what’s available, it’s, the systems you need to set up to enable you to make a choice about the right equipment*** and
- A Swe: 1190      **Specification**
- C Eng: 1191    It’s, it’s, that’s right it’s, it’s (S Bul:Yes) **how you go through the tendering processes** to make sure what you can get (XX XX)

S indicates his problem through repeating the word “procurement” with a questioning intonation (1178). In this sequence the final solution to the problem, that is, the final interpretation of the phrase “procurement and commissioning”, is delivered by C and A in collaboration (1189, 1190, 1191).

## 4.2. Discourse structural miscommunication

Negotiation is a task oriented activity, during which the participants interact to learn about their mutual expectations, beliefs and ideas in

order to reach an outcome satisfying to all parties. They continuously have to check the preconditions for the talk; what is meant with a certain expression, what has been discussed or agreed upon so far. “Speakers do not come with a full supply of knowledge (what a speaker knows and what a hearer knows) and metaknowledge (what speakers and hearers know or assume to know about their respective knowledge and what parts of each knowledge base they know the other to share) about shared information. Information states evolve as different domains of knowledge become relevant to current topics and as listener reactions display the current status of a particular piece of information.” (Schiffrin, 1987: 204-205). During this process of alignment the progression of the conversation is put on hold while the participants attempt to straighten out problems making requests for confirmation, clarification and completion. These conversational breaks are grouped under the next heading, the discourse structural miscommunication. (Fig. 2).

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DISCOURSE STRUCTURAL MISCOMMUNICATION	
Participants want confirmation	
Indications:	The listener asks direct questions often prefaced by meta expressions e.g. “So everything sum up...can you say this?”
Participants want clarification	
Indications:	The listener asks direct questions often prefaced by meta expressions e.g. “When you say...what do you mean...?”
Participants want completion	
Indications:	The listener asks direct questions often prefaced by meta expressions e.g. “Tell me a little more about...”
Problem source	<b>Local</b>
The problem is	<b>Thematized</b>
and	<b>Solved</b> by the first speaker often in cooperation with other participants

**Fig. 2. Analytic categories of miscommunication; discourse structural problems.**

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The discourse structural miscommunication concerns the propositional or referential content of a sequence of talk in contrast to lexical

miscommunication that mainly deals with the lexical content of the turn even though both sequences may be prefaced with the words “What do you mean...?” In other words, a discourse structural problem may first be indicated as a lexical problem, but then it develops into a problem about some aspect of the task that the participants have to perform. The conversational breaks of this type were due to unclear or insufficient information or to the speaker’s need for confirmation of his interpretation of a particular stretch of talk.

#### 4.2.1. Requests for confirmation

The overwhelming part of the miscommunication of discourse structural type consists of requests for confirmation. The group displays a question pattern that seems to be typical for this kind of task oriented interaction. After an expository turn by one of the participants, another party seeks confirmation that he has grasped the message either through repetition or through reformulation of the message as example 4 illustrates. Here the American B wants to know if the health care system in Bulgaria is a state controlled health care system or a private system.

- |            |  |
|------------|--|
| Example 4  | ECS  |
| B Am: 202  | (....)in in Bulgaria, do you see <b>your system moving to: a a private system</b> , or what do you see happening?  |
| S Bul: 203 | There is er a strong ideas for this moving, but actually this, at the moment these are only ideas er=  |
| B Am: 204  | =So it’s <b>still very much a government controlled</b> — ?  |
| S Bul: 205 | <b>Yes yes</b> , and er everywhere ... almost everywhere proba, probably eighty percent of the chiefs of the hospitals and erh factories etcetera are from the last party and they try to keep the old system and this is actually the main problem now in the moment ... but ehr actually the the idea, is to move ... more in the private ... uhm I can’t say in the private medicine at all — |
| B Am: 206  | <b>But in that direction?</b>  |
| S Bul: 207 | <b>But er yes and in in the direction</b>  |
| B Am: 208  | <b>That doesn’t mean total privatization <u>but in that direction</u></b>  |
| S Bul: 209 | <b><u>No no this is this is impossible to make total privatization</u></b> because for instance er the price of one er erh medical apparatus er is very high.../the rest of the turn omitted/  |

In example 4 the American rephrases and repeats his question (204, 206 and 208) to make sure that he has understood the Bulgarian, who repeats and elaborates (205, 207, 209) his first answer (205) and each time he qualifies his answer with further details.

#### 4.2.2. Requests for clarification

Several of the requests for clarification, were prefaced with expressions such as “What do you mean?” but it cannot be irrefutably stated that these requests for clarifications emanate from difficulties in understanding the language. If anything, the participants are uncertain about some aspects of the propositional or referential content of a turn and want to to elicit additional information from the other party.

In the following example 5, a Swedish buyer, L. Swe, is discussing the paragraphs of a sales contract concerning the installation of a new instrument with a British seller, J Eng.

- |            |       |  |
|------------|-------|--|
| Example 5. | SwE 2 |  |
| L Swe: 262 |       | <b>Appropriate services, what do you mean by that?</b> It’s er—  |
| J Eng: 263 |       | The appropriate services, that that is er <b>electricity</b> (L Swe: Oh, ok) <b>er the the machines have oil, fuel, this sort of thing, things that are outside our control.</b> |

The Swede displays an interpretation problem with the phrase “appropriate services” which he finds in the contract draft and is provided with the needed information by the Englishman. The turns in example 5 can be compared to and contrasted with the turns of example 1. Both the sequences are built up in a similar way. However, in the first example the speaker is satisfied with a lexical explanation of the term and the conversation on the former topic is continued. In the case of example 5, the question is used as a start for evolving a new topic, and the answer gives the premises for the rest of the talk on this topic.

#### 4.2.3. Requests for completion

The requests for completion are few. There is no indication in these instances that the speaker does not understand the preceding talk; he just wants additional names, more precise figures or some other supplementary information as the Swede A does when he comments on the Pole M’s report about the activities at the Polish university: “I was

impressed by the series of seminars that you talked about. Tell me a little bit more about them, how the... you, you are doing it for a fairly long time, couple of weeks or ten days or something?"

## **5. Managing lexical and discourse structural miscommunication**

How do non-native speakers of English (NNS) and native speakers of English (NS) cope with miscommunication? How do they signal that they have problems and how do they solve them? Do NNS and NS use different strategies? Is miscommunication always a negative factor? The answers to these questions differ according to the type of miscommunication.

### **5.1. Lexical miscommunication**

According to Faerch & Kasper (1984) language users faced with communication problems can adopt two types of behavior, avoidance behavior, i.e. renouncing (part of) their original communication goal, or achievement behavior, i.e. attempting to maintain their original aim by developing an alternative plan. These behavior types manifest themselves in reduction strategies and achievement strategies. It is quite evident when studying the material in toto that some of the participants reduce their contribution considerably or even refrain from speaking at all. However, it is impossible to say whether this is the result of a conscious communicative strategy or not and therefore only the achievement strategies will be discussed here. Faerch & Kasper (1984) divide these strategies into non-cooperative (the NNS manages to solve his problems on his own) and cooperative (the NNS reaches a solution to the problem with the assistance of another interlocutor) strategies. In 54% of the instances of lexical miscommunication the NNS helps himself, searches his mind for the right word and corrects his grammar and if he still is uncertain about having come up with the correct word he explains or expands the topic as the Hungarian M does in turn 312 (ECS): "In the futures... in Hungary the standards are are... are not... playing... as a as a... act, as a... as a law... (XX)... that means that it's not obligative".

The cooperative strategies involve a joint problem-solving effort by the interactants initiated through a direct or indirect appeal by the NNS.

All the instances of appeals for help from the NNS were responded to, but it is notable that help is given by another NNS in nearly half the cases. (Out of the cooperative instances, 46% of the total number, 21% were instances where help was given by a NS to a NNS, 25% by a NNS to a NNS.) The NS seem to be reluctant to correct and suggest words and phrases.

During the SwE 1 negotiation the English team shows this caution when dealing with language errors produced by the Swedish team. Towards the end of the meeting the question of quality control and maintenance comes up. The Swede C does not distinguish between the words “prevented” and “preventative”. The Englishman R tactfully provides the correct form unobtrusively embedded in his own turn (ex. 6).

Example 6 SwE 1

- C Sw: 943 ...and also, have you some sort of connection between your quality result, according to, your er **prevented maintenance?**... Do you have any procedure, at any time for **prevented maintenance?**
- R Eng: 944 We have a new structure for **preventative maintenance**

This way of correcting the NNS participant is similar to what Day et al. (1984) call off-record corrective feedback. In their investigation of corrective feedback in NS-NNS discourse they distinguished between on-record corrective feedback; i.e. when the NS in response to an NNS’s error supplies corrective feedback with declaratory intonation and off-record corrective feedback; when the response can be either a question or a statement and can be interpreted in at least two ways: as corrective feedback or as continuing contributions to the conversation.

Contrary to the investigation of Day et al. (1984) only a few occurrences of on-record corrective feedback were found in this data base. One reason for this may be that self-repair is preferred before other-repair in ordinary conversation (Schegloff et al, 1974). However, there are some exceptions to this and the most obvious example is the interaction between a child and an adult and this exception would also be relevant to interaction between competent native speakers and not yet competent speakers regardless of age (Schegloff et al, 1977). In Juvonen’s (1989) investigation about repair in second-language instruction, which included teaching activities as well as non-teaching activities, it was found that the type of discourse determined the way repairs

were made. In the non-teaching activities a preference for self-repair was at work, but in the teaching activities the expert role of the teacher is more salient and therefore more face-threatening repair patterns were more likely to occur. So even if this investigation concerns interaction between NS and NNS it is very unlikely that the NS participants should make use of on-record corrective feedback in this type of discourse where the participants have equal status.

Another reason could be that the main part of the word searching instances in this investigation were found in the beginning of the negotiations, that is in the presentation phase which often has a monological character (Öberg (1993), as the different participants present their cases and try to pinpoint the problems. During this phase the parties also try to establish a positive working climate and therefore it could be a delicate matter to question or correct the other party's language.

Lexical miscommunication that signals a person's 'foreign language footing' can also be a positive contribution to the interaction as it may help to promote an air of sympathy and cooperation obliging the NS to try to understand and grasp the speaker's meaning. (Bülow-Möller, 1993; Marriott, 1992).

Discussions about the meaning of key concepts can also be used as a resource to expand and elucidate the issue at hand, which is illustrated in example 3. During the previous discussions it has become evident that East and West have different ideas about what a clinical engineer is and what his responsibilities are and the debate about the meaning of the phrase "procurement and commissioning" is used as a contribution to that discussion. When the Bulgarian raises the question about the meaning of the word "procurement" it induces the other participants to give their conflicting interpretation of the word. Then the Englishman gives an explanation of the term that amounts to a summary of some of the different tasks a clinical engineer is supposed to perform. Thus, in this section not only the words are defined, but also to some extent the responsibilities of the clinical engineer. The negotiation of the meaning of the phrase "procurement and commissioning" has created a new basis from which further discussions can start.

## 5.2. Discourse-structural level

Negotiations are task oriented activities, predetermining the interaction into one of information exchange and argumentation and decision making. With requests for confirmation, clarification and completion the participants monitor the negotiation. The requests are sometimes prefaced by expressions such as “If I understand you correctly...?”, “So you mean...?” but these expressions do not necessarily indicate language problems. It may be that one participant does not understand what his opponent is saying and therefore needs an explanation or a complementary piece of information, but these interruptions in the flow of interaction may also be used as a resource to elicit additional information and to implicate the opponent in a decision process.

A specific chain pattern of questions, that seems to be typical within a negotiating activity, is a combination of requests for clarification and requests for confirmation and/or requests of completion. This question pattern has different functions. It could define a crucial problem and delimit the bargaining room or lead up to a standpoint on the issue. In example 7 the Englishman D looks at the drawings of components of a new machine that the Swede L wants the Englishmen to produce. D sums up the proposal in a request for confirmation: “So this is the package you’re, you’re asking us to consider?” L confirms and adds some more detailed figures which D repeats in order to grasp the size of the business proposition. Through a complementary question he learns that these components are unique, which leads to another reflection by R. They might need new tooling and R makes another request of confirmation in turn 1045.

Example 7 SwE 1

R Eng: 1045 **So you’re...you’re looking for, for tooling and, pressings on this?**

L Sw: 1046 Yes...And we would like to, to buy a a...complete package (D Eng: Yeah) included er technical er supplies

D Eng: 1047 Mm, that makes sense(.....)  
Turns 1048 - 1052 omitted

R Eng: 1053 **So you’re looking for a total management package on those parts?**

L Sw: 1054 Yes, we are discussing to to to, I think that’s the easiest way to to handle this, because we have, we don’t have any, we don’t have so much capacity here in (xx)  
Turns 1055 - 1063 omitted

L Sw: 1064 **So, you think you will handle our inquiry?**

D Eng: 1065 Yes

After yet another complementary question from D (not reprinted here), about where the machine is going to be assembled, R considers the consequences of this answer and asks a question of confirmation (1053). In this way, by an extended step-by-step procedure the Englishmen elicit all the necessary information for a decision, the scope of delivery, the quality requirements and the time schedule. Jointly the Swede and the Englishmen establish the basis for a decision and when L, using a request for confirmation (1064), asks if the Englishmen want to consider the business proposal, they are ready to say yes.

This chain of questions could also be used as a topic change strategy. An abrupt change of the topic may irritate other interlocutors and the speaker may even run the risk of being ignored. To use the just described step-by-step speech pattern can be a safer way to gradually cajole one's opponents into a change of topic and thereby regulate the agenda in one's own interest. The Yugoslavian A uses this strategy when he turns the discussion about quality assurance and standards into a discussion about the position of the clinical engineer within the healthcare system (Ex. 8).

Example 8 ECS

A Yug: 306 **May, may I ask** er in Hungary, does there exist er government controlled or government subsidized er standardization institution which is now trying to arrange for this new quality testing institutional or is there just new—  
Turns 307-308 omitted

A Yug: 309 **So you have translated now the standards or just adopted and nationalized**

M Hun: 310 Yes...yes...Yes.../the rest of the turn omitted/

A Yug: 311 Yeah No Ok now you have the standards which are like Western type of standards European standards **how these standards are right enforced in practise** (.....)  
Turns 312-320 omitted

A Yug: 321 **So it actually at this moment, all this standards, like the, IEC standards 601 and so on, they do not apply...to a hospital, they have not to use it**

M Hun: 322 They they can recommendations now...they're only recommendations

A Yug: 323

(XX XX) its only for the (XX) because they do they are not enforced to use it so they have no clinical engineers that may test this or do it **it's very similar in Yugoslavia see=**

A first starts (306) to find out if Hungary has a special institution that is responsible for the upkeep of international standards and he follows up with a question about what kind of standards Hungary has adopted (309). The crucial question for A is if these standards are obligatory (311) and if they are not, how they are reinforced. Finally he asks about what happens with these standards within the hospitals (321). Now A has reached the point where he can start drawing conclusions about what the upkeep of these rules means to the status of clinical engineers, because they have the responsibility to reinforce these rules.

To be noted is that the turns 1045, 1053 and 1064 in example 7 as well as the turns 309 and 321 in example 8 are initiated with a marked so. According to Schiffrin (1984) so is used when newly shared information is employed as a basis for the interpretation of topical talk. She further claims that “by marking response as an inference warranted by one’s interlocutor, a respondent assigns to the initial speaker partial responsibility for the accuracy of his/her own inference”. (Schiffrin, 1984:215). In other words this speech pattern not only elicits needed information, but it also incorporates the other speaker in the process and makes him co-responsible for the final stance taken at the end of this interactive process and the final decision or the topic change can emerge as the joint construction of the participants.

## 6. Socio-cultural miscommunication

There are several differences between the socio-cultural miscommunication on the one hand and the lexical and the discourse structural miscommunication on the other hand.

Firstly, contrary to the case with indicators of lexical and discourse structural miscommunication, the indicators of socio-cultural miscommunication are seldom explicit. The signals of miscommunication could be silence, verbal or non-verbal signs of uneasiness and unexpected changes of topics. Occasionally there can be open protests or direct questions.

Secondly, the problem source of socio-cultural miscommunication is difficult to trace. The problem source of lexical miscommunication is

locally positioned in the immediate preceding turns or even in the same turn and it is easily identified. The problem source of discourse structural miscommunication is positioned within a more comprehensive context, but still firmly situated within the negotiating activity. It is easily identified as it concerns the propositional content which has been misrepresented or misunderstood. The problem source of socio-cultural miscommunication is global in the sense that the problem source is not to be found in the immediately preceding turns of talk but earlier in the interaction or in the prerequisites of the talk, in the participant's cultural or social background or in a combination of these preconditions.

Thirdly, while all the negotiators are aware of the lexical and discourse structural problems, they are mainly not fully aware of the socio-cultural complications which may have the effect that socio-cultural problems are perceived only vaguely or not at all.

Fourthly, the lexical and discourse structural problems are in most cases expressed and addressed (=thematized) and therefore possibly solved. The socio-cultural problems on the other hand, may be expressed or remain unexpressed (=not thematized) and consequently they may be or they may not be solved.

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## SOCIO-CULTURAL MISCOMMUNICATION

### A. Thematized

Participants are aware that something is wrong.

Indications:	Verbal and non-verbal signs of uncertainty and confusion. Open protests or direct questions
Problem source the problem is and	<b>Global</b> <b>Thematized</b> <b>may be solved</b> by the participants often in cooperation

### B. Not Thematized

Participants are vaguely or not at all aware that something is wrong

Indications:	Silence. Change of subject. Incomplete turns. Verbal and non-verbal signs of discomfort
Problem source the problem is and	<b>Global</b> <b>Not thematized</b> therefore the problem is <b>Not solved</b>

**Fig. 3. Analytic categories of miscommunication; socio-cultural problems.**

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In the A instances the problem was recognized both by the participants and the analyst. In the B instances the problem was not recognized, at least not openly acknowledged, by the participants but spotted by the analyst. The indicator could be an irritated tone of voice or expressions of surprise or discomfort. Even if some problems are thematized and some not, the distinction between the categories within this heterogeneous group of miscommunicative instances is not sharp. Sometimes more than one problem was present and a surface problem could be solved while others were just acknowledged and still others were ignored or not even perceived. Instead of making a futile attempt to divide this type of miscommunication into more detailed subgroups some examples will be described in order to illustrate the different properties of these miscommunication events and to describe in which way they can be handled and used by the NS and NNS.

### **6.1. Examples of socio-cultural miscommunication**

The first illustration, taken from ECS, contains an animated argument about how to cut the cost of the course that the participants are planning. Assuming that driving a car is just as cheap and convenient in Europe as in the US the American B suggests that the students should take their cars and drive through Europe to the agreed site of the course. This suggestion is forcefully contested by the Hungarian N and the Englishman C who claim that travelling expenses in Europe are exorbitant or as the Englishman expresses it: "Those travel figures are out of court!". The nonplussed American exclaims: "Are we saying that the costs of going by car are roughly the same as going by airplane?" However, the American understands his mistake and withdraws the suggestion and the problem is solved. In this case the problem source was the American's lack of sufficient background knowledge, but the problem was recognized and addressed.

In the next example (ex. 9) the problem is solved, but only on the surface. The first part of ECS has been devoted to reports and descriptions of the situation within the bioengineering field in Eastern Europe. Suddenly the Czech I makes an unexpected suggestion which upsets the Westerners:

## Example 9 ECS

- I Cze: 819 **Do I understand it correctly that we finish for example now on these east-west communication and the next part is the west-east communication** or... because, N raised you know **a questionnaire for the east part and the for the west part**, and we manage now the east part to the west, and now there are you know a number of question which covers partly you know the problems we have touched, so will we now organize **so that the representatives of the Western countries will give accounts to the East countries** (B Am: Aaaah ) it is not mentioned so ?
- J Eng: 820 **An account of? (I Cze: XX) an account of what?**
- I Cze: 821 Of these questions you know
- N Hun: 822 Of of what's appropriate (I Cze: Yeah) from those questions because not all er (I Cze: Erhm but than just)
- B Am: 823 **I I I never viewed er as the Westerners here were going to... give er give that kind of of an answer that collectively** we would discuss issues er and and reach some common er reach some consensus on recommendation (J Eng: Absolutely) well...
- N Hun: 824 I er let let me just add to this intent and clear probably that but he meant then we can talk that there are certain questions which (.....)

The Czech I's suggestion that the situation in the West should also be reported on, upsets the Westerners. The sudden sharp tone in the American's voice and the quickening speed of J Eng's speech reveal their disapproval of the suggestion. In his statement I refers to a questionnaire directed both to the Eastern parties and the Western parties and written by the Hungarian N. The delegates try to find the letter in question and the whole episode is concluded with a compromise. The delegates from the West will give some information about educational programs in the EC.

At first glance it seems as if the problem source here is a forgotten letter. But there could also be other explanations. Saville-Troike & Kleifgen (1986) have investigated and analyzed the communication in a public elementary school that serves children from a variety of language backgrounds and they have organized their findings into three levels of interaction: scripts, structures and codes. The category of scripts included rules and expectations for behavior and they found that "the most serious miscommunication between teachers and students

occurred where their scripts included conflicting rules and expectations for classroom behavior”.

In this case there could be a misconception about what script that is valid. Is this an informal talk on equal terms between friends, or is this a formal or informal negotiation on unequal terms between benefactors and beneficiaries?

A misconception could have been generated in the very beginning of the meeting when the Czech I asks in a very formal way: “I’m sorry I’m interrupting you **Mr. President** ...”

By starting his turn in this formal way I indicates that he has come to take part in a formal negotiation but B tells him that this will be a very informal meeting. B also stresses the informality after lunch when the Pole M joins the meeting. “This is a *very* informal group” and that he hopes “that they will come up with some points of action that they will be able to accomplish as a collective body”. One interpretation could be that I has taken B’s declarations too literally. He now acts as if this is an informal discussion between friends that mutually entrust each other with information.

A third example of social-cultural miscommunication, too long to be reproduced in toto, is the following discussion from ECS about the form of the final report from the meeting. Should the individual summaries of the current state of the Eastern countries be included or not? This sequence (ex 10) opens with an unexpected question by the Hungarian N:

- |             |  |
|-------------|--|
| Example 10  | ECS  |
| N Hun: 1732 | Who is going to receive these reports? or who are going to receive   |
| B Am: 1733  | That’s...  |
| N Hun: 1734 | Because er if if we want to distribute it for, I don’t know, lots of people then probably it would be better to have a conclusion within the report referring to the individual reports, and not attach it to the report... er exactly, but refer to it, because I see that’s lots of problem which we were talk, talking about they are similar, so it can, can be summarized, er saying that this regional, and, referring and, er relevant to all of the countries (J Eng:Yep so) of course, these reports which we made they are not secret they are available, but probably its its not necessary to be attached to everybody who will receive the reports. |

B starts to answer the question in a hesitant tone of voice, but N interrupts and reformulates his question and adds (1747 ): “(.....) it is very easy to say that it was so simple and so so natural that all these things (C Eng: Ja) things we schemed up *now* (C Eng: Sure), but yesterday morning it was not... (C Eng: Right) (.....)”. But as N does not express his anxiety quite openly, the Western delegates treat this issue as a technical problem, while the Eastern delegates are noticeably silent. Not until after turn 1763 when B addresses the anxiety issue questioning all the Eastern delegates about their feelings in this matter, do the Eastern delegates break their silence and it becomes clear that the others share N’s discomfort (Ex. 11).

Example 11 ECS

B Am: 1763 *Ok... aah is there is there anyone... who feels... that there... er that the written version of their national pre presentation is er... confidential document that’s not available to anyone who requests it? What is the view about... that attachment?*

Turn 1764 omitted

A Yug: 1765 *If they’re declared as, personal views, of us, its ok but they’re, will declared as official statement (C Eng: /mumbles/ Yeah, here it comes,... no its right ) of the society is not ok because you see, we have been unable to contact like... the societies of (XX) and so on in this short time and to get a... complete feedback so I would not like to declare that this is their (XX) what it meant was that we are=*

Now a decision not to send the reports indiscriminately is taken. The sequence ends (Ex. 12) with a relieved N trying to gloss over the episode, by giving another innocuous reason for not wanting the summaries to become official. They are badly written.

Example 12 ECS

N Hun: 1768 *=Because because when when we sent out the invitation, we indicated (C Eng: Personal) expected that (A Yug: Ja) everybody was invited in his personal capacity (A Yug: That’s interesting) not representing (A Yug: No yes I cannot take that er responsibility) neither his organization nor his nation er we invited you because you are familiar with the country,... that was the only thing, and the other thing that, I am quite sure that everybody had in his mind when he prepared the reports said: “Well I make it in a*

way which is probably not very academic or in a little bit loopy in in the wording but it goes among friends and and then nobody will misunderstand some sentences”, which could be otherwise, because we have to formally this way, so this report is very frank in a sense and if it goes unlimited to everybody’s hand, it might cause some, in certain cases, some kind of of of conflicts and I am not sure (XX)

Blum-Kulka & Weizman (1988) claim that communication is inherently ambiguous, which is a result of the fact that speakers often have vested face interests in keeping up a certain level of ambiguity. The vagueness and shifting accountability in N Hun’s turns makes it probable that this claim is valid also in this sequence. The indefinite forms in his last turn “it **might** cause **some** in **certain** cases **some kind of** of of conflicts and I am **not sure**.....” also indicate that his real reason for holding up the negotiation has not been made explicit. That some of the Western delegates suspect another reason too, but by reasons of face saving never ask why and wherefore, might be deduced from C Eng’s mumbling in turn 1765, example 11.

There seems to be a great difference between the ECS negotiation and the business negotiations. There are hardly any instances of socio-cultural miscommunication in the business negotiations. The negotiators here have established routinized ways of handling problems and they act on behalf on someone else. This enables them to distance themselves from the problems through expressions like: “I have talked to our service people and they expect”, “My colleague is suggesting that...”.

A sequence taken from the beginning of the Swe 2 negotiation, where a discussion about ‘after sales service’ occurs, illustrates this distancing strategy (ex. 13). The Englishman J has, at an earlier point, promised the Swedes to have an engineer on site within 24 hours of fault diagnosis, but now the contract says within 3 days. The two firms have different business cultures, which is evident from some comments in Swedish within the Swedish team, before and after this segment. The English salesmen are said to make agreements with the buyer and sign the order but then the contract is drawn up by the firm’s lawyer and the first paragraph says that all verbal agreements are invalid. In the following sequence, example 14, the Swedes insist on the 24 hour

wording, while the Englishman claims that even if the contract says 3 days, it is practically the same as 24 hours.

- Example 13 SwE 2
- L Sw: 46 “(.....) guaranteed to have an engineer at site... within a maximum of 3 days of fault diagnosis (XX XX)” **So, what, that, that, that, actually means=**
- T Sw: 47 =Because we we, we talked about, 24 hours
- J Eng: 48 Yes, yes, I I, talked to **our service people**, and generally **er they would expect to have somebody here the following day, but er they have a limited resource, they have about 20 engineers** and normally there is an engineer... that is either... in Noncest or in, in a close er in a company close to Noncest. But **he’s looked at the worst case** if all the engineers, were, on, some overseas er job and (.....)
- Turns 50-72 omitted
- L Sw: 73 /the beginning of the turn omitted/ be because **we we think** that... generally **we we say like that that... we can’t...** of course that’s always when it’s, it’s down, it’s always the worst case but generally **we we’re talking about... we need 24 hours on the engineer to get there** (J Eng: Right) and **we can’t accept more than, 24 working hours, as a standstill. That’s our general... rule** (.....)
- Turns 74-80 omitted
- J Eng: 81 No, that’s right, normally (L Sw: Er *ok*) I I think erm ju just going back to the, to the 3 days that it was, **the only concern that our, service department has** was, using the word “guarantee” erm because, **they, they normally would achieve it**, but there will be one or two instances when it would be difficult **that was their concern, and they would didn’t want to say “guarantee” when they—**

The problem indicated in this sequence with a direct question (46) is not if the engineer should be on site within 24 hours or more. The parties agree on 24 hours but they disagree on the necessity to put the agreement in print. The problem source seems to be differing assessments of verbal agreements. The Englishman J seems not to be empowered to change the wording in the contract and in order to free himself from personal responsibility on this point he refers to “he”, i.e. the company’s lawyer, in turn 49, and to the service people and the

service department in turns 49 and 81. In the same way L Sw dissociates himself as a person from the issue through the use of “us” and “our”, in turn 73. By laying the blame for a contentious point on someone else or on the company policy, they manage to continue the discussion in a friendly atmosphere.

## **6.2. Managing socio-cultural miscommunication**

Kreuz & Roberts (1993) call miscommunication, similar to the kind illustrated here in examples 10, 11, 12, pragmatic errors. “These errors, refer to the breakdown of the social and contextual components of a discourse. Perhaps the most typical way for pragmatic errors to occur is through unintentional violations of Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle. Therefore, when speakers launch into lengthy, irrelevant monologues, or fail to provide crucial information, they are committing pragmatic errors”, (Kreuz & Roberts 1993:241).

Thomas (1983) prefers the term pragmatic failure and applies this term to an “inability to understand ‘what is meant by what is said’” (Thomas 1983:91). She further claims that there are ‘pragmatic ground rules’ which are cross-culturally different. “Every competent native speaker knows that there are times when what is said cannot be taken at face value but must be interpreted according to different ground rules ... Over the centuries, when the natives have told the British colonist that the village was just over the hill when it was really ten miles distant or that the work would be done manana, they no more expected to be taken literally than I, when I inquire how you are, want to hear about your hammer toes and haemorrhoids,” (Thomas 1983:106-07). In example 10, when I takes B’s statement about an informal meeting at its face value, it can be said, that the interlocutors have different pragmatic ground rules. These ground rules are at odds and therefore a pragmatic mistake may be unavoidable.

The four examples of socio-cultural miscommunication show that the problem indicators of socio-cultural miscommunication can be very diverse, and the problem sources varying. To establish a connection between problem and problem source is a delicate matter to say the least. Lack of background knowledge of substantial facts such as the price of gasoline in Europe is a problem source easy to determine and a problem easy to solve. Why someone’s utterance is met with complete

silence or anger or just confusion may be more difficult to ascertain and therefore the participants become uncertain as to how to handle the situation.

If established patterns seem to exist to cope with communicative problems caused by lexical and discourse structural miscommunication, improvisations seem to be the problem solution to socio-cultural miscommunication. Nonetheless, even if the socio-cultural problems are complex and difficult to solve it is important to try, as failures to solve the problems affect not only the possibility to satisfactorily accomplish the given task, but also the mutual evaluations of the participants as Kreuz & Roberts (1993), Marriot (1992) have shown in their studies. The follow-up interviews of this investigation also indicated that the lack of full understanding affected the assessment of the East City seminar. As one of the East European delegates said: "It was a meeting where two trains were passing each other."

In the firmly established frame of a business negotiation these problems seem to cause few complications, especially if the participants have long experience of dealing with one another. References to colleagues or superiors are one way to avoid getting too deeply involved in the problems. In talks such as the ECS negotiation of which the framework is less clearly defined, problems sometimes emerge quite unexpectedly and perplex the participants. One problemsolving strategy then, may be to reformulate the problem into a less aggravating question as the participants in example 9 do. Another strategy may be to "fish" for the real reason behind a particular comment as B is hesitantly trying to do in example 11. When solving this kind of problem, a participant's personality and general experience and knowledge is more important in determining his choice of strategy than his language affiliation.

## **7. Concluding discussion**

Communication is a collaborative enterprise. Speakers and listeners must coordinate their efforts if the interaction is to succeed. Many researchers, e. g. Thomas (1983) and Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1986), are mostly concerned with the obligation for the speaker (in this case the NNS) to make him or herself understood. But the listener (in this case the NS) also has a duty to understand. When the collaboration fails, both parties must share the responsibility. "The duty to understand is

not a matter of just understanding the words, (determining the sentence meaning), but also of understanding the sense the words acquire in the particular context of an utterance (determining the utterance meaning), and the point of the speaker's use of those words in that context and their possible implicit and indirect message (determining the speaker's meaning) ... In particular, it involves the ability to detect what can and what cannot be said or signaled in a given situation..." (Dascal & Berenstein 1987:143). The analysis shows that the participants in the negotiations here under investigation acknowledge this duty to understand and that they make use of all the resources available in this context in their collaborative work to establish mutual understanding.

Firstly, the main resource to be used when trying to reach understanding is the discourse process itself, regardless if it is managed by native speakers or by native speakers and non-native speakers. Moreover, if an interlocutor is committed to the task to make him or herself understood and to understand the other party he or she is bound to react to and deal also with instances of incipient miscommunication and try to use them as a resource rather than let them develop into fullblown misunderstandings. The participants in the negotiations analyzed above, not only avert the impending miscommunication, but also use these instances of miscommunication as a resource to elicit and expand relevant information, or to disambiguate unclear points and to implicate the opponent in the decision process. Moreover, through reacting to and dealing with instances of miscommunication that can be attributed to inadequate language proficiency the participants may sometimes promote an atmosphere of understanding between the participants which will help to develop personal relationships.

Secondly, negotiations are primarily task-oriented activities and this focus on the task may facilitate the communication for the native speaker as well as the non-native speaker. In other words, the participants' possible expertise and knowledge about the issues at stake is a resource used when eliciting and making sense of complex information. The emphasis on the importance of the problems presented by the issues at hand, may very well override the significance of the problems presented by the participants' varying and sometimes insufficient language competence. This is not to say that the question of language competence is of no importance. There is a lowest possible limit of acceptable language competence. Without this competence one cannot

take part in the interaction and perform the task of negotiating.

Thirdly, negotiations are a highly structured form of communication, with conventionalized forms of interaction. The negotiation format can be used as a communicative resource too, provided that both parties have the same general notion about what a negotiation is and how it should be conducted. So when people from different countries, with different language backgrounds meet to discuss and solve problems, their communicative behavior is informed by their orientation to and knowledge about the tasks and the negotiation format.

However, there are instances when the collaborative efforts to reach understanding fail. Problems due to lack of knowledge about the prerequisites of the meeting, about facts and conversational norms related to the opponents' social and cultural backgrounds and failures to employ imagination in an effort to grasp the meaning of an opponent's utterance could cause misunderstandings. This miscommunication is often linked to the affective or relational dimension of interaction. The shared responsibility for the progress of the interaction becomes particularly evident when pragmatic failures occur. Just as the speaker has to be relevant, truthful, unambiguous and orderly and provide the right amount of information, the listener has to do his best to grasp the speaker's wishes and ideas. Failures to do so affect not only the outcome of the negotiation but also the mutual evaluations of the participants. But when the participants are alive to the potential problems and actively address them and possibly solve them, instances of miscommunication can be used as a resource to bring the discussion forward and to give the participants deeper insights not only into the problem at hand but also into the opponents' ideas and ways of thinking. This would further the outcome of the negotiation and moreover, also enrich each individual participant with valuable knowledge and experience.

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