

“What do you like about Spain?”

Building understandings of people and places in interaction mediated by plurilingual and digital resources

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Introduction

In today's highly diverse and interconnected societies, youth's lives, and their encounters with close or distant people, languages and cultures, are significantly and regularly shaped by multimodal, digital communication technologies. These do not just mediate but actually model and transform their social interactions and shape their expectations and understandings of self, others and 'the world' at many scales and dimensions. As sociolinguists and educators, approaching and illuminating the complexity of how young people navigate the constellations of information, social relations, resources and possibilities afforded by the ensemble of social diversity and digital communications seems like a necessary action – one that should be developed from an action/activist research stance. This approach can provide researchers, educators and youth with spaces and opportunities to critically and collaboratively reflect upon their preconceptions and stereotypical expectations of themselves and others and how these transpire into specific interactions, as a first step to deconstruct or transform worldviews and dispositions.

This chapter focuses on a sequence of interaction, recorded using ethnographic methods, involving young people with different linguistic and cultural repertoires taking part in an after-school digital storytelling program. We are interested in how participants give meaning to the 'context' of their encounter and, in particular, how they identify themselves, each other and places. We also discuss the resources they mobilise in managing interaction. The main theoretical tools discussed in the next section are membership categorisation and transidiomatic practices. The research project that yielded the data presented and the methodology employed are then introduced, followed by the data analysis and conclusions.

Producing understandings of people and places

This chapter is primarily centred on the understandings that participants build of people and places. In the Social Sciences, 'context' is often used vaguely

to relate a particular phenomenon (e.g. an interactional encounter) to factors considered to be of a higher order (e.g. the 'who', 'when', 'where', 'why'). Despite the lack of a common definition as to what is implied when speaking about context, Goodwin and Duranti (1992), following Goffman (1974), argue that there is general consensus that context is something framing communicative events and offering resources for their interpretation.

Schegloff (1992) describes two general trends in how context is brought into research in the Social Sciences. In the first, what is of primary interest is the particular event, behaviour or statement that is framed by a context. In such studies, analysts' own understandings of different elements assumed to make up the context are invoked. This is the approach that Cameron (1990) argues strongly against in her call for a demythologised sociolinguistics. She succinctly critiques much research – especially quantitative – in this tradition for its straightforward assumption that something called 'context' somehow exists before something called 'language'. Cameron deconstructs what she terms the 'correlational fallacy', whereby analysts make use of their understanding of gender, race, class, etc. to elucidate human language behaviour, without recognising that those same elements are themselves in need of explanation. Therefore, she claims, the explanation does not in fact explain anything!

This leads to the second approach pointed to by Schegloff (1992). This is the perspective taken, in particular, in traditions such as Interactional Sociolinguistics, Linguistic Anthropology, Linguistic Ethnography, Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis – all disciplines influencing the approach taken in this chapter. Research in these traditions tends to be interested in advancing our very understanding of context; thus, context becomes an object of, not just a factor in, analyses. Context is conceived as "a socially constituted, interactively sustained, time-bound phenomenon" (Goodwin and Duranti, 1992: 6). As ten Have (2002) writes, social facts are produced through participants' practical activities, and the task of the researcher is to demonstrate the procedures through which they are accomplished. From this perspective, participants not only orient to the different phenomena that constitute context in the course of their actions; they also take part in the situated production of those phenomena.

One way that people produce context is through a procedure known as membership categorisation (e.g. Sacks, 1974). The largest body of work on membership categorisation has been concerned with identities (e.g. Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998). From the perspective of mythologised sociolinguistics, identity has been conceived of in terms of pre-existing characteristics of people that determine their language-related behaviour. From a radically different stance, membership categorisation allows identity to be conceptualised as a social fact produced in interaction.

Central to the membership categorisation apparatus is the Membership Categorisation Device (MCD), which Sacks (1974) defined as a collection of membership categories plus rules of application. We begin with the first part of the MCD apparatus, being collections of membership categories. For example,

'classroom' is one collection, which includes categories such as 'teacher' and 'student'. Related to such categories are category-bound activities and predicates, or "motives, rights, entitlements, obligations, knowledge, attributes and competencies" (Psathas, 1999: 144). Thus, the category 'teacher' is linked to the category-bound activity of 'teaching' and to certain normative expectations in terms of competences, knowledge, rights and obligations.

As for the second part of the MCD apparatus – rules of application – Sacks (1974) outlined two. The first is the economy rule, according to which a single category term from a MCD does adequate reference to a person. So, the single category 'teacher' would be enough to identify a person at any given time. The second rule – the consistency rule – states that if several people are being categorised, and the first is categorised using a category from a particular collection, it would be relevant to use that same collection to categorise the remaining people. So, once a 'teacher' has been identified, the other members present could be categorised as 'students'.

In the data studied in this chapter, participants' membership categorisation work is mediated by plurilingual and digital resources. A main feature of the data we present is the use of a laptop computer and the Google Translate tool and the young people's familiarity with Asian pop cultures. We refer to the participants' transidiomatic practices to describe the "comingling of localised, multilingual interactions and technologically mediated, digitalised communication" (Jacquemet, 2016: 8). The notion of transidiomatic practices emerged from Jacquemet's (2005) research on sociolinguistic superdiversity, migration and asylum processes, and complements other concepts that similarly extend Gumperz's (1964) approach to repertoire (e.g. plurilingualism, translanguaging (Vallejo and Dooly, 2020) or transmodalities (Hawkins, 2018)). While our research is located in a very different setting from Jacquemet's, we are inspired by his research showing how digital communication technologies (e.g. Skype, Facebook, Google) in contexts of linguistic and cultural (super)diversity are much more than facilitators of interaction; rather, they transform interactions and access to knowledge. Jacquemet (2016: 4) describes how they "alter the very nature of this interactivity, confronting people with expanded rules and resources for the construction of social identity and transforming people's sense of place, cultural belonging, and social relations".

We now turn to the methodology employed in the collection and analysis of the data presented.

Methodology

This chapter presents one aspect of a collaborative, intersectoral educational initiative – referred to as 'Let's Go!' – undertaken in a socio-economically disadvantaged municipality in the Barcelona Metropolitan Area. The initiative was aimed at boosting the English language competences of youth in the municipality. The specific work presented here was carried out as part of

the funded research project entitled ‘Inclusive epistemologies and practices of out-of-school English learning (IEP!)’, an ethnographically informed action/activist research project (Vianna and Stetsenko, 2014; Moore and Vallejo, 2018) which, among other objectives, aimed to increase youths’ access to quality non-formal opportunities for learning English. One of the after-school opportunities implemented as part of this research was a digital storytelling project, part of the ‘Global StoryBridges’ network, linking the young people with youth in other parts of the world, in order to promote their English language learning, digital literacies and critical cosmopolitanism (Hawkins, 2014). Local groups met and collectively produced video stories in English (the lingua franca) that represented different aspects of their lives, for audiences of youth at the other sites. These videos were shared on the project’s web-based platform. Alongside this digital storytelling process, different overlapping and complementary activities took place in the project sessions, including those related to building and sustaining relationships among participants, different off-task activities, etc.

The analysis presented here is of a video-recorded interaction, and we account for multimodal interactional features as well as human and non-human actors (i.e. youth and adult participants, a laptop computer with Google Translate). The names of people used in this chapter are pseudonyms, with the exception of the adult facilitators – two of whom are authors – who agree to their real names being used. The adults facilitating the session – Claudia, Emilee and Miaomiao – were guiding the youth to think of and type up a list of places that could be filmed for future digital stories. Miaomiao was a PhD student from China who participated as facilitator and researcher in the sessions. Her presence was received with great enthusiasm by the young participants, who were highly engaged with Asian pop cultures. Her participation regularly prompted questions from the young people about her interests, background and experiences, including the question that initiates the interactional sequence studied in this chapter: “What do you like about Spain?”

What do you like about Spain?

Here we focus on: (1) how participants give meaning to the ‘context’ of their encounter, and in particular how they identify themselves, each other and places; (2) the communicative resources they mobilise in managing their interaction, drawing on the theoretical tools introduced in the previous section of this chapter. Prior to the excerpt presented, the young people – Nanyamka and Naiara in particular – had established an interactional dynamic in which they typed comments or questions into the Google Translate tool in Spanish and/or English and then had Google Translate read the translation in Chinese aloud for Miaomiao to react. This was novel in the session, as interaction between the youth and Miaomiao usually took place in English, with stronger users of English – mainly Nanyamka (who was schooled in English as a child in Ghana),

- 51 NAN: *por eso* (.) *que allí no hay-*
that's it (.) *that there aren't there-*
- 52 NAI: *hay templos*
there are temples
- 53 NAN: *sí*
yes

At the beginning of the excerpt (line 5), Miaomio requests clarification about what Naiara and Nanyamka actually want to ask her. In response, Nanyamka asks Miaomio the question in English directly (line 6), and then reprimands the computer (line 8). This direct addressing of the digital artefact frames the laptop's status as an active and accountable participant in the interaction – as animator (Goffman, 1981) and recapitulator (Wadensjö, 1998) of the young people's utterances. The question itself (“what do you like about Spain?”) builds on a specific collection of membership categories – Spain – as a shared and understandable scalar sign (Blommaert, Westinen, and Leppänen, 2015) upon which to build the interaction. This ‘benchmark’ scalar reference (Blommaert, Westinen, and Leppänen, 2015) varies and requires clarification from some participants as the sequence evolves, as we will see later on in this analysis. Mobilising the reference to Spain makes membership categories such as ‘Spanish people’ and ‘foreigners’ (or ‘Chinese people’) relevant to the interaction, together with different stereotypes regarding the activities and predicates associated with them.

Miaomio's answers to the question (“weather”, “food” and “the church”, lines 10 and 14) raise a series of reactions that are telling of alignments and misalignments between the young participants' categorisation of her as a Chinese person in Spain, their normative expectations of her and her listed preferences. On one hand, Miaomio's reference to the weather prompts general laughter as, paradoxically, it was raining heavily that day. This laughter, along with Nanyamka's alignment (“weather is beautiful”, line 13) and Miaomio's later clarification (“not today not today”, line 14) bridges the apparent gap between Miaomio's fondness for Spanish weather and the current reality in a way that is not disruptive. The second of Miaomio's favourite features of Spain, food, does not seem to incite any reaction, probably as it meets the group's category-bound expectations about things that foreigners like about Spain. However, her third preference, the church, leads to quite a different reaction from the young participants, as expressed both verbally and through gesture and gaze. In line 15, and after Miaomio lists her three preferences, Nanyamka takes on the role of interpreter but translates only this last response to Spanish for her peers (“la iglesia”), with falling intonation and an aerial stroke of her right hand (see Figure 13.1). She thereby draws attention to and shows a lack of keenness for Miaomio's choice. Naiara's reaction, opening her eyes wide and turning her gaze from Nanyamka to Miaomio (Figure 13.2), to then request Nanyamka's confirmation by repeating the same word in Spanish with rising intonation (lines 16–17), shows her own bewilderment. Meanwhile, Nanyamka and Sara (another one of the young participants) make eye contact and exchange serious and confused facial expressions (Figure 13.2).



Figure 13.1 Screenshot from line 15



Figure 13.2 Screenshot from line 16

In line 20, Nanyamka continues in the role of interpreter, translating Naiara's request for confirmation into English for Miaomio ("church right?"). Miaomio, who seems quite unaware of the young people's surprise, confirms ("yes church", line 21), and then Nanyamka, switching into Spanish, ratifies Naiara's understanding with a "lo que escuchas, iglesia" ("what you hear, church") in line 22. In line 23, acknowledging the young girls' puzzlement, Claudia, another one of the adult facilitators, prompts Naiara to ask Miaomio



Figure 13.3 Screenshot from line 29

about her preference for the church (“ask her Naiara, ask her why”), which Naiara does in line 24 (“why?”), prompting embarrassed laughter from Sara. In line 26, Miaomio repeats Naiara’s question, as though she is unaware that her taste for the church is an issue for discussion. At this point, Julián, who until now had not spoken, addresses Naiara in Spanish and asks her if she is surprised by Miaomio’s fondness of the church (“¿te sorprende?”, line 28), to which Naiara responds with a “no” without moving her gaze from Miaomio, awaiting her answer.

Miaomio’s response to Naiara in line 30 (“because is beautiful, the weather’s beautiful”) reproduces Nanyamka’s earlier utterance from line 13, while also proving that Miaomio has not followed the course of the young people’s exchanges or the reason for the confusion. In her next turn (line 31), Nanyamka also requests Miaomio’s clarification by asking “but here or in Barcelona?”, thus adjusting the shared contextual reference from the scale of the nation-state to a more local one (i.e. “here” in the municipality where the project takes place, or the city of Barcelona). This request to rescale the place of reference suggests that Nanyamka is trying to plausibly align Miaomio’s preferences with the young people’s normative expectations of her. While Barcelona is an international tourist destination due in part to its architecture, including its churches, the young participants had previously discarded the church in their own town as a place for recording material for a digital story. If Miaomio liked the touristic churches in Barcelona, it could be counted as a common-sense attribute of her as a Chinese person in Spain, while liking non-touristic churches or the Catholic church as an institution would be less normative.



Figure 13.4 Screenshot from line 33

In line 33 and overlapping with Nanyamka's question, Naiara formulates a different one ("you are Christian or?") which reinforces the young people's need to accommodate Miaomio's liking for church with their membership categorisation work and prompts further enquiry and discussion. In line 34, Miaomio responds to both Nanyamka and Naiara by saying that she likes the weather and/or churches (depending on what she has understood as the focus of the discussion) "both" in Barcelona and in the town. She then repeats Naiara's question with rising intonation ("Christian?"), showing her ongoing confusion and/or seeking clarification. Meanwhile, Naiara looks at Nanyamka for language assistance (line 33, see Figure 13.4) and Nanyamka rephrases and implicitly corrects the question in English for Miaomio (line 35). Miaomio then responds that she is not Christian, but she finds church beautiful (line 36).

The interaction here develops into two parallel enquiries about Miaomio's religious interests. In line 37, looking at Naiara, Nanyamka expresses her belief, in Spanish, that Miaomio is Buddhist, although using the inexact term "Buda" (and later also its plural and inexistent form "Budos"). Naiara responds by asking why Miaomio would go to a church that worships the Christian God (lines 39 and 41), to which Nanyamka aligns by commenting that church is indeed not for Buddhists (lines 43 and 46). While their vocabulary might express a certain lack of familiarity with the subject of Buddhist religion, their exchange voices several stereotypical understandings held by them, including that Chinese people are Buddhists, that all Spanish churches are Christian and that only Christians would take an interest in them.

In an overlapping sequence that seems to follow the same rules of category building (and exclusion), Sara addresses Miaomiao – with Claudia’s language assistance – to ask if there are churches in China (lines 38, 42, 44–45). Miaomiao responds that there are no churches in China, only temples, which suggests alignment between her own understandings of China with the girls’ expectations of religious beliefs and places of worship in Spain and China. In the final part of the fragment (lines 48–53), the two parallel conversations converge as Naiara, Nanyamka and Sara bring their information together to collaboratively build a consensual explanation, in Spanish, of Miaomiao’s liking of churches as beautiful places that are non-existent in China. They make sense of Miaomiao’s taste for Spanish churches for aesthetic rather than religious reasons within their normative expectations for a young Chinese Buddhist woman in Spain (although part of this categorisation – being Buddhist – was never confirmed by Miaomiao).

We now turn to the discussion and implications of this fragment.

Conclusions

The analysis offers insights into participants’ situated and collaborative production of understandings of people and places, in ways that build from but also challenge their preconceived ideas. For educational purposes, it is significant that the participants do not move beyond stereotypical understandings of themselves and others in their membership categorisation work. However, the disbelief generated by Miaomiao’s fondness for the church reveals the young girls’ category-bound expectations of her and sheds light on how identity is both built and contested in social interaction; in this case, by transgressing stereotypical understandings of what a young Chinese woman should like about Spain. This confrontation between the young people’s preconceived ideas and the reality presented by Miaomiao, and the ensuing process in which the young people seek to reconcile their common-sense understandings and the conflicting information emerging in the interaction, is arguably a first step in promoting more complex and nuanced worldviews.

The fragment also shows how this social process takes place and is possible through a bricolage of diverse linguistic codes, modalities and media, in what we understand as transidiomatic practices. It is significant to note how the young people bring Chinese into the interaction through the Google Translation tool. We explain this both in terms of play and in terms of the young people’s deference and desire to make a connection with Miaomiao through the language. Our ethnographic work has also revealed the important role of digital devices and the Internet in providing the young people access to Asian pop cultural references, which arguably fuel their imaginations and expectations about young Chinese women in Spain. Finally, Spanish emerges in side-sequences in the excerpt and scaffolds both the young people’s production in English and their configuration of membership categories.

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The after-school site where the interaction takes place is part of the transnational, digital storytelling project *Global StoryBridges*, led by Professor Margaret Hawkins of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. See www.globalstorybridges.com.

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