LANGUAGE USE AND CONTEXT AS SOURCES FOR MEANING IN RESEARCH INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED IN NORWEGIAN AS SECOND LANGUAGE

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Introduction

Philosophy of science has traditionally answered the question: what is scientific. According to Fay, the basic question in philosophy of social sciences in today's multicultural world should be whether understanding others - particularly others who have a different cultural background - is possible, and if so, what such understanding involves (1996). This paper takes up this discussion with a twofold focus: language and context. An endeavor that will not be easy, if one is to trust a large research project on the topic:

> "That element of interaction that we think of as understanding is as risky and troublesome to write about as it is to achieve" (Roberts, 1996a:9)

But even if the task is difficult, it is important. Migration research is dependent on that we understand the possibilities and limits of communication under less than optimal conditions. Communication is difficult even between two native speakers, and it is made even more difficult when one of the participants does not master the language fully.

Another reason for focusing on this topic is that Taylor (1992) questions our belief in language as a perfect means of communication. He is being skeptical about understanding, and asks for reasons why we should think that we actually understand each other. His question is simple, but not easy to answer.

My own research on migrants is based on interviews conducted in Norwegian, which is a second language[1] for the migrants. I have therefore an interest in exploring how understanding can be justified and validated under these conditions. What triggered my interest was an observation of how during an interview I felt that there was a shared understanding present, whereas when looking at the transcripts of the interview direct indicators of this understanding were lacking. Is there something wrong with the transcripts or is there something about the shared understanding that is not in the words themselves, and thus not captured in a transcript?

Understanding is understanding of meaning, and, according to Habermas, the study of meaning in language can roughly be divided into three competing approaches (1998b:278). First, the intentionalist semantics approach that puts emphasis on speaker's intention and language as a tool like medium for conveying intentions from one person to the other. Second, the formal semantics that emphasizes grammatical structures and search for the conditions under which a sentence is true. And third, the use-theory of meaning that calls attention to social interaction in which linguistic expressions serve practical functions. Because the nature of my interviews, I have chosen to focus in this paper on the last mentioned approach, which in philosophy is called use-theory of meaning, and in linguistics for a pragmatic perspective on language. This tradition focuses on actions, not on intentions behind words nor grammatical rules that construct meaning. Given that

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[1] Linguists use the concept *second language[1]* to indicate that the language in question is not the user's native language, but a language that has been learned later. It does not mean that the user only knows two languages, as many of the migrants speak several languages at their arrival to Norway. Because I focus on first generation migrants in my research, a minority speaker and a second language speaker can be consider to be synonymous.

many migrants cannot find the right words and grammatical constructs, it becomes problematic to legitimize understanding if one relies on intentionalist or formal semantics alone.

Also, recently many linguists emphasize the joint construction of understanding, and how messages are not independent, but heavily dependent of each other (Duranti, 1997, chp.7-9). Therefore, I will try to make an attempt to explore how understanding is possible in second language interviews by focusing on the interactional features of the interviews. Linguistically mediated interaction have also the potential to be a rich source of information about human interaction and social order (Habermas, 1998a).

The first part of this paper focuses on language, and more specifically on communication in second language. But to recognize what is special with second language use, one must also understand how communication through language use works in general, which will be seen through Clark's pragmatic position on language. The second part of this paper focuses on the research interviews as context for interpretation. It has been claimed that words get their meaning from the context. Without understanding the complex role of context interpretation becomes a superficial exercise. In addition to this general reason to study context, it has been argued that poor language skills bring with them an increased reliance on contextual knowledge (Roberts, 1996a:14), which makes it even more important to study the context for my research interviews.

Language and understanding

In this section I will try to explore the general principles behind understanding of language. As I mentioned in the introduction, I will present a pragmatic position on language that takes its starting point, not in single words or sentences, nor the grammatical or other rules that can create meaning, but the use of language. This use-oriented tradition goes back to Malinowsky in social sciences and to late Wittgenstein, Austin and Searle in philosophy. (Duranti, 1997 Ch. 7).

My discussions on language and understanding have two different main sources that differ in their relation to second language. First, I rely on *Achieving Understanding: Discourse in intercultural encounters* (Bremer, Roberts, Vasseur, Simonot, & Broeder, 1996), which presents results of several large and resent research projects on migrants in Europe as second language users. In contrast to many other studies by linguists, which focus on how people learn a second language or how majority population adapt to second language users, this study focuses on the discourses, conditions and consequences of understanding, and how understanding is an integral part of the production a discourse. The authors provide insight in the conditions of interpretation of discourse from both participants point of view and are able to "relate the local to the overarching and informing historical and social conditions which govern the discourse of both minority and majority participants. (Bremer et al., 1996 xi)". Their knowledge of the conditions of communication is derived from linguistic research, but has a clear value for anyone, and especially social scientists, who needs to communicate with second language users. Second, I rely on Clark's *Using Language* (1996), which does not relate to second language users at all as it is a theoretical work trying to explain what language is and how communication works. I have chosen Clark, before the classics like Wittgenstein, Austin or Searle, because his work incorporates developments in linguistics in the recent years, and yet has the kind of completeness and rigor, that often is found among classics. By combining these two sources I am trying to bring insights from the new developments in linguistics into the more specific area of second language use.

I will start by introducing the concepts non- and misunderstanding. In a pragmatic tradition of language and meaning, understanding as a concept cannot be separated from the use-aspect of language. It is interaction in a discourse that is the source of understanding. Therefore, I will present the concept of turn-taking, before I try to present what understanding is. The main part of this section consists of a discussion of Clark's view of Language as Joint Action. He has developed further this pragmatic position on language, and gives answers to many practical and theoretical questions, but he leaves some questions unanswered, which I will take up for discussion in the end of this section.

Non- and Misunderstanding

Understanding is a contested concept, but I have chosen not to take up this debate. In stead, I will try to illustrate one possible position by first presenting what it is not. Bremer defines two different situations where understanding is lacking:

> "*Non-understanding* occurs when a listener realizes, that s/he cannot make sense of (part of) an utterance either because too few elements in the utterance are accessible (in the extreme cases none) or because the frame of reference in which they are to be viewed is not clear - as in a sudden, unannounced topic switch. [...] In the case of *misunder-standing,* by contrast, the listener achieves an interpretation, which makes sense to her or him - but it wasn't the one the speaker meant. " (Bremer, 1996:40)

It is important to separate these two, because in non-understanding the listener is aware of the lack of understanding and can take actions him or her self to correct the situation. In misunderstanding the listener believes that he or she understands and the misunderstanding can remain undetected by both parties.

Information in a conversation is located simultaneously on several levels: in gestures, words, grammatical structures, references to both in and outside the discourse, and different forms of context. Therefore, it is seldom that problem on one level only creates a serious non- or misunderstanding. We are usually able to fill a gap using information from the other levels.

The causes of non- or misunderstanding are multiple and hard to identify in each case with certainty, because the evidence of misunderstanding or non-understanding does not directly point to a cause, and because the causes are usually multiple and not singular.

> "In looking at understanding, […] we always take for granted that there is a potential misunderstanding at many levels; and that both understanding and misunderstanding are founded in linguistic difficulties and imbalances, social and cultural differences and power relations which structure the individual encounters in hierarchical ways." (Roberts, 1996a:10)

In this quote Roberts presents several key ideas: First, that the potential for misunderstanding is always present. Second, that these misunderstandings can happen on several levels. Third, that the process of communication is always ambiguous, and fourth, that cultural background and power relations are part of the context that influence communication.

Even if the multiple causes for non- or misunderstanding are common, sometimes it is possible to identify a single element that causes a problem of understanding. Bremer shows how sometimes a word is not understood; or a word is misheard, either because of the listener's expectations influence the perception or because the speaker has poor pronunciation. The relative degrees of difficulty can also cause understanding problems on at least three different dimensions: First, the subject matter itself as some subjects are complicated or require specialized knowledge to be understood properly. Second, the way it is formulated as some formulations are very indirect and evasive, and require contextual knowledge to be interpreted as intended. And third, the manner in which it links with conceptual knowledge of the listener, as second language users conceptual knowledge pushes their interpretation towards the present in both time and space (Bremer, 1996:56).

Misunderstandings are not limited only to the content. One can also misunderstand the interaction in a discourse:

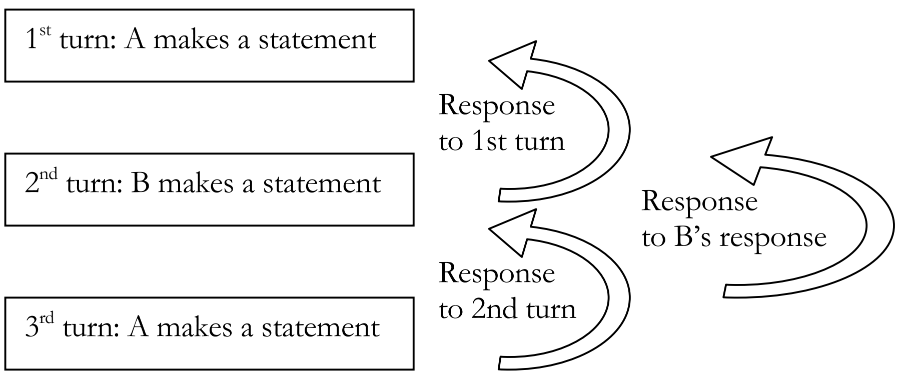
> "[..] lack of understanding on this level usually results in inappropriate (e.g. impolite) behaviour on the minority worker's part, which is held of a graver nature than a 'mere' linguistic problem. Misinterpretation on a pragmatic level is often far more face-threatening to both sides and the client's response is attributed to an intentionality which it does not, by design, have. Problems of this type typically surface as *misunderstandings* [...] It is seen as a problem of behaviour, not of language." (Bremer, 1996:59)

A common problem, of this kind, is that the second language user is not able to recognize and respond correctly to openings and closings of topics or conversations that are introduced by the native speaker. We often use culturally specific clues that signalize a change, but a second language user might misunderstand these signals, and not respond correctly, which can give the impression of impoliteness. To be able to describe and understand the interaction in a discourse properly, one needs the concept of turn-taking.

Turn-taking and Understanding

For the use-oriented tradition in linguistics turn-taking is one of the central concepts. If we think of a discourse as a ballgame, then a turn is the time one keeps the ball before it is given away or lost away. During this time, the one with the turn says something that relates to what was said previously or introduces a new topic.

Figure 1: Turn-taking in a discourse



To be understood is one of the main goals in a discourse, and one comments in each turn explicitly or implicitly on the other participants understanding. Thus in the 2nd turn, B's statement will be a response to A's statement, based on B's interpretation of what A said in the 1st turn. This response can have many forms (agreement, disagreement, elaboration, question, reparation, etc.), but it will contain a signal to A of how his statement was interpreted. In the 3rd turn, A's statement will be simultaneously a response to B's statement and to B's interpretation of A's first statement. There are several layers of back-reference in a discourse, but the number and precise role they play must be judged separately in each case.

Reparation is a form of response we all use, even if we do not know the label linguists use on it. In this example reparation can occur in the 3rd turn if A recognizes that B's response in the 2nd turn indicates mis- or nonunderstanding of A's statement in the 1st turn. In other words, A is using his 3rd turn to restate or explain what was the meaning of the 1st turn. In this manner, understanding is created in an interactive process that involves both participants. Understanding becomes joint-understanding.

> Understanding is 'a process mutually constructed in the course of inferencing by all participants in an encounter' (Gumperz 1982a quoted from Bremer et al., 1996:16)[2]

Understanding becomes thus not something absolute and final, but something changing and crafted. Understanding is simultaneously part of and a result of interaction. Understanding, or the lack of it, is continuously influencing the course of the dialogue. Roberts claims that it is hard to find evidence of how an utterance has been understood, but lack of understanding will often be visible in a dialogue. This makes it possible to study understanding, or rather the lack of it (Roberts, 1996a:18).

A consequence of this position is that misunderstandings, not understanding, becomes the important source of information in second language research interviews. In addition to information that is given explicitly in an interview, misunderstandings will reveal information about the subjects' expectations and behavior in the interview setting. The authors follow Gumperz, when they state: "These misunderstandings provide the starting point for reconstructing a system of social presuppositions" (Roberts, 1996a: 12). For a researcher worrying about misunderstandings it is useful to know that a misunderstanding is not bad data, it is perhaps the best part of the data, if it can be recognized and treated correctly. Misunderstandings will among others reveal information about how the participants understand the context for the discourse.

Understanding should be understood as a continuum from sufficient understanding for both parties to continue communicating to total lack of understanding (Roberts, 1996a:12). The parties involved can have different understanding, and may have understood the other's utterances in different ways. One should therefore ideally always study both parties' degree of understanding.

On surface language skills seem like a well-defined subject that has clear boundaries and undisputable content, but language skills are closely connected to language use, as well as, our understanding is directly dependent of the context. I will first try to explore the use-aspect of

[2] Herbert Clark takes a similar, but much further elaborated stand: "Language use is really a joint form of action. A joint action is one that is carried out by an ensemble of people acting in coordination with each other. Language use is thus more than the sum of a speaker speaking and a listener listening. It is the joint action that emerges when speakers and listeners - writers and readers - perfomr their individual actions in coordination, as ensembles. (Clark, 1996 backcover)"

language more by presenting Clark's view of language, before I go over to discuss the role context has for understanding.

Clark: Language is Joint Action

The most common way to think about communication is the traditional linear producer-message-addressee mode[3]. The producer has a meaning that is coded into a message that utilises signs (linguistic and non-linguistic), which is sent to the addressee, who decodes this message. The model is linear in its form: the meaning is transformed from one head into another head. Vagle, Sandvik and Svennevik (1994:59) describe following problems with this linear model: it assumes that (1) the message is clear before the act of communication, (2) that message is identical with senders intention, and (3) that there is a unproblematic medium (language or signals) that can be used to transfer meaning from the sender to the addressee. These three assumptions seem reasonable at first, but a closer scrutiny by the authors show that each one of these assumptions has serious problems.

Clark advocates a model of Language as Joint action as a fruitful alternative to this linear model of communication:

> "Language use is really a joint form of action. A joint action is one that is carried out by an ensemble of people acting in coordination with each other. [...] Language use is thus more than the sum of a speaker speaking and a listener listening. It is the joint action that emerges when speakers and listeners - writers and readers - perform their individual actions in coordination, as ensembles." (Clark, 1996:3)

It is important to notice that for Clark speaking cannot be performed separate from listening. By defining these as joint actions a whole battery of characteristics of a language skills can be defined.

Given that language is a form of action, we need to disentangle the different levels of action. The best known is probably Austin's typology for different speech acts that can be performed on several levels. Clark develops Austin's typology of speech acts further to his own ladder of joint actions in language use.

Table 1: The Ladder of Joint Actions by Clark

Levels	A's act	B's act
level 4	Proposal of joint action	Consideration of proposal
level 3	Signalling of meaning	recognition understanding
level 2	Presentation of words/signals	Identification of words/signals
level 1	Execution of sounds/signals	Attention to sounds/signals

(Clark, 1996 153)

We have here a discourse with two participants A and B and action on four different analytical levels that all can be considered as linguistic. An example can be clarifying. When I utter, "My name is Eero", I am executing sounds that are used to present words that signal meaning. These

[3] This linear communication model is closely connected to the conduit metaphor. Malinovwki is one of the early criticizers of the conduit metaphor. "The false conception of language as means of transfusing ideas from the head of the speaker to that of the listener has, in my opinion, largely vitiated the philological approach to language". (1935/1979:9) quoted from (Duranti, 1997:216)

three lowest levels are very close to common understanding of language use. Clark's level 4 is a radical addendum and changes the dynamics of discourse analysis. My utterance is also a proposal for joint action. I am not just saying my name, I am presenting myself for B, who then will consider if my proposal is taken up by him. B has several possible responses. He can accept my proposal and just nod to show his acceptance of my proposal. His nod is a signal that now I am presented to him. A more polite response by B could be 'My name is Clark', which is simultaneously a recognition of my presentation and a proposition for a new act that I would need to respond to.

Clark's ladder of Joint Actions is useful, because this new fourth level (which Austin lacks) have theoretical implications that gives us new possibilities for analyzing a discourse, which are especially useful for the analysis of second language interviews.

> "*Upward completion*. In a ladder of actions it is only possible to complete actions from the bottom level up though any level in the ladder." (Clark, 1996:147)

In other words, the lower levels are necessary means for the upper levels. Thus one of the important activities participants engage in, is the search for evidence of that ones discussion partner has completed each of the levels.

> "*Downward evidence*. In a ladder of actions, evidence that one level is complete is also evidence that all levels below it are complete." (Clark, 1996:148)

In other words if B shows evidence of completion of the joint action on level 4, then all lower levels must be completed. But what is evidence of understanding for Clark? One type of evidence can be found through *Adjacency pairs* in a discourse:

1. A proposes a joint project for A and B
2. B takes up the proposed joint project.

Thus it can be stated quite plainly: "Uptake is evidence of understanding" (Clark, 1996:200). This is still a simplified presentation but it has potential to a rich presentation of language use problems, because it is possible to present problems on each of the four levels, and study how one can reduce and repair such problems on each of the levels. It has also direct relevance for research interviews, as it supplements or conflicts the previously presented claim that there is little evidence of understanding. By adding the fourth level where proposal-uptake happens, we get direct evidence of understanding. This is in contrast, or at least a significant addition, to Roberts who claims that it is misunderstandings that are the important source of evidence (see page 5).

> Conversations are not just taking turns. "Conversations are not so much sequences of *individual actions* as they are sequences of *paired* actions." 196

In the traditional linear view one of the main problems is, whether or not, the addressee is able to understand the meaning the producer intended. The problem is partly created by the lack of feedback. This problem is not an epistemological problem, but rather a practical problem if one is to follow Clark's argumentation. By focusing on paired actions, we have a chance to follow the uptake of proposed actions, and thereby get an indication of understanding in the interviews.

One of the problems that are not solved is that even if there is uptake of joint action, the details on lower levels can be misunderstood. For example, during the research interview, we both can agree that the migrant is making a confession to me, but I can still misunderstand details of the confession that can escape the checking and rechecking of meaning. The likelihood of misunderstanding will grow the longer the migrant talks, without me offering interpretations during the interview. A consequence of Clark's approach for research interviews is that the search for joint construals is method for increasing the validity of an interview.

> "*Principle of joint construal.* For each signal, the speaker and addressees try to create a joint construal of what the speaker is to be taken to mean by it." (Clark, 1996:212)

Clark is trying to escape this problem of misunderstanding by focusing on the joint construal of meaning. According to him it is this joint construal of meaning that will be used for the rest of the discourse, and not A's original intention. It is B's uptake, and A's acceptance of B's uptake that establishes A's construal as a joint construal. (Clark, 1996:213) This has two important implications: First, in a normal conversation meaning is checked and rechecked.[4] Our need to validate and correct construals is the reason why we during a discourse show signs of how we understand. What kinds of signals we use is dependent of how probable we find possibilities for misunderstanding. The better we know the person we talk with, the more we can jump from one topic to an other, without checking upon each other that we actually understand each other. Second, meaning changes in the discourse:

> Yet as far as both speakers and respondents go, it is their *joint* construal that counts - what the speaker is taken to mean. They have a shared basis for a mutual belief and for no other (Clark, 1996:219)

Thus Clark downplays the importance of private meanings, and emphasises the public meanings as the 'real' meanings that we live and act by. This is a position that conflicts with the de-contextualisation of language in survey research,[5] but fits well with research traditions that ground themselves in social interaction as Mary Douglas' Cultural theory (Douglas & Ney, 1998).

Clark's approach is no miracle medicine against misunderstandings. He is trying to clarify the mechanisms that are used in communication in general. If language is viewed as joint action both understanding and misunderstanding must be understood in a different way than if one uses the linear model of communication as a norm. But there are at least three clear benefits of using his approach also on second language users: First, we get a more solid base for the interpretation of the interviews, as we can analyze understanding and uptake on all four levels, which allows us to downplay bad vocabulary and grammar; Second, we can focus on joint construals of meaning instead of hidden private meanings; Third, the normal practice of looking for signs of understanding can be consciously emphasized in a research interview, thus making a continuous validation possible.

The Ability to make Judgments as A Necessary Assumption

Words are ambiguous in themselves, and judgment is needed to choose between the different alternatives. Clark is notably silent about this part of communication. Our ability to make judgments seems to be a hidden assumption lying behind his theory of language as joint action.

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[4] This is the layperson's version of what Kvale calls for *instant validation*, which for him is one of the most important tools for validating interpretation. The lesson is that one should validate interpretation primary during the interview (Kvale, 1996).

[5] "[Survey data] is an array of decontextualized responses. But because such responses have no 'meaning' in themselves, everyday contextual understandings are reintroduced, slipped into the analysis through the back door of coders' subculture." (Mishler, 1986:5)

Signals are not without ambiguity, and often we find our selves in situations where signals are mixed and perhaps even in conflict with each other. We need judgment to solve these ambiguous situations; what is a reasonable interpretation among all the possible interpretations. And often, reasonable is what in our view would be rational.

> But to make sense, beliefs, desires, and actions must in general be rationally connected. In other words, without the presupposition that agents are rational the entire enterprise of interpreting the meaning of their activity - and thus the point of describing their behavior as intentional activity - would be undermined. Therefore we must assume that agents are in general rational." (Fay, 1996:110)

The implication of Faye's assumption of general rationality is that when we are trying to understand a discourse, we are actually trying to understand the reasoning others engaged in to construct an intention for a behavior. This reasoning is closer to good reason and the ability to justify a act, than an economic man type of rationality. The importance of this assumption lies in the centrality of justification to many social processes:

> "The process of justification is the basis of the social bond; without justification, knowledge can have no grounding; justification involves dialogue and presupposes the presence of others before whom to be justified. A social theory that ignores the presence of others in its account of reason must fail, because it cannot say how agreement is reached." (Douglas & Ney, 1998 21)

Also social bond and knowledge can be seen as dependent of that justification is possible. For my purposes, the second part of this quote is more important. Perhaps the most important consequence of Clark's model of Language as joint action is that it explains the details of how agreement in a dialogue is reached: through uptake of joint actions. I have concentrated on second language users and the search for understanding, but with this proposal-uptake-confirmation of uptake model understanding can also be seen as agreement upon meaning or joint construction of meaning.

If the participants do have a differing views of what is justifiable reasoning reaching agreement becomes problematic. And the problems for communication can also be traced back to different ways to justify what is knowledge (see Douglas, 1982). Thus a linguistically pragmatic solution for understanding becomes entangled with epistemological questions.

One does not have to agree upon the other's definition of rationality and grounding of knowledge, but an assumption of participants' general rationality is necessary to understand the other. In a research interview, a there will be a continuous search for a shared rationality.

Cognitive Linguistics and interpretation

There is also a lesson for second language use that can be learned cognitive linguistics, which also focuses on how language is used in practice. In contrast to Clark, who starts with interaction, George Lakoff starts from how we perceive and understand words, and more particularly, on how we build meaning in language starting from very basic bodily experiences, which are then weaved together into a complex concepts and categories.

Bremer and Roberts did not try to explain why second language users conceptual knowledge makes it difficult to discuss issues that are not tangible and not in the present time and space. I would suggest a possible explanation based on George Lakoff's idea of concepts varying in their degree of cognitive immediacy:

> *Basic-level categorization:* The idea that categories are not merely organized in a hierarchy from the most general to the most specific, but are also organized so that the categories that are cognitively basic are "in the middle" of a general-to-specific hierarchy. Generalization proceeds "upward" from the basic level and specialization proceeds "downward."
>
> *Basic-level primacy:* The idea that basic-level categories are functionally and epistemologically primary with respect to the following factors: gestalt perception, image formation, motor movement, knowledge organisation, ease of cognitive processing (learning, recognition, memory, etc.), and ease of linguistic expression. (Lakoff, 1987, 13)

Basic-level categories have several interesting characteristics that make it likely that they are central in the second language users vocabulary: they are short words with high frequency of use; children learn these first; we relate to them with our bodies, which becomes visible in the way verbs are used with these categories; and there is less disagreement about the meaning of the basic-level categories than other categories. A chair is an example of a basic-level category. Most people would agree upon what a chair is, but if we move downwards from this basic-level, and specify it as a kitchen-chair, it is likely that there is more disagreement about, which chairs would fall into the category. If we move upwards on the ladder towards more general categories, we could talk about furniture, and again there would be more disagreement about how to define what furniture is. In our actions, we relate to the basic-level. When we use a verb there is usually a basic-level category present as in 'I sit in a chair', but it is unlikely to say that 'I sit in a kitchen-chair', or that 'I sit in a piece of furniture'. Even if Lakoff does not address second language use as a topic, these insights from cognitive linguistics can teach us something useful for communication in second language. First, I believe, that the less language skills the more basic-level concepts are used, and the more difficult it is to discuss abstract topics. Second, there is less ambiguity and less mis-understanding when we use basic-level categories. Therefore, as an interviewer I should try to introduce my questions with basic-level concepts if possible. Under interpretation I can have more trust that there is no mis-understanding if we are using basic-level categories. And contrary, if we are not using basic-level categories, the interpretation should emphasis the possibility of cultural and social differences. And, third, the non-basic level categories will be important carriers of culturally and socially specific knowledge that can be used to collect culturally and socially specific information.

The role of context

The previous section focused on what language is and how understanding is possible. Words and sentences are ambiguous in isolation, and we use context to narrow down their possible meaning. In other words, we are using our knowledge of the 'whole' to decide what is the meaning of the parts, and this is how context enters the discussion. Roberts points out the complexity of the issue:

> Any degree of (non)understanding results from a complex fusion of particular, local inferences and general or global knowledge. [...] In interaction where the minority

worker has little experience of the new language, they will rely on the global and general contextual features typical of such encounters. (Roberts, 1996a:14)

One should also notice how for the analysis of interviews in second language, the issue of context is even more important than usual, because the second language users use contextual knowledge to fill the gaps in their language skills. As I earlier have pointed out this can be related to the filling gaps in language skills with information from the context.

In addition to the increased importance of context, the second language speakers will probably contextualize differently from native speakers. One example of this is given by Bremer:

> "Even if the talk turn to the past or the future, the everyday life and realm of experience of the minority worker remain the preferred frame of reference. […] Whereas abstract topics and hypothetical issues are difficult to understand" (Bremer, 1996:56)
>
> If we accept what Lakoff wrote about basic-level categories (page 10), this emphasis of everyday life and own experiences in interpretation is what one would expect of second language users.

In this section I will try to present ways to understand how we use context when we try to understand each other. Almost anything can be considered as context, if one defines context as what gives a word it's meaning, as some pragmatists do. For analytical purposes, I find it necessary to divide context into more manageable parts.[6] To structure the presentation I will use Goffman's typology of contextual frames. He starts from a focused action that is the speech act or utterance one is trying to interpret. The first contextual frame is the physical frame that consists of the physical environment for the focused action. The second contextual frame is the behavioural situation. The third frame is a cultural and social frame. The fourth, a institutional frame, is optional and used if the setting is institutional. The fifth is background knowledge (Vagle et al., 1994:27). In the following I will try to situate my own research contextually using Goffman's frames.

The Physical Frame and The Behavioral Situation

The physical frame influences interpretation of interviews by containing direct clues and information that is used in the discourse. I conduct my interviews in the homes of the migrants, which have several advantages and a few disadvantages. The topics for my interviews are the everyday life of migrants, their social relations, and behavioral strategies they have chosen, which all leave traits in their homes.

Common for all my interviews so far is that the interviews take place in the living room. We are all sitting around a table on which the recorder is placed. The way we are seated does limit the number of participants and helps to structure the interview. It is clear that the seating is a result of that we have previously established a joint action, a interview, that creates a goal; passing of experiences and opinions from the migrants to me, and a time-frame of one to two hours. So the physical frame and the behavioral situation are entangled into each other, but it is still useful to try to treat them separately when possible.

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[6] An alternative way to treat contextualisation is Husserl's formal-pragmatic concept of lifeworld, which in the presentation by Habermas is devided into a) foreground knowledge consisting of situation dependent and topic dependent knowledge, and b) deep-seated background knowledge (Habermas, 1998a239-241).

Even if the physical setting is geared towards a focused interaction, there are great differences between households how focused these interviews actually are, children being the most common interruption. The presence and style of interruptions gives me an idea of what kind of relations there are between the members of the household.

Homes are filled with objects that can inspire a change in the course of the discussion. Many objects have a story behind them; where did it come from, who gave it, and for what purpose.

In addition to the stories that can be told about the objects, the objects can be used to improve communication. Traditionally only linguistic signals have been considered, where as Clark shows how there is a much larger register of sources available. Because of the ambiguity in language every bit of language use must be anchored in time and place. The method of signaling that is used to achieve this is called indicating, which consist of a range of techniques varying from pointing with a finger to the use of syntactical clues (Clark, 1996:ch.6, p.164). To me it seams obvious that one of the possible sources of non- and misunderstanding is error of indication, and one way to reduce the number and severity of non- and misunderstandings is to rely on the most concrete techniques of indication. I have during the interviews observed over and over how gestures, like a nod in the direction of a picture of the person who features in the story being told, are used to ground the topic of discussion. I have also noticed that if the person talking has problems finding a word, or trying to repair a misunderstanding, we often start again with a physical object that is in sight. It provides a solid point of common ground, from where the discussion can move forward again.

One mechanism for why the physical context is more important for second language users can follow from Clarks claim for the need to ground or index all words to reduce their ambiguity. Given that the migrants use the context to fill the gaps in their language skills, it is possible that the tangible and present features of context are a stronger source for indexing than the in-text references that could provide an alternative meaning for the words. In other words, if language skills are weak, it is easier to ground the meaning in the physical and present world, than in a topic that appears only in the discussion one is uncertain about in the first place.

There is more information that can be interpreted from the physical setting. How is the space in their home is structured; what kind of social life is the home prepared for? What kind of life-style are they communicating with their homes?

> "A person wants goods for fulfilling [social and ritual] commitments. Commodities do not satisfy desire; they are only the tools or instruments for satisfying it. Goods are not ends. Goods are for distributing, sharing, consuming, or destroying publicly in one way or other. […] The main objective of consumption is to achieve the desired pattern of social relationships (Douglas & Ney, 1998:53-54)

The physical objects do not communicate directly, and given migrants' different social and cultural norms and values, the problem for me is to understand what are they trying to communicate with their objects. So just observing is not enough. I need their stories to be able to understand.

As I earlier stated the behavioral context is the interview, which is a situation both familiar and unfamiliar to my research subjects. In their encounters with public officials they have been interviewed, but these interviews have a different power balance, since often the public officials are gatekeepers for something the migrants are looking for. Also, these interviews are often formal, and used to legitimize the bureaucratic decisions, which gears them towards finding evidence to place the migrant into predefined categories. Hopefully, in my interviews the power balance will be more even, and the migrants will experience it as an opportunity to voice their opinion. I will try to encourage my informants to tell stories, as narratives are a form of discourse practically everybody is familiar with. Their expectations will have a large influence on the interview, and these expectations again are set by their cultural and social frames, which I will soon come back to, and by the information I have been able to give to them prior to the interview.

The Cultural and Social Frame

The Cultural- and Social Frames are the third type of Goffman's frames used to distinguish contexts. These frames define the goal, the participants, and what are the relevant topics for discussion. Migrants' frames are likely to differ from the majority's frames, and one way to understand socialization is to consider it as learning the use of the right frames for each situation. These frames are a good source of data about interaction, but it is difficult to generalize from the interview situation to other social settings. For our purposes here what is important is the way these frames influence the research interview it self, and the participants interpretation of each other during the interview.

Power relations in the society structure the discourses and understanding in many ways. To describe all these possibilities for misunderstandings is probably an impossible task, but some examples can make the role of the frames clearer. One of the most obvious in discourses is the degree of power one assigns to the counterpart. Generally speaking, many minorities have a disadvantaged position in the society, and often this is combined with fact that for a minority speaker many of the interactional situations are new. Therefore second language speakers are uncertain about how to behave in a given situation. They either do not have the relevant frame, or they are uncertain which frame is the appropriate for this given situation. Roberts writes that

> " a commonplace [difficulty] is that minority speakers have no way of knowing how intrusive or personal majority interviewers consider they have the right to be." (Roberts, 1996b:226)

The majority and second language speakers can have a different frame of reference and thereby their expectations and behaviour in an encounter can contradict each other, and create problems of understanding[7].

> "The regularity with which *questions about possible planned events* are misunderstood even by participants with a quite advanced competence in their second language is both striking and surprising. They are almost always misunderstood in the same way, that is, as questions about the real situation, the 'here and now' which shows how this is fore-most in the learner's consciousness [...] So we have reason to believe that many of them simply do not expect to find interest being expressed in their personal wishes in a official situation." (Bremer, 1996:57-58)

[7] "Much of what people take as common ground may be represented in the form of *procedures* for joint activities. There are routine actions, such as shaking hands and offering thanks - when, with whom, and how. [...] There are also larger 'scripts,' specifying the expected course of the joint activities that take place in restaurants, doctor's offices, supermarkets (Clark, 1996:109)." It seems obvious to me that some of the problems migrants have is that they do not share the same procedures as natives, which creates behavior that natives find obscure or difficult to understand. Because the natives take these procedures to be facts of life, there must be something wrong with people who do not behave according to them. It is easier to accept bad pronunciation or bad grammar, than bad behavior.

This leads me to a more general question about how to choose the right frame for interaction in an intercultural encounter, and how to interpret (act) when one does not have experience of a similar situation? Every situation is unique in its details, but somehow we need to choose a frame or set of frames that allow us to define what the situation is. Given the enormous cultural diversity and variation, one can end up with a very large number of possible frames, which would make the interpretation of the material almost impossible. Lets say that there are only 1000 possible frames to choose between. When two people meet there would be then a million (1000 * 1000) possible combinations. When three people meet there would be a billion possible combinations. As a consequence for interpretation, every interactional situation would have to be considered truly unique, and we would have difficulties with having predictable interactions with other people. Therefore, I believe, we need an assumption that will make interpretation feasible. This assumption can be formulated in several ways. First, we could claim that the number of possible frames is actually much smaller, but this does not seem realistic[8]. Second, we could argue that the human brain has enough capacity to process alternatives, but this would not solve the problem for research interviews, as the process of justifying every interpretation would become a daunting task. Third, there are some kinds of shortcuts, heuristics or procedures that make interpretation more efficient. I believe that the third one of these assumptions is the most credible one; in its minimal form it is just a claim of that there are patterns of social organization and we use our knowledge of these patterns when we meet other people.

The next step would be to choose a theory that will explain what these patterns of social organization are, and how the patterns are used in social interaction. This is a large discussion, and without getting into it, I will just point out that Thompson, Wildavsky and Ellis have presented a more theoretical version of Mary Douglas' model that could be useful, as it claims that there are only five structurally distinctive ideal types of patterns of social organization even if the specific content will differ from case to case (Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky, 1990). And these five patterns can be used either explicitly by analysts or unconsciously by most people.

> "Life, we concur, goes on, much of it on automatic pilot. [...] Decision theorists call these automatic pilots 'heuristics', we call them cultural biases. (Thompson et al., 1990:59)"

Their neo-Durkheimian structuralistic perspective has some implications for intercultural encounters: First, experiences from one socio-cultural context can be used in another context if it is structurally equivalent. Since there are patterns of social organization, we can learn, and use what we have learned in another context. And second, the participants in a discourse will try to find an agreement upon how to structure an encounter.[9] And contrary, disagreement of which type of social organization is used to structure the encounter will lead to misunderstanding and perhaps a conflict. Many of the conflicts political scientists study can be described as conflicts between two or more forms of social organization (Thompson, Grendstad, & Selle, 1999). In this way the patterning of social organization enhance our possibility for understanding, as they limit the possibilities for interpretation. Even if we do not have the same experiences there are structural

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[8] There are hundreds of languages, each one with subcultures, and one can find hundreds of distinctive interactional situations in each one of them.

[9] According to Simon Innvær, in a discourse the participants are trying to position themselves according these patterns of social organization. He claims that participants choose their position in the discourse as a response to the positions the others have taken. Similarly to Clark, he emphasises, not peoples initial position, but the one that arises in a confrontation with others' positions (Innvær, 1999).

equivalents in our experiences and by creatively combining our own experiences we are able to have an understanding of the others (if we are interested).

Frames are far more specific and detailed description of what is proper than the few patterns of social organization described by Thompson. But these few structural patterns can help us to define which one of the many frames to use in an unfamiliar situation.

Background Knowledge

The fourth of Goffman's frames, the institutional frame, is not very relevant for my interviews, as the interaction between me and my interview subjects can hardly be considered institutionalised. There are of course institutions involved: they are a household and a family, whereas I represent the university institution, but this 'meeting of institutions' is better understood as a feature of our background knowledge. Therefore, there will be no separate treatment of the institutional frame.

The last one of Goffman's frames that distinguishes between different aspects of context is background knowledge. It consists of our knowledge of the other, of society, and of the world that forms the background against which our behavior and utterances must be interpreted. This is much wider than the social and cultural frame, which defines expectations just for the interview situation.

Common Ground is needed for understanding

Some of our background knowledge will be shared, and can be used as a part of the common ground used in the creation of joint meaning in the discourse. One should therefore, if one wants to understand how the participants understand each other, distinguish between knowledge about the world, and assumptions about the other participants' knowledge of the world. As an example, part of my own background knowledge is my knowledge of the disadvantaged position migrants have in the labor market, which is largely rooted on research (Berg & Vedi, 1994; Djuve & Hagen, 1995; Light & Bhachu, 1993; Portes, 1995), but I also assume that most migrants have information of this, even if they have not read the research reports. Clark presents a versatile way to deal with our assumptions:

> "The main categories we exploit identify people as members of certain cultural groups, systems or networks that I will call *cultural communities*. […] *Inside information* of a community is particular information that members of the community mutually assume is possessed by members of the community. *Outside information* of a community is types of information that outsiders assume is inside information for that community." (Clark, 1996:101)

Thus, as a member of the research community, I have certain knowledge of the migrants, and to the degree I expect other researchers to share this knowledge, it is inside information. My expectations of the migrants' knowledge is outside information, whereas the migrants own knowledge about their own cultural community is obviously inside information. So, both are looking for common ground, but coming from different cultural communities our starting point is different. A possible problem in the research interviews is that the outsider's knowledge is different from the insider's knowledge, and perhaps even erroneous, creating problems for interpretation and communication.

> "Common ground isn't just there, ready to be exploited. We have to establish it with each person we interact with. [...] The first step in establishing either type of common ground is finding the right shared bases - the right evidence." (Clark, 1996:116)

We search for evidence in membership in the cultural communities that define what kind of shared common ground we have. This evidence can be dress, language, dialect, situation, jargon, vocabulary, appearance, basically anything, even what people say, do or presuppose can place them in a community. These communities form overlapping and often nested sets of memberships (Clark, 1996:103-105). But what happens if the participants share only a few or perhaps even none cultural communities? Is it still possible to understand each other?

Outsider's information as a resource

One of the important language skills is to present matters in a way that are adapted to the listener. Unless we take into consideration how our conversation partner is going to understand our statements, communication remains difficult. One must be able to imagine what the conversation partner knows, which will rely partly on one's outsider's information and partly on the common ground the participants are able establish during the discourse.

In their attempts to communicate with Norwegians my subjects have experienced both moments of understanding and misunderstanding and hopefully learnt from these. I will try to benefit from their previous mistakes, and use my subjects' knowledge of their miscommunications as a resource that can be used to improve the interviews.

Briggs emphasizes how in cross-cultural interviews[10] the researchers often base themselves too much on our western folk theories about interviewing. He recommends instead identifying the *subjects*' resources for conveying information, and the relative compability of the shared rules and understandings that underlie their discursive strategies with those associated with interviews. (Briggs, 1986)

> "In other words, relying on interviews allows us to accomplish an initial decontextualization of the data even before we begin the analysis. We are, in fact, asking the natives to reduce the information to precisely the type of forms that fit our native-speaker bias for unavoidably referential, surface segmentable and relatively presupposing forms." (Briggs, 1986, 118)

Thus, because my respondents have knowledge of Norwegian language and culture (especially of cultural misunderstandings), they should be able to recognize those elements in a discourse that need to be explained more carefully and translated to cognitive elements understandable to me as a Norwegian.

Heidegger's notion of unobtrusiveness is based on that there is a uninterrupted quality in our surroundings and routine actions. "For social interaction to work, most of the time we must 'lose our selves in it'". (Duranti, 1997:319) I understand this as we live in the context, which is not present in a reflexive, conscious way in our everyday interpretations. I believe, research interviews represent exactly this kind of interruption that triggers the subject's need to explain and 'translate' their reality for me, which facilitates my interpretation of their world (Briggs, 1986). If this

[10] Briggs analyzes the situation common to many anthropologists, where the researcher is the foreigner and the subjects are the natives, which is a situation opposite to mine, but his observations are just as valid for my interviews.

translation would not happen, I would have to try to enter their world before I could understand the context that is used to form their messages to me.

Concluding Remarks

The discussion in this paper combines insights from pragmatic linguistics that can help us to understand how we communicate in second language, and from sociology that can help us to understand the role of context. These insights were then combined with more specific topics that address either second language use or research interviews directly. As a result several features of the research interviews have become clearer, and the interviews appear to me as a richer source of information than I expected.

It will be possible to read and analyze the interviews for non- and misunderstandings, following the lead by Bremer et al. (1996). Reparation, a action taken by one of the participants when he or she realize that there has been some non- or misunderstanding, becomes a important source of information, as it is a direct commentary upon the interpretation that happens during the discourse. Reparation of misunderstanding will help to rule out fallacious contextualisations, and it can be a direct commentary upon significant cultural differences.

An additional possibility is to analyze uptake in the interviews, as evidence of understanding, following the lead of Clark (1996). Knowledge of how turn-taking and reparation in a interview take place, makes it easier to identify uptake. Thus, and contrary to the position taken by Bremer et al. (1996), we can find direct evidence of understanding, but only if we are willing to assume that people are rational in general.

A pragmatic view of language makes it possible to justify and validate interpretation better when the interview subject's linguistic skills are poor, i.e. when grammatical rules are broken and perhaps even words are misused. If one would base oneself only on the intentionalist approach to meaning and language there would be no way to interpret the message with certainty under such conditions. If language is only a carrier of intentions, and the message is of poor quality we can never ensure what the speakers original intention was. By looking at language as a joint action, i.e. broadening our perspective on what language is, we are also getting a much richer material available for interpretation. I therefore believe that the use of a pragmatic position of language is useful for my research purposes.

For second language users the context, and particularly the tangible and present context, will be a more important source for meaning than for native language users. Therefore in the interpretation of the interviews more attention must be given to the way context is used and how meaning is grounded. Dividing the context into more manageable parts using Goffman's Frames can reduce some of the ambiguities. But in intercultural encounters, it remains problematic to know, which cultural and social frame the discussion partner is using. Therefore, some kind of heuristics or shortcuts is needed to reduce the variability. The difficulty of entering the subject's world, which sometime is presented as a requisite to understanding, can be at least partly alleviated by the subjects themselves 'translating' their own experiences to the researcher.

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