

Using English in the real world

A very brief sociolinguistic introduction to
intercultural interaction

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My Research and Classes

- ▶ **Research fields:**
- ▶ **Sociolinguistics:** examines the many different relationships between language and society
- ▶ **Intercultural Interaction:** examines how people actually communicate and interact with people from different backgrounds
- ▶ **Other courses:**
- ▶ English Skills (first year)

Why are you studying English?

- ▶ 1) in order to pass English exams
- ▶ 2) because you love the challenge of learning the intricacies of English grammar
- ▶ 3) to be able to use it with friends or at work in the future

If you chose 3) ...

- ▶ This means that you are already thinking about English as a practical communicative tool to use in the world outside the classroom.

BUT ..

- ▶ This is where it starts to get a bit tricky
- ▶ ...because people from different backgrounds often interact in English in VERY different ways, which can lead to misunderstandings and other kinds of difficulties.

Who speaks English?

- ▶ English is spoken in approximately **75 territories** either as a first or an official second language (Jenkins 2015)
- ▶ 329 million people speak English as their **first language** (Crystal 2003) e.g. in the USA, the UK, Australia
- ▶ 430 million speak English as a **second (official) language** (Crystal 2003) e.g. in Singapore, The Philippines, Nigeria, India
- ▶ Over one billion people speak English as a **foreign language** (not as a first language or an official language) (Jenkins 2015) e.g. in Japan, France, Russia, Thailand, Mexico

An example of a misunderstanding

A Chinese businessman and an American businessman have been chatting at a conference (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012)

- ▶ Mr. Wong: Well I must be going now but I really enjoyed our chat.
Mr. Smith: Yes, me too. We should get together to have lunch sometime.
Mr. Wong: That's a good idea.
- ▶ However... three weeks later *Mr. Wong is annoyed* because Mr. Smith still hasn't called to arrange to have lunch

What's the problem?

= Different rules of communication

- ▶ **Content rules**: the words people use and the meaning they want to convey are sometimes different
- ▶ Mr. Smith's "Let's have lunch" may be intended as a type of **greeting** = I like you so let's be friends and maybe we could have lunch someday
- ▶ Mr. Wong heard a **genuine invitation**

Another communication problem....

- ▶ Sequencing (frame) rules: the order in which you say something may be important
- ▶ At the beginning? (important in English)
- ▶ At the end? (important in Chinese, Persian, Japanese)
- ▶ Because “Let’s have lunch” **comes at the end** of the conversation, Mr. Wong thinks **it must be important** and therefore a genuine invitation

And even...

- ▶ **Attitudes**: sometimes simple misunderstandings can lead to the development of negative feelings towards others or reinforce the **negative stereotypes** we already hold
- ▶ Mr. Wong may not just be annoyed by Mr. Smith, but this incident might reinforce his stereotype that Americans are insincere and unreliable. Based on his past experiences, Mr. Wong might even think that Mr. Smith was looking down on him and is possibly racist against Chinese people.

Some other things that can affect our use of language and our understanding of others

- ▶ Gender
- ▶ Social class
- ▶ Age
- ▶ Profession
- ▶ Geographical region and social/ethnic group influences
- ▶ Different world views
- ▶ Attitudes
- ▶ Politics
- ▶ Economic forces

So...

- ▶ In order to use English effectively in the real world, we don't only need to know about the language (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, etc.) but we need to understand how people from different backgrounds use English differently and how they might view the world in a different way from us.
- ▶ I hope you will start to think more about how language is used around you and learn to enjoy the intercultural communication rollercoaster as much as I do!

References

- ▶ Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a global language (2nd ed.)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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- ▶ Neustupný, J. V. (1997). Teaching communication or teaching interaction? *Intercultural Communication Studies* 10, 1-13 (Kanda University of International Studies, Tokyo).
- ▶ Scollon, R., Scollon, S. W., & Jones, R. (2012). *Intercultural communication: A discourse approach*. Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.