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## **Achieving Mutual Understanding in Intercultural Project Partnerships:**

### **Co-operation, self-orientation and fragility**

**Vladimir Zegarac and Helen Spencer-Oatey**

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#### **Abstract**

Communication depends on co-operation in at least the following way: in order to be successful, communicative behaviour needs to be adjusted to the general world knowledge, abilities and interests of the hearer, and the hearer's success in figuring out the message and responding to it needs to be informed by assumptions about the communicator's informative intentions, personal goals and communicative abilities. In other words, interlocutors co-operate by co-ordinating their actions in order to fulfil their communicative intentions. This minimal assumption about cooperativeness must in one way or another be built into the foundations of any plausible inferential model of human communication. However, the communication process is also influenced to a greater or lesser extent, whether intentionally and consciously or unintentionally and unconsciously, by the participants' orientation towards, or preoccupation with, their own concerns, so their behaviour may easily fall short of being as co-operative as is required for achieving successful communication.

In this paper, we consider in some detail a critical incident from a meeting which took place at the beginning of an intercultural project partnership and we argue that such communication situations are 'fragile' in that they can put pressure on the participants to be more self-oriented (i.e. self centred) and, therefore, less co-operative. We explore the reasons for this and propose that affective factors including face play a key role. We end by considering the theoretical implications of our study for future research.

**Key words:** Co-operation; Self-centredness; Fragility; Common ground; Face.

## **1. Introduction**

This paper explores the processes of achieving mutual understanding in a context that has rarely been studied by applied linguists: intercultural project partnerships. It focuses on the informational (i.e. message content) rather than relational (social rapport) aspects of communicative interaction, and considers some challenges that can occur in communication at the beginning of a project partnership. Little applied linguistic research has been carried out on such projects, and this study is a first step in addressing this gap. We argue that at this early stage the participants face specific pressures which can hamper the success of communicative exchanges if not handled appropriately. We maintain that a thorough understanding of such communication processes is best obtained by combining insights from cognitive pragmatics (Relevance Theory, Sperber and Wilson, 1986; 1995), and social pragmatics (Politeness Theory, Brown and Levinson, 1987; Spencer-Oatey, 2008) to the analysis of discourse. In this paper we combine concepts from these research approaches and apply them to the analysis of a Sino-UK preliminary project meeting. We draw particular attention to the role that the self-orientation of the participants played in the interactions and argue that greater attention should be paid in the intercultural field to its impact.

Many applied approaches to intercultural communication (e.g. Gibson 2000; Chaney and Martin 2011) adopt implicitly the traditional view of communication as an encoding-decoding process. The code model of communication has been criticised, probably most explicitly and convincingly by Sperber and Wilson (1986) who argue that the view of communication as an encoding-decoding process fails to take into account several important features of most communicative interactions:

- (a) Communication is generally at rather high risk of failure because it depends on the participants' ability to make inferences about each other's communicative and informative intentions on the basis of often scant evidence presented by the linguistic and non-linguistic signals.

Such inferencing indicates that communicative behaviour is fundamentally co-operative, although different inferential models of communication characterise co-operation in different ways. Within Grice's (1967/1989) approach, co-operation in communication involves making contributions appropriate to the topic, purpose or general direction of the communication event. In Relevance-theoretic pragmatics (Sperber and Wilson, 1986; 1995), it involves the participants' orientation towards achieving their goals by engaging in communication: the hearer's goal is to gain some worthwhile information by attending to the communicative act; the speaker's goal is to have a desired impact on the hearer. A competent and sincere speaker will aim to achieve this by conveying worthwhile information while putting the hearer to the expenditure of as little mental processing effort as is necessary for deriving (i.e. figuring out) this information (i.e. the message). As Sperber et al. (2010: 360) observe:

For communication of this type to succeed, both communicator and addressee must cooperate by investing some effort: in the communicator's case, the effort required to perform a communicative action, and in the addressee's case, the effort required to attend to it and interpret it. Neither is likely to invest this effort without expecting some benefit in return. For the addressee, the normally expected benefit is to acquire some true and relevant information. For the communicator, it is to produce some intended effect in the addressee. To fulfil the addressee's expectations, the communicator should do her best to communicate true information. To fulfil her own expectations, by contrast, she should choose to communicate the information most likely to produce the intended effect in the addressee, regardless of whether it is true or false.

This may seem a very minimalist view of co-operation: the interlocutors are each pursuing their individual goals and investing some effort into this. Nevertheless, they are co-operating in the way they allocate their cognitive resources: the communicator, if competent and sincere, aims to achieve his or her goal by conveying information as economically as possible for the hearer, and a competent

hearer will aim to obtain worthwhile information by trying to figure out what the communicator, aiming to be adequately informative, intended to inform him or her of by producing the communicative act. In other words, communication is co-operative, not only because each party is investing some effort in the process, but because the participants' allocation of cognitive resources (attention and processing effort) is co-ordinated in that each participant's reasoning and actions take account of the abilities, intentions and goals of the other. It is important to observe that on this view there is no incompatibility between self-orientation and co-operation in communication, because the speaker and the hearer can, and do, co-ordinate their actions in pursuit of goals, some of which are shared and some of which are not. However, self-orientation gives rise to problems in co-operation when it leads to the failure in the co-ordination of actions required for successful communication due to inadequate use of their cognitive resources.

In this paper we show that the relevance-theoretic view of co-operation in communication provides a better basis for explaining our data than Grice's. We consider the pressures that work on a joint goal (development of a joint project) presents for co-operation in communication. We argue that the main difficulties lie with the co-ordination aspect of co-operation due to the participants' lack of an adequate set of presumed shared beliefs (technically, mutual cognitive environment) at the outset and with their lack of appreciation of the need to avoid a self-oriented perspective at some key points in the interaction.

(b) People convey information for various reasons, e.g. to get those they interact with to accept the communicated assumptions as true beliefs, but also to influence their plans, their actions and their feelings. In some situations, such as negotiating future work on a joint project, a particularly important goal is to establish explicit mutual agreement which will lay the foundations for future collaboration on a joint endeavour.<sup>1</sup> In such situations, a key requirement of the communicative interaction is to enlarge the set of the participants' presumed shared beliefs. We use the term 'presumed shared beliefs' as an informal alternative to the more technical terms 'common ground'

(see Clark, 1996) and ‘mutual cognitive environment’ (see Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995), as the differences between the theoretical contents of these technical terms need not concern us here.

The data we analyse in this paper suggest that enlarging the participants’ presumed shared knowledge through communication may have been hampered by the self-orientation of the participants.

Pragmatic approaches to communication thus typically describe communicative behaviour as fundamentally co-operative and as premised on (some version of) the notion of presumed shared beliefs. Comparatively little attention has been paid in cognitive pragmatics to the impact on the communication process of personal goals and the self-centred (or self-oriented) disposition of the participants in a communication event; in fact, superficially, it might seem as though co-operation and self-orientation are mutually exclusive. In this paper we present evidence which demonstrates the very close interconnection between co-operation, self-orientation, as well as the (personal) goals of the participants in communication. While our account draws on the framework of Sperber and Wilson’s (1986; 1995) Relevance Theory, another perspective on these issues is beginning to emerge. Kecskes (2010) investigates the interplay between co-operation and egocentrism in communication and points out that “an adequate account of interaction should consider interlocutors not only as common-ground seekers, but as individuals with their own agendas” (Kecskes, 2010: 53). We concur with this observation, but we pursue it from a different angle, as an integration of Kecskes’ perspective with ours is beyond the scope of this paper (not least because ‘self-orientation’ and ‘egocentrism’ are fundamentally different concepts).

Although self-oriented behaviour does not necessarily have an adverse impact on the success of communication, it stands to reason that it may easily do so as communication is essentially other-oriented rather than self-oriented. This is what happened in the interactions analysed in this paper. We illustrate the negative impact that occurred and consider the likely causes of the participants’ self-orientation. We start, however, by reviewing some key features of the communication process

(notably: fragility, co-operation, egocentrism and presumed shared beliefs) and we point out some of their interconnections. We then use them to provide some explanatory insights into an intercultural project meeting, examining how these factors impacted on the achievement of mutual understanding.

## **2. Multiple perspectives on the communication process**

### *2.1 The fragility of communication*

As explained above, the sharing of information through communication crucially depends on the participants' ability to make inferences about each other's intentions in producing communicative acts. Communication is thus always at considerable risk of failure because we can never make absolutely sure that the communicative act has been interpreted in the context intended by the speaker and in the way intended by the speaker. However, the risk of failure is greater in some types of communication situation than in others and this is drawn attention to by Firth (1996, Wagner and Firth 1997), whose analyses of international business telephone calls by non-native speakers of English draw on the 'fragility-robustness' of communicative activities.

Firth (1996: 248) proposes that some talk-based activities and/or contexts are 'fragile' while others are more 'robust' in terms of participants' ability to withstand anomalous and deviant linguistic behaviour and where negotiation of meaning is needed. He gives two examples to illustrate this. The first is a telephone conversation where someone needs to write down a participant's name and needs to find out how to spell it correctly. He argues that by the nature of this task, the interaction is 'fragile' and requires any perceived problems to be dealt with immediately and not to be allowed to 'pass'. The second example is of a business negotiation, where a potential customer does not immediately understand the phrase 'fixed weight', and the seller explains the meaning of it. This again is a 'fragile' interaction, because without understanding the term 'fixed weight', the seller

would not have been able to negotiate a sale adequately with the potential customer. Firth's notion of fragility is very useful for analysing the communication difficulties observed in the intercultural project meeting considered in this paper, and in the next section we consider how it interfaces with the Relevance-theoretic cognitive pragmatic approach to communication.

## *2.2 Fragility, co-operation and self-centredness in communication*

Firth's concept of 'fragility – robustness' meshes well with the cognitive relevance-theoretic approach to communication (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995), especially in relation to co-operation and the self-orientation of the participants. The following is a very informal sketch of the main tenets of this theory.

In Relevance Theory terms, any behaviour (such as an utterance, a gesture, a facial expression, a manifestly deliberate silence) which makes evident a person's intention to inform somebody of something is communicative. The interpretation of a communicative act is driven by the question: 'What is the communicator's point in producing this act?' rather than the question: 'What do the words/gestures/facial expressions produced by the communicator mean?' Comprehension is an inferential process aimed at answering the 'What is the communicator's point?' question. The search for answers is guided by the expectation that the communicator, in producing the communicative act, aimed to convey some worthwhile information in the most economical way for the addressee (i.e. without putting the addressee to the expenditure of more processing effort than is necessary for figuring out the information). This expectation stems from a general feature of human cognition: its orientation towards relevance (in other words, its orientation towards maximizing worthwhile information while economising on processing effort) and the nature of communicative acts: they are evidently produced with the intention to pre-empt attention. As paying attention to a communicative act, representing it mentally and integrating this representation with the context



requires the expenditure of mental effort, the communicator is not justified in producing the act unless its mental representation and processing will lead to enough worthwhile information to offset the effort required for comprehension. The communicator is thus co-operative as s/he invests some effort in producing a communicative act which conveys information economically from the addressee's point of view.

In the context of these Relevance-theoretic assumptions about communication Firth's concept of fragility is easily explained. If comprehension is an inferential process which takes the communicative act and the context as inputs and yields interpretations (i.e. received messages) as outputs, it is at some considerable risk of failure. This is because there is no guarantee that the contextual assumptions available to the addressee include those which are required for interpreting the communicative act in the way intended by the communicator, or that the direction of the addressee's reasoning in interpreting the act will proceed along the lines intended by the communicator. Various factors can influence the level of success of this inferential process, so communication is inherently 'fragile'. In other words, communication is always fragile rather than being fragile only in special circumstances as Firth (1996, 2009; Wagner and Firth 1997) suggests, although the level of the fragility can clearly vary.

Work in politeness theory suggests that the inferential Relevance-theoretic model of communication needs to be integrated with the role of 'face' in social interaction. For example, it seems reasonable to take the view that a speaker who asks a hearer for a favour (e.g. a stranger requesting information about the time of day from a passer-by) is openly appealing to the hearer's desire to be seen as a helpful person (i.e. the hearer's self-image or face). Clearly, there are cultural as well as individual differences regarding the importance of maintaining face by being helpful to others (for more detailed accounts of face and linguistic politeness within the framework of Relevance Theory see Jary 1994, 1998, and Escandell-Vidal 1996). These observations suggest that communication is at greater risk when the speaker's main concern is for his or her own goals and purposes rather than

those of the hearer, i.e. when the speaker is self-oriented rather than hearer-oriented, because the speaker cannot be sure whether and to what extent the hearer will be inclined to put himself or herself out to help the speaker achieve his or her own purposes. If the Relevance-theoretic approach to communication is broadly along the right lines, the speaker who pursues his or her own goals through communication, and is in this sense 'self-oriented' should clearly communicate this, as concealing his/her personal goal entails opting out from communication as a form of social action: one in which all participants are co-operative. In other words, concealing personal goals pursued through communication is a form of manipulation and manipulative behaviour is not co-operative (in any sense of this term) by definition. Thus, situations where the speaker asks the hearer for a favour often provide clear clues that the communicated information relating to the request is (primarily) relevant to the speaker, rather than to the hearer (e.g. beginning with 'Excuse me,...' as an apologetic way to introduce the request for a favour). From the Relevance-theoretic perspective, the speaker could be seen to be self-oriented, not only when he or she is trying to achieve some personal goals (whether these are made evident or not), but also when she decides, for whatever reason, to communicate in a way which is less than optimally relevant to the hearer(s), or in case the hearer is justified to assume that the communicator has failed to do her best to achieve optimal relevance.

These observations may suggest that communication is primarily co-operative. However, we would argue that it is also fundamentally self-oriented for at least two reasons. First, there is no evidence that we initiate communication in order to further the interests of others more often than we initiate it to further our own interests, goals and purposes (Keckesz 2010, 2011, with Zhang 2009; Keysar 2007). Second, although this may seem paradoxical, there is no incompatibility between co-operation and self-orientation in communication: a person who decides to achieve their goals through communication typically has to take account of the hearer's abilities and cognitive resources (e.g. the contextual assumptions presumed available to the hearer); that is, the speaker has to be co-operative in order to achieve his or her personal goals through communication. Of course, in order

to be successful, the speaker needs to estimate the extent to which other participants in communication have similar assumptions about the goals of communication and the extent to which they are willing to put themselves out in order to comprehend the messages that any of the other participants intend to convey. To be sure, in some situations the speaker does not necessarily need to adjust significantly to the hearer, say because the status relationship is such that the communicator can reasonably expect the hearer to accept the imposition of needing to invest whatever effort is necessary to figure out the message. However, there are inherent risks here: the hearer may not be willing or, even if willing, may not be able to comply with the speaker's preferences.

### *2.3 Fragility of communication, self-orientation and presumed shared beliefs*

The set of assumptions presumed shared by the participants in communication is called their 'common ground' (see Clark, 1996) or 'mutual cognitive environment' (Sperber and Wilson, 1986; 1995). There are some theoretically important differences between these terms which are not relevant for the description and analysis of the material considered in this article. For this reason, as mentioned above, we use the informal and theory neutral term 'presumed shared beliefs'. As communication depends on the participants' abilities to make as reliable estimates as possible about each other's inferential abilities and cognitive resources, including the contextual assumptions which are available to them, presumed shared beliefs play a key role in communication. Experimental evidence suggests that participants in communication monitor their presumed shared beliefs, checking that they are appropriately updated as communication progresses (see Clark, 1996; Clark and Brennan, 1991; Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986; Clark and Schaefer, 1989; Schober and Clark, 1989). An important experimental finding is that in face-to-face interaction people use various non-linguistic cues, including those whose function is to provide evidence of mutual understanding as the conversation progresses. This suggests that failure to establish, monitor and suitably update the set

of the participants' presumed shared beliefs in communication is due either to flaws in their communicative competence or to a self-oriented disregard for the communicative abilities and needs of other participants. So, a participant in communication who pays insufficient attention to the set of beliefs presumed shared by all participants could be considered self-oriented because of his or her lack of alertness to the needs of others and will most likely fail to co-operate with them effectively in negotiating meaning and conveying messages. This relates to the concepts of mindfulness (Langer 1989) and attentiveness (Fukushima 2013), which we explore in another paper (author and co-author, in preparation).

### **3. The communication event**

This article focuses on a meeting that occurred in the preliminary stages of a potential intercultural partnership project which formed part of a large Sino-UK educational programme. The main elements of this full programme were four materials development projects, but there was also an agreement for there to be a separate research and development component, which we focus on in this paper. British and Chinese stakeholders had agreed at a Joint Steering Committee meeting, prior to the start of all the projects, that there should be some research associated with the whole materials development programme, and formal notes from this meeting described the research element as follows:

The Programme will provide funding for a separate Research and Development component. This component, led by nominated experts from both sides, will address overarching issues which cannot properly be addressed either by the Project Management Group or the individual projects.

Project internal document

Following a bidding process, the British Programme Management team designated a professor, Paul, to lead this overarching research project within the UK and it was his responsibility, with the support of the UK Programme Manager, Eva, to establish in collaborative discussions with potential Chinese partners a joint overarching research project that the Sino-UK Joint Steering Committee would approve. Two exploratory meetings were held with different potential partners and the first of these has been selected for analysis in this paper. The meeting took place in the UK and was spread over 2 days. It lasted for 2 hours and 5 minutes on day one, and 1 hour and 32 minutes on day two. Participants were five British academics (Paul, the lead professor; Mary a senior academic; Jane, a research assistant, and two others) and the UK Programme Manager, Eva, plus two Chinese professors. The meeting was video recorded, which was standard practice for all meetings in the Programme. Only brief extracts from the long interaction can be shown here. They have been transcribed in accordance with Dressler and Kreuz's (2000) transcription system.

### *3.1 Overview of the meeting*

The meeting started with a long, monologic description from Paul of the research he would like to carry out. This lasted for 40 minutes, after which the Chinese lead professor, Fan, raised an unexpected fundamental issue: although the research focus that Paul was suggesting was both very interesting and very relevant, it was much more academic than the Chinese stakeholder was expecting. He then listed four issues that the Chinese stakeholder wanted research on, such as platform and intellectual property rights (IPR). At first Paul tried to find points of overlap, and suggested foci that could address the interests and concerns of both the Chinese stakeholder and his team, but then Fan came out with yet another very unexpected piece of information: the British research team were expected to produce research reports on exactly these four issues. Eva responded by complaining that no one had told the British that they were expected to do this, and she argued that the four issues were inappropriate as topics for the overarching research. She

explained that these particular issues needed to be dealt with very quickly in order to allow the materials development projects to proceed smoothly, and that the UK Programme Management team had assigned other staff to handle them. All this confusion was very time consuming. After a total discussion time of 2 hours and 5 minutes, which included 55 minutes explicitly trying to resolve the impasse, the meeting ended with no real progress. However much of the discussion entailed each person putting forward their own points, rather than asking the other for more information. Although they understood each other at the level of the more explicitly (i.e. more directly) communicated, information, they did not ask each other any probing questions which would have helped them to figure out some more implicitly communicated relevant information. This is surprising in some respects, because in everyday casual conversation people often ask such probing questions when chatting about each other's plans (e.g. How are you going to do this? Who's in it with you?).

The meeting resumed the next day and initially went back over the same points. Fan argued that the four issues had been agreed by the Sino-UK Joint Steering Committee, which was attended by both UK and Chinese staff, and that the decision therefore could not be overturned. Eva explained again that the British were not trying to ignore the issues, but that they were integral to the materials development projects and thus could not wait for the outcome of the overarching research. However, during this discussion, the British participants started to press Fan for more precise details: for example, had research groups been set up for each of the four topics, who were the leaders of the groups, what were their contact details, what exact tasks had they been set, what was the timeline, and so on. Through this more detailed questioning, the nature of the impasse began to emerge. Participants eventually realised that there had been two fundamental misunderstandings: one over the meaning of the term 'research' and one over the timeframe.

The excerpts from the meeting considered below lend support to the conclusion that communication was adversely affected by the interplay of several key factors: (a) general lack of effective co-operation in communication; (b) participants' failure to establish an adequate set of mutual shared beliefs regarding the goals of the meeting in the context of the joint project (including their mutual understanding of some key terms, such as 'overarching research'); and (c) their response to perceived communication difficulties by adopting a more self-oriented approach to communication (where a more other-oriented approach would have been more effective).

#### **4. Data analysis**

##### *4.1 The start of the meeting*

Extracts 1a and 1b come from the beginning section of the meeting. Mary, a senior academic, started by checking that everyone knew each other and then handed over to Paul to lead the discussion. Paul's handling at this point was critical because the success of the meeting depended to a large extent on the participants' clarity about the goals of the meeting and the points to be discussed. Paul rightly decided to open the meeting by laying out the agenda, but failed to do so efficiently for several reasons.

##### Extract 1a

- 1 Mary So over to you Paul.
- 2 Paul OK, well there were THREE main elements to the research proposal. and
- 3 what I'd like us to do today if we can, is to get as far as we can with an
- 4 action plan, on those three elements. and then Eva has suggested that uh
- 5 there's another aspect uhm of the research and development process, uh
- 6 that we really should be considering looking at, that WASn't part of our

7 original bid. so I'd also like us to discuss that. I'll outline what I think Eva  
8 means and she's here to elaborate on what that might be. uh that is really  
9 quite urgent in the sense that if we decide to go uhm with that proposal,  
10 uhm then we're going to have to uh start the research activity very soon,  
11 which is also a good thing I think because it will get us working together  
12 early on. so just to sort of give us a rough agenda, there's four (..) the four  
13 main elements are one (..) uh to find basically (..) at the base of this are  
14 video tapes of a variety of different practices, and because this is the  
15 overarching research project, those can be focusing on teaching and  
16 learning.

*[Continues for a further 9 minutes, talking in depth about the  
videoing element and without specifying what the four agenda items  
are.]*

Paul started by assuming that everyone was familiar with 'the research proposal' but added (lines 2–4) that Eva had suggested a fourth possible aspect. From his description of this fourth element (lines 5–6), it is impossible to figure out what this 'aspect of research and development process' really refers to, and although Paul promised to explain what it was, he did not actually do so. This put the participants under considerable pressure. The Chinese participants in particular were likely to be less familiar with the British research plans than the British were and so they not only had to listen carefully for Paul's explication of the three main elements of his research proposal, but also simultaneously had to check whether, and how, what he was saying related to the 'additional aspect of research' that he had just mentioned. The choice of 'And then' (line 4) at the beginning of Paul's utterance could well have increased the pressure because these words could easily be interpreted as indicating they introduce an utterance which should be contextualised as a natural continuation of the preceding utterance. So, from the Relevance-theoretic perspective on communication, Paul failed to co-operate effectively because he put the Chinese (and maybe other) participants to



unwarranted expenditure of processing effort, by failing to communicate efficiently an important part of the propositional content of his message: information about which aspects of research he was talking about, and possibly also by initially misdirecting the Chinese hearers' reasoning towards the wrong context. Paul's contributions are obscure and long-winded (he talked for 11 minutes yet never identified the four main elements for the agenda), thus requiring considerable expenditure of processing effort which is not offset by adequate worthwhile information, not least because he failed to identify what the four agenda items are that he said he wanted to discuss.

The impact of these initial flaws in communication was compounded by other key weaknesses. For example, by not explaining the nature of Eva's proposed fourth aspect, it would have been very hard for the participants to understand why that aspect would have to start so urgently (lines 8–10). In this respect Paul failed to communicate some assumptions which were important for the fulfilment of his communicative intention, but were not shared by the participants (i.e. were not part of their set of presumed shared beliefs, and the result was poor mutual understanding. This is evidenced by the fact that after 11 minutes Eva stepped in saying she was confused, that Paul's explanation was too detailed and asking him to step back. He did not believe her and checked with the Chinese participants, who supported Eva's position (see Extract 1b).

#### Extract 1b

Paul      well let me ask, are you, am I losing you?

Fan      well to me it's a bit (..) we come down to the too much detail.

Paul      yes, OK.

Fan      could you give me an overall picture?

Paul      OK

Extracts 1a and 1b demonstrate a failure of co-operation and this can be seen as a consequence of the speaker's self-oriented approach: Paul failed to take account of the hearers' ability to comprehend his words in the way he intended them to and he also failed to build the appropriate set of presumed shared beliefs. Even though the communication situation was rather 'fragile', especially as it involved participants from different cultures who were at best only superficially acquainted, Paul did not check whether they were following what he was saying. He did not check whether they were familiar with his research proposal, let alone whether they were following his particular points. Instead, he launched into a monologue (about a detailed element of a research procedure), which the hearers could not adequately comprehend, because the requisite contextual assumptions were not available to them.

Why might Paul have been as self-oriented as this? A plausible reason could be affective factors: the depth of his enthusiasm for the research that he was proposing. He seemed to be so keen to explain the intricacies of his research approach that he overlooked the need to tailor his explanation to the cognitive resources and needs of the other participants. His interest and enthusiasm seemed to blind him to this and in this sense he was self-oriented. Yet in other respects, Paul demonstrated co-operative behaviour, from both a pragmatic and general perspective. Throughout the rest of the meeting, he repeatedly tried to find points of mutual academic interest that could form the basis of a research collaboration (e.g. see Extract 2 line 1 below). This demonstrates the close interconnection between co-operation and self-orientation – the speaker may communicate successfully in some respects and not in others.

#### *4.2 The Second half of the meeting (Day 1)*

Forty five minutes into Paul's long monologue, Fan stepped in and revealed that what the Chinese stakeholders were expecting from the overarching research was fundamentally different from what

Paul had been proposing. Fan listed four specific topics that they wanted researching which bore only tangential connections with Paul's proposed research. This unexpected turn to the meeting ushered in another phase of communication problems where each of the participants demonstrated self-orientation in communication. Here we illustrate it in Extract 2, particularly with respect to Paul and Eva.<sup>2</sup>

#### Extract 2

- 1 Paul I mean I think one valuable thing that you and I COULD do is to articulate  
2 these issues, one outcome would be an articulation of these issues from  
3 the perspective of learning. do you see what I'm trying to say? to inject the  
4 learning dimension into the technology debate, which is what I've been  
5 doing in Europe. that's basically what they want me to do. whether that  
6 would be=
- 7 Fan =well I would be more than happy to do it, but however I HAVE to (..) well  
8 Eva will have to be involved as well in this thing, because the [name of  
9 Chinese stakeholder] will like to know these, (..) well here's the  
10 overarching research project going on now, then the [name of Chinese  
11 stakeholder] will expect answers to the four major issues, they are  
12 expecting from UK counterparts. they will be getting the outcomes from  
13 their four groups, and from UK side, oh you have the overarching research  
14 going on, what is the answer to these four questions.
- 15 Eva but you see=
- 16 Fan =if they hear that Fan is involved, they will say, Fan, what are you doing?  
17 ((laughter)) but this is not the case you see.
- 18 Eva I mean this is where you see, it seems to me, (..) I sort of can't- I don't  
19 know how to get round this, uhm in the sense that IF that is what was-

20            what they are expecting the UK side to be doing, there should have been  
 21            something in some of the documentation, you know, because there's no-  
 22            I mean the Joint Steering Committee, I mean the UK members of the  
 23            steering committee have NO: conception at all that this was what was  
 24            expected=  
 25    Fan    =but Eva=  
 26    Eva    =[name] doesn't. so from the UK side there is NO: there's nothing either in  
 27            writing or in anyone's heads to imagine that we are meant to be coming up  
 28            with that.

As mentioned above, one way Paul attempted to ensure adequate co-operation in communication was to put forward repeatedly ideas for collaborative projects, as illustrated in lines 1–5 of Extract 2. However, at the same time, he simultaneously showed a certain amount of self-orientation. When he asked whether Fan was following what he was saying (line 3: 'do you see what I'm trying to say'), he did nothing to make sure that Fan responded, allowing his question to be interpreted as implicating the assumption that he was expressing his thoughts very clearly. This might well have made Fan feel he was not genuinely being invited to seek clarification.

Eva demonstrated even greater self-orientation during this phase of the meeting. When Fan explained what the Chinese stakeholders were expecting, she repeatedly maintained that this should have been communicated more clearly to the British (e.g. lines 19–24). She became more concerned about communicating her own perspective and making her own points than asking Fan to provide more details. Although they understood each other at the level of explicitly, i.e. directly, communicated information, neither asked the other any probing questions which would have helped them gain understanding at the more relevant, and more implicit message level. For

instance, if she had asked Fan for more details about what exactly the Chinese stakeholders were expecting to receive about the four issues from the (British members of the) overarching research team, and when they were expecting to receive that, the mismatch of expectations which emerged the next day would have been short-circuited. As it was, after a total discussion time of 2 hours and 5 minutes, the meeting ended with no real progress on the key issues.

What might be the causes of self-orientation in this part of the meeting? We suggest that face-related defensiveness and restraint are plausible explanations in these interactions. A competent communicator conveys ideas clearly and effectively. In the context of this assumption, frequent requests for clarification may easily be interpreted as admissions of the speaker's lack of communicative competence and, therefore, threaten the speaker's face. Moreover, the speaker who repeatedly checks the hearer's comprehension may be taken to imply that the hearer's communicative competence is less than adequate and, therefore, threaten the hearer's face. This could explain the lack of follow-up (both in terms of opportunity and take-up) to Paul's confirmation check (line 3).

However, additional face concerns are probably also at play. Paul's recurring suggestions (only one of which is shown in the extracts included here) of ways in which they might be able to collaborate and still meet the Chinese stakeholders' requirements can be regarded as co-operative from one point of view, in that they are other-oriented because they aim to find a solution to the impasse. However, from another perspective they can be interpreted as a strategy to avoid face loss, and therefore, as self-oriented (i.e. as reflecting Paul's personal preference for preserving his face). He and his team had been awarded a British grant on condition that he could successfully negotiate a research collaboration with a Chinese partner. If he failed to achieve this, not only would he lose a considerable sum of money for his department, but he would potentially be evaluated as an incompetent negotiator. Thus for face-saving and other personal reasons, it would be important for Paul to do his utmost to find a way of overcoming the impasse.

Eva was also placed in a very face-threatening as well as operationally difficult situation. When Fan revealed publicly that the Chinese stakeholders were expecting a certain type of overarching research, this was very problematic for her. In her role as the UK Programme Manager, she could be expected to know about this and to have conveyed it to the British teams, so the fact that she had not done so could imply that she was incompetent in understanding and/or communicating what the Chinese stakeholders wanted. Moreover, Eva and the British stakeholders had already commissioned other professionals to deal with two of the issues identified by Fan since they were integral elements of the materials development projects, and Paul and his team had won (following a bidding process) funding for broader academic research. So to now agree to Paul's team going along with the Chinese stakeholders' expectations (as reported by Fan) would have led to major programme management difficulties and embarrassment for the British stakeholders. So from this viewpoint, it is understandable that Eva's response was to justify her (and the British stakeholders') position, rather than to seek further clarification from Fan. However, her self-orientation for both herself and the British stakeholders whom she represented (which occurred several times in this way throughout the rest of the day's meeting) had a major negative impact on the achievement of mutual understanding.

Another important perspective on the self-oriented behaviour illustrated in Extract 2 relates to personal goals, which may or may not be construed as part of the overall purpose of the joint project. In Extract 2 Paul overtly communicates that he would like to work with Fan to 'inject the learning dimension into the technology debate' and to articulate this clearly, adding that this is something he has already been working on elsewhere (lines 3–5). This may lead Fan to think that Paul might be trying to push, as it were, his personal agenda and make it part of the joint project. In other words, Paul's communicative behaviour might appear to be self-oriented (even if this was not actually his intention).

Due to the failures of co-operation and the (perceived) self-orientation of at least some participants, by the time the meeting ended, no agreement on key issues had been negotiated effectively. The meeting had begun without establishing a set of shared beliefs which would provide the common ground needed for adequate negotiation of meaning in achieving the agreed goals and, unsurprisingly, ended in an impasse. The participants' failure to co-operate effectively in the communication process was largely due to the self-oriented approach that they had adopted for a number of reasons.

#### *4.3 Resumed meeting (Day 2)*

The meeting resumed the next day and initially went back over the same points. Fan argued that the four topics he had outlined the previous day had been agreed by the Joint Steering Committee, which was attended by both UK and Chinese staff, and that the decision therefore could not be overturned. Eva explained again (as she had done on Day 1) that the British were not trying to ignore the issues, but that those issues were integral to the materials development projects and thus could not wait for the outcome of the overarching research. However, during this discussion, (only a fraction of which can be shown in Extract 3), the British participants started to press Fan for more precise details: for example, whether research groups had been set up for each of the four topics, who the leaders of the groups were, what their contact details were, what exact tasks had they been set (Extract 3 lines 14–16), what the timeline was (lines 25 and 28), and so on. As Extract 3 shows, through this more detailed questioning, the nature of the impasse began to emerge. Participants eventually realised that there had been two fundamental misunderstandings: one over the meaning of the term 'research' and one over the timeframe.

#### Extract 3

1   Eva     that's right. and so and so I think what the- (..) the British didn't understand

2 the term research in- in THOSE terms, because it was- well you've got to do  
3 those anyway.

4 Fan yes, the- I- in the steering committee meeting both sides agreed there  
5 should be a research component on this project. so this is actually a  
6 universal agreement on both sides, there SHOULD be a research  
7 component. then what sort of things are we going to research ON. this is  
8 where it seems to me, when Eva and I met we just discovered, we are NOT  
9 talking about the same thing. there are some MISmatches, some  
10 MISmatches in terms of the research topics. this is where you know the  
11 problem arise actually. *((35 seconds omitted))* the [name of Chinese  
12 stakeholders] will have no objection whatsoever to what Paul is doing  
13 actually, they have no objection whatsoever. but this is=  
14 Jane =sorry, Fan, with the four groups, because maybe we're misconstruing now  
15 what they were, what was the (..) set of tasks that the groups were going to  
16 be asked to do. was it that they=  
17 Fan =yes, they have, each each group has=  
18 Eva =so can you tell us what the tasks=  
19 Fan =no, I can't remember, I only look after my own business you see.  
20 *((laughter))*  
21 Eva so what what task were you given for [name of topic]?  
22 Fan I have to investigate and come out with recommendations to the [name of  
23 Chinese stakeholder], you know how to- how to cope with [name of topic]  
24 issues.  
25 Jane was there like a timeline. I'm just wondering=  
26 Fan =that's the document I prepared, in Chinese and translated into English.



- 27           *((31 seconds omitted))*
- 28   Eva     so like Jane said, were you given a (..) a sort of deadline, I mean
- 29   Fan     oh we we actually were given a deadline. without SARS it would long time
- 30           have been done. yes, we- we- the deadline for US actually was before the
- 31           end of May. the four groups=
- 32   Jane     *((looking at Eva))* =YOU SEE, we thought a three year deadline.
- 33   Fan     no actually it's not. no no not at all not at all.
- 34   Eva     this is why we said we had different understandings of what=
- 35   Fan     =not at all. actually these four groups worked=
- 36           *((7 seconds omitted))*
- 37   Eva     this is why I say- actually the British as well- of course we know we have to
- 38           solve these things but we don't call them research.
- 39   Fan     well, this is how THEY- the [name of Chinese stakeholder] understood,
- 40           that's research. yes. that's research. actually in our original planning, these
- 41           four groups should come up with recommendations by the end of May.

The communication on the second day of the meeting was other-oriented in two important respects. First, the participants tended to acknowledge the point made by the previous speaker before moving on to express their thoughts (see the initial words in lines 1, 4 and 17) and thereby linguistically indicated that their utterances were logically related to the previous speaker's. This is also an indication of other-oriented speech, because the speaker is explicitly showing that what he or she has to say is directly related to the previous speaker's conversational contribution (see also the use of 'so' in lines 18, 21 and 28). Second, and perhaps even more importantly, the participants invited each other to explain in greater detail particular points relating to the project that they were insufficiently clear about. This shift from a self-oriented speech to other-oriented speech led to

much more effective co-operation in the negotiation of meaning and enabled the participants to move forward in exploring further collaboration on the project.

So why did the participants on the first day of the meeting (Extracts 1 and 2) adopt a self-oriented approach which had a negative impact on successful co-operation in the negotiation of meaning, and on the second day take a more other-oriented approach with a more positive impact? From Extract 3 we can see that another participant, Jane, initiated the questioning approach (line 10) and that after her initial intervention, both Eva and Jane adopted this approach, supporting each other in the questioning in order to gain clearer responses from Fan (see lines 14–21). It seems that Jane's initial intervention helped Eva realise she needed to take a more other-oriented approach. Jane had no leadership role in the proposed collaboration, so probably had less personal face concerns to hamper her negotiation style. It is plausible, therefore, that this gave her the freedom and objectivity to help change the negotiation style of the meeting.

## **5. Discussion**

We have considered a project negotiation meeting in which communication was adversely affected by the interplay of several key factors: (a) general lack of effective co-operation in communication; (b) participants' failure to establish an adequate set of presumed shared beliefs regarding the goals of the meeting in the context of the joint project (including their mutual understanding of some key terms, such as 'overarching research'); and (c) their response to perceived communication difficulties by adopting a more self-oriented approach to communication (where a more other-oriented approach would have been more effective).

Our analysis has three aspects. First, at the level of observational description of the transcripts several factors which played a major role in communication difficulties were identified. These include: the failure to lay out the agenda for the meeting in good time, the monologic style of one of

the participants with focus on his own planned research, one group of participants' emphasis on the need for research which was more academic than presumed by the other group, the abrupt introduction of a new topic, confusion regarding the meaning of a key term ('research') and the lack of probing questions which would have helped avoid or resolve confusion, among others. The main generalization based on each of these observations is that on the first day of the meeting the participants showed considerable self-orientation, which was detrimental to effective co-operation.

Secondly, at the next level of what might be termed 'descriptive explanation' we characterised the situation under analysis as 'fragile' due to a significant degree of uncertainty about the views, assumptions and expectations of other participants. Even though the (groups of) participants were in a position to make some assumptions about their presumed shared goals, they were unlikely to be confident about the set of beliefs they can presume to share, as they did not know each other well, came from different cultural backgrounds, and were engaging in communication in order to establish the basis (i.e. set of shared beliefs) required for future joint work. Therefore, they were also likely to have some doubts about how to be co-operative in this situation, both with regard to making conversational contributions appropriate to the purpose of the meeting and with regard to making decisions about which of their conversational contributions at any given point in the meeting would be optimally relevant to others. At these early stages of negotiating the direction of their planned future collaboration on the project, they were in a position to presume fairly reliably that they shared some goals, while being unsure about others. Some goals were probably only believed to be important by individual participants and their acceptance by others certainly needed to be established, whether through open negotiation or more or less covert, manipulative, forms of persuasive behaviour. Of course, it is also possible, perhaps likely, that some participants in this – as in any – communication situation had personal goals, perhaps personal agendas, which they were fully aware had little bearing on the accepted, or the presumed accepted, purpose of the joint project negotiation. This raises two important questions: *How can the miscommunication resulting from these situational pressures be explained in a principled, theoretically well-motivated way?* and

*Why did the participants respond to the situational pressures with counter-productive self-oriented communicative behaviour?.*

These questions lead us to a third level of analysis: 'theoretical explanation'. The questions were addressed within the framework of Sperber and Wilson's (1986; 1995) Relevance Theory in cognitive pragmatics and the concept of face within social pragmatics. On the one hand, the Relevance framework makes it possible to give an explicit theoretical characterisation of 'fragility'. On the other hand, it provides the basis for a coherent and systematic theoretical account of the nature of miscommunication on the first day of the project negotiation meeting in terms of the relation between co-operation, relevance and context. It should be noted that this framework also provides an insight into the participants' much improved communicative effectiveness on the second day, when the conversational contributions were more relevant than on the first day. According to Relevance Theory participants in the communication event presume that the speaker aims to make a conversational contribution which is optimally relevant (i.e. optimally informative) to the hearer(s). It stands to reason that communicative acts which are other-oriented are more likely to be optimally relevant (i.e. to convey enough worthwhile information for no unjustifiable expenditure of processing effort) because a self-oriented communicative act requires the hearer to work out the speaker's intended meaning by processing it in a context in which it is relevant to the speaker, and, therefore, requires the hearer to put more mental effort into accessing it. For this reason, a self-oriented communicative act is likely to be less than optimally relevant: it requires the hearer to invest greater processing effort than should be necessary for figuring out the relevance of the utterance to the hearer. We have argued that the communication situation under analysis puts each speaker under some considerable pressures to preserve his or her own face as well the face of other participants. Frequent requests for clarification may easily be interpreted as admissions of the speaker's lack of communicative competence and, therefore, threaten the speaker's positive face. Moreover, the speaker who repeatedly checks the hearer's comprehension may be taken to imply

that the hearer's communicative competence is less than adequate and, therefore, threaten the hearer's positive face.

## **6. Concluding comments and implications for future research**

Through the analyses in this paper, we have demonstrated the following:

- Co-operation and self-orientation are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they can go hand in hand, and in certain respects can be regarded as different sides of the same coin;
- Self-orientation can have a major negative impact on the negotiation of meaning in that it can hamper the establishment of the set of presumed shared beliefs which provide the common ground required for conducting the interaction successfully;
- Self-orientation in communication behaviour can occur for various reasons, one of the most important of which seems likely to relate to face concerns.

These findings have important theoretical implications.<sup>3</sup>

Firstly, more research is needed to incorporate explicitly self-orientation into the Relevance-theoretic framework of communication. This entails considering the interconnection between co-operation and self-orientation by describing and analysing critical instances of communicative interaction, such as the one considered in this paper. Our initial investigation suggests that the Relevance-theoretic perspective on communication is essentially correct: the general condition for communicative success is that the hearer can reliably presume that the speaker is co-operative (and in this sense, altruistic). Self-oriented communicative behaviour is generally successful only provided the communicator can reliably assume that the hearer will 'make good' by accommodating the speaker's self-orientedness (and that the hearer is, in this sense, altruistic). It does not follow from this that co-operation and self-orientation play equally important roles in explaining the possibility of communication. What does follow from these observations is that, in order to be able to rely on

‘making good’ to communicate successfully, we need to have in place a communication system which also allows for communication without having to ‘make good’. In Relevance Theory terms, the orientation of communicative behaviour towards relevance (a positive function of informativeness and a negative function of processing effort) plays a central role in this communication system. On this view, communicative behaviour is quintessentially co-operative in that the participants’ success in the production and the comprehension of communicative acts is guided by the presumption that the communicative behaviour is oriented toward optimal relevance.

Our data suggest that self-oriented communication is successful only provided some further special conditions are met: the hearer(s) must be willing and able to take account of the speaker’s self-orientation (say, because they tacitly agree to put themselves out for whatever reason – and there are many, including presumed mutual support between friends) or the acceptance of the speaker’s self-orientation needs to be negotiated and ratified (say, when the self-orientation of one of the participants is likely to present an imposition on the other). With respect to the communication event we have considered (see Extracts 2 and 3), neither of these conditions was met on the first day (leading to miscommunication). On the second day, both groups of participants adopted a co-operative other-oriented, rather than self-centred approach and the communication process was repaired. In the light of these observations, the best way to accommodate evidently self-oriented communicative behaviour might be not to revise the framework of Relevance Theory, but to introduce the term ‘self-oriented communication situation’, defined as: a situation in which it is, or needs to be, made evident to the participants that the main relevance (i.e. most of the worthwhile information) of the interlocutors’ (both the speaker’s and the hearer’s) contributions is to the self, not to the other, and where all participants need to (be willing and able to) accept this in order for communication to succeed. As we have tried to show, our data seems to lend support to the conclusion that self-orientation is detrimental to communicative success only when it leads to poor co-ordination of communicative actions.

From a different perspective which we cannot explore here in detail, our analysis also has some interesting implications for cognitive, descriptive and social pragmatics. Relevance Theory has seldom been used in the description and analysis of actual communication events. Our study puts the theory to the test. While the outcome seems promising, further similar studies are needed. The concept of 'fragility' proposed by Firth (1996: 248) characterises some talk-based activities and/or contexts as 'fragile' and others as more 'robust' in terms of participants' ability to withstand anomalous and deviant linguistic behaviour and where negotiation of meaning is needed. The theoretical elaboration of the concept of 'fragile communication situation' and our analysis of an early stage intercultural project negotiation meeting show that a much broader concept of 'fragility' than Firth (1996) envisaged is called for. We have argued that the situation under analysis is fragile for a whole range of reasons (e.g. those having to do with face) including those given by Firth.

Secondly, our study further suggests that affective factors, and especially face, may play a major role in inducing self-oriented behaviour. Paul and Eva were both fully committed to collaborating effectively with the potential Chinese partners and to finding a way to achieve it, and yet they nevertheless displayed marked self-orientation in their negotiation behaviour which hampered very significantly the achievement of mutual understanding. We propose that affective factors played a key role in this unhelpful behaviour, and that these were multifaceted. In this particular meeting, Paul's self-centredness at the beginning may have been due to his excessive enthusiasm for the topic and this may have blinded him to the communication needs of the other participants. Later in the meeting concerns about face seemed to play a major role for both Paul and Eva. Face theory is normally associated in pragmatics with concerns about politeness, rapport and/or relational management. However, our study suggests that face concerns are not limited to these aspects of interaction; on the contrary, they can hamper people's behaviour in establishing a set of presumed shared beliefs required for successful communication, and thereby hinder the co-ordination of

communicative actions required for the successful negotiation of mutual understanding. This proposed link between self-orientation and affective factors is broadly in line with Canagarajah's (2006: 205) commonsense proposal that attitudinal resources, such as patience, tolerance and humility to negotiate differences can help people in the making of meaning and in sustaining a conversation. The present study, therefore, points to the need for exploring in depth the impact of face on the processes of negotiating meaning.

Finally, our study has focused on a single, extended meeting and so we clearly cannot draw any conclusions from it as to how frequently self-orientation in communication may result in the communication and negotiation difficulties similar to those experienced in this case. Nevertheless, we would argue that our analyses point to the need for much greater attention to be paid to the relation between self-orientation and the set of presumed shared beliefs which makes the common ground between the participants and ) is a key prerequisite for the successful co-ordination of communicative actions, especially in fragile contexts such as preliminary meetings in intercultural project partnerships. We hope, therefore, that our paper will stimulate further research in this area.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Of course, people also engage in communication in pursuit of personal goals, whose achievement may depend on these goals being openly discussed or concealed from the other participants.

<sup>2</sup> Fan's communicative behaviour also demonstrated co-operation and self-orientation, but for space reasons, only two participants' behaviour are analysed here.

<sup>3</sup> They also have important practical/applied implications, but these are beyond the scope of this paper. For more details, see author and co-author, in preparation.



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## Transcription Conventions

(..)	Short untimed pause
:	Lengthened syllable
word-	Word cut off
=	Latched talk
WORD	Highly stressed syllable or word
word.	Sentence-final falling intonation
word,	Continuing intonation
word?	Rising intonation
(( <i>word word</i> ))	Descriptive or explanatory comment by the transcriber
[word word]	Gloss of a name replaced for anonymity reasons

|

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