Intercultural Moments: A Case of Peer Discussions among International Students in Japan

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Abstract—When are the relevant moments for "interculturality"? Why do participants invoke, accept, and collaboratively develop them? When do they resist them? This study explores these questions by examining the case of foreign graduate students in Japan. It examines a series of group discussions held for a graduate seminar course in a Japanese university. The analysis of the discourse data shows that while moments of interculturality repeatedly appeared in their talk, these moments were invoked in order for the speakers to pursue trans-cultural social purposes. Put another way, while non-Japanese students invoked their foreign-ness in their talk, they did so *en passant*, not as an ultimate goal.

Index Terms—Interculturality, conversation analysis, category bound activity, narrative, situated identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the past ten years, discursive-constructionists have explored the notion of "interculturality" and have shown that moments of interculturality are ephemeral. Interculturality is *not* always an omni-relevant, in other words pre-scribed condition of interaction, but is instead something participants negotiate and invoke when the situation calls for it. Even in what seem self-evidently cross-cultural contexts, such as conversation exchange tables between Japanese and American students (e.g., [1]), a discussion between a Japanese radio host and a foreign student guest [2], [3], or discussion on study-abroad experiences by Korean students in Japan ([4]), detailed analysis of actual interactions amongst participants (e.g., what was said, how it was said, and when was it said) shows that the mere fact that the speakers are from different cultural groups does not automatically result in interactionally-relevant self-identifications as culturally different. This paper illustrates with yet another set of context where international students in a Japanese university are involved that moments of interculturality are not present *a priori*; rather, they emerge only when participants decide to treat them as relevant. The study attempts to reveal what makes the interaction relevantly intercultural, and the procedure in interaction to engender it.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A. Research Questions

WhenIn this study, I will first start by detecting the moments of construction of interculturality. The moments of interculturality is understood as the moments when speakers accept intercultural selves, for example, presenting (projecting) self as Japanese, Korean, or Thai, or at a more abstract category, someone from other cultures, in interaction among selves. My stance here is to argue that the fact of being intercultural is itself a social phenomenon (Nishizaka, 1995: 302), and the fact of being culturally different is indeed an achievement in and through talk-in-interaction. The literature before me have already made this point based on various data source (e.g., [1], [2], [4]).

The ultimate research question in this study is to ask ―When do they let others or project from themselves such moments in a particular social context? When are the―moments‖ for interculturality? How, and why do participants invoke, accept, and collaboratively develop them?‖ And these questions invoke some further questions to follow.

When we identify the moments in the talk-in-interaction, the next question is to ask how these moments get constructed. Who starts it, and whom is it addressed? How does the addressee treat the projection of intercultural self in their talk? How do the participants present develop the intercultural selves?

Although this is an integral part of my aim in this study, I would like to probe even further, in other words, which is the main research question of my paper. That is, what are these moments for? When in talk, and how are intercultural moments made irrelevant? Why do we go about doing these works?

There are further issues to consider in addition. Participants do not always welcome the moments of interculturality to prolong in their interaction. At times, participants resist, or treat interculturality irrelevant, particularly when such intercultural selves are proposed to them by someone other than themselves. What are the reasons in the developing talk that they resist (or curtail) the moments of interculturality? When they do so, *how* do they accomplish resisting it through their interaction? And ultimately, what is the social consequence (accomplishment) which such irrelevancy brings to the participants? With these questions in mind, this study will tackle a piece of naturally occurring discourse data in Japanese.

B. The Method of Analysis

The I will be adopting a similar set of methodologies to analyze the data for this study as the other presenters in the organized topic, i.e., drawing on Membership Categorization Device [5], [7], Category-bound Activities [8] in this paper. Membership categorization device or MCD is composed of two parts, 1st, one or more collections of categories, and 2nd, some rules of application. I do not have time to explore this entire apparatus today, however, I will point out some most relevant concepts within it for this study, namely, concept of partitioning constancy and inconstancy. I will also draw on conversation analyticapproach to storytelling in particular, because the data I collected generated many occasions of personal storytelling.

Within the conceptualization of Membership Categorization, Sacks' lecture has discussed a particular notion which directly indexes what I am after. They are partitioning constancy and inconstancy [5], [6]. *Partioning constancy* registers the observation that on a given occasion, with its particular composition of participants, some two membership categorization devices (MCDs) could turn out to partition those participants identically, i.e., the individuals may end up differently being members of the same categories under the application of alternative category collections [6]. On the other hand, some two MCDs may have *partition inconstancy*, which means that each partitioning the local population differently than the other does, yielding alternative co-class memberships. Sacks provides a specific example: A group therapy session – someone behind the mirror (one-way mirror), categorizable as "patients" and "observer", but by saying *"we are about to start testing"* while leaning forward to the microphone, then they thereby invoke an alternative categorization device, "performer" and "audience"[5]. These categories parallel each other, i.e., partitioning constancy. All the persons who are patients, then now are performers under the other category collection. However, the two sets refract the scene rather differently[7].

With the same example, we also see the bearing of partitioning inconstancy. By reference to "patients" and "observer" category, these two are different categories within its collection. The same can be said about the alternative category, "performer" and "audience". Both partitioning constancy and inconstancy can serve as vehicles for replacing the relevance of one set of category terms by another. And they can thereby cover or camouflage identities, activating alternative bodies of common sense knowledge, inference, perception, etc. to conduct and understand in the situation and of the situation [7]. What Schegloff states here is highly relevant for this study because my focus is to see how intercultural moments (which can be considered as two apparently different memberships as [culture A] versus [culture B]) transforms into something else, we can imagine these both cases above are plausible routes which we can witness in the data.

C. Category Bound Activities

In this paper I also draw on category-bound activities to examine what the speakers are doing in terms of constructing a category. One can allude to a category membership by mentioning an action that is category-bound. The doing of a category- bound action can introduce into a scene or an occasion the relevance of the category to which that action is bound [7].One can allude to the category membership of a person by mentioning that person's doing of a particular action, and the doing of a category-bound action can introduce the relevance of category into the scene.

D. Narrative Analysis

The most relevant aspect of storytelling from CA perspective for this study can be summarized as the following [6]

1) What stories are about, given their recipients and various occasions in which they are told, may be related to the trajectory of telling itself([6]: 102 [10]).
2) We cannot know what distinctive features of structure or interactional enactment a story will generate in advance (e.g., [9]). The uptake in the course of telling by the recipients of the story becomes highly crucial for it.
3) Story telling embedded in our everyday communication is often used to do something rather than just being told for their own sake.

As we will see in this study, the intercultural moments get invoked and resisted encompassing the development of a narrative. The story undertaken by the teller may provide a moment of interculturality, yet the uptakes of the story by the recipients may work against it and transform the interpretation of the narrative to some other matters besides it.

III. THE DATA

The participants of the talk to be examined in this study are graduate students in Japan. It examines a series of group discussions held for a graduate seminar course in a Japanese university. The regular attendees for the discussions were four native Japanese and six to eight foreign graduate students from other countries (Thailand, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, the People's Republic of China, and Indonesia). As you can see in the slide, they gathered in a classroom in the university after a graduate class, then talked for approximately 30 minutes with no supervision. The discussion routine was a part of their seminar activity.

They engaged in a round-table discussion every few months and casually discussed various topics related to, but not at all exclusively limited to, their own learning processes as graduate students. Their common language for communication was Japanese. ((Despite more than a few Chinese native speakers present, there was no code-switching to Chinese even during the discussion time.))

The discussions were video- and audio-recorded, and transcribed according to the system commonly adopted in studies that take a conversation analytic approach to discourse [7], [10].

In this study, I will focus on the moments in the data in which these participants invoke intercultural moments, and through such a process they resulted in establishing a *common,* or what I call in this paper *transcultural* identity

with their Japanese and non- Japanese peers. The goal of this presentation is to illustrate that in the data examined here, the moment of interculturality, or emergence of "cultural others", is actually transformed into an opportunity to construct transcultural identity among the participants, which ultimately contribute to re-establish their graduate student-hood with different levels of experience. Along the way, I would like to provide answers to the above mentioned questions on interculturality.

IV. THE ANALYSIS

A. Analysis of an Emerging Narrative

The below is an excerpt from the data set. The excerpt contains a personal narrative by an international foreign graduate student from Thailand. In this interaction, there are 9 participants, Ping (Thailand), Elly (Indonesia), Kan (Sri Lanka), Chen (China), Hanako (Japan), Kyoko (Japan), Wong (China), and Noriko (Japan).
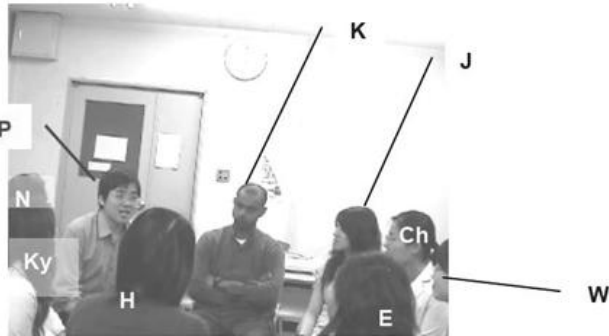

Fig. 1. Seating of the participants in excerpt 1.

The main focus of this excerpt is Ping, a student from Thailand Elly, a student from Indonesia. Let us first discuss what Ping has said in the personal narrative. His narrative is composed of two major chronological parts, namely, when he was in Thailand, and then when he first started his graduate program in Japan. He constructs his narrative in a "before-after" framework, the life in Thai being the before and the one in Japan the after.

1 P: eto watashi ichiban taihen datta no wa desu ne:

2 benkyoo shite

3 ita (.) toki no, [supiido to,
   "well what was the most difficult for me is, the speed when I was studying (in Thai) and"

4   [((Ch: nods))

5 nihon de benkyoo shite (.)ita supeedo mo zenzen
6 chigatte ite

   "the speech while I study in Japan, were very different,"

7 E: nods

8 P: tsuite ikenai tte yuu ka.
   "I wasn't table to catch up."

Excerpt 1.

First P tells the others that the speed of learning is different between Thai and Japan. Here P already provokes a potential intercultural moment here. P further describes in details how his life in Thai differs from that of Japan (Excerpt 2).

9   E: hayai no?

     "Is (Japan) fast?"

101 P: hmm yukkuri tte yuu ka. gakusee no
1   PEESU ni awaseru

12   tte yuu kanji (.) ((looks around))

     "I'd say (Thai was) slow. They are like adjusting to The students' pace."

13   E: nods

141 P: >dakara< y ukkuri shita kanji nan desu yo. .hh
5

     "So it is rather slow, you know."

     >dakara< yukkuri sita kanji de oshiete te >watashi mo<

16
17   *"so (they are) teaching slowly and so was I"*

     yukkuri shita kanji de nannimo nonbiri shitetara
     se- (.) kochira no hoo kara sekkyoku teki ni
181 moraoo to shinai de
920
     "(I) was slow and did nothing-(.) (I)did not try to obtain anything from this side"
     nanka gyaku ni sensee no hoo ga
     kande: kande: (.)nanka
21   ataetekureta[kanji.
22   *"on the contrary, the teachers' side*
23   *made the lecture digestible and gave it to us."*

24   Ch, J, W: [aa:::.

     "oh::"
     Excerpt 2.

In both before and after portions of telling, P projects the same set of category-bound activities, invoking [teacher-student] standard relationship pair to describe both his life styles in Thai and Japan. In the telling about the Thai student life, he says in line 15 *kochira no hoo kara sekkyokuteki ni* moraoo *to shinai* —I did not try to obtain anything from my side‖ and in line 16-17 describing the teacher's action as *kande kande ataetekureta* —chew and chew, then give (the information) to us.

B. Category-Bound Activities

Excerpt 3 indicates Ping's telling of his student life in Japan. The Thai telling has already established the standard pair and the most category-bound activity, thus the second part was easily understood in the same vein. At the same time, these are also heard as appropriate, category-bound thoughts for particular kind of students, that is, someone with linguistic difficulty.

222 P: daigakuin no kenkyuusee no toki wa desu ne: nanka
3   tooji wa (.)

"when I was still a research student, at that
time," nanka kenkyuusee sensee no jugyoo o
24   ukeru koto ga dekiru ***"well, they were able to***
audit the professors' lectures."

252   IMA dame na n desu kedo tooji wa dekite
6
"until now, though, at that time we could."

27   Ka: ((coughs))

282 P: de O-sensei wa irassharanakatta n desu
9   kedo honto ni (.)
"so Prof. O was still here and she was really (.)"
nanka shokku tte yuu ka .hh ((looking at Woo))
30   ***"I was kind of shocked."***

31   Bunpoo wa konna ni kuwashii n da! toka. Honto ni
323   tabun S sensei toka mo honto ni zenzen
334   kikitorenakute /((Ch: nods back))

"(Japanese) structure is in this detail! I
thought. Really Prof. S too, I was not able to
catch what she says at all."

P: A moo chotto yukkuri shite yo! De honto ni tsuite
303   ikenakatta toki ga atte. (1) hmm. Tte yuu ka.
1   ***"(I wanted to say) please slow down a bit! So***
32   ***there's time***

when I could not catch up. (1) hmm I mean."
Excerpt 3.

On the contrary to what we saw in Excerpt 2, in his telling about Japanese student life he projects it through verbalizing his inner thoughts in self-quotations, as in line 28 *bunpoo wa konna ni kuwashii n da!* "Japanese structure is in this detail " and in line 30 A *moo chotto yukkuri shite yo!* "please slow down a bit! (to Professor S)".

Given the telling here, one can examine the contrastive presentation of Thai life versus Japan life, which projects the speaker (P) to have an intercultural self vis-à-vis others present.
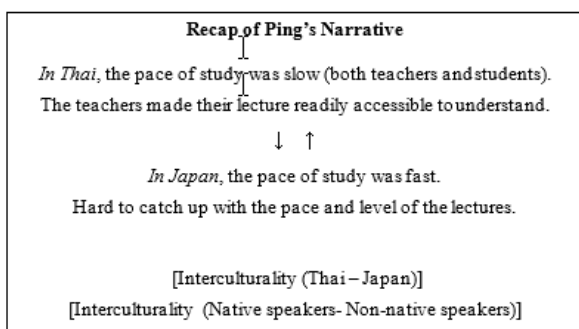
Fig. 2. Recap of P's narrative.

In Excerpt 4 and 5, we will reveal how Ping's narrative was received by the others in the talk.

C. The Recipient Reactions of P's Personal Narrative

In Excerpt 4, we observe that another participant Elly now speaks up.

32   H: ((looks at E. E nods deeply and everyone notices her emphatic nods))

33   ALL: laughs

34   E: issho! Watashi ima soo! Ima demo (*)
"the same! I am that now. Still now. (*)"

35   ALL: giggles

Excerpt 4.

In line 32, Hana looks at Elly who displays her big nodding gesture, then everyone in the group also pays attention to her (Fig. 2). While all participants laugh as a reaction, Elly says in line 34 "the same!" indicating that her feeling is the same as described by Ping in Excerpt 3.

Fig. 3. All participants look toward Elly.

Elly is a student from Indonesia, just arrived to this country, and struggling to survive in a Japanese graduate program. Not being able to catch (comprehend) everything in the lecture can be treated as a category-bound activity for foreign students. Elly invoked the category-bound activity to index the membership category "non-native students."

D. Transformation to Transcultural Category

In addition to the newly developed membership category [foreign students], the further interaction in the group shows there was yet another development of a new membership category. Let us examine Excerpt 5, this time with a careful transcription of the participants' kinetic performance along with their utterances.

36   P: hehe iya demo tatoeba Ssensei S sensei no hoo da
37   to>tatoeba< oshie (.)tai no ga
38   ippai ippai de

"hehe no but for example to Prof. S, for example, She
wants to teach (you) so much, so"

38   E: nods

39   P: nanka to omotta kaRA ma (.) ((looks at others)) sorenari
40   ni

"so she thinks, uh accordingly"

4142 Supiido mo agatte kuru to omoimasu
kedo (.) yappari nagaku iru to (.)
   "speed will improve eventually (.) as one stays longer (.)"

4344 nantonaku narete kite: (.) ma hayai no mo ma: betsu ni zenbu
   "somehow one gets used to it (.) uh even if it's fast, if not"

45 wakaranaku TEMO pointo o (.) wakaru dake de
   "understand completely, all one needs is to get the points."

   ((H nods while P speaks, towards J, Ch, and W))

46 Ch: ah:: ((sits back))
   "oh::"

47 W: ((nods at P))

Excerpt 5.

First Ping comments that Prof. S wants to teach students so much (thus she speaks fast, thus it is hard to catch up), and then in 41-431 Ping says that that one gets used to the speech as one stays (in Japan) longer. Ping's statements here accept Elly's projection of newly emerged category membership of [non-native speaker]. The old intercultural category, Thai vs. Japan has now been faded in the background upon this new category.

In line 44-45, Ping further comments that ―even if you cannot get everything, all one needs to get is the main points. Who was this statement addressed to? As Ping states this, his gaze shifted and drifted off from Elly, and moved around to J, Ch, and W, then back to E as shown in Fig. 4.
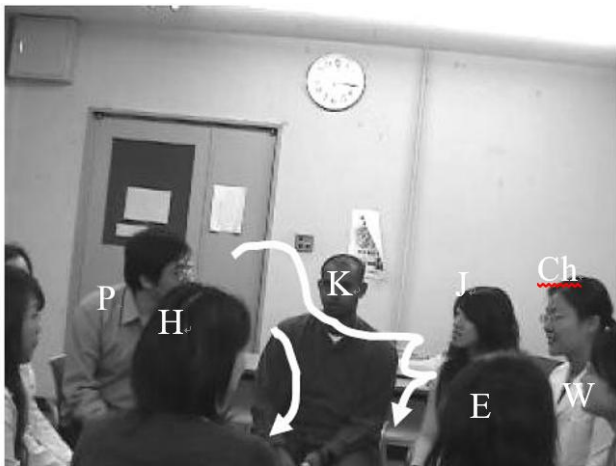

Fig. 4. P's eye contact engagement tracking.

While Ping is making that statement, Hanako, a Japanese doctorate student, also nods and looks at the students whom Ping just made an eye contact with. What we see here is a collaborative team work between Ping and Hanako, and Ping is representing the message. What was Hanako's entitlement to display her co-authoring of Ping's statement here? Ping and Hanako are only two doctorate students in this particular group, and the rest are first year Master's students. Here, we now observe an emerging category in replacement of potential intercultural category--that is, expert-novice graduate student status, and the non-native speaker status has been faded out.

When we closely examine how he formulates the telling and the inference-work done by the participants in the talk, we learn that the [Thai-Japan] intercultural moment gets very quickly faded out, and a new category was invoked. The foreign student category was projected by a recipient of the telling, but in the following sequence, the responding recipients also dismissed this category and transformed it to an alternative category, graduate student-hood which all the participants are now treated as members. They elevated the reason for the telling through multiple occasions of partitioning constancy [5], that is, they end up being members of the same, transcultural category under the application of alternative category collections [7].

V. CONCLUSION

This study showed how the speakers in this particular context, although they bring in their intercultural selves (D. Zimmerman, 1998) momentarily, or at least invokes potential moments for interculturality in passing, they quickly treat these moments as irrelevant for the on-going talk. The study showed that the participants immediately invoked a new category through mentioning and accepting the category bound activities for the new collection. In the current example, senior-junior graduate student categories (identities) took place over the intercultural self-categorization. We can say that the tellings were ultimately treated both by tellers and listeners to construct a 'transcultural' membership category, which they all can be part of in different ways. The participants in the group discussions managed these intercultural potentials and transformed them into the opportunities to re-build who they are vis-à-vis each other, as graduate students in the university. This is not surprising, since the initial purpose of this activity is to have gatherings as such.

To provide an answer to my research questions, that is, *when* in talk, and *how* are intercultural moments made irrelevant? And why? This study can suggest the following: The intercultural moments are made irrelevant in order to achieve some other social purpose for the occasioned talk. The examples I looked at in this study show that they are gathering in order to rebuild and confirm their social relationships within the same membership category, that is, graduate student hood—and their interculturality does not index much significance to this particular co-construction of social identity. By following through from the emergence of a personal telling until it is received by the listeners of it, and drawing on microanalytic approach to capture the participants' actions, this study described the process by which interculturality gets backgrounded and transculturality comes foregrounded.

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