# GUMPERZ'S CONTEXTUALIZATION CUES: A MEANS FOR INTERPRETING DISCOURSE IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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**Abstrak**

"Cross-cultural misunderstanding" atau yang lebih dikenal dengan salah pengertian dalam proses komunikasi lintas budaya sangat sering terjadi dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Interaksi dalam lapisan masyarakat sebenarnya adalah interaksi antar nilai-nilai yang dikemas dalam sistem yang disebut "budaya". Oleh karena itu suatu cara yang bisa dipakai sebagai indikator untuk mencegah terjadinya salah pengertian sangat diperlukan untuk menciptakan interaksi yang harmonis dan saling memahami dalam proses komunikasi antar budaya.

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap dan mengulas penggunaan "contextualization cues" yang dicetuskan oleh Gumperz (1982) sebagai upaya untuk mencegah salah pengertian (misunderstanding) dalam proses komunikasi lintas budaya. Contextualization cues atau petunjuk/ tanda konstektual dimanfaatkan sebagai alat untuk menghubungkan keterkaitan antara bahasa dan budaya. Lebih lanjut artikel ini juga akan memberikan ilustrasi terjadinya salah pengertian yang disebabkan oleh perbedaan pemahaman dan nilai-nilai budaya dari pihak-pihak yang terkait dalam proses komunikasi lintas budaya dan bagaimana petunjuk/ tanda konstektual ini bisa berperan sebagai senjata yang ampuh dalam mengupas proses terjadinya salah pengertian tersebut.

**Kata Kunci**: misunderstanding (salah pengertian), cross-cultural communication (komunikasi lintas budaya), socio-cultural knowledge (nilai-nilai sosial budaya)

## A. Introduction

It has been widely known that interaction between members of different ethnic groups is an increasingly common aspect of modern life,

as more and more people face cross-cultural encounters. These encounters inevitably bring about wrong interpretations that possibly lead to misunderstandings or even conflicts for the worst as a result of people's different norms, values, or conventions incorporated within one frame of "culture". When the context of cross-cultural communication is individual relations, the impact of cross-cultural misunderstandings can ruin personal involvement and when the stage is international affairs, the result can be very fatal indeed.

For this reason, it is important to examine the causes of misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. This examination is so crucial since at the global level the smoothness of human encounters is dependable upon global understanding towards global discourse, which of course bears different cultural assumptions and ways of communicating. While at the level of daily human encounters, it can be useful to create and maintain mutual relationship that is based on mutual understanding. In so doing, the occurred misperceptions towards discourse because of cultural differences can be bridged to minimize the possibility to create misunderstandings.

This article aims at analyzing the way people might interpret discourse in cross-cultural encounters. The analysis focuses on, among others, the role of socio-cultural knowledge in conversational inference, by which it indicates how one implicitly interprets utterances and illustrates how one reflects his interpretation through verbal and non-verbal responses. To accommodate this, Gumperz's notion of contextualization cues as a means for interpreting cross-cultural discourse is taken as the foundation to discover the triggers of possible cultural misunderstandings.

As having been highlighted in recent studies of conversation from a variety of linguistic, it is generally agreed that the contributing factors for determining conversational inference are not only grammatical and lexical knowledge, but also participants' personal background knowledge, socio-cultural assumptions concerning role and

status relationships as well as social values associated with various message components. These social inputs are reflected and communicated through a system of verbal and non-verbal signs that connect the ongoing process of a conversational encounter and affect the interpretation or inference process of the content of conversation. This is exactly what Gumperz does with his notion of contextualization cues.

Gumperz's notion of contextualization cues accentuate linguistic cues that contribute to the signaling of contextual presuppositions. Although such cues carry information, it will have no meanings if they are not conveyed as part of the interactive process. In regard to this point, the analysis in this article will be dealing with *the question of how the social knowledge is stored in mind and being recalled to interact with grammatical and lexical knowledge during the process of conversational exchanges*. Several examples of cross-cultural discourse have been derived from both relevant references and my own empirical findings to depict how contextualization cues mingle and coordinate with social-cultural knowledge in strengthening cross-cultural communication and how the lack of this kind of coordination can bring about unpleasant or unexpected situations leading to misunderstandings that become a trigger spoiling a smooth encounter.

Before going further to in-depth analysis, it needs to be explained here the definition of such notions as *contextualization cues, cross-cultural* and *conversational inference.* Contextualization cue is "the channeling of interpretation which is affected by conversational implicatures based on conventionalized co-occurrence expectations between content and surface style" (Gumperz, 1982: 131). The notion of *cross-cultural* is chosen as one of terminologies composing the title of this paper because it provides a broader perspective of human encounters; "it encompasses more than just speakers of different languages or from different countries; it includes speakers from the same country of different class, region, age, and even gender" (Tannen, 1985: 203). Whereas *conversational inference* as defined by Gumperz (1982:

153) is "the situated or context bound process of interpretation, by means of which participants in an exchange assess others' intentions, and on which they base their responses."

Those three notions are the soul of the entire analyses that will be discussed in the following parts of the article and finally lead us to the awareness of Agar's term of 'languaculture' (1994: 28) in which he sums up the inseparability of language and culture: "Culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture." Only if understanding this interconnection, harmonious relationship developed through the process of human interactions across cultures can be more feasible to achieve.

## B. The Relationship Between Socio-Cultural and Lexical-Grammatical Knowledge in Conversational Inference

This section basically outlines the three concepts on how to visualize the relationship of extra-linguistic, socio-cultural knowledge to grammar in order to draw conversational inference established by the three traditions: the ethnography of communication, discourse analysis, and conversational analysis. Then, in the next step the discussion will show how the theories developed by those three traditions are insufficient in providing a more comprehensive perspective of conversational inference. Therefore, the focus of the analysis is shifted to Gumperz's ideas which encompass broader and more extensive insights in building up theories about the correlation of extra-linguistic and lexical-grammatical factors in conversational inference.

The first concept is based on the anthropological tradition of ethnography of communication, where the extra-linguistic, socio-cultural knowledge is manifested in the performance of speech events elaborated within consequences of acts in certain real time and space, and identified by culturally specific values and norms giving constraints on both the form and content of what is uttered. In order to identify the culturally specific values and norms, the ethnographers conducted the empirical data selection since the previous data provided by the linguists

being concerned with historical reconstruction and context free grammatical rules are insufficient for providing information needed for understanding how language is employed. The data selection was done by means of studies of language use focusing on what so called by Hymes (1962) 'the means of speaking', which cover such elements as information on the linguistic repertoire, distinct language varieties, dialects, and styles employed in a community, the description on the genres in terms of which various verbal performances can be identified as myths, epics, tales, narratives, and the like, various of acts of speaking commonly used in a particular group, and the 'frames' serving as instructions on how to interpret a sequence of acts (Bauman & Sherzer, 1975).

After having done the identification of the means of speaking, the ethnographers then put them into practice and correlated them to cultural norms in the performance of particular speech events, whose actions are seen as governed order by social norms. The result of this method is new, highly, valuable, descriptive information documenting the enormous range of signaling resources available in various cultures as well as many culturally specific ways that rule of speaking in context.

Though this information provides enough evidence to show how much language use, like grammar, is rule governed, it does not show how interactants themselves identify events, how social input varies in the course of an interaction, and how social knowledge affects the interpretation of messages. Rather it deals primarily with how social norms affect the use and distribution of communicative resources. Hence, the tradition of ethnography of communication relates the extra-linguistic, socio-cultural knowledge to grammar in a way that social background does provide the sources of various uses of language application. Yet, it does not specify the interrelationship of these variations in events characteristic of particular social groups.

The second theory generated from the tradition of discourse analysis puts its primary concern on the cognitive and contextual

functioning and the application of knowledge of the world to the interpretation of what goes on in an encounter. In other words, the view within this theory takes into account a psycholinguistic of an individual member of a culture in which his knowledge of the world is made use to interpret utterances in context. Various mechanisms to put the knowledge of the world into play are then presented by cognitive psychologists and specialists in artificial intelligence. These mechanisms are to describe the cognitive structures involved and show how they can come into interpretation. So, such mechanisms as schemata, scripts, and plans (Bobrow & Collins, 1975; Schank & Abelson, 1977) are developed to figure out relevant setting to common discourse situations or to describe the expected sequences of activities like the setting of eating in a restaurant. These constructs are viewed as if the plot of a play with which the listener will be able to reconstruct the event is mentioned in its discourse, even when it is not developed completely, by recalling his knowledge of the script. In other words, the listener can fill in excluded information though it is not specified in the overt content of messages.

Other view of world knowledge is defined by Fillmore (1977) with his concept of 'scene', where meaning is characterized in terms of a picture or an image rather than in terms of lexical sequences or abstract semantic formalisms. Scenes are viewed like pictures in a way that they can be described from various perspectives and from different point of view. In short, the theory established in this tradition indicates that the extra-linguistic knowledge reflected in cognitive functioning exists independently apart from communication; it is thus not connected to the interaction process.

The last theory, conversational analysis, is mainly concerned with naturally occurring instances of everyday talk which concentrate on the actual discourse mechanisms. Referring to this concern, Sacks and his collaborators (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970; Sacks, 1972; Schegloff, 1972; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974; Turner, 1974) conducted the

first systematically research focusing on conversations as the simplest example of naturally organized activity and studied the process of conversational management without making any prior assumptions about participants' social and cultural background. It is found that everyday conversation pictures a dynamic interactive flow marked by constant transitions from one mode of speaking to another, for example, a shift from informal daily chat to serious discussion. In other words, speech routines also bear strategies incorporated into the broader task of conversational management. The research has also discovered that sequentiality, i.e. the order in which information is introduced and the positioning or locating of a message in the stream of talk, greatly contributes to interpreting daily conversation. Further Sacks recognizes that the principles of conversational inference are quite different from rules of grammar in that interpretations take the form of preferences rather than obligatory rules. It means that at the level of conversation many possible interpretations exist more than those at the level of sentence grammar. Preferences are constrained by the interaction goal as well as by expectations about the other's reaction and assumptions. Once one interpretation has been chosen, it will be hold until something else occurs and makes participants realize that the interpretation has been shifted. So, interpretations are negotiated, repaired, and altered through interactive processes rather than unilaterally conveyed.

It is obvious then that the three traditions discussed above have something of importance to contribute to the theory of interpretive process or conversational inference. However, they have displayed limitations which affect both the validity of the analysts attempt to capture participants' interpretive processes and the social load in it. At the level of ethnographic description, socio-cultural knowledge is reflected from verbal behaviour being categorized in terms of speech events, unit of verbal behaviour bounded in time and space. Events are usually standing in isolation and range from ritual situations where behaviour is directed to casual everyday talk. The events are so culturally

bound in a way that they are governed by social norms specifying participant roles, rights and duties, permissible topics, appropriate ways of speaking, and ways of introducing information. Such norms are so varied in accordance with context and network specific, so that the psycholinguistic notion underlying individual's personal knowledge of the world to make sense of talk in context is an oversimplification. This oversimplification of course is not enough in accounting the very real interactive constraints in every day verbal behavior.

At the level of discourse analysis, the description of time bound event sequences cannot contribute to the interpretive process and cognitive functioning cannot refer to knowledge of the physical world. Thus, this tradition has indeed defined the basic theoretical issue concerning extra-linguistic knowledge reflected in cognitive or interpretive schemata. This issue indicates that structural analyses of events have showed that interpretation is context bound, and therefore human knowledge is best treated as situation specific. However, these structural analyses of events are only brought into the speech situation; it does exist independently apart from real communication. It therefore needs to conduct a further investigation how the description of event sequences is activated in the interaction process to learn how contextual presuppositions function. At the level of conversational analysis, the main focus on naturally occurring instances of everyday talk concentrating on the actual discourse mechanisms is not linked with the social background underlying the conversational management that bears in it. It is undeniable that this tradition has found some important findings such as the conversational management in speech routines, the contribution or the role of sequentiality in daily conversation interpretations and the recognition of the principles in conversational inference. However, those findings unfortunately have nothing to do with the role of participants' social and cultural background in the process of interaction. To put it in another way, this tradition does not illuminate how the social import or load of participants varies in the

interaction process so as to bring an influence to how a daily conversation is managed and interpreted.

Considering the limitations of theories established by the three traditions, Gumperz's notion of contextualization cues in developing a more comprehensive theory of the importance of taking into account the socio-cultural knowledge for drawing conversational inference is considered more feasible and reasonable. In what follows I will outline Gumperz's theories on a way of extending the insights developed and building up more general and comprehensive perspectives in relating linguistic and extra-linguistic factors in conversational inference.

## C. Gumper's Contextualization Cues in Accomodating The Actualization of Socio-Cultural Konwledgein Conversational Inferrence

As having been mentioned before that despite of its limitations, each of the three traditions has been discussed above has something of importance to the development of the theories of conversational inference. This part will particularly look at Gumperz's perspectives (1982) on how to utilize the contributions of the three traditions to the process of conversational inference and provide a more comprehensive theory of what is taken into account for both shared and culturally specific aspects of an interpretive process.

The notion of contextualization cues were invented to answer dilemma inherent in society where a particular stereotype about a certain group is judged only based on the basis of such isolated non-linguistic criteria as residence, class, occupation, ethnicity, and the like without trying to investigate linguistic function. The basis assumption of this notion is that the process of channeling of interpretation is influenced by conversational implications based on conventionalized co-occurrence expectations between content and surface style. To say it in other words, interpretation of intent is based on culturally and situationally bound presuppositions. The way speakers signal and listeners interpret what the

activity is to understand semantic content and how each sentence relates to the previous or preceding one is dependable upon the constellations of surface features of message form.

Gumperz defines the content of message form in terms of contextualization cues which comprise a number of such linguistic realizations depending on the linguistic repertoire of the participants. Thus, such cues as code, dialect, style switching processes, paralinguistic and prosodic features like tone of voice, pitch, loudness, pacing, pauses, choice among lexical and syntactic options, formulaic expressions, conversational openings and closing, sequencing strategies, and conversational management are also covered into the notion. Generally speaking, a contextualization cue is any feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signaling of contextual presuppositions. Those cues are carried out along with surface style of interactants, which is grounded on the basis of culturally specific situations. Although such cues by themselves carry information, meanings are conveyed as part of the interactive process.

To describe surface style in which cultural values are attached, Gumperz utilized the term of 'speech activities' (Levinson, 1978) instead of the term of 'speech events' as it is used by the tradition of ethnography of communication. He further defined a speech activity as "a set of social relationship enacted about a set of schemata in relation to some communicative goal." The term of speech activity is preferable with the view that it is the means through which socio-cultural knowledge is stored in the form of constraints on action and on possible interpretation. For example, when the activity of telling a story is conducted, participants engaged in the activity have conventional expectations about what count as acceptable and unacceptable feature of linguistic and non-linguistic entities. Each description of speech activities requires a certain model of interaction, such as a model for turn-taking rules, the possible topic, the outcome of interaction, etc. So, by identifying and signaling a speech activity, interactants at the same time identify and

signal the social presuppositions by which a message is to be interpreted.

To sum up, Gumperz argues that the effort to reach the right interpretation on what goes on in the interaction process is not a matter of unilateral action, but rather of participants' coordination in trying to solve the code of bearing socio-cultural aspects through the process of contextualization cues. The participants in a successful interaction will try to align themselves by relying on the constellations of verbal style in which linguistic cues function, surface style within which the process of recalling and signaling socio-cultural knowledge enacted in the speech activity is operated, and the perceptual bases of contextualization cues in which the use of non-verbal signs and seemingly trivial facial and gestural cues are employed.

Thus, the notion of contextualization cues is considered more reliable in providing a broader perspective on the theories of conversational inference rather than the previous three traditions in a way that contextualization cues generate interpretation of messages at three levels:

a. the content of messages in terms of linguistic cues
b. surface style in terms of which the intended meaning of communicative intent is connected to extra-linguistic, socio-cultural values identified in speech activities, and
c. the perceptual bases which enable participants to employ which appropriate and acceptable non-verbal signs, such as facial expressions, posture, and gesture in the process of conveying the communicative intent.

That is why by applying the concept of contextualization cues, misunderstanding or miscommunication in human encounters can hopefully be avoided. The next part of this article will primarily deal with examples of misunderstandings occurred in cross-cultural communication to illustrate how this concept plays an important role in elucidating what is really happening in the interpretive process.

**D. Example of Cross-Cultural Misunderstandings**

As the work of Gumperz (1982) says that participants in human encounters automatically process communicative signals covered in contextualization cues. For example, a speaker does not stop his utterances suddenly and thinks what kinds of tone of voice, pitch, and loudness he should produce when he is angry, and whether or not he should raise or lower his voice to express his anger. A listener, on the other hand, does not stop responding and thinks whether or not the speaker is angry when he raises his voice. All those things are carried out automatically. The participants encode and decode the contextualization cues involved spontaneously without thinking about what impression the cues give. This kind of phenomenon is central to what is defined by the anthropologist, Gregory Bateson (1972) with the idea of two messages in communication, the basic message and the meta message. The indication how the speaker wants the listener to take his basic message implied in his paralinguistic and prosodic features in the illustration above is called a meta message. In other words, how an utterance is said communicates meta messages about the relationship between interactants.

Some empirical data gathered by some experts such as Tannen (1984), Gumperz himself (1982), Scollon (1995), etc. show that misunderstandings occur through culturally misinterpreted performance by interactants in solving the code represented in the communicative cues or signals. One of the examples is stated by Gumperz in his work. He exemplified a misunderstanding between a speaker of Indian English and a speaker of British English. When a speaker of Indian English use increased volume of his voice to perform the business negotiation-as-usual of getting the floor, his business partner who is a speaker of British English assumes that he is angry. A speaker of British English typically gets the floor by repeating an initial phrase until she or he has audience attention. When the speaker of British English responds in kind to what he has perceived as a flare up of temper on the part of the Indian, both interlocutors feel that the other unaccountably introduced the tone of

anger into the interaction. The key of misunderstanding in this case is that the differences of expectations about how paralinguistic signals are used to indicate what is meant by what is said are not shared. Therefore, the intended meaning of the tone produced by the speaker of Indian English is taken to mean another by the speaker of British English.

Other example is presented by Tannen (1984) in her research in which she taped 2 ½ hours of Thanksgiving dinner table conversation among six friends. This conversation showed that sub-cultural differences that resulted in repeated misunderstandings of each other's intentions did exist even though all participants spoke the same language and seemed to understand each other. The misunderstanding occurred when three of the dinner table conversation participants seemed to dominate the interaction. Those three participants were from one of part of the United States, New York city from which they do not share the same values of turn-taking habits and ways of showing friendliness. When any two or more people talk, each one of them waits until the other has finished talking before taking a turn to talk. This simple criterion bears cultural and sub-cultural differences in how much pause one expects speakers to allow within turns and between turns.

The party expects less pause will repeatedly and predictably be the one who interprets a turn-taking pause as an uncomfortable silence indicating that the other has nothing to say. As a result, if that person has friendly intentions and wants to maintain the smoothness of the interaction, she or he will fill the silence with talk. However, the others interpret that intention as a way for not giving them a chance to talk. In other words, what is intended as a friendly act of keeping conversation going is interpreted as an unfriendly act of not giving the other interactants to participate in the interaction.

So, the misunderstanding occurs because the expectation of shorter turn-taking pauses leads them to continually take the floor before the others felt there had been enough pause for them to start talking. The slower speakers regarded the faster ones not to give them a chance to

talk, but the faster ones thought the others had nothing to say and were not holding up their end of the conversation. In regard to Gumperz's notion of contextualization cues, the misunderstanding in this case occurs because of the different values underlying the concept of conversational management in which turn-taking is one of the elements involved.

The next examples of misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication that are going to be discussed below are illustrated through actual conversations. The first example is taken from the work of Gumperz (1982), while the second one derives from my own finding upon reflection on my experience.

**Example 1**

The graduate student has been sent to interview a black housewife in a low income, inner city neighborhood. The appointment has been made over the phone by someone in the office. The student arrives, rings the bell, and is met by the husband, who opens the door, smiles, and steps towards him:

> Husband: So, y're gonna check out ma ol lady, hah?
> Interviewer: Ah, no. I only came to get some information. They called from the office.
> (Husband, dropping his smile, disappears without a word and calls his wife.)

This example shows that misunderstanding had occurred even before the interview was started. The interviewer realized that being black himself he ruined the friendly atmosphere by failing to recognize the significance of the husband's speech style in this particular case. The style performed by the husband is actually a typical opening sentence that is familiarly used to make sure whether or not a certain person comes from the same group. If that person can come up with the expected formulaic reply, then he is regarded as a friend instead of a stranger. Upon

reflection on the incident, the student himself stated, in order to show that he was part of the interviewee's community, he should have replied with a typically black response like "Yea, I'ma git some info" (I'm going to get some information) to prove his familiarity both on the community itself and on the local verbal etiquette and values. Instead, his reply in standard English was interpreted by the husband as a sign that he was not one of them, and perhaps not to be trusted. This phenomenon has clearly showed that the varieties of surface forms and the way in which they function are undoubtedly culturally specific. The formulaic phrases like "So y're gonna check out ma ol lady, hah?" and "Yea, I'ma git some info" reflect indirect conversational strategies that are used to make conditions favorable to establishing personal contact and negotiating shared interpretations.

**Example 2**

The following conversation was personally experienced by me. This. speech activity of having a chat is actually a small talk that is considered as a joke in a daily encounter amongst friends in East and Central Java, Indonesia (amongst Javanese). However, I found that this joke can turn out to be an insult when it was inferred by my friend from Flores, one of the other islands in Indonesia.

| | |
|---|---|
| A (Anita) | : Hi....are you going somewhere tomorrow? |
| P (Peter) | : Yeah...I am supposed to cause as a new comer I really wanna know this city. |
| A | : Well, you can just go to Malioboro shopping center as the first start and take a walk along the street. |
| P | : That's a good idea, but I really wanna go to the zoo. |
| A | : Haa...to the zoo? You'll visit your brother there? |
| P | : What? Visiting my brother? I don't have any brother there. |
| A | : (Laughing) |

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P : (Silence....no response for a while)
Oh, OK....thanks for making fool on me.

The question of "You'll visit your brother there?" is actually a common joke told to friends when they want to go the zoo. This question is considered as a joke by Javanese since Javanese people share a value that people are, of course it is not serious, regarded to intend visiting the historically and scientifically ancestor of human beings; i.e. apes and other similar species if they want to go the zoo. In this case, Peter, my friend from Flores, failed to respond my joke as I expected for he is not from Java. He, finally, realized that it was just a joke after he had been living in Yogyakarta for 3 months, but he still could not accept it as an acceptable joke. Instead, he viewed this kind of question as a really unpleasant joke that he had ever heard. Therefore, he finally got angry and left me. It is obvious then that this conversation has strengthened Gumperz's work that speech activities are signaled by culturally specific linguistic signs.

This example has also given justification for Gumperz's reason for choosing Levinson's speech activity (1978), in which socio-cultural knowledge is stored in the form of constraints on action and on possible interpretation, to describe the surface level of communicative intent. The different socio-cultural schemata concerning daily talks amongst friends shared by I and my friend had raised a misunderstanding indicating that my friend did interpret my question (joke) as something else that was not of course my expectation. He simply did not recognize at the first that the structure of that question implicates a joke that is commonly encountered in Javanese culture; that the strict constraint of his contribution should have corresponded to the function and the nature of this question structure that is meant for making a joke. As a result, he did not interpret it as the way it should be, rather it was viewed as a kind of an insult that made him offended. In other words, he was not able to gather strong evidence for the social basis of contextualization conventions and for the

signaling of the communicative goal that will enable him to make inferences on the structure of the question and therefore to give the expected responses and contributions to the conversation.

The last example, that derives from my own finding upon my friend's observation, depicts misunderstanding in Spanish language when it is put in different context of cultures. The misunderstanding focuses primarily on the first level of contextualization cues, the content of messages in terms of grammatical knowledge as part of linguistic entities. The Spanish language has two different forms of 'to be': ***ser*** and ***estar***. The first form is used for inherent conditions of human beings or entities that cannot be changed. For example:

- Yo ***soy*** doctor means I am a doctor (I'll always be).
- Ella ***es*** mi madre means she's my mother (She'll always be).

The second form is used for changeable conditions or characteristics (position, location, features, etc.). For example:

- ***Estoy*** cansado means I am tired (but I won't always be tired).
- ***Esta*** iloviendo means it's raining (but it won't rain forever).

Each form of to be can be followed by Spanish adjectives depending on the situation. When these forms of to be go together with a certain adjective applicable to two cultures, it can result in misunderstanding. For example, the adjective 'Guevon or Huevon' is interpreted differently by speakers of South America and those of Central America when it is to follow those forms of to be. In South America this word is considered a very bad word used to say to someone that s/he is extremely stupid. It usually follows the verb ***ser*** in order to let know the person that s/he is very stupid and her/ his condition of being very stupid will never change. For example:

- Usted *es* **guevon** means you are stupid.
- Que guevon! means What a stupid!

In Central America and Mexico the same word has a totally different meaning; i.e. lazy or bored, and can be used with both forms of the verb to be. For example:

- ***Estoy*** **guevon** means I am bored instead of I am very stupid.
- Usted ***esta*** **guevon** means you are bored instead of you are very stupid.

In this case, the combination between the form of to be ***estar*** and this adjective explains that the situation will probably change. On the contrary, if this word goes together with the verb ***ser***, it means the situation will not change. For example:
- ***Soy*** **guevon** means I am lazy instead of I am very stupid (the situation will not change).
- Usted ***es*** **guevon** means you are lazy instead of you are very stupid.

Misunderstanding that can occur because of the failure in recognizing the different meanings of this linguistic device is, for instance, when someone from Mexico says to someone from South America such an utterance as:

- Mi hermano no va a clase porque ***es*** **guevon**.

The meaning of this utterance understood by the speaker of Mexico is 'My brother does not go to class because he is lazy'. While the meaning for the speaker of South America is 'My brother does not go to class because he is extremely stupid'.

In conclusion, all the examples outlined above have clearly indicated that the notion of contextualization cues can be an essential means to actualize socio-cultural knowledge in conversational

inference. The close constellation of these two elements is really important to draw the right interpretation in communication across cultures. In so doing, misunderstandings or miscommunications that can lead to conflicts can be avoided, so that mutual understanding in human encounters can be realized.

## E. Conclusion

To summarize, the process of conversational inference involves several elements. Such elements as the perception of contextualization cues and the signalling of communicative goals in accordance with the variations of speech activities are the main points taken into consideration in the conversational inference process. In addition, the combination of the three levels covered in the concept of contextualization cues related to the social basis play a crucial role in coming up with precise interpretation of what goes on in human interactions.

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## APPENDIX

The following examples are to illustrate the theories of conversational inference developed by the three traditions, the ethnography of communication, discourse analysis, and conversational analysis. All examples are taken from the work of Gumperz (1982).

**Example 1 (illustrating the concept provided by the tradition of ethnography of communication)**

This incident was recorded while the author (Gumperz) was sitting in an aisle seat on an airplane bound for Miami, Florida. He noticed two middle aged women walking towards the rear of the plane. Suddenly he heard from behind, "Tickets, please! Tickets, please!" At first he was startled and began to wonder why someone would be asking for tickets so long after the start of the flight. Then one of the women smiled toward the other and said, "I ***told*** you to leave him at home." He then looked up and saw a man passing the two women saying, "*Step* to the rear of the bus, please."

**Example 2 (illustrating the concept provided by the tradition of discourse analysis)**

This incident was recorded at the end of a helicopter flight from a Bay Area suburb to San Fransisco airport. The cabin attendant whose seat was squeezed in among the half dozen passengers all grouped together in the center of the aircraft picked up the microphone and addressed the group:

We have now landed at San Fransisco Airport. The local time is 10.35. We would like to thank you for flying SFO Airlines, and we wish you a happy trip. Isn't it quiet around here? Not a thing moving.

**Example 3 (illustrating the concept provided by the tradition of conversational analysis)**

The incident was observed at a luncheon counter, where the waitress behind the counter was talking with a friend seated at the counter.

Friend : I called Joe last night
Waitress : You did? Well what'd he say?
Friend : Well, hi!
Waitress : Oh yeah? What else did he say?
Friend : Well he asked me out of course
Waitress : Far out!