



Tuesday, June 24th, 11:15-11:45, room 101

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American English X Brazilian English: an empirical study on pragmatic and sociocultural differences

Keywords: language and culture, intercultural communication, contextualization conventions

Even though English teaching in Brazil usually takes place in monolingual contexts, the number of native English speakers teaching in the country has grown considerably. Both intra and intercultural communication contexts (a Brazilian teacher working with Brazilian students, and a native speaker teaching Brazilian students, respectively) bring about important issues on contextualization conventions (GUMPERZ, 1982, 1996, 2007). These conventions can affect the course of conversations and, on a deeper level, the course of interpersonal relations. This paper will present results of an empirical study which investigated how intracultural communication differs from intercultural communication in English classes, taking the concrete level of interactions into account. The results point to important characteristics on the level of sociocultural aspects which affect – and are affected by – contextualization conventions. These conventions represent the complex cognitive relations of language not visible on the linguistic surface, since they have a role in building and pointing to the contexts which help interlocutors determine the type of communicative action taking place at the moment of interaction. Data was drawn from the shooting of English classes taught by Brazilian and American teachers in language courses in Brazil and also from interviews with teachers. Contextualization cues, such as prosody, lexical and syntactic choices, and gestures were analyzed. The qualitative research methodology is based on a comprehensive description and analysis of data. Extracts from the shootings were transcribed based on the conventions of GAT2 (SELTING et al., 2011) and contextualization cues were revealed. In the interviews, the teachers made their own analyses of the extracts, pointing out to cultural impressions. These analyses were then compared to the previously made descriptions. The micro-perspective of linguistic description was, therefore, put together with the macro-sociocultural impressions provided by the interviewees. Both perspectives produced conclusions about the social and cultural background which are related to contextualization conventions used by Brazilian and American participants. The paper shows how various pragmatic characteristics of intra and intercultural communication – such as turn taking, directness *versus* indirectness (WIERBZICKA, 2003) and politeness rules (SPENCER-OATEY, 2008) – can be linked to the concept of ‘space’ (HALL, 1966), which, in American culture is closely related to the idea of



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individualism and, in Brazilian culture, to the notion of collectivism (even though, a discussion on the very terms 'individualism' and 'collectivism' also arises from the work).