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Interreligious Dialogues Across Cultural Boundaries:
An applied sociolinguistic study of German and American conversations about religion

Increased mobility and burgeoning channels for easy, international communication mean that contact between adherents of different religions is increasing at a previously unimaginable rate, but often resulting in more religious conflict than religious dialogue. Language, as both a component and a creator of culture, is the key to understanding interreligious dialogues. Yet, surprising, there are very few studies of these types of dialogues from a sociolinguistic perspective.

This study will research interreligious dialogues – primarily between adherents of the three Abrahamic faiths – using John Gumperz' Interactional Sociolinguistics methodology, which was chosen in large part because it "pays particular attention to the efforts individuals make to get other people to recognize their feelings, perceptions and interests" (Rampton, 2007). Given the very private nature of interreligious dialogues and the value many people place on their respective religious identities, it is necessary to use a methodology that considers where a discursive encounter fits into the cultural and personal perspectives and experiences that participants bring to and take from an interaction (ibid).

Research Question

Are there specific linguistic and paralinguistic signs that interact with the existing social context to create a more successful interreligious dialogue?

Hypothesis

I expect my research to show that specific contextual cues are both indicators and creators of a successful religious dialogue. Preliminary research seems to indicate gestures, gaze, proxemics (both social and physical), chronemics, back-channeling, overlapping talk, and hedges are the cues that most often indicate a successful dialogue is taking place, as well as continuing to create a context where the dialogue can continue.

Methodology

- Since linguistic activity is always situated in the interactional context, my first step has been to observe and participate. Gathering ethnographic information from the participants is a signature method of IS
- Conduct interviews
- Use preliminary data to develop a more refined hypothesis. To date, it seems non-linguistic cues, particularly gestures and proxemics, and several specific discourse markers – back-channeling, hedges and tag questions – play a significant role and my preliminary hypotheses is that these are the keys to a successful dialogue
- Audio- and video-record
- Analyze recordings – the grasp of communicative ecology gained in the preliminary stages is then used in the detailed analysis of the recordings
- Transcribe recordings into interactional texts – primary purpose of transcribing is to investigate social and/or interactional significance of non-verbal conduct
- Use texts to conduct further interviews with participants
- Synthesize data into dissertation

Research project key words – talking about faith

Methodological key words – interactional sociolinguistics, linguistic ethnography