Joint production of intercultural discourse:
Communication in a multicultural workplace

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This paper is based on an analysis of audio-recordings of naturally occurring interactions conducted in English in a multicultural workplace. The participants are non-native speakers of English from diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds. Whilst such interactions are commonly associated with cross-cultural miscommunication, findings revealed that these speakers adopt a collaborative style of discourse in their interactions. Examples are presented of some of the strategies which facilitate their construction of mutually intelligible meanings. The observations of this study are consistent with previous studies of strategic competence (Faerch and Kasper 1984) and meaning negotiation (Long 1982, Canale 1983) among second language learners. However, this research draws on the insights of research on collaborative discourse among native English speakers (e.g. Coates 1989, 1993, Ferrara 1992) to emphasise the relevance of joint text production in the intercultural context. The paper concludes with the presentation and discussion of a model of collaborative intercultural discourse.

Communicating cross-culturally has become a regular feature of life in Australia where people from many different ethnolinguistic backgrounds live in close proximity and work together daily. According to Clyne (1994), the cultural diversity of the Australian context calls for a multicultural framework for interactional cross-cultural research, one which studies the communication of various ethnic minorities working with one another, not only with Anglo-Celtic Australians. This study follows on from other research on communication between migrants from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in Australian industry (Clyne 1977, 1994, Clyne, Ball and Neil 1991, Bowe 1994, Neil 1996). The paper examines naturally occurring discourse in a multicultural workplace setting where English is used as a *lingua franca*. The intercultural communication described appears to flow effectively, largely because potential miscommunication is averted through the collaborative processes of talk.

Work by Gumperz and his associates (Gumperz 1977, 1982a, 1982b, Roberts, Davies and Jupp 1992) has profoundly influenced current theory on cross-cultural discourse. In his theory of interpretive or discourse strategies, Gumperz specifies the linguistic and sociocultural knowledge which must be shared if conversational involvement is to be maintained. This knowledge includes speakers' assumptions about which information is to be conveyed, how it is to be ordered and put into words, and their ability to fill in the unverbalised information needed to make sense of what takes place (Gumperz 1982, p. 172). In intercultural communication, these factors are more likely to differ. Through examining interaction between speakers from similar and diverse backgrounds, Gumperz has tried to demonstrate that conversational involvement is usually accomplished in intra-cultural communication, but is compromised in inter-cultural communication.

Influenced by this work, I set out in the present study to identify incidents of communication breakdown in my own corpus of cross-cultural conversational data. Instead, what I discovered was a social world in which communicative success is surprisingly common, seemingly due to the collaborative efforts of these non-native speakers of English in their attempts to create mutually intelligible meanings. One explanation for this has come from the emerging field of joint text production research.

This paper will present examples of some collaborative discourse strategies employed by speakers. These strategies, namely, turn-sharing, repetition and clarifiers, form the basis of a model of collaborative intercultural discourse. Similar strategies are used by female and male speakers, subordinates and superordinates in the workplace context and speakers from a range of ethnolinguistic backgrounds. The implications of these findings for the study of intercultural communication will then be explored.

2. The study

The research site for this study was a multicultural workplace, the cleaning and catering sectors of a large public hospital. The site was chosen because of the broad ethnolinguistic mix of its workforce. Few participants were born in Australia or derive from English speaking backgrounds. Participants included three supervisors, a Serbian woman, a Filipino woman and an Italian man, together with their staff of approximately forty people. Among this staff a further diversity of backgrounds was represented, including Greek, Macedonian, Chilean, Vietnamese and Laotian. Levels of English proficiency varied but for most, their knowledge of English has largely been untutored and learned during intercultural communication in the workplace (Rehbein 1987). Therefore, English was commonly used as a *lingua franca*, but was not the first language of the participants.

The aim was to collect a corpus of spontaneous spoken discourse in this institutional setting. Naturally occurring interaction is unmatched for the variety and richness of data it offers the analyst. For this purpose, participants were selected who were willing to wear a small microphone attached to a pocket-sized tape recorder for ninety minute sessions in the course of their day's work. Recordings were made of their everyday interactions, most of them dyadic. These data were then transcribed for analysis using a method based on DuBois, Cumming and Scheutze-Coburn (1988).[1]

3. Collaboration in intercultural discourse

Analysis of this corpus of naturalistic conversational data revealed intercultural communication which was collaborative, congenial and basically successful. There was a surprising amount of joint turn completion, prompting between speakers, supportive feedback and constant clarification. Interlocutors participated actively in the conversations by monitoring and facilitating the development of one another's talk. The result was talk which was often jointly constructed by both participants in an exchange. Therefore, meaning was on one hand mutually comprehensible which has heightened importance in communication between non-native speakers and on the other, efficiently produced, as the workplace context demands. Many of the processes outlined here have been described in the second language acquisition literature as meaning negotiation (e.g. Tarone 1977, Long 1982, Canale 1983) achieved through strategic competence (Faerch and Kasper 1984). However, useful parallels can also be found in the literature on collaborative discourse and joint text production.

Aspects of what Coates (1989, 1993) calls *joint text production* have variously been described by many researchers analysing naturalistic discourse (e.g. Edelsky 1981, Watts 1987, 1991, Coates 1989, Ferrara 1992, Lerner 1991). Coates (1989), in her study of communication among a group of women friends, observed a process by which speakers worked together to produce shared meanings. By completing each others' utterances and interjecting with questions of clarification, short comments and minimal responses, the women in her study were shown to be collaborating in the production of text. An utterance which petered out often seemed to signal that the speaker was confident that her interlocutors understood her intended meaning. Coates concluded that in women's discourse the goal is not to take the floor from another speaker so much as to participate with others in conversation. She attributed this cooperative style of communicating to women, particularly when they are interacting with close female friends. The discourse features which Coates describes seem to have equal relevance for intercultural discourse as it appears in this corpus.

In the pages which follow I will outline similar processes which feature in this corpus of intercultural data. In communication between non-native speakers there is a heightened need for active participation by all speakers if the interaction is to proceed smoothly and be optimally

effective. Reciprocal use of turn-sharing, text recycling and the use of clarifiers in these data reveal high involvement and solidarity between speakers.

3.1 Turn-sharing as a collaborative discourse strategy

Turn-sharing is a term I have coined to describe a turn which is consecutively produced by more than one speaker in an interaction. This idea of turn-taking differs from the conventionally accepted system first postulated by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974). According to their model, one speaker speaks at a time and a turn begins as the turn of the other speaker ends. Different researchers have challenged this notion and suggested alternative constructions such as shared floors (Edelsky 1981) and turns-in-a-series (Lerner 1991). Evidence from this corpus suggests a collaborative approach to turn-taking where speakers jointly participate in producing one turn. This may occur through preemption as the interlocutor comes in to prompt the speaker and facilitate the turn's completion. Alternatively, a turn completion might be invited by the original speaker who seeks help to complete her utterance. Such turn-sharing offering lexical help seems to be particularly relevant between two non-native speakers.

An example occurs in a symmetrical encounter between two male cleaners, Lei (Vietnamese) and Mahmat (Turkish). Lei has been looking for Mahmat, whom he had arranged to meet at half past eleven. Having finally located him, Lei now tries to explain this situation to Mahmat:

1.	Lei	I'm looking for you, half past, e~ eleven. (0)
	Mahmat	(0) I tell you, I tell you I go~~, Mr Hopper's (0)
	Lei	(0) I~~ I~~ came ah there. (0)
	Mahmat	(0) office,
	Lei	eh? . not~~
	Mahmat	[not there?]
	Lei	[nobody there.]

Lei's flow of talk is slowed by intra-turn pausing, fillers and restarts (e.g. 'I~I~ came ah here.'). As the interaction unfolds, Lei's intended meaning becomes obvious to Mahmat, who offers a possible turn completion based on the 'not' which Lei has provided. Mahmat's questioning intonation indicates a suggested turn completion from which Lei can construct his own meaning, rather than a stated turn completion in which the first speaker's projected intonation contour is usually continued. In fact, Lei simultaneously resumes his own turn so the two completions are spoken in unison. Mahmat's preemption differs only slightly from Lei's preferred alternative. Here, Mahmat seems to be using preemption to assist Lei in his search for the word which his pausing and restarts have indicated he is not finding easily. This gesture facilitates the process of constructing meaning so that the conversation can be continued. Collaboration has achieved the successful completion of the turn.

While such preemption is initiated by an interlocutor, a speaker's talk can also 'peter out', functioning as an invitation to the interlocutor to continue the turn. Like preemption, this strategy is often employed in non-native speaker discourse when the speaker is having difficulty identifying the appropriate word. In these data, petering out by one speaker often leads to the turn being resumed by the other speaker in order to fill the gap or complete the sense.

A clear example of petering out is given in item 2 where Theona (Macedonian) is explaining a work matter to her supervisor Juana (Filipino).

2.	Theona	I don't know! too many <X piece X> what's it called? I forgot, where they test the~
	Juana	oh yeah, they test th=e~
	Theona	yeah.
	Juana	the <X glucose X>.
	Theona	(0) yeah, them or another place. (0)

Theona has used the routine formula 'what's it called?' to signal her struggle to find a word. Inherent in this query is an invitation for Juana to intercept with the appropriate word. Theona continues on, providing additional information for her interlocutor. She then sets the scene for Juana's turn completion, petering out at precisely the point where this word needs to be supplied. On the interlocutor's part, Juana immediately acknowledges that she knows what Theona is trying to say. Her contribution to the turn includes a repeat of Theona's initial part and then the correct word. Juana supplies the word 'glucose', enabling

Theona to resume her own turn completion. The text has been jointly constructed as one speaker assists another in conveying her intended meaning.

Turn-sharing is a method by which speakers collaborate in the construction of meaning. It seems that the same turn can be constructed of different speakers' contributions and that this may be especially important in *lingua franca* situations. In his lectures, Sacks (1964-8) argued that building a sentence that is unplanned and yet coherent involves very quick and close attention to the talk of the others, thus indicating solidarity and close social organisation. Zuengler (1989) has argued in contradiction of this idea, viewing the act of finishing another's statement as a dominating move, denying speakers the opportunity to choose their own words in finishing the statement. In conversations such as (2) between two non-native speakers of English, *deny* seems too strong a word. Where restarts, pausing and hesitation phenomena are present in one speaker's turn, the other non-native speaker's turn completion seems more a facilitative recommendation, a suggested lexical completion rather than a bid to take it over.[2] Turn-sharing can therefore be a collaborative discourse strategy.

3.2 Repetition as a collaborative discourse strategy

Repetition is another strategy used in successful intercultural discourse. It can be defined as the partial or complete duplication of an immediately preceding utterance towards the production of the next turn. In this way, repetition is part of a turn recycling process by which salient talk becomes the basis of a subsequent turn. Such repetition presents itself in many types of discourse. Children's language is rich in repetitions, expansions and reformulations. Ochs (1983) demonstrates that young children use repetition to carry out a wide variety of speech acts including agreement, disagreement, querying, greeting, imitation, insulting and accusing. In second language acquisition research, repetition is viewed as a communicative strategy for negotiation of meaning and a strategy for the production of dialogue. In his study of the language of Turkish immigrants in German factories, Rehbein (1987) claims that migrants in the workplace are forced to communicate in often repetitive intercultural communicative situations. This results in a reproduction of those language elements which their experience tells them are most successful. In English native speaker discourse, Tannen (1989) lists a diversity of uses of repetition including getting or keeping the floor, showing listenership, stalling and gearing up to answer, among other things.

In this corpus, there are two principal ways in which speakers use repetitions of the other speaker's prior discourse as a basis for formulating their own utterances. The first is by echoing the form of the preceding utterance, basically unmodified, though sometimes with a change in intonation. This may simply indicate listenership or function as a request for clarification. The second is by using key elements of the previous utterance as the basis of further talk.

An echo of the preceding utterance may be a precise imitation of the model, using the same intonation. More often the repetition is accompanied by a change in intonation, for example, a questioning or exclamatory intonation. Example 3 is one such case where Fatma (Turkish) reformulates a declarative statement by Haralambos (Greek) as an exclamation.

3. Fatma — how many months you been there?
   Harry — four months.
   Fatma — four months!

Fatma's exclamatory repetition 'four months!' functions as a kind of backchannel, providing feedback that confirms her attentiveness and interest. At other times, a declarative is transformed into an interrogative by an altered intonation, as in example 4:

4. Andy — busy every day!
   Lei — every day?

In both examples, speakers draw upon existing material to provide a supportive response and engage the speaker in further dialogue. The speakers employing this strategy are both male and female and are from many different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. A preceding utterance is a ready resource where few other resources are available for engaging another speaker in continued talk, because according to the

rules governing turn-taking a question demands a response. Repetition is similarly used to request clarification, as in example 5.

5. Quan — what room do you want to do?
   Dom — the sister said to do this room.
   Quan — sister said do this room? okay we start this room.

Here, the echo in its slightly modified form, is used by Quan (Vietnamese) as a check. This gives Dom (Italian) the chance to qualify himself if this was not his intended meaning.

Sometimes a preceding utterance is elaborated upon to form the basis of a subsequent speaker's turn. In the literature on first language acquisition this is an expansion. Expansion, in this context, is the key to what Watts (1987) has called text-sharing. According to Watts, a text sharer is a speaker who uses a previous utterance as the basis of her own utterance. Such recycling of elements between speakers can form the basis of whole conversations. Watts (1987, p. 45) calls this a 'conversational fugue' in which whatever is said by one participant is immediately integrated into the other's ongoing utterance. Two women, Maria (Greek) and Juana (Filipino), engage in this kind of repetition in their conversation about a newly opened shopping complex:

6. Maria — I see the TV again today, wo=oh! too many people! thousand of them.
   Juana — mm,
   Maria — more than hundreds thousand,
   Juana — <P too many. P>
   Maria — <X not much buying though, X> going to see. (0)
   Juana — (0) but not~~ but not many people buying things really, they just ah, go [to have a look.]
   Maria — [yeah, no buy!] to have a look. no one really <X cares X> [<X the people. X>]

The contributions of the two speakers are replicated and modified, repeated and paraphrased, but the same elements recur throughout this shared text. This produces a sense of cohesion, confidence in mutual comprehension and a firm dialogical structure, all hallmarks of collaboratively constructed talk.

3.3 Collaborative strategies for clarification

Clarification is another important part of collaborative discourse, particularly in an intercultural context. An interlocutor can use clarifiers to monitor her own comprehension of what is going on. Clarification requests are commonly employed by the interlocutor when she has not fully heard or understood the content of the preceding utterance. In their simplest form, such clarifiers are requests for recapitulation. The term 'recapitulation' is useful as it encompasses elements of both repetition and reformulation in its meaning. However, the decision to represent the utterance precisely or in paraphrased form is usually left to the speaker, as in the following example between two men, Vietnamese and Italian.

7. Kim — <p yeah p> . and your friend?
   Orazio — huh?
   Kim — your friend here, working here? finished?

Orazio's (Italian) 'huh?' is ambiguous but which ever way it is intended, a request for recapitulation places the onus on a speaker to further respond.

In example 8 clarification strategies are employed by both speakers. Hien (Vietnamese) has just explained that her son is 'six' and Juana has mistaken this for 'sick'. Of course, under this misapprehension, Juana can not make sense of Hien's message.

8. Hien — [my son's, six years old.]
   Juana — what's wrong?
   Hien — huh?
   Juana — <F what's wrong with him? F>

Several clarification strategies are at work in this sequence of meaning negotiation; repetition, expanding on the previous utterance and a request for recapitulation by Hien. Juana also uses a request for more information to clarify Hien's meaning. The first 'what's wrong?' is in response to what Juana thinks Hien has just said; that her son is ill. In the second formulation, which is solicited by Hien, Juana turns a general question into a more specific inquiry about the health of Hien's sick son. As a result of these collaborative strategies, miscommunication is quickly resolved.

4. Towards a model of collaborative intercultural discourse

There are many other examples in this corpus of interactive phenomena by which speakers collaborate in the production of meaningful discourse. A model of collaborative intercultural discourse emerges in which a repertoire of discourse strategies including turn-sharing, repetition, and clarification is employed by speakers regardless of ethnolinguistic background or linguistic ability, when they are interacting interculturally. When both speakers utilise such strategies, successful intercultural communication is more likely to take place. As the examples have shown, such speech behaviour seems to have particular relevance in intercultural communication where neither participant is a native speaker of English.

Insights from research on collaborative discourse shed further light on the factors characterising these speakers. In most descriptions of a collaborative style of discourse, the speakers are members of a closeknit group, as with Coates' (1989) group of female friends. Watts (1991) observes some discourse features similar to those identified here in the communications of an extended family. Others have noted such patterns in conversations between married couples (e.g. Goodwin 1981, Schiffrin 1987) and between a therapist and long-established client (Ferrara 1992). In this study, a closeknit social network has developed from such shared experiences as all the speakers having migrated to Australia and being non-native speakers of English. Although their backgrounds are culturally quite different from one another, their commonality seems accentuated by the fact that all are members of minority groups in the Australian context. Secondly, they are united by their position within their immediate institutional context. Hospitals are institutions with notoriously entrenched hierarchies and it is not difficult to discern where the cleaning staff, the vast majority from non-English speaking backgrounds, might find their place in such a system. Roberts, Davies and Jupp (1992) argue that the sense of powerlessness which amounts to racial discrimination will be reflected in the discourse of such people at inter-group and intra-group levels. This perception seems to play a key role in shaping the discourse of these speakers at an inter-group level. However, I would argue that the sense of disempowerment has become their strength. Their relationships as longstanding colleagues and friends, together with other elements of their shared histories have provided the basis for a level of empathy and intimacy which is essential for a collaborative style of discourse to be effective. When they are talking among themselves, the speakers support each other in their conversation using the usual sorts of feedback, but also by helping to facilitate the talk through turn-sharing, prompting and clarifying. Their English language skills may be limited but their use of such collaborative discourse strategies is powerful and empowering to the non-native speakers who employ them and participate in the joint text production.

So what are the theoretical implications of a model of collaborative discourse for intercultural communication research? Sarangi (1994) has argued that such research, in its search for a comprehensive theory, needs to go beyond a 'celebration of miscommunication'. He has come out in criticism of the tendency to focus on the point of trouble in the talk, as have other researchers (Singh et al. 1988, Heyman 1990, Kandiah 1991, Gramkow 1995). The data here present a picture of intercultural communication in which miscommunication rarely occurs because it is resolved through the collaborative process of talk. The examples in this paper show how second language speakers help each other to overcome communicative hurdles and together develop talk which is supportive and mutually comprehensible. This is achieved through speakers' strategic competence, their ability to use techniques to solve communicative problems. This discussion has attempted to move away from the 'celebration of miscommunication' to show that intercultural communication using a *lingua franca* is achieved by a process of collaboration and to suggest that this must be integrated into the theory.

Kandiah (1991) stressed the need for a theory of intercultural communication which accounts for 'at one end . . . unpleasant communication breakdowns among participants who share fully both linguistic codes and conversational principles; and at the other end . . . pleasing communication successes among participants who do not share even the code, let alone the less overtly structured principles.' The findings of this study indicate that a model

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Endnotes

The transcription notation used is modelled on that developed by DuBois, Cuming and Scheutze-Coburn (1988) but with two significant modifications. I have not adopted their convention for indicating intonation unit boundaries with a carriage return so that each intonation unit appears on a separate line. Instead, final continuing and rising pitch contours are all indicated but the text continues across lines until the cessation of the speaker's talk. Another convention I reviewed was the use of word-internal symbols to indicate primary and secondary stress. These I found to be unnecessary for my analysis at the discourse level.

[21] For a more detailed analysis of turn-sharing, see Neil (f.c.)

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of collaborative intercultural discourse might be a good place to start.

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