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To cite this version:

Béatrice Cahour, Laurent Karsenty. Explicitation methodology for the study of interpretation in dialog. ISAPL 2000. La psycholinguistique - science multidisciplinaire de 2000 : quelles implications, quelles applications ?, Jun 2000, Caen, France. pp.45-54. hal-00675770

HAL Id: hal-00675770

https://hal.science/hal-00675770v1

Submitted on 1 Mar 2012

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Pre-print version Cahour B. & Karsenty L. (2002) Actes du colloque ISAPL'2000 (Applied Psycholinguistics), Europia Prod. : Paris.

Explicitation methodology for the study of interpretation in dialog

Béatrice Cahour & Laurent Karsenty

1. Introduction

We are interested in describing the socio-cognitive dynamics of the interactions (Cahour & Pemberton 1998), that is the interpretative and socio-relational processes which are at work in a verbal interaction.
Most of the technics which aim at enlightening the interpretative processes in a dialog setting bear either on experimental settings whith a variation of relevant factors, followed by the analysis of the observable data which have been produced by the subjects (e.g. Isaacs & Clark 1987, Wilkes-Gibbs & Clark 1992), or on an implicit methodology based partially on theoretical frames and partially on the introspective and projective analysis of the researcher. It is clear today that, when studying the interactional processes like the intentions and interpretations of the participants, the analysis is not done independantly of the subjectivity of the researchers who use naturally their own experiences, knowledge and way of reacting within the world (Schütz 1987).

In the eightees, the analysis of the cognitive activities of the subjects have been completed by the subjects themselves who describe their mental activity during of after its development. The validity of these types of verbal protocols has been largely argued by Ericsson & Simon (1984).

We propose here an investigation of the communicational processes extending this methodological orientation. It consists in helping the subjects to have a reflexive activity on their mental activities when they interpret a sentence in a natural dialog setting, in a more exhaustive way than through a spontaneous introspection.

For helping the subjects to retrieve and describe their cognitive activity we use a new methodology of questioning developed by Vermersch (1994, 1999), a researcher in cognitive psychology.

We will develop here, from the analysis of the disambiguation of two utterances, the different contexts in which they are interpreted and the various processes through which the subject's thought follows its course (mental images, search for relevance, change of context....). We already argued that many difficulties of inter-understanding come from the illusion of the interlocutors to share a same cognitive context (Cahour & Karsenty 1996). Many authors in pragmatics have already stressed the role of the context in communication, and in the line of Sperber & Wilson (1986) we wish to clarify how is the context dynamically selected and used for interpreting.

2. Methodology

Explicitation interviews (Entretiens d'Explicitation in french, sometimes translated by Elicitation interviews) is a technic which has been developed by Vermersch, a french researcher in cognitive psychology interested in phenomelogical approaches of consciousness (1994, 1999), to get the actors remembering and describing in detail their activity, mental or not.

The actors are helped to retrieve and describe specific moments of their activity. The main caution when interviewing the subjects about mental activities is to avoid asking them *why* they took decisions or *why* they made some judgements, otherwise they tend to rationalize and reconstruct the activity (Ericsson & Simon 1984). On the contrary, the interviewer must focus the actors on their actions, on what was done, perceived and thought. In addition to this important point, Vermersch's explicitation techniques get the subjects to focus on a specific moment of their past activities, specific in time and space, and not talk in general about a type of situation ; the subjects then retrieve their activities more directly, more vividly, in a less conceptual mode. The episodic recollection of the activity more than the intellectual reasoning about the activity is reached and the subjects describe with more details what really happened and what they really did. A specific mode of questioning is used for simultaneously guiding the subject to retrieve more details but without influencing the reponses; behavioral cues (gaze, gestures, prosody, discourse content) indicate if the interviewed person is telling his/her genuine experience or is commenting about it in a more distant way. This technic of interview is subtile and complex and necessitates a specific training for the interviewer to master it.

The great interest of this technic is double : the data obtained are more exhaustive and of a finer grain about the mental activities of the subjects and theses data are also more reliable than those gathered with a classical type of interview, since the interviewed person is helped to reach a vivid souvenir of the situation and to avoid reconstructions.

The two researchers are in a natural collaborative work session, talking about the new study they work on together ; during their dialog, when they perceive a slight problem of understanding, they stop the discussion and interview the one who had a difficulty to understand an utterance. The interview bears generally on the last sentence produced by the interlocutor and lasts more or less one hour. Both researchers are trained to the Explicitation Interview technic. The dialogs and interviews are audio-recorded and transcribed. Ten ambiguous utterances have been studied and two cases will be presented in detail here.

3. First case analysis : « it looks more difficult... »

Dialog situation : B is reading and commenting a text written by L ; they are in the same room but separated by a folding screen; they can hear each other but they cannot see each other. They are used to this situation of collective work, but they are generally face-to-face. This time they wanted to test the situation of communicating without seing.

After a silence, B says to L :

« it's funny it looks more difficult to me a priori, it looks rather difficult to me.... »

(in french : « c'est marrant, ça me semble plus difficile a priori, ça me semble assez difficile moi... »)

Then L interrupts B and tells her what he thinks she means, and how he was not sure about it at first. B interviews him to help him explicitating his interpretation processes, that is the mental activity of L who finds the deictic « it » ambiguous and the hypothesis he produced to find a plausible reference.

We develop below a synthesis of the interview :

• From a change of the voice, L imagines that B moves back and infers she has finished to read the text:

« I felt that you moved back on your seat (...) your voice changed (...) I felt a move of distancing with the text (...) I did not see you moving but I have it clearly in mind (...) I imagined you did not look to the text anymore... It was clear you had finished to read the text (...) at the same time you say : it's funny, it looks more difficult... »

• First hypothesis of L : « it » refers to something in the previous discussion.

At first, L is seaking for an interpretation in the discursive context, that is a point in the text they were discussing just before which would be difficult to understand for B ; L says in the interview *« I was looking for something in the text you were reading as if I was scanning a text... I try to sweep across to look for a topic or a point of discussion which could be difficult (...) not in the document because I don't see the document, but in my mind (...) all that we said before »*

During this time B keeps on talking

• Second hypothesis of L : L has « suddenly » a second interpretation in mind : « it » refers to the fact of talking without seing each other ; we notice that he wonders how he « jumped » to this second hypothesis, and until the end of the interview he will not be sure of this transition.

« I don't know how I jumped to the second interpretation (...) it appeared suddenly in my mind (...) then in a second time I thought : she is going to tell me it seems more difficult to me to talk without seeing each other »

The only point he mentions spontaneously is that he thought the special thing in the situation was the fact to talk without seeing each other.

« I felt : there is something very special in our situation, it's that we talk without seeing each other »

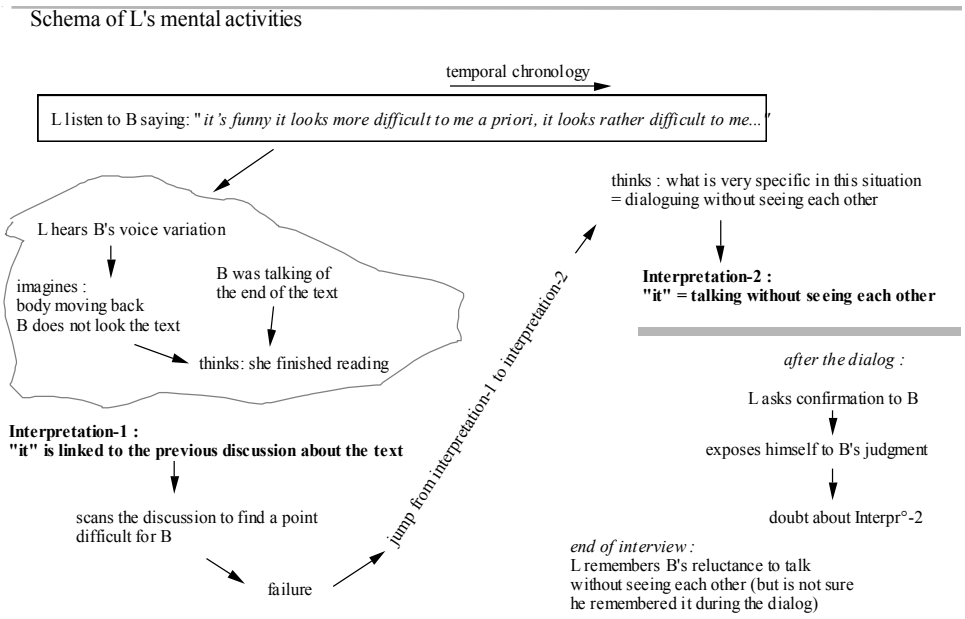
Obviously, to reach this second interpretation, L leaves the discursive context of the commented text for another zone of research, another type of context, the present situation of communication, that we call the situational context. We note that L is very assertive about this second interpretation, when he found it, he was sure it was the right one.

• Doubt about the second interpretation : After having interrupted the dialog because he had detected an ambiguity, L, while proposing his second interpretation to B, doubts of this interpretation he was so sure about . He explains this doubt by the fact that, by telling his interpretation, he exposes himself to B's power to evaluate his hypothesis.

*« I told you « it's the fact to talk together without seeing », and I asked you « right ? » and you did not answer, but at the moment I asked you, suddenly I had a doubt (...) by saying it I know I'm in the position to expose myself to your judgment ».*The interviewer B checked if it was not the lack of answer which rendered L doubtful, but L confirmed that he felt the doubt at the same time when he proposed his interpretation.

• Afterwards remembering of B's reluctance :
At the very end of the interview, B asks L in a more inductive way: *« do you think I had talked about this difficulty to dialog without seeing each other during our interaction, in a way or another ? »* and L answers : *« Hey ! you talked about the difficulty of some persons to talk by phone, to talk without seeing the other ; I felt some reluctance from you at the beginning to do this exercise (...) you were not convinced by the interest to do it (...) you said « I always want to turn towards you »*.

But L remains uncertain that it is this remembering which made him jump to the second hypothesis. This is only a possible explanation of the transition between the first interpretation and the second one : L remembered B's reluctance to dialog without seeing each other and linked it with the difficulty she evokes. What B meant was slightly different (it seems more difficult to make an interview after the dialog without seeing the interviewed person) and she was speaking slowly and repeating the sentence because, while speaking, she was elaborating the reasons why she intuitively thought that.



4. Second case analysis : « which Paul ? »

Dialog situation : B and L talk about Ann who came in France to be trained by B to a method invented by Paul-1. At some point during the dialog, B says :
B : – « Ann, I had her meet Paul» (she thinks of Paul-1)
L : – « Paul ? which Paul ? »
(in french : « - Ann, je l'ai fait rencontrer Paul - Paul ? quel Paul ? »)

B, observing that there is an ambiguity that L cannot solve, interviews L to know which were his mental activities between these two turns. We develop below a synthesis of the interview :

• Immediate interpretation : L interprets immediatly Paul-2, that B knows also and that they often talk about.

• Visual representation : L imagines a visual scene with Paul-2 and Ann, he simulates mentally their meeting.

He said during the interview *« I saw her talking with Paul at the CNA »* (place where Paul-2 works)

• Non-verbal sign : L also sees an expression in B's eyes when she pronounced « I had her meet Paul », that he interprets as : it's important or interesting for Ann (visual cue of expression)

« also the way you said it (L simulates the eyes wide opened) made me think that it was important for her to meet Paul »

• Search for importance of the event : L does not find the interest for Paul-2 or for Ann ; he does not know Ann (an english student) but think of the reasons why Paul-2 (a busy french professor) would be interested in meeting her, and does not find a plausible one.

• Adapting the verbal reaction : L wonders which interest they have to meet, but he is afraid to be rude if he asks B this way ; *« this question could have offended you »* he says when B interviews him (management of the relation)

• Question of clatification : He then asks *« Paul, which Paul ? »* for desambiguating B's utterance and knowing Paul's reference without offending B. From B's point of view, since they were talking about the method invented by Paul-1, she was sure that he was part of the discursive context and, when she talked about Paul, she did not think at all that it could be ambiguous for L. After, she admits that if they suddenly change their topic and talk of « Paul » they refer most probably to Paul-2. They know as much Paul-2 but she knows more Paul-1 than L. Also they were talking in the CNA, where Paul-2's office is.

An interesting point is this discrepancy between B's context of interpretation and L's context of interpretation :

- B associates Paul in the present discursive context with the author of this technic they are talking about, and since the present topic is directly linked to this Paul-1, it is obvious for her that the reference is Paul-1, and she does not anticipate at all the ambiguity generated for L.

- L, from his own point of view, understands Paul as the referent that they most frequently share with B, that is Paul-2. It is the most accessible referent for L and B out of any specific context, that is the Paul the most often mentioned by them. We can call it a « favoured shared referent ». Maybe also the situational context (being near Paul-2's office) leads him to this interpretation (but he does not mention it spontaneously). He does not even think of another possible referent and prefers to ask the question of clarification « Paul ? which Paul ? ».

Also the role of the visual imagery is striking in several of our data. Very rapidly, when interpreting, the subjects create visual imaginary scenes or scan real scenes of the past. It is not clear if this scene imagined here by L between Ann and Paul-2 is created for finding a plausible interpretation of the importance of their meeting, or if it is activated automatically, not intentionally.

Finally in this example we observe the role of two types of events which are often forgotten in the cognitive models of mutual understanding :

Firstly, the important effect of a non-verbal cue which is the expression in the eye, since this expression seams to convey a precise meaning for L (the importance of the meeting).

Secondly the role of the interpersonal relation in the mental preparation of a verbal reaction : L refrains a question which could offend B. We have here a very

nice example of the face management principle which indicates how the interlocutors protect their own and the others' sensitivities and tend to avoid offences and conflict (Goffman 1964, Brown & Levinson 1978). This example shows clearly how participants to an interaction are oriented to the content meaning but also to the interpersonal and relational meaning (Watzlawick, Helmick-Beavin, Jackson 1967).

5. Conclusion

Sperber & Wilson (1986) state that when communicating we take risks because we are never sure to be understood and that what is surprising is how we success in communicating. The data presented above confirm how often we have the false illusion to share a same context of interpretation with our interlocutor, and how the interpreter has to produce cognitive efforts to understand what is meant.

With the methodology we use here, we focus on a fine-grain description of the individual interpretation processes and it stresses the heterogeneity and variability of the interpretative process, and the difficulty to anticipate it. This methodology is very promising because we gain more information about the mental activities. It is reliable because, as one can see above, the subject can make the difference between when he is sure and not sure to retrieve (that must be checked carefully during the interview) ; also the fact that some moments of the interpretative event remain un-explicited (like the sudden jump between the interpretations) are a guarantee of the absence of rationalisation and construction. Finally the numerous crosscheckings on the progress of the events obtained during the interview are another sign of validity.

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Summary

This study analyses in a very detailed way the interpretative processes in a natural professional dialog setting, with Explicitation Interviews, a technic based on psycho-phenomenology. The internal processes for undertanding the interlocutor are detailed ; from the analysis of two utterances disambiguation, the different contexts in which they are interpreted and the various processes through which the subject's thought follows its course are described : hypothesis based on the situational and discursive context, or on the facial and vocal expressions, doubts, mental images, search for relevance, change of interpretative context, face protection and insult avoidance.

Key-words

Interpretative processes ; dialog ; interaction ; explicitation interview ; disambiguation ; context ; mental processes ; relevance ; insult avoidance ; face protection