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PRACTICES IN UNDERSTANDING IN MULTILINGUAL ENROLLMENT CONSULTATION

ABSTRACT

Communication with authorities belongs to a field of research with a long and intensive research tradition. The present paper focuses on the process of understanding in oral institutional communication. It will present some mechanisms by which common understanding is achieved by using different resources. In contrast to the numerous papers dealing with written institutional communication, little work has been carried out on conversations in the administration. Based on Becker-Mrotzek's (1999, 2001) classification of oral institutional communication into three different types: discourse on consultation, objection and application, the present paper focuses on *data collection interviews* or *application discourses* (Ger. *Datenerhebungsgespräche*), which form "the major part of citizen-administration-discourses" (Becker-Mrotzek 1999: 1399). Despite the frequency of these types of discourse, they are the subject of remarkably few studies.

KEYWORDS: understanding, institutional communication, enrollment consultation, conversation analysis, multimodality

STRESZCZENIE

Komunikacja z organami władzy należy do dziedziny badań o długiej i intensywnej tradycji badawczej. Niniejsza praca skupia się na procesie rozumienia w ustnej komunikacji instytucjonalnej. Przedstawi ona pewne mechanizmy, dzięki którym osiągane jest wspólne zrozumienie przy użyciu różnych zasobów. W przeciwieństwie do wielu artykułów poświęconych pisemnej komunikacji instytucjonalnej, niewiele prac poświęcono rozmowom w administracji. Opierając się na klasyfikacji ustnej komunikacji instytucjonalnej Becker-Mrotzek (1999, 2001) na trzy różne typy: dyskurs na temat konsultacji, sprzeciwu i aplikacji, niniejszy artykuł koncentruje się na *wywiadach służących zbieraniu danych* lub *dyskursach aplikacyjnych* (niem. Datenerhebungsgespräche), które tworzą „większą część dyskursów obywatel-administracja" (Becker-Mrotzek 1999: 1399). Mimo częstości tego typu dyskursu są one przedmiotem zadziwiająco niewielu badań.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: rozumienie, komunikacja instytucjonalna, konsultacje rekrutacyjne, analiza rozmów, multimodalność

DATA COLLECTION INTERVIEWS

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

Becker-Mrotzek et al. (1992: 245) define *data collection interviews* as "those in which the counselor and the client together collect personal data, for example, for an application". They are characterized by the following *peculiarities*: institutional purpose, disparate knowledge transfer, distribution of tasks, dominance of the institution, different options for action and correspondence of institutional writing and everyday oral content (ibid: 242ff.). The basis is a questionnaire *(form)* with accompanying texts which contain, for example, assistance for filling in the questionnaire and lists of certificates that should be attached. Despite the fact that the form is accompanied by lists of codes and instructions on some questions, there is little understanding on how the form is completed by the client in practice. Data collection interviews take place when the application submitted to the authorities in person are accompanied by a conversation (Becker-Mrotzek 2001: 1514). This means that "the application sequence already transliterated in the form is voiced in the application discourse" (Becker-Mrotzek 1999: 1399). Thus, data collection interviews provide an interface between oral and written administrative communication. Becker-Mrotzek notes that data collection interviews involve a twofold transformation process. Not only is there a transformation from "oral to written", but also from "everyday to institutional" (Becker-Mrotzek 2001: 1518). Becker-Mrotzek (2001: 1514) emphasizes that this type of conversation has no advisory role, but points out, however, that the discussion type may still include a consultation function, under certain circumstances. In light of the fact that, in addition to assisting with the application, the consultant's duties include reviewing the applicant's package of documents the data collection interview can be seen to have an advisory role. However, the extent of the advisory function varies from conversation to conversation.

FORM

As already mentioned above, data collection interviews represent an interaction type characterized by a shift from written to oral administrative communication, as the written content of the form is voiced by the counselor (Becker-Mrotzek 2001: 1514). The conversation is strongly influenced by the omnipresence of the form. Thus, the *form* defines the indispensable object of the interaction or the "significant object", which is understood as "a spatial structure with a mostly clear core and arather unclear peripheral region that is temporarily established through interaction between different participants" (Deppermann/ Schmitt 2007: 111). The form thus constructs the interaction and becomes the coordinative center. Over and above that, it is an interactive situation in which the participants are engaged in verbal interaction with the realization of a practical activity, namely the completion of the

form. Thus, the *activity of filling in* becomes an integral part of the interaction process (Khalizova 2019). The interaction facilitates the completion of the form by means of the conversation initiated by the consultant following the questions in the form. Questions and answers form the central activity types (Becker-Mrotzek 2001: 1514). The incomplete form constitutes the *content* of the interaction, while the completed form represents the *purpose* of the interaction.

UNDERSTANDING

Understanding is a subject of investigation with a long research tradition. Due to fundamental differences between verbal and written communication, the process of understanding in verbal interactions and written communication should be differentiated as well (Deppermann 2008: 227). The present article is interested in the process of understanding in oral interaction. In the long research tradition of cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics, understanding is seen, above all, as a mental process. According to the approach inspired by Ryle and Wittgenstein and which later appeared in both ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, understanding is construed as an "indexical achievement established in interactive actions" (Mondada 2011: 542). Deppermann/ Schmitt (2008: 221) define understanding as "a discursive phenomenon that is thematized, pointed out and handled by participants in intersubjectively observable processes". Understanding is, therefore, not a mental process, but an achievement demonstrated by the participants in the interaction (Lindwall/ Lymer 2011: 453). Deppermann/ Schmitt (2008: 222) point out that "understanding is empirically not available as a psychological phenomenon but rather in a social and linguistic process of documenting, processing and securing understanding". The empirical starting point of this work is the concept of "documentation of understanding" *(Ger. Verstehensdokumentation)*. By this, Deppermann/ Schmitt (2008: 222) understand "all activities with which participants of the discussion thematize or display understanding or with which they presuppose that they have reached a certain understanding".

Deppermann (2008: 230f.) points out that every documentation of understanding and every production of intersubjectivity requires the following three basic operations: first, the speaker must construct a contribution understandable to the listener. Second, the listener must document, by using implicit or explicit practices of understanding, how he or she understood the speaker's contribution, and third, the person acting as the speaker must indicate whether he or she feels adequately understood by the listener. Here, Deppermann (2008) identifies three outcomes, namely follow-up action, ratification of understanding or misunderstanding. This three-step scheme can be expanded in various ways, and subsequent revisions of comprehension are of course also possible. In this context, the orientation of the

recipient's design is of great importance. The first basic task for each participant is thus to construct contributions in such a way that they can be understood, in context, by the addressees.

COMMON GROUND

In institutional interactions, the "common ground" (Clark/ Schaefer 1989: 260) of the interactants, or the set of beliefs, assumptions and knowledge they share, is relatively small. Unlike counselors, who have "professional knowledge", clients have partial "uncategorized" knowledge (Hartog 1996: 306). At the request of the authority or with a specific request, the clients come to the agency, where they can find out how this request can be dealt with and what documents they must submit. As part of this process the agency employee conveys institutional and professional knowledge to the client. Conversely, the client also conveys knowledge relevant to the processing of his request to the public agency employee (Rosenberg 2014: 27f). It is the task of the counselor to structure the client's knowledge into professional categories, through evaluation processes (Hartog 1996: 306). The process of knowledge transfer is *bilateral*. Against this background, *knowledge transfer* or "grounding" plays an important role (Rosenberg 2014). Due to the *institutional* as well as the *lingua franca context*, participants have to bridge knowledge asymmetries of an institutional, interlingual and intercultural nature. This makes the interaction framework particularly complex. Utterances that are not formulated in an optimal manner can cause *communication problems*.

DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION

The data set contains a 55-hour audio and video corpus of form-based enrollment consultations, which are part of the enrollment procedure for international students at the University of Freiburg. 150 interviews were documented in total. The fieldwork (the observation of interviews and the making of audio and video recordings) spanned a period of three years (2014–2016). The data material is characterized by a strong interculturality, with students and consultants from 49 countries having participated in the study. However, German and English were the dominant languages in these conversations. For further analysis, only conversations in German or English as lingua franca were included. Thus, a total of 114 audio and 24 video conversations were used. Access to data for the study involved three stages: obtaining permission from the *head* of the Student Service Center in

Freiburg; obtaining the permission of the *consultants* to be present at the data collection interviews and to record them; obtaining the permission of the *students* to be present at the data collection interviews and to record them.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods of analysis such as *conversation analysis* and *multimodality research* were central to the study. Video analysis provides methodical access to the multimodality of interaction. Video data is also the source of information on physical/visual expression in the analysis. "The documentation of understanding in the form of verbal and other kinetic activities, with which the participants in the interaction constantly publicly show each other the interpretations of their own and others' actions, is therefore a basic, permanently relevant task" (Deppermann 2010: 13).

The empirical starting point is the concept of "documentation of understanding" *(Ger. Verstehensdokumentation)*. By this, Deppermann/ Schmitt (2008: 222) mean "all activities with which participants of the conversation thematize or display understanding or with which they presuppose that they have reached a certain understanding". Deppermann/ Schmitt (2008: 230 f.) point out that any documentation of understanding and any creation of intersubjectivity require the following three basic operations: the speaker ("ego") must construct a contribution to a conversation that is sufficiently understandable for the listener ("alter"). In the second step, the "alter" has to document how he has understood the ego and, finally, the person who acts as the speaker *(ego)* has to indicate whether he feels sufficiently understood by the listener. These three basic operations of underpinning documentation of understanding correspond to a basic temporal and structural organization of conversation sequences in three positions of conversation contributions essential for the system of understanding (Schegloff 1992). Against this background, it is possible to examine various *linguistic/communicative* (e.g. *formulation of receptives, inquiries, turn continuations, reformulations*) and *physical/visual* resources, with the help of which understanding is achieved or documented and negotiated. By using them, participants try either to *secure* or *negotiate understanding* in the 2nd position, i.e. by answering the question or commenting on the speaker's statement (the question/statement appearing) expressed in the 1st position. The *ratification of understanding in the 3rd position*, which refers to how the speaker responds to the addressee's documentation of understanding, is done *explicitly* in my corpus, i.e. through concrete utterances, as well as *implicitly* through subsequent actions. These follow-up actions can be both verbal and multimodal in nature.

A reconstructive approach is used for these purposes. This identifies the observable communicative phenomena that are produced, treated (observable) by participants in the interaction as signs and expressions of the process of understanding, and witnessed by the researcher in his fixation on audio or video recordings and transcripts (Deppermann 2010: 13).

The level of *sequential organization* is the immediate level of negotiation of understanding. Subsequent actions such as answers or queries always document understanding, (non-) acceptance, clarification or correction. The relevance and expected follow-up actions are especially evident when they are missed, or when their absence leads to follow-up problems. Understanding is therefore always to be indicated in relation to the previous turn (Heritage 1995: 398). It is precisely this retrospective relation of the documentation of understanding and the subsequent interactive application in the next turn that are tied to the sequential manner of the interaction (Deppermann 2010: 14).

THE PROCESS OF UNDERSTANDING
IN DATA COLLECTION INTERVIEWS

In the following chapter, I would like to present some examples to demonstrate how understanding in this conversational type takes place. The first example is an audio example and only allows the verbal level to be scrutinized; the second is a video example and also allows the nonverbal level to be looked at. Both examples demonstrate the process of filling in the *'Qualification for university entrance' form field*. This form field is one of the most complicated to fill in. As the form is filled in together by candidate and counselor in the context of a data collection interview, the candidate is usually asked the question concerning the university entrance qualification orally. This results in great difficulty for most applicants with regard to the German term *Abitur*. Very rarely do applicants answer the question of the university entrance qualification without the help of the counselor. In this case, they have the opportunity to answer the written question with a list of different country-specific terms for higher education entrance qualification. However, even then, they are not always able to understand the question. The German term *Abitur* corresponds to the acquisition of the general university entrance qualification. Any applicant wishing to enroll at the University of Freiburg must have obtained the university entrance qualification in their home country in the form of a diploma, the naming of which differs from country to country. While in Germany it is *Abitur*, various different terms are used in other countries. Due to the different names given to the university entrance qualification in different cultures, it is not surprising that the question asked by counselors including the term *Abitur* often causes problems in understanding. In order to achieve mutual understanding, counselors resort to different standard procedures, such as the *transfer* (this is explained as 'high school' using the English synonym 'high school') or *reformulation* of the question.

Example (1): ((Conversation 15.04.2015/ Student from Belgium/ Counselor from Togo/ Form field "Qualification for university entrance"/{00:39}, Counselor (B), Student (S)

01	B:	WANN hast du dein abitur?
		(when did you get your high school diploma)
02	S:	(2.0)
03		abiTUR;
		(high school diploma)
04		(1.8)
05	B:	abiTUR?
		(high school diploma)
06	S:	(1.0)
07		ahh::
08		ich [WEISS nicht].
		(i do not know)
09	B:	[WANN]hast du mit (.) universität angefangen?
		(when did you start to study at university)
10	S:	(1.0)
11		AHH,
12	B:	in BELgien?
		(in Belgium)
	S:	in BELgien,
		(in Belgium)
-> 14	B:	**BAC (-) bac your baccalaureat**.
		(high high your high school diploma)
15	S:	AHH ä::hm
16		(1.8)
17		ä:hm
18		(1.8)
-> 19		**this is** meine (-) [DREIzehnte]-
-> 20	B:	**[tu as finis le LYcee]?**
		(you have finished high school?)
-> 21		**et tu as deja commence pour la premiere fois l'universite**
		(and you have already started university for the first time?)
22	S:	JA.
		(yes)
23		ähm
24		(1.0)
25		ähh
26		(1.2)
-> 27		**this is mine ähh this is mine** DRITte ähh jahre so das ähm
		(1.2)zwei [zweitausend]-
		(this is my third, um, year so it is, um, two two thousand)
-> 28	B:	[kennst du] **BAC baccalaureat**?
		(do you know the high shool diploma?)
29	S:	JAja.
		(yes yes)

The excerpt can be categorised in the following way. In the first line, a counselor from Togo (native language: French) asks when the student from

Belgium (native languages: Dutch and French) graduated from high school. After a short pause (l. 02), the student repeats the word 'Abitur' with a rising-falling intonation (l. 03), thereby highlighting the word he has trouble understanding. After another short pause (l. 04), the counselor repeats the question, which consists only in the word *'Abitur'*, and so confirms that the Abitur is the central topic (l. 05). After a pause (l. 06) and a hesitation, which is indicated by the delay marker *'ah'* (l. 07), the student indicates that he does not know the answer (l. 08). The counselor rephrases his question almost at the same time as the student gives his answer (l. 09). After a pause (l. 10) and a hesitation (l. 11), the counselor specifies his question by mentioning the country (l. 12). However, the student does not reply in his next turn, instead repeating the words of the counselor (l. 13). After trying to explain the question to the student by means of repetitions and paraphrasing, the counselor switches to French in line 14, and asks once more about the Abitur, this time using the word *'baccalauréat'*. This means that, at this point, codeswitching is taking place. Nevertheless, the language change does not elicit the anticipated response from the student, who starts an explanation (l. 19) after two pauses with fillers (l. 15–18). He begins his sentence in English – a transfer is taking place. The student is interrupted by the counselor, who asks him two more questions and switches completely to French (l. 20, 21). It is interesting that the student does not switch over to French but continues to speak in German (l. 22). After two pauses with delay markers (l. 23–26), the student tries once more to give an explanation (l. 27). He starts his sentence in English again before proceeding in German. The beginning of the sentence in English constitutes the second transfer within the conversation extract. As the student is interrupted by the counselor again (l. 28), he does not finish his sentence. The student reacts with positive affirmation (l. 29) to the counselor's question of whether he knows the terms *'bac'* and *'baccalauréat'* (l. 28).

An interesting interplay occurs in this sequence. When the counselor realises that the student has trouble understanding the German term *'Abitur'* and is consequently unable to answer the question, he switches to the student's mother tongue to help him. However, this language change only adds to the confusion. The counselor tries to help the student with this language change to French accompanied by rephrasing. It is also interesting that the student himself does not switch over to French, but continues to speak German or falls back on English. As a result, this sequence points to another aspect of the problem, which is brought on by the lack of a categorical agreement on the term *'baccalauréat'* in different languages and cultures. The term 'baccalauréat' (short form 'bac') is a noun of French origin. Different countries have different concepts of the term. The 'baccalauréat' in France, as well as in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, can be likened to the German 'Abitur'. In Belgium and Canada, the 'baccalauréat' is not a secondary school diploma, but a higher level qualification which is awarded after at least three years of university education, making it the equivalent of the German 'Bachelor'. As the ultimate problem exists on a different level, the codeswitching in line 27 does not allow the conversational partners to make progress, because the above-mentioned

concepts of the word 'baccalauréat' are significantly different in both speakers' cultures. For this reason, the language change, which is only resorted to as a method of negotiating and explaining the meaning, is counterproductive and hinders the process of understanding.

Example (2): (Video 14.04.2016/ Student from Slovakia/ Counselor from Germany/ Form field "Qualification for university entrance"/ Language English/ 04:02 – 04:26 Sek.) {00:24} Counselor (B), Student (S)

In this example, a counselor from Germany (native language: German) and a student from Slovakia (native language: Slovak) are filling in the same section as in the first example. The question on the candidate's *graduation year* has already been asked in two different variants and also answered. However, it was responded to wrongly, because instead of the high school year, the student named the year of the *bachelor's degree*. The sequence begins with the moment the counselor starts the process of negotiating understanding. In the first turn, the counselor asks if the student wants to enroll for a master's or a bachelor's degree (l. 01). The student declares that she would like to enroll for a master's degree course, having completed her bachelor's degree last year (l. 02). In the images, we can see that the student was about to fill in the form field (fig. 1.1), but turned to the counselor while answering
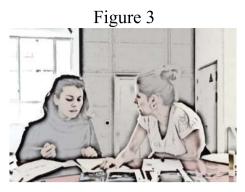
Figure 1.1   Figure 1.2

01   B: but are you doing a MASters (.) degree here or bachelor degree

Figure 2.1   Figure 2.2

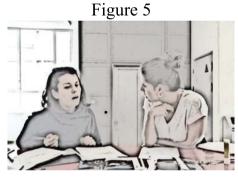02   S: i am doing my master but I finished my BAchelor in slovakia.

Figure 3

03   B: okay than it CANT be fifteen.

Figure 4

04   B: i am talking about your SCHOOL
(.) when you were child.

Figure 5

05   S: oh oKAY.

Figure 6
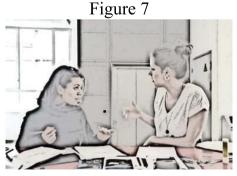

06   S: how LONG.

the question (fig. 1.2). As she finally answers the question, they both look at each other (fig. 2.1, 2.2). The *face-to-face orientation* of the interlocutors indicates that, from this moment, verbally and visually it is especially attentively interacted, because the negotiation of understanding is taking place. After the student has answered the question, the counselor repeats the high school year already mentioned by the student (l. 03). She bends over the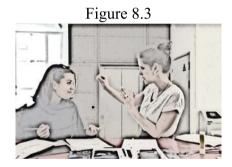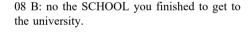 form and points to the form field to be filled in. This gesture leads to gaze reorientation by the student, who returns her gaze to the form (fig. 3). Following this, the counselor explains that the term 'university entrance qualification' does not mean the year in which the bachelor's degree is awarded, but that of the school's diploma certificate (l. 04). After the categories 'bachelor' and 'school' have been mentioned and explained, the student signals her understanding (l. 05).

Figure 7

07   S: the PRImary school?

Afterwards, the student seeks clarification as to whether it is elementary school that is being to (l. 07), turning to the counselor for direct eye contact and gesticulating her utterance with a *metaphorical gesture* (fig. 7). The consultant then explains once again that the term 'university entrance qualification' refers to the acquisition of such qualification and that the school year must be indicated in the corresponding field (l. 08). In the accompanying images, we can see that the counselor, in the same way as the student before her, gestures a lot while speaking (figs. 8.1, 8.2, 8.3). The gestures she uses are metaphorical ones. These gestures are

Figure 8.1

Figure 8.2

Figure 8.3

08 B: no the SCHOOL you finished to get to the university.

primarily intended to support verbal communication visually, so that the question is more understandable to the student, who is looking at the counselor at that moment. The counselor uses speech-supporting gestures as the *tactic of negotiating understanding* after the previous attempts to clarify the question have been unsuccessful.

After the content of the question has again been explained by the counselor, the student confirms her complete understanding with 'alright' (l. 09) and names her graduation year (l. 10) in the following turn.

The process of negotiating understanding in the form-based conversations analyzed here manifests itself firstly by a

Figure 9

09 S: alRIGHT.

Figure 10

10 S: two thousand and TEN.

change in body orientation from a *side-by-side arrangement* to a *face-to-face arrangement*, resulting in direct eye contact and, secondly, an increased use of accompanying gestures, especially *metaphorical gestures*. This confirms the thesis of Goldin-Meadow (2005: 241) regarding the role of gestures in the context of the human thinking process. Due to the fact that the interviewees in the data corpus of the study are speakers of multiple languages, the tendency to use gestures in order to negotiate understanding can also be explained by the lingua franca context. In order to achieve mutual understanding, the interlocutors increasingly resort to gestural accompanying actions.

SUMMARY

The present paper demonstrates the process of achieving mutual understanding in data collection interviews which represent a case of oral institutional communication. In summary, the process of understanding in the investigated interactions is conditioned by both the *institutional* and the *interlingual* context of interaction, a high level of *precision*, and a strong security bias that is both verbal and non-verbal. Understanding takes place not only verbally, with the help of diverse *linguistic/communicative* practices, but primarily multimodally, using different *physical/visual* resources such as gaze, gesture, head movement, and body orientation. Understanding between the participants in the studied interactions is attained at multiple levels. The understanding display in the data corpus extends from filling in the form over the verbal negotiation up to nodding the head. In conclusion, it can be stated that non-understanding is rarely observed and is often negotiated with reference to the various *modes of manifestations of understanding*. Observation shows that not all multimodal resources are used with a similar frequency in the analyzed data collection interviews, which makes it necessary to divide them into *main* (eye and gesture), and *secondary factors* (facial expressions, body orientation, head movement). In addition, with regard to the use of nonverbal practices, a distinction should be made between *speech-accompanying* and *speech-substituting use* of nonverbal resources. The institutional nature of communication confers special characteristics on the process of understanding that are not com-

monly observed in other types of communication. So, for example, the successful process of understanding between the interactants can be recognized not only verbally, but also multimodally (e.g. by *gaze orientation)*. While the *gaze triad (form – counselor – student)* is characteristic for a smooth interaction process, direct eye contact is taken up comparatively rarely and marks the process of negotiating understanding. Similar to the gaze, the state of the current process of understanding can be recognized by *body orientation*. For example, a side-by-side arrangement signals a smooth flow of interaction, while a face-to-face arrangement signals a process of negotiating understanding. Another important observation concerns the control function of the gaze in the 'instruction to fill in – filling in' pair sequence. This monitoring activity fulfills an understanding function as the counselors visually check the correctness of the filling in.

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