

Finns in interaction with non-finns: problematic phenomena perceived as critical incidents

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Abstract

This study focuses on Finns' perceptions of problematic phenomena in their communication with non-Finns. The aim of the study is to examine intercultural face-to-face encounters experienced as critical incidents by the respondents.

Critical incidents are communicative events which have been experienced as embarrassing, irritating, funny, strange etc. and which are therefore remembered vividly.

People are often not aware of "the obvious" in their own communication. It only becomes visible to them when communicating with somebody whose "obvious" differs from it, as is the case in intercultural encounters. Therefore the study of critical incidents helps to identify "obvious" and therefore invisible features in one's own communication style.

The data consists of 202 critical incidents collected from lecture journals submitted by Finnish open university students in connection with introductory courses to Intercultural Communication. To identify such incidents in the journals, content analysis was used.

The study suggests that phenomena such as different orientations to time, degree of directness, role differences and differences in verbal and nonverbal communication were among those experienced as critical.

keywords: intercultural face-to-face encounters, critical incidents, communicative style, content analysis, problematic dimensions of communication.

Introduction

This study in progress concentrates on Finns in interaction with non-Finns and, particularly, on problematic phenomena perceived by the Finnish respondents as critical incidents. Critical incidents (hereafter CIs) are "interactional events which the participants have experienced as problematic and embarrassing or even funny. -- events that they remember vividly" (Salo-Lee & Winter-Tarvainen 1995:82). Intercultural encounters are a particularly rich forum for the study of CIs, due to differing interactional expectations. Finding out which dimensions of communication tend to be perceived as problematic may provide useful knowledge which may have implications for intercultural communication training.

THE METHOD

The data

The data of the present study were collected from learning diaries written by students of the Open University of Jyväskylä attending introductory courses to Intercultural Communication in 1996 through 1999. So far over 200 CIs have been collected from learning diaries whose writers gave written

permission to use their diaries for research, teaching, and publishing purposes. The data are almost exclusively in Finnish. The original Finnish quotations have here been translated into English.

The analysis

Critical incident technique (see Flanagan 1954:335) was used to analyze the data. In this case, the technique consisted of the following three steps:

Step 1: Identifying the CIs in the diaries

Flanagan (1954:327) defines a critical incident as "any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act. To be critical, an incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects." For the purposes of the present study, Flanagan's definition was operationalized into the following criteria:

1. "human activity": a communicative event between a Finn/Finns and a non-Finn/non-Finns
2. "critical": something perceived as problematic or unexpected by the Finnish respondent and reported in the learning diary as such
3. "sufficiently complete in itself": a situation that had been described exhaustively enough for inferences to be drawn about it

To identify such incidents in the data, attention was paid to textual cues which indicated that

- 1) something was perceived as problematic

Ex.

I myself noticed I had made a mistake when -- (19)

- 2) something went against the respondents' expectations

Ex.

- I expected everybody to listen to what I had to say. Still, this was not the case but the Italians interrupted me in what I considered to be a harsh way and started all to give their own opinion in chorus. (134)

- 3) something made the participants react in a particular way

Ex.

I felt offended. (134)

By paying attention to textual cues in the way described above, each one of the CIs was identified in the learning diaries.

Step 2 consisted of identifying thematic units, i.e. categories associated with different specified themes, in the CIs. A number of thematic units emerged as attention was paid to the salient characteristics of the communicative event described by the respondent. For instance, the thematic unit "Choice of topic" was identified among others from CIs number 122 and 156 on the basis of the following textual cues:

- We were sitting in a bus on an excursion with our group when she asked me if I shaved my legs. I was surprised at the question as I considered it all too personal to be asked in a public place. -- (122)

- an American fellow passenger kept asking too personal matters such as whether I was married and why I was not married. (156)

Step 3 consisted of forming final response categories based on the thematic units. This was done by studying each thematic unit in closer detail. Sometimes further differentiation could be made inside a thematic unit, in which case two or more subcategories were formed; sometimes several thematic units (e.g. turn-taking, back-channeling, expectations about the amount of talk) seemed to represent different sides of the same phenomenon and could therefore be grouped under one main title (e.g. conversational management).

RESULTS

The results show that the Finnish respondents had perceived the following dimensions of communication as problematic in their interaction with non-Finns:

1 Language and language use

1.1 Language proficiency

1.1.1 Finn lacking in language proficiency

1.1.2 Non-Finn lacking in language proficiency

1.2 Transference of mother tongue patterns into foreign language

1.2.1 Finn transferring mother tongue patterns into foreign language

1.2.2 Non-Finn transferring mother tongue patterns into foreign language

1.3 Different concepts or connotations

1.3.1 Finn mistaking a concept to mean the same as in Finland

1.3.2 Non-Finn mistaking a concept to mean the same as in his culture

1.3.3 Finn's concept unfamiliar to non-Finn

1.4 Words used as a well-meaning gesture

1.4.1 Non-Finns' words taken too literally or personally by a Finn

1.5 Degree of directness

1.5.1 Non-Finns perceived as too indirect

1.5.2 Non-Finns perceived as too direct

1.5.3 Finns using indirect strategies (criticism, self-presentation, acceptance of an offer or invitation)

1.6 Choice of topic

1.6.1 Non-Finns' choice of topic perceived as unexpected by Finns

1.6.2 Finns' choice of topic perceived as inappropriate by non-Finns

1.7 Choice of register

1.7.1 Non-Finn's choice of register perceived as unexpected by a Finn

1.8 Addressing by name

1.8.1 Non-Finn's addressing by name perceived as unexpected by a Finn

1.9 Conversational management

1.9.1 Turn-taking

1.9.1.1 Turn-taking perceived as difficult by a Finn

1.9.2 Backchanneling

1.9.2.1 Non-Finns' backchanneling behaviour perceived as negative or unexpected by Finns

1.9.2.2 Finns' backchanneling behaviour perceived as negative or unexpected by non-Finns

1.9.3 Expectations about the amount of talk

1.9.3.1 Finns perceived as too silent by non-Finns

1.9.3.2 Non-Finns perceived as too silent by Finns

2 Nonverbal communication

2.1 Eye contact

2.1.1 Finns' eye contact mistaken as a sign of intimacy by non-Finns

2.2 Smile

2.2.1 Finns' smile mistaken as a sign of intimacy by non-Finns

2.2.2 Non-Finns' smile perceived as unexpected by Finns

2.3 Gestures

2.3.1 Finns' gestures misinterpreted by non-Finns

2.4 Touch

2.4.1 Non-Finns' touches perceived as negative by Finns

2.4.2 Non-Finns' touches perceived as positive by Finns

2.4.3 Finns' touches perceived as negative by non-Finns

2.4.4 Non-Finns' lack of touch perceived as negative by Finns

2.5 Space

2.5.1 Finns' use of space perceived as unexpected by non-Finns

2.5.2 Non-Finns' use of space perceived as unexpected by Finns

2.6 Physical appearance

2.6.1 Dress code

2.6.2 Nudity

2.6.3 Reactions to strange looks

2.7 Territoriality

2.7.1 Non-Finns' territoriality behaviour perceived as negative or unexpected by a Finn

2.8 Degree of expressiveness, emotion and animation

2.8.1 Non-Finns' expressiveness perceived as unexpected by Finns

2.8.2 Finns' lack of expressiveness perceived as unexpected by non-Finns

2.9 Artefacts: Gifts

2.9.1 Finns' choice of gift perceived as negative by non-Finns

2.10 Time and activity orientation

2.10.1 Non-Finns' attitude to time perceived as negative or unexpected by Finns

3 Stereotypes

3.1 Finns treating non-Finns on the basis of stereotyped views

3.2 Non-Finns treating Finns on the basis of stereotyped views

4 Role expectations

4.1 Power distance

4.1.1 Finns' low-power-distance behaviour leading to CIs

4.2 Gender roles

4.2.1 Finnish females' behaviour perceived as negative by non-Finns

4.2.2 Non-Finnish males' behaviour perceived as negative by Finns

4.2.3 Non-Finns' gender attitudes perceived as unexpected by Finns

5 Miscellaneous

Some of the above categories are discussed and illustrated with examples below.

Finns using indirect strategies

We were visiting an American businessman in Minnesota, U.S.A. -- He had spent several years working in Helsinki. When we first arrived in Minneapolis, we had visited his sister's family and they had loaned us a car. We spent a few days in Minnesota; during that time, the businessman took us to see local sights. The last evening we paid a farewell visit to his sister's and, taking the businessman's cue, took her a cake. When receiving the cake, the lady asked us if we would like to have coffee and we, in a typically Finnish way, said no and - were left without, we were not even offered cake. We were a little embarrassed, because it was for coffee that we had come and I guess we thought that the businessman knew the Finnish customs by then and had briefed his sister about them. (171)

Speech acts are actions and purposes such as promises and invitations carried out verbally (Salo-Lee & al. 1996:26). In the above incident, the Finns enacted the speech act 'acceptance of an offer' as they would have done among Finns but were misunderstood by the American woman. The Finns were using independence strategies of politeness. Independence strategies (Scollon & Scollon 1995:36-41) aim at leaving the other alone, respecting the other's privacy and increasing distance (Salo-Lee & al. 1996:52). Privacy is considered an important value by many Finns. In the above incident, the Finns use indirectness in order to give the interactant the freedom to preserve her privacy even after she had expressed her desire to treat them to coffee. In a way, the Finns give the American an opportunity of saving her face in case she did not really want them to stay for coffee - after all, she had now complied with the norms of politeness and showed her good will by asking if they wanted coffee - and still preserve her privacy by not needing to follow up her offer because it was rejected. At the same time, the Finns expect the American to meet their need for affiliation by insisting on their having coffee. Hence the feeling of

disappointment when the offer is not repeated but the American takes their words at face value without seeing what lies behind them.

Hofstede (1991:79-81) has found that soft values like modesty are characteristic of feminine cultures, while masculine cultures value hard values such as competitiveness. One Finnish respondent reported an incident where the feminine value of modesty clashed with the masculine value of assertiveness and cost her the post of first flutist in the school orchestra. The Finnish respondent failed to comply with the masculine value of praising oneself and was misinterpreted:

In American culture, the self-deprecation typical of Finns may be something negative. According to American culture, each person is unique and has the same opportunities as everyone else. I myself noticed I had made a mistake when I was applying for a post as a first flutist in the school orchestra. When telling about my flute-playing skills, I happened to belittle them a little too much like one normally does in Finland. The post was given to my American competitor who could praise her own playing skills. (19)

Self-deprecation is one manifestation of "off-record politeness" (Brown & Levinson 1978), i.e. presenting one's message in an indirect way. In Finland, it is an acceptable way of presenting oneself. Modesty is often valued over assertiveness or aggressiveness when talking about oneself. This attitude is also reflected by the Finnish proverb "Oma kehu haisee" ("Self-praise is no recommendation", literally "Self-praise stinks"). This rule applies even when talking about others in certain situations, e.g. when introducing a speaker to the audience. Exaggeration of the

speaker's merits by the introducer or by the speaker him/herself is not viewed positively. "Hyvää ei tarvitse kehua" ("The good does not need to be praised"), instructs a Finnish guide-book in public speaking (Mattinen 1981:64). Modest self-presentation, instead of assertiveness, is encouraged in Finnish culture (Sallinen-Kuparinen 1986:194).

Conversational management

Such aspects of conversation as back-channeling, turn-taking and expectations about the amount of talk were sometimes perceived as problematic. Most incidents belonging to this category had happened to Finns in encounters with British or French people. Turn-taking in conversation seemed to be difficult for Finns talking to the British, and the Finns' conversational silence evoked reactions from both the British and Frenchmen. There were two incidents where a non-Finnish lecturer talking to a Finnish audience found the seeming lack of backchanneling behaviour by the audience strange. One of the lecturers was Swedish, the other American. Donal Carbaugh (1997, oral comment) has reported a similar incident where he was lecturing to a Finnish audience and found their complete lack of backchanneling extremely disconcerting.

Two incidents in this category had to do with non-Finns' backchanneling behaviour which was experienced by the Finn as an interruption. Here is one of them:

Once again we had a group discussion [in England], this time the topic was drugs. I thought I had something important to say, so I expected everybody to listen to me. Still, this was not the case but the Italians interrupted me in what I considered to be a harsh way and started all to give their own opinion in chorus. I felt offended. Only later did I understand that the situation was not meant to be taken personally. It was simply the way of talking typical to their culture. (134)

Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985), Sajavaara and Lehtonen (1997), and Salo-Lee (1997) have described Finnish conversation practices. Finns are silent listeners. Instead of verbal backchanneling, they express their attention and interest with an intensive presence reflected by a steady, direct eye contact (Salo-Lee 1997:35). The speaker has the obligation to talk and the listener the right to listen. Long breaks in the speaker's speech are usual and acceptable and, between Finns, are not mistaken for turn-taking signals. The speaker is not criticized or interrupted with comments. (Sajavaara & Lehtonen 1997:274.) These unwritten rules are quite strict. Therefore breaking the speaker's flow of speech with a comment is easily interpreted negatively as an interruption instead of interest and involvement in what the speaker is saying.

It is easy to imagine that a Finn communicating in a foreign language, like the respondent in the above incident who was attending a language course in England, makes longer pauses than usual in order to search for words and formulate his/her message grammatically. A person whose conversation strategies differ from Finnish norms and who may be used to shorter turn-taking breaks may easily be led to believe, by the Finn's long pauses, that the Finn has stopped speaking and is waiting for the interlocutor to take the floor. The situation becomes even more catalytic of misinterpretations if the Finn, like in the above incident, is communicating with somebody in whose culture (like in Italy, Spain and Latin America) it is not only acceptable but even desirable for the listener to show his involvement in what is being said by actually interrupting the speaker with comments. People using communication styles where interruption and frequent verbal backchanneling is the norm may find a non-interrupting, non-backchanneling interlocutor dull, indifferent, or even mentally retarded.

So the first step to the misunderstanding was the difference in conversation rules followed by the interactants. The Finn felt that the Italians interrupted her and thereby broke against the Finnish conversation rule according to which the listener must remain silent.

The second step may have been differences in expressing a differing view. In Finnish conversational culture it is quite usual to signal protest or criticism by silence (Salo-Lee 1997:34) instead of openly stating a differing position. Consensus is valued. Finns invest themselves personally in what they say (Carbaugh 1995:54), and to openly criticize somebody's opinions is to criticize her as a person (Sajavaara and Lehtonen 1997:274). This unwillingness to argue becomes evident in intercultural settings with people using different conversational strategies like in the above incident with Italians. It is even reflected by previous research findings, where French businessmen have paid attention to Finns' intolerance of conflicting views (Hiukka 1991:10).

The third step leading to the CI had to do with expressiveness. Cultures vary in the degree to which the show of emotions is considered acceptable. The Finn felt that the Italians stated their opinion in a vehement manner. In Finland, a neutral way of expressing ones opinions is quite usual. Therefore the Italians' more expressive way ("*started all to give their own opinion in chorus*") may also have been interpreted as a personal affront by the Finnish respondent.

The Finnish respondents reported two incidents where they felt they were unable to take the floor when talking with a native English speaker

I was on a business trip in England with some colleagues. We visited universities, where we were shown different departments and their activities. The presenters spoke volubly and we, in accordance with Finnish speaking rules, waited for our turn in order to make comments and ask questions. However, we never got a turn, neither had we time to react to the situations. (60)

I was on a study tour in England with my three language teacher colleagues. We had booked a meeting with one university's coordinator of international exchange affairs, who had promised to tell us about that field. About 15 minutes had been reserved for our meeting, and our host told us about the international exchange affairs while keeping his turn so effectively that each of us Finns found it very hard to take a turn during the "conversation", even though we would have had plenty to ask and comment on. (129)

Müller-Jacquier (1988:16) observes that such discourse parameters as e.g. the routines of turn-taking are subject to culture-bound conventions. Therefore the interactants are usually not aware of them. Consequently, deviances from the expected, unwritten conversational rules are attributed to the character of the conversation partner rather than to their cultural background. In intercultural encounters, this easily leads to misunderstandings.

The Finns in the above incidents, even though as teachers of English their English was presumably fluent, were still not communicating in their mother tongue but in a foreign language. When speaking a foreign language, the speaker's reactions may be delayed just enough to make the interactant believe that the speaker is not going to take a turn which the interactant is offering with a brief pause. Cultures also vary in the length of turn-taking pauses considered appropriate.

In the above two incidents, the British people may have thought that the Finns had not used the switching pauses they may have offered for taking the floor, and therefore the British continued to talk, leaving the Finns forever waiting for their turn.

Nudity

The Finnish respondents reported several incidents that had to do with nudity, usually non-Finns' reactions to being required to undress in connection with a sauna bath.

Years ago in Finland we got to know our friend from London (man, over 70 years old), whom we later often visited. He would spend summer holidays in Finland admiring especially our beautiful, clean nature. One day, at the very beginning of our friendship, we wanted to take him to our summer cottage by a lake in order to give him new experiences and to show him a little more of the Finnish countryside. We called his hotel and invited him to join us, to which he first took a favourable attitude - until we mentioned the opportunity to have a sauna bath in the sauna by the lake. Presenting a polite excuse, our friend then rejected the invitation, which to us seemed a bit odd. Later, when we had got to know each other closely, our friend told us he cancelled his coming because he feared that he might have had to go to the sauna. The mere thought of being naked even in the company of a semi-familiar male seemed to him strange and inappropriate. (10)

Nudity is a dimension of nonverbal communication which is often laden with taboos. The existence of sauna culture in Finland has formed the Finns' attitudes towards nudity. In ancient times, the sauna played an important role in the family's personal hygiene. Not too long ago the sauna was also used as a natural delivery room. Some Finns still living today can boast having been born in a sauna. Currently when homes are equipped with modern bathrooms, the significance of the sauna has shifted from being a washplace to being a place of relaxation. A great number of Finnish homes have both a bathroom or bathrooms and a sauna. It is customary for the whole family to take a sauna together when the children are small. Therefore the children grow to consider nudity as a natural phenomenon. Still, even in Finland unwritten rules dictate when and where it is appropriate to present oneself naked. In cultures where children do not customarily see their parents naked, nudity may bear other connotations and lend itself to other interpretations.

In the above case a critical incident took place because the Finns considered nudity in connection with sauna so natural that it never occurred to them that somebody might feel otherwise.

CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on Finns' perceptions of problematic phenomena in their communication with non-Finns. The findings of the present study suggest various dimensions of communication which the Finns perceived as problematic in their intercultural interactions. The main dimensions found problematic consisted of various aspects of verbal and nonverbal communication, stereotypes, and role expectations.

The question whether the results reflect a particularly "Finnish" communicator profile cannot be answered at the present stage of the analysis. However, in the section 'Language and language use', certain categories of CIs indicate problematic phenomena that may be even more widely experienced by Finns when communicating intercultural. In this sense, the categories 1.4 (Words used as a well-meaning gesture) and 1.9 (Conversational management) were interesting. The Finnish respondents did seem to stress the literal meaning of words even in situations where words were meant not to be taken literally. However, exceptions from this rule also existed, motivated by the need for modest self-presentation or for respecting the interlocutors' privacy. The Finns' seeming lack of backchanneling may also be perceived negatively in intercultural encounters.

As to the nonverbal aspects, the steady, open eye contact which the Finn directs at the interlocutor is a potential source of critical incidents. Expectations concerning touch and situations where nudity is acceptable probably also constitute important dimensions where critical incidents may occur when Finns communicate intercultural.

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