

Face-to-Face Communication and Social Positioning in the Experience World of Finnish Technical Professionals

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Abstract: The objective of the research was to examine the experience world of professionals in the field of technology as users of foreign languages to illustrate the general meaning structure in the agency of a foreign language user. The theoretical framework of this research was phenomenological. The fieldwork was carried out through thematic interviews with seven interviewees in a medium-sized Finnish engineering company with international operations. Through a phenomenological method of analysis the individual meaning units were identified. Out of these individual meaning units a common meaning structure that reflected the experiences of all the interviewees was uncovered. Face-to-face communication and social positioning manifested as common meaning units, significant elements forming this structure in the accounts of the interviewees. Thus the findings of this research project suggest that in foreign language education special attention should be paid on establishing oral communication and thereby nurturing interactive communication skills in the students, instead of focusing on providing web-based language education.

Keywords: *engineering education, face-to-face communication, interaction, language education, social positioning*

1. Introduction

Vocationally oriented language learning (VOLL) has been studied quite extensively, but most research projects have focused on language as a purely linguistic phenomenon. This study shares the view expressed in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) where language users are seen as active social agents, members of society conducting tasks that are not solely linguistic in nature. This paper is part of a research project where the goal was to illustrate the general meaning structure in the agency of a foreign language user. The objective of this paper is to examine the experience world of Finnish technical professionals as users of foreign languages in a professional setting of intercultural encounters. The fieldwork for the research was carried out in a medium-sized Finnish engineering company with international operations through participatory observation and interviews of engineers working for the company. Interview data was collected in two phases: open, thematic interviews were arranged with twelve engineers for a pilot study during my stay with the company. In the second phase, two years later, seven engineers - three females and four males, were chosen for the final research, and in-depth thematic interviews were conducted with them. Today's globalising world is more and more becoming a world of virtual encounters, but the engineers in this research accounted for the significance of social encounters in a professional context. The salient nature of face-to-face communication came strongly out in the narratives of the interviewees as a common meaning unit. This was especially clearly articulated in connection with conflict situations, which called for systematic face-to-face contacts in order for the conflicts to be resolved. Social positioning was manifested as a salient element in the professional competence and face-to-face interaction of the interviewees. Virtual modes of education are promoted with the decision-makers of language education today, contrary to these findings (Ministry of Education, 2011), and teachers are urged to devote at least a part of their courses to virtual learning. The findings in this research indicate, however, that a face-to-face contact still seems to be the primary mode of communication in a professional setting. Hence more emphasis should be paid on social interaction skills and this aspect of linguistic competence should be nurtured in schools at all levels.

2. Methodology

The theoretical approach here is phenomenological. In this framework it is paramount that the researcher's own knowledge concerning the subject matter is bracketed throughout the preparatory and interview stages of the research. It is also important to stall the moment of awakening or revelation allowing the meanings to become visible or emerge only when the researcher is ready for them, so that they are not precipitated in any way. Using free imaginative variation the frameworks of reference are examined until the essences of the phenomenon is uncovered. The process of analysis employed here was further developed by Perttula (2000) from Giorgi's original phenomenological method (1997). In Table 1 I have described stage by stage the regimen of the two-phase method as it was realised in this research with the data of each individual interviewee. Table 2 illustrates the respective method raising the level of analysis from an individual level to a general one describing the phenomenon as it reflected all the interviewees' experiences. Thus the method of analysis was comprised of two phases: the individual and the general. In the first phase the objective was through the identification of individual meaning units to uncover the experience as pure as possible, as lived through by the person. Hence phase one resulted in seven individual meaning networks formed through an analysis of the data. Out of these individual meaning networks the analysis proceeded through phase two towards a common meaning structure that reflected the experiences that were common, shared by all the interviewees.

Table 1: Phase one of the phenomenological method of analysis as it was conducted in this project

Stage of the method/ Phase 1	Result
Reading through the data with a phenomenological attitude: bracketing, reduction.	Researcher arrives at a general sense of the whole
Identifying meaning relations in the data and separating them.	Separate meaning relations and a more focused sense of the phenomenon
Transforming the meaning relations into the language of the discipline through reflection and imaginative variation.	Transformed meaning relations that contain the necessary and sufficient essence of each meaning relation revealing the phenomenon more directly
Classifying each transformed meaning relation under a theme.	The matised individual meaning relations
Organising the transformed meaning relations into the matised individual meaning networks.	Seven the matised individual meaning networks.
Synthesising the individual situated structures of the phenomenon, or individual meaning networks.	Seven descriptions of the individual situated structure of the phenomenon <i>Individually experienced language use in a professional context</i>

Table 2: Phase two of the phenomenological method of analysis as it was conducted in this project

Stage of the method/ Phase 2	Result
Transforming the individual meaning networks into proposals of general meaning relation.	Proposals of meaning relation
Forming content areas in all individual meaning networks that structure the proposals of meaning relations.	Content areas reflecting proposals of meaning relation
Connecting each proposal of meaning relation with a content area.	All proposals of meaning relation address a content area.
Forming proposals of content area out of each proposal of meaning relation.	Proposals of content area.
Forming seven proposals for a common network of meanings.	Seven proposals for a common network of meanings.
Structuring the seven proposals for a common network of meanings into one common network of meanings.	Creation of a common meaning network. <i>A general description of the situated structure of the phenomenon.</i>

Out of these individual meaning units a common meaning structure that reflected the experiences of all the interviewees was uncovered. The experiences of the language users in a professional context in the study formed a common network of meanings woven around the following key concepts: autonomy of language users, female gender in engineering, intercultural understanding, as well as face-to-face interaction and social positioning. This paper examines the two latter mentioned concepts as manifested in the accounts of the interviewees. This article will be included into a series of articles for my dissertation that inquire into the experience world of language users as uncovered in the study; each article focusing on one of the common meaning units.

Face-To-Face Communication: In the increasingly multicultural world of today communication between people is becoming even more significant than before, and at the same time it is defined as a wider concept than a mere exchange of information. Communication is seen as less focused on persuasion, and more focused on the connection between the participants, less on the self than the process of social interaction. A fixed identity of a person, an organisation or a nation-state is hence giving way to a more dynamic one that constantly keeps adjusting to tumultuous surroundings (Eisenberg, 2001). With the ever increasing electronic modes of communication: email, voicemail and instant messaging in the internet, face-to-face interaction and a real-time physical dialogue may seem to be diminishing in value. Nevertheless, an authentic contact instead of a virtual one, is somehow primary to us humans (Turner, 2002). We tend to seek a visual contact with one another in order to establish meaningful interaction between any two or more parties. Face-to-face communication is a complex process of shared sense-making, interaction where people are physically, via their senses connected through coordination, orientation, posture, touch, vision, sound, smell and artefacts, while at the same time the participants are inescapably conscious of one another (Hougaard & Hougaard, 2009). Researchers have designed several major models of communication over the years, but what these models all share in common is interconnectivity: there is a tendency to increase the degree of overlap between individuals and communities, and social interaction between different cultures increases the need to reflect on the Other, people are becoming Other-aware, not just self-aware (Hill, Rivers, & Watson, 2008).

When looking at communication in the business life of today, even though email is the method to be chosen for making appointments and the telephone the medium of swift conversations, a scheduled in-person meeting is still the most convenient method for creating an authentic dialogue between two parties. Also the daily routine in engineering is carried out in an intensely oral culture characterised with a high degree of interpersonal encounters (Darling & Dannels 2003). In this research the salience of face-to-face communication in professional encounters was emphasised, especially in conflict management either proactively or as a remedy in an inflamed situation. The interviewees spoke for face-to-face contacts in professional encounters in the following extracts. Sampo felt that the participants in a face-to-face interaction were more considerate and more in control of themselves than otherwise. Kari testified that there were some restrictions that had to be accounted for in face-to-face situations: an oral agreement was not seen as sufficient or binding, but a confirmation in writing was needed. Kari and Marja also accounted for having all their senses open when they explored the signals emitted by their counterparties:

- Sampo: Well, normally there are no problems there on site when you are face-to-face. There is something like – some kind of courtesy, anyway, here in these European cultures, so that...
- Kari: It is enormous the emailing-. Quite rarely nowadays I settle anything on the phone with the customers. So that if I have settled something over the phone I will afterwards send the person an email stating 'as we agreed on the phone'. --- - because nowadays more and more- it's all the same what was said, or what was the spirit of the conversation, what's on paper is what counts. --- It's rare that they'd straightforward try to turn the matter from black to white, but in a way they change it a little.
- Kari: It is always a good situation if you can meet a person face-to-face. You can see it in his eyes already if he has got your message. Some people are just – they will just nod and say yes-yes, even if they have not understood you.
- Marja: What is needed [in this work] is some kind of sensitivity to the situation, something like an ability to read between the lines, and reading people's faces, so that even if cultures differ, basically the reactions of people are the same all over anyway. In the same way you can see it, if somebody

gets annoyed about something, or becomes nervous or happy, the signs are the same almost everywhere.

- Jari: It is old truths that if you have to negotiate something like interface issues; it truly is so that seeing someone face-to-face will help you there. So that – then of course when you have met with this person a few times it is much easier to speak with him on the phone after that.

3. Intuition - Reading the Signs in the Counterparty

Intuition seems to play a vital role in professional competence, and the interviewees in this research would also often refer to resorting to their intuition when trying to make sense of a situation of face-to-face communication. The role of intuition has been emphasised in research on professional expertise in the stage model of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986), where intuition and tacit knowledge are seen as salient elements in professional expertise. Intuitive knowing can be illustrated through an example on the process of perception (Polanyi 1969): when one raises one's hand and moves it across one's face the colour and shape of the hand are in a constant state of change in the changing lighting and temperature. The hand is, however, through a holistic, intuitive process perceived as one solid object, not as a series of slightly changing clues to be interpreted. A parallel can be drawn from the skill of employing integrative perception to intuitive, tacit knowing, where it is difficult to break the analysis of the whole down into the components that form it. Also in this research the participants manifested having adopted a holistic stance that did not follow any given sets of rules to different situations in a professional context; they intuitively employed the tacit understanding that they had developed through an integrating process about these situations. Intuition was utilised by the participants in reading the signs in the counterparty to determine what kind of action to resort to in their business encounters. This was manifested e.g. in connection with presentations, where the interviewees attentively observed the audience for potential adjustments in the presentation, not just prior to delivering the presentation, but also during the presentation. This confirms what has been discovered in earlier research (Dannels & Housley Gaffney, 2009) – that in the field of engineering it is expected that the presenter puts forth convincing arguments, is motivational, focuses the presentation according to the audience, as well as creates a natural, close connection with the audience. Lately the role of intuition has been contested, and there have been both proponents for and adversaries against the reliability of intuitive decision-making. Some researchers have challenged intuition e.g. as purely the result of an inability to verbalise the chain between practice and deep understanding.

There have been endeavours, however, to reveal the tacit, intuitive dimension of expertise knowledge in a structured representation of expertise through concept mapping, where it can be illustrated as a bridge between knowledge structures (Kinchin & Cabot, 2010). It has been admitted that in order to assess the quality of intuitive judgment one needs to assess the predictability of the environment where the judgment was made, as well as a person's possibilities of learning the regularities of that environment (Kahneman & Klein, 2009). The interviewees in this research referred to intuition in connection with reading the signs in the counterparty in order to determine what kind of action to take. They also indicated that they could through these intuitive thinking processes that they had adopted verbalise the deep, tacit understanding to the practice as Arja and Marja manifest in the following extracts:

- Arja: I do change my attitude. And I try to learn – I mean – I may try to read people a bit too much even. I am terribly sensitive to nonverbal communication, how people react to different things and-. - -- If you think about a meeting situation, I do change my own mode of operation according to who the attendees are.
- Arja: I go along the situation; I don't plan it that much. That I have this – have always had this strong intuition, which of course may often be wrong, too.
- Marja: I guess you could call it some kind of intuition --- you can pretty soon see who it is who makes the right questions. --- --- You should be articulate and smooth, and you should be able to read people's faces and reactions there.
- Marja: The morning was spent pretty much with me using my feeble Swedish so that I could see it myself on the customers' faces that they were feeling pretty uncomfortable there. And maybe then, when I could get hold of the atmosphere somehow - it was not so slow any longer that they would have felt so uneasy about it any longer.

- Marja: Usually something like genuineness is what is always sensed and conveyed, so that if you genuinely try to settle things, that you genuinely want to get along with these people, then that is conveyed, everyone can sense ('smell') - sense that. Some customers may have a role on, it may be difficult to reach them, but normally the easiest way of doing so is...
- Niina: By being genuine?
- Marja: - being genuine, you have to be genuine and sincere and also - when talking about products and delivery - to tell about the so-called drawbacks - with care of course, but something, in any case. Because that will convey an impression to the other party that - that I'm not just bragging here, presenting you something that does not exist. But I have to somehow be convinced of the fact that what I am doing here is something that is really great and we can do this so well.

Playing games: The interviewees would often refer to social interaction in a professional setting as a game, where they and their counterparties encountered in various professional contexts were acting as players each with their own sets of tactics. According to Goffman whenever one takes part in a social encounter, "... a distinction will be drawn between what is called the person, individual, or player, namely, he who participates, and the particular role, capacity, or function he realizes during that participation." (Goffman, 1974). In social interaction a game can be defined as "an on-going series of complementary ulteriortrans actions progressing to a well-defined, predictable outcome" (Berne, 1964). These transactions are repetitive and they differ from rituals, which Berne associates with intuition in that games are dishonest by definition, they are associated with ulterior, concealed motives and involve a psychological gain or payoff to the instigator after a set of maneuvers (Berne, 1964). The references of the interviewees to games played by themselves, however, were mostly positive in nature, seemingly lacking the dishonest element associated with games according to Berne's definition. In the following narrative Kari describes how he sees meeting new people at work as a game, in which he makes observations about his counterparty predicting their potential actions.

- Kari: I have this - I pretty much play the game along- what the people are like, how they start things. I don't have any one set procedure there.
- Marja: But if you are too nice in these matters - if the machine supplier knows that there are some shortcomings in their delivery that will affect our delivery - if you are too nice there, they will not respect or value that then.
- Marja: It is just like in normal interaction with people, it is a continuous game, where you constantly assess what he now thought about what I said here, and what will I say next [laughter] and whether this was a good move or not.
- Petri: ... it is what I present, and in which order, and-. Because it is always like a game, really. It is always like a game.
- Niina: Tell me more about this game?
- Petri: Well, when there is a goal, some goal that you want to reach, or you want to have something accepted by the other party, you do need to have some kind of tactics there. Like what are the things that you say out loud, and what are the things you do not talk about. What you offer someone so that you can again gain something yourself....

According to the interviewees they would continuously assess the situations and the participants there as to what kind of strategy to adopt in any given situation with any given counterparty. This way organisational or institutional communication is constantly being reactivated in the interaction between people, which strengthens both the social identities of the participants and the practices that are thus created (Carbaugh, 1996). A constituent element of a game is a tacit set of rules that has to be followed in order for the game to be realised. A breach of these rules or a code of conduct was experienced as detrimental. Hence some of the encounters in a professional context were assessed by the interviewees as having involved dishonest, unfair behaviour from the counterparty, which had led to an obstructed game, and a deteriorated relationship. In the extract below Kari refers to some games as not being "fair", which has resulted in perplexity and confusion among the players, when they cannot anticipate the behaviour of the counterparty to follow the rules of the game. Kari implies here that there are certain tacit rules that have been defined for professional interaction and that the participants expect to be followed in order for the game to be fair.

- Kari: For example there is the person who is a terribly fast mover himself, and requires quite sudden actions from the other party, as well. And he himself will simplify things whenever it suits him, but then again demands something else from the others... it is not fair that game... he requires something from us without seeing the big picture. And then again when we ask him for something, he will not budge at all.

Controlling the encounter: The interviewees would often describe situations where they would endeavour towards taking control over a situation – of “taking things into their own hands” in professional encounters. In the following extract Marja feels that it is in the interest of the company that she works for, that she takes the lead and steers the professional encounter towards a successful conclusion. Therefore she takes caution in her pursue towards getting the initiative in the situation. At the same time she is, nevertheless, aware of the danger of inadvertently offending the counterparty in the process, and sees humour as an appropriate means for avoiding this:

- Marja: When you are there as a supplier, and they are there as customers, it is difficult to mangle the decisions. Of course you can try and-and, either through the use of humour or some other ways try to steer things.--- But of course there are situations when you just have to go along with them, for the most part, because they are the customers after all, and you cannot – at least not in an impolite manner – run them over.
- Niina: Right. So that it is humour then that will help there-?
- Marja: Humour is pretty good, because using it everybody will save his face.
- --- ---But somehow you have to take it into your own hands. So that if we want something, if we need to get something out of this situation, then we do need to keep the initiative in our hands.

Social Positioning: In this research social positioning emerged in many forms, but especially intensively pertaining to status. The interviewees accounted for having been positioned as inferior in some encounters, and mentioned other occasions where they had deliberately positioned themselves as inferior with ulterior motives for specific purposes. This is where social positioning came quite close to the definition of a game: the participants had covert motives had activated certain tactics, and their payoff would be a successful business encounter both for them and the company. According to Bakhtin (1986) and the socio-cultural theory, it is through interaction in socio-cultural discourses that the participants, the recipient and the producer of these discourses, are simultaneously positioned. Social positioning can thus be described as a key concept in communication. It is understood as an interactive process, where the images of both the self and other people are constructed and communicated intentionally in situations on interaction. Through social positioning the producer of the discourse can consciously indicate to the recipient what stance he/she is taking in a situation by signalling to one another what kind of a social position they are going to adopt in each particular encounter (Hausendorf & Bora, 2006). Erving Goffman, who was a pioneer sociologist in the research of face-to-face interaction, developed a dramaturgical approach to human interaction distinguishing a person or individual from the particular role or function that he/she adopts during an activity or episode (Goffman, 1974). There is a difference between self-positioning and self-presenting, where in the latter a person strives to convey an image of him/herself to the outside world, whereas in self-positioning the relationship with the outside world is more dialogical in nature. When people position themselves (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) they not only portray external positions of themselves but are also prepared to take on to themselves positions that are designated to them where the two: the external and the internal position may be completely discrepant.

Social positioning has been defined as a concept that is more flexible and dynamic than the more static, ritualistic notion of a role (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). This distinction can also be illustrated through the spatial dimension suggested by the term “position”. When one positions oneself, one immediately also positions others in relation to oneself. Harré and van Langenhove (1999) emphasise the relational nature of the concept of positioning, where participants are always positioned vis-à-vis each other. This process takes place as interactive positioning, where one positions another person as e.g. powerful, and as reflexive positioning where one necessarily at the same time positions oneself as powerless. Social positioning involves assigning and negotiating the reciprocal relationships of all the parties in the process of interaction. As such, positioning can be seen, not as excluding the concept of role, but as presupposing it and situating “role” with notions such as “identity”, “self”, “status”, and “category membership”. Both the concepts of “role” and

"identity" are associated with the perceptions of others considering the person, whose identity is in question, and as such are essential to understanding the relational nature of positioning. (Weizman 2008, 16.) Since the construction of a social position is dynamic by definition, a person's social position is fluid and may be changed during the communication process. Positioning theory is often regarded as a theory of conversation analysis (e.g. Davies and Harré 1990), but I am here referring to social positioning as taking place in the narratives of the interviewees where they account for their experiences in professional interaction.

4. Occupying a Status Position

Positioning is dynamic by nature as it portrays a person's most prominent stances in social interaction and at the same time conveys a salient element of identity work for the participant. Sometimes the position that the counterparty occupies can be seen as a status position. The concept of status can be characterised by its clarity vis-à-vis other status positions, by the embeddedness of these positions into corporate and categoric units, the connectedness or networking qualities of status positions to one another, and by the degree of authority attached to status. (Turner 2002) In the following Arja manifests how it had been useful for her to get some distance to her work and her embedded corporate position, when she had been away on maternity leave for a year. She had gained a new perspective to matters and did not accept at face value how her corporate position was aggressively challenged through the hostile behaviour of her counterparty in a professional encounter. She could simultaneously objectively assess the reasons for this kind of behaviour, and at the same time calmly defend her position as a technical expert:

- Arja: I always remained quiet and apologised [when confronted with an aggressive sales person] --- But then I had been at home for a year and had gotten some perspective and learned to put things into proportion in this life, like-. --- then this sales person called me and started yelling at me --- I just kept repeating to him that it is the Sales Manager he needs to talk to, while he was raging there.--- He just had this urge to emphasise his own position.

Next Jari describes how he has learnt to emphasise his status as a technical expert by abiding by the cultural standards as expected in different professional settings. Had he not verified his position as a technical expert by indicating that he "had a plan" when working in the United States, the interaction might have become strained. Vice versa if the participants in the social interaction had not been able to determine their respective status positions in relation to Jari they would have been confused and the interpersonal flow in the interaction would have been strained or obstructed.

- Jari: Well, they [the Americans] talk a lot, and you have to have, when talking about technical, and also other issues, but at least with technical issues, you always need to have a "plan". So that you can immediately say what you are going to do next. Even if you do not know if that is of any use, but everybody is happy that way, and will go: 'aha, tomorrow we'll do it like this then'.

Reflexive and interactive positioning: The relational nature of social positioning is emphasised in the division into "reflexive" and "interactive" positioning (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) – these dual forms of positioning are also labelled as "reciprocal positioning" and thus take place simultaneously and are dependent on one another: when one reflexively positions oneself as superior one automatically interactively positions the others as inferior. In this research both reflexive and interactive positioning emerged especially intensively pertaining to status. The interviewees accounted for having been positioned as inferior in a certain situation, and mentioned other occasions where they had deliberately positioned themselves as inferior in social interaction.

Reflexively positioning oneself as inferior: Participants in social interaction may reflexively position themselves on an epistemic scale, presenting themselves e.g. as ignorant or knowledgeable (Du Bois, 2007). In the following Petri accounts how he positions himself on an epistemic scale as somewhat ignorant when faced with challenging customers in a problematic situation. He seems to disguise his real personality under the generic personal attribute of inferiority here. Doing so he avoids being confronted or pressured by the people he knows have earlier troubled his colleagues. In order to be able to placate the counterparty and to enhance settling the situation Petri chooses to present himself as "*reppana*" (poor wretch), which in Finnish is a positively coloured expression of a personality trait. On the affective scale this social position can be characterised as predominantly denoting a slightly foolish, benevolent, but unfortunate soul:

- Petri: Yes, they [the customers] were really- towards our sales people and our British service person they were really- they would put on pressure, and bully them, but for some reason they would then be quite ok towards me, and constructive. I will present myself as a poor wretch, they will then handle me more carefully. [laughter]

Another similar strategy of positioning oneself as inferior, was presented by Arja when she described her behaviour during the early days working as an engineer. Arja accounted how she would disguise her lack of professional knowledge as inadequate language skills. It was easier for her to admit that her linguistic performance in the English language was deficient than to admit that she did not possess the professional knowledge required. Later in her career Arja came to realise that her language skills were not that inadequate after all, and that she could or should not adopt the social position of a person whose professional image is characterised by deficient linguistic performance.

- Arja: - so that it was somehow so easy to hide behind my poor English skills. --- These systems are pretty complicated and I came here straight from college and had not even heard about them when I started here.--- My orienteering process was somewhat inadequate, and because of that it was so easy for me to say-, I resorted to saying that my English was bad.
- Arja: The teacher asked me after the course [English language] why I was there, since I knew those things already.... After that course I had to start thinking that maybe I'm not so terribly bad [at languages] after all. That I could not hide behind that screen any longer.

Interactively positioning a person as inferior: In a company with a strongly hierarchical division of labour it is more likely that the status of the members is clear, and the influence of categoric units (e.g. education, age, gender) becomes diminished in encounters between members. In a setting where there is no clear hierarchy or division of labour to define status, the members will rely on diffuse status characteristics especially if they are differently valued. (Turner, 2002) In the research the interviewees had not experienced the division of the labour in the company as highly hierarchical, on the contrary: they testified that compared to other organisational cultures the hierarchy with their company was fairly low, and it was quite effortless to approach the representatives of the management level. There had, however, been negative experiences where the interviewees had personally experienced the influence of a categoric status. They manifested having been defined and confronted according to a categoric unit instead of a corporate unit and professional status. In the following Arja describes an encounter that was not embedded into corporate units, but the positions of the interactants may have been defined by their categoric (here: male-female) units. From the gender perspective this can be seen as a manifestation of power, where a male expert does not treat his counterparty based on the corporate unit of a technical expert and a colleague, but defines her through a categoric unit as a female, and thus inferior in his eyes, so that he can manifest his authority over her.

- Arja: - through his behaviour he shows you that he does not, like, appreciate you at all.
- Niina: What kind of behaviour is it?
- Arja: Well, for example by cutting in on you at any meeting you might be attending with this person. If someone asks for my opinion on an issue there- and I am trying to answer the question, then this person will cut in, will come and offer his opinion, even if he does not know the first thing about the issue at hand!

It is noteworthy here that Arjamayat first have tried to distance herself through the use of the passive voice in her narrative, but she changes her perspective to a subjective stance in the continuation. This can naturally also be interpreted as an expression of a missing dialogical relationship in communication. In the extract Arja recounted how she was treated by her colleague as an object, not as a co-worker, an expert, but as an object whose opinions need not be paid attention to at a meeting. The person that Arja was referring to here may have acted in this manner regardless of the gender of the counterparty. He may just have adopted an attitude that expressed a restricted engagement to the world, one where he saw himself as the subject and would treat any person around him in an objectifying manner.

Using Gender as a Social Position: In a social positioning process people account for themselves and others in various ways in terms of being, sometimes communicating conflicting images of themselves and others (Hausendorf & Bora 2006). One may, for example, be positioned as inferior according to the categoric unit of

gender, age or the like, as was also the case in the earlier examples, but it is also possible to actively utilise a categoric unit tactically to further one's own purposes. A person may knowingly define his/her position not as embedded into the corporate unit, but as converted according to a categoric unit, just as Arja describes herself sometimes resorting to using her gender in the following. Arja seems to be critical towards herself because of this, however, and asks herself whether it is morally questionable to utilise gender this way, after all:

- Arja: When you say it –like ‘hey, now I’d need your help, you’re so good at this’, so that you can do it in a positive spirit. Maybe this is something where I use my gender, because I cannot imagine a man going to another to ask ‘could you, would you be so kind?’ [expressed with a sweet voice lengthening the vowels]--- But then again I raise the question to myself, whether I did wrong to behave in that manner.

Marja, on the other hand, wants to disguise female gender under the corporate unit of a technical expert in the professional context. In a way she wants the female engineer to be the initiator in the process, neutralising and wiping out the impact of gender as a categoric unit as completely as she can in order to primarily communicate her identity as a technical professional.

- Marja: Actually the more beautiful a young woman is the more she needs to pay attention to not being paid attention to. - - - As neutral as possible, so that you [a female engineer] do not stand out from that mass of males at all, then you are good as an expert.

Marja wants to highlight the fact that in order to strengthen a person's identity as a technical expert also a male engineer needs to have a fact-centred approach to expressing himself. Any accentuation of one's exterior appearance might hence give a wrong signal to the counterparty and destroy one's endeavour towards a social position embedded into the corporate unit of a technical expert:

- Marja: And his [an expert] task is not to be so, to give people the impression that this guy probably uses all his time working and developing himself, not by looking himself in the mirror.
- M: Yes, well, and-and if you strongly smell of after shaves and things like that. Because this really is a world that is pretty close to production, so that neither the people in the counterparty are like that. So that they will experience you as a smooth sales person, not as an expert, then.

Organisational Social Positioning: Institutions in a society are seen to be continuously reactivated in the daily interactions, and through institutional communication it is possible to solidify the social identities of people into justifiable practices (Carbaugh, 1996). An approach of this nature was indicated by the interviewees as reflected in the way they would professionally utilise the backing provided by the organisation to forward their own standpoint after having been confronted by the counterparty. Sometimes an interviewee would manifest these justifiable practices in the form of taking cover behind the façade of the organisation. In this kind of a situation it may just have been a question of buying some more time in order to solve a specific, problematic issue. A person may also have aspired to seek for an affirmation to one's professional opinion from the reinforcement that the organisation could provide him/her with. Hence it had become a form of personal tactics and a justifiable practice to use the organisation as a shield and “to hide behind it,” when confronted with a difficult request in a situation of face-to-face communication, just as Jari describes in the following.

- Jari: I will say “I’ll need ask about that from Finland.”, especially if I already know beforehand that this suggestion is of no use, then I’ll call someone or send an email, and I’ll get an answer, and then I can tell them the next day that this is a bit [laughter]I don’t know, this is my tactic. I have noticed that if I told them straight away that I don’t feel like going through with this – that is not good.
- Jari: It’s been seen so many times before that when you sort of hide a bit behind your organisation, then that will help you there.

5. Conclusion

With all the virtual modes of communication available for us today there are also new hazards looming in the horizon: sensory and cognitive overload combined with new concepts of time and space are the contemporary perils that have emerged with the new forms of communication. Face-to-face interaction can,

however, still be considered as the primal and primary means of communication for us humans. The interviewees in the research acknowledged the significance of face-to-face communication through their experiences of language use in a professional context. They manifested a deep rooted aspiration to abandon virtual modes of interaction in order to come into an authentic contact with the counterparty, especially in situations of potential conflict, where there was a problem to be solved or some kind of friction to be detected. In encounters such as these the participants would feel more at ease when they could holistically interpret the signals emitted by their counterparties and thus resort to all their senses in the process of interaction instead of just depending on a visual or aural interpretation of the situation. Intuition emerged from the data as a vital part of professional face-to-face communication. The interviewees manifested that an intuitive analysis of situations and the participants in these situations formed a salient element in their professional expertise. Thus the interviewees were able to form and verbalise a bridge between tacit knowledge structures and the practice, where they would employ intuitive thought processes into action. In this research social interaction in a professional setting was often referred to as a game, where the participants acted as players making observations and analysing the situations and the other participants there, and endeavoured to take control over the situation. In social psychology a game is defined as a series of ulterior, repetitive transactions progressing towards a predictable outcome involving both concealed motives and a psychological gain or payoff to the initiator after a set of manoeuvres. The payoff for the interviewees was a successful professional encounter, where they managed to get what they had aspired for. The success of the encounter was assessed from the point of view of the organisation the interviewees worked for, but they would gain personal gratification out of a fruitful outcome as well. There seemed to be tacit rules and codes of conduct to these games, a breach of which was experienced as detrimental. Some of the encounters in a professional context were assessed by the interviewees as having involved dishonest, unfair behaviour from the counterparty, which had led to an obstructed game, and a deteriorated relationship.

Social positioning is understood as an interactive process, where the images of both the self and other people are jointly constructed and intentionally communicated in situations of interaction. In this research social positioning was manifested powerfully in the narratives of the interviewees where they accounted for their experiences in professional interaction. The participants accounted for fluid and dynamic processes of positioning themselves and others in various situations of interaction in terms of being. They sometimes communicated conflicting images of positioning either according to the categorical unit of gender, age or the like, or according to a corporate unit. In this research both the reflexive and interactive forms of social positioning emerged especially intensively pertaining to status. The interviewees accounted for having been positioned as inferior in some encounters, and described other occasions where they had deliberately with ulterior motives positioned themselves as inferior in social interaction for specific purposes. Thus for some elements social positioning could also be characterised as coming close to the definition of a game. Occasionally the interviewees would resort to organisational positioning by taking cover behind the façade of the organisation e.g. when they sought to stall the proceedings and buy some more time in business transactions. Organisational positioning may have been employed as a justifiable practice, to use the organisation as a shield and "to hide behind it," when confronted with a difficult request in a situation of face-to-face communication. Face-to-face communication, social positioning and intuition were manifested as salient elements in the professional competence of the interviewees. With view to this it is deplorable that these findings are not reflected in language education today. Virtual modes of education are strongly promoted by the decision-makers of language education and teachers are urged to modify their courses for virtual learning. The findings of this research indicate, however, that a face-to-face contact still seems to be the primary mode of communication in a professional setting. Hence also in language education more emphasis should be paid on social interaction skills and this aspect of linguistic competence should be nurtured in schools at all levels.

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