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Uncovering institutionally imposed norms through the interaction interview: Mormon missionaries in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of the interaction interview to research the management processes of the American Mormon missionaries in the Czech Republic. The missionaries operate on the basis of norms for daily interactions, language acquisition and use which are imposed by a larger institution – the church. The relationship between the types of domains in which subjects are involved and the resulting accounts of interactions is revealed. It is also deemed necessary to analyze the transcripts of data generated by the interaction interview, as these are co-constructed by researcher and subject and contain multiple levels of reporting. Three levels of management accounts – specific, routine and normative – are defined and their co-occurrence in the transcribed interviews analyzed. It is claimed that the routine level, which cannot be avoided in the interviews, is valuable in that it contains management summaries which are often used in support of accounts at the specific level.

1. Introduction

This paper¹ has two aims: the first one is to discover and map out language management in a large multicultural and multilingual church organization on the territory of the Czech Republic. The second aim is to evaluate the interaction interview as one method used in doing so.

In the past, language and sociocultural management accounts generated by the interaction interview have been used to examine the behavior of individuals living in or traveling to a foreign culture (Neustupný 2003, Muraoka 2000). While this paper ultimately seeks to do the same, it reports on the use of the interaction interview to generate accounts of management from individuals accounting their regular daily routines. That is, my goal is to examine accounts of management practices of individuals within institutions on the days they were *working* within the foreign culture and to show the relationship between the type of situation described and the reporting of linguistic and sociocultural interaction norms.

Outside of large institutions, norms regarding behavior may be self-imposed, i.e. they are sanctioned by the individuals themselves based on ideas of how an individual should behave, on the basis of the given individuals' membership in a smaller, less formal group, for example, students of a specific language, such as the Japanese students in Neustupný (2003). Institutionally imposed norms can be understood here as either written rules regarding language or other practices in given contact

situations, e.g. “The official corporate language of Czech-German company X is English” or “All individuals participating in this institution study Czech for two months prior to their arrival on the job” or unwritten, e.g. English should be used when even a single foreigner is present², interactions with people on the street should always begin in Czech. Those imposing the sanctions are, in the latter case, individuals higher up in the given institution.

In this paper, I will focus primarily on the analysis of data from the Czech mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the Mormons, in particular, the American missionaries working in it. This group was originally selected as an object of macro-sociolinguistic inquiry - the situation of the Mormon missionaries is a part of the language situation of all native English speakers, and in fact, that of all foreigners in the Czech Republic. The missionaries play a key role in the work of applied linguists to elaborate the norms for the acquisition and use of Czech as a foreign language. Part of the discourse on foreigners in the Czech Republic is the question of how well and in what domains these foreigners should or are likely to become competent in Czech in the future. In the official education domain, this would be, for example, the establishment of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the creation of the Threshold Level for Czech for Foreigners (see Hasil 2005). In the everyday domain, this could be manifested in the establishment of an acquisition norm known as “Survival Czech”, meaning a limited collection of words and phrases used to conduct such basic day-to-day interactions as shopping or commuting, and the subsequent marketing of this language level in study programs for foreigners, foreign company employees, etc.

From the macro perspective, the linguist may initially deem Mormon use and acquisition of Czech as a deviation from other native English speaker acquisition norms of Czech. Acquisition norms vary among different groups of native English speakers residing in the Czech Republic, e.g. study abroad students, people working in the Czech Republic as English teachers and in other professions, expatriates, people married to Czechs or missionaries. The Mormons appear to be the most successful in the acquisition of Czech, based on their achievement of (self-evaluated) “fluency” during their 1-2 year mission period and a near 100% achievement of this level within the group.³ Furthermore, for the missionaries, advanced knowledge of Czech does not reflect personal investment or interest in Czech culture, nor is it the result of attempts to integrate – it is rather, a work issue⁴. In order to further grasp the management of Mormons’ Czech acquisition and how such acquisition both influences and is influenced by the specific nature of the missionaries’ work, it is necessary to obtain a picture of the structure of their daily activities.

Given this observation, it is further interesting to note that past studies of Czech language acquisition by native English speakers, (i.e. Sherman 2003, Sherman in press) reveal a discourse which highlights certain sets of activities that are perceived as likely to aid in this acquisition, for example, visiting pubs, dating or marrying Czechs, etc. Yet the Mormon lifestyle governed by specific behavior and lifestyle norms which reach far beyond the boundaries of these “Czech” activities (the consumption of alcohol in pubs stands out as one in particular), placing them in a sort of no-man’s land in the entire scheme of ethnic groups living and behaving in the Czech Republic⁵.

I will show how the institutional nature of the construction of norms makes for a portrayal of management processes different from those restricted to individuals. I will further show that when

accounts are elicited using the interaction interview in particular, norms, deviations from them, evaluations, adjustment designs and implementation can be presented using the combination of several different levels of reporting.

2. The interaction interview

The interaction interview was initially presented as an alternative to the traditional recall interview (Neustupný 2003, Muraoka 2000). Its main realization consists in the subjects' describing a set period of time, for example, a day, and all events or interactions taking place within that period. When the interaction interview is aimed at generating accounts of certain types of behavior in particular, the researcher may prompt the subject to reveal certain details of interactions, such as which language the given interactions were conducted in or who an individual interacted with. The challenge presented is that of how to capture the various stages of management when in situations where recording actual interactions is either forbidden or would strongly influence the course of the interaction. As we will see, the interaction interview provides its own unique set of data and is highly dependent on the life domains which it covers. In this case, the missionaries' life consists primarily of the daily life and work domains, while others, e.g. a family domain, are lacking.

In an ideal situation, the interaction interview as merely one type of source in forming a picture of the institution's language policy. Others include participant observation - attending worship services, Sunday school, and observing interactions in the church at other times, recall and follow-up interviews, and analysis of written materials (pamphlets, textbooks, web pages) provided by the organization. Here, however, data are taken from transcriptions of interaction interviews exclusively.

The examples presented here are taken from nine interaction interviews with eleven American missionaries aged 19-22 who were serving missions in Prague in December 2004. The missionaries had been in the Czech Republic/Slovakia for time periods ranging from two months to two years. Seven of the interviews were conducted with individuals and two were conducted with pairs or "companionships". The interviews were conducted in English by a native English speaker and transcribed using conventions from Conversation Analysis (Psathas 1995).

All of the missionaries were native English speakers who had undergone a mandatory two-month intensive Czech language course at the Missionary Training Center (MTC) in Provo, Utah prior to their arrival in the Czech Republic, which marked the end of their formal, classroom or group language training. Upon their arrival in the Czech Republic, their language education then continued on the level of self-study and practical application. During all parts of the mission, each missionary is paired with a companion who is in his/her presence at all times. It is the duty of the more experienced missionaries to assist in the language acquisition of their newer companions. For most of the missionaries, Czech was the first foreign language they had learned to speak fluently. They also did not anticipate ever using Czech again upon the completion of their mission.

The missionaries' work domain consists of, in addition to the other missionaries, Czech members of all ages who are members of the mission and who also serve in various administrative roles, and the president of the mission and his assistants, who are American. Work takes place in several types of situations: home situations in which the missionaries go about their daily routine of

taking care of their personal needs, studying, preparing for interactions outside of the home and praying, church situations, in which they participate in activities in their church buildings – English classes, social events, worship services, etc. and field situations, in which they speak with people on the street or visit them at their homes. These different situations in the missionaries' days reveal that their interactions are a combination of native and contact situations. This is closely related to the different domains, i.e. home situations are primarily native ones, church situations are both native and contact, and field situations are primarily contact.

As noted by Neustupný and Nekvapil (2003), in cases of organized management – successful language management relies on successful communication management which requires in turn successful socioeconomic management. The socioeconomic factor here helps us to answer the question: what characterizes the missionaries' entrance into contact situations? This can be viewed in terms of the fact of the missionaries' being American native speakers of English. Part of their job includes teaching English classes, which are offered to Czechs and others free of charge. This is to their advantage in engaging people in conversation, as English is considered a valuable commodity in the post-Communist Czech Republic, slowly becoming an essential employment qualification, and language classes are often expensive for the average Czech budget.

3. The accounts

The accounts of the missionaries' daily activities and resulting management processes require an analysis of form as well as content. This is due to the fact that three levels of reporting were present in the transcripts. These are the representations of:

(1) “what we did that day” or specific

This is the level which is supposed to be the exclusive result of interaction interviewing as depicted in Neustupný (2003). At this level are reported specifics of interactions, which often must be elicited - for example, in what language the missionary addressed a particular person. The missionaries' job is interaction-based and recounting it tends to focus on “anecdote-worthy” cases, i.e. interactions which resulted in a longer conversation, a verbal commitment to attend English classes or services, or a conflict situation. In regard to language, it was highly uncommon to get to the specific level in the sense of “what we said to that person”, for, as noted by Neustupný (2003), non-linguistic features of interactions are more easily reported than linguistic ones.

(2) “what we usually do” or routine

The routine level is the most easily recalled and accounted of the three levels, which is documented by the fact that in nearly every case, when asked to recount the particulars of any given day, the participants' immediate response was to reach for their daily planners, which are provided by the church. In the planners, days are divided up into half-hour blocks which are meant to enable the missionaries to schedule meetings and keep them⁶. As a result, the reporting of a given day's activities tended to lean more toward generalized descriptions of certain interactions, e.g. “tracting” or systematically visiting all of the apartments in a given building, visiting inactive church members, addressing someone on public transportation or on the street, etc., and the first turns of interactions.

It is this level that most often produces management summaries⁷ through the noting of repeated deviations from norms, often their evaluation, sometimes adjustment designs and implementation, for example the use of English as compensation for the inability to handle a given task in Czech.

(3) “what we’re supposed to do” or normative

These expectations are directed toward the behavior of the missionaries in formulations such as “a missionary should”, “our schedule is”, “we have”, etc. At this level, official policy, including schedule, assigned role, etc., is reported. These are institutionally-imposed norms that do not depend on the host culture in question – mostly native norms, some contact norms, but those that would apply anywhere – in the Czech Republic, in Japan, etc. Accounts which include the normative level also reveal the practices surrounding the role of the missionaries within tandems or pairs of missionaries who live and work together for two-month periods. In this case, it is the companion who imposes the norms, and in fact, the elder with seniority who is responsible for doing so.

I will now examine several examples which document the presence of these three levels and indicate what kinds of language and sociocultural norms are dealt with in the various domains.

Example 1: Home Domain

1. C: alright Friday. (..) okay um: (.) got up at around six thirty,
2. T: mm hmm
3. C: um our normal morning schedule is we get up.
4. T: mm hmm
5. C: and we exercise for a half hour but (.) I’ll be honest it’s usually we exercise for ten
6. minutes and wake up for twenty.
7. T: ((laughs))
8. C: um then I usually cook breakfast, um it just depends
9. T: and you did that on Friday.
10. C: mm hmm mm hmm. um then Elder Fisher and I both showered and got ready for
11. the day, um we start with a personal study in the scriptures and I usually do that in
12. English
13. T: mm hmm
14. C: because I’m still new enough that I I just I don’t get it when I study Czech
15. T: mm hmm
16. C: um Elder Fisher because he’s been here longer sometimes will read the Czech (.)
17. um then we do a companionship study and y- we really have (.) a struggle with
18. knowing what to study so often we just prepare for the day, make phone calls
19. T: and so what did you what did you study on Friday
20. C: on on Friday?
21. T: yeah
22. C: uh (..) yeah we did we made phone calls that day

The speaker C in this example is two months into his mission and expressed hesitancy regarding his passive command of Czech, and he is working with a companion who has spent nearly two years on the mission. This example marks the beginning of a standard interaction interview and provides a general framework for the interplay of the three levels of reporting – “got up around six-thirty” (specific – see line 1), “usually we exercise for ten minutes and wake up for twenty” (routine – lines 5-6), “our normal morning schedule is we get up and we exercise for half an hour” (normative – lines 3-5). The missionary continues at the routine level before being steered back in the direction of the specific mode, but he soon drifts back into routine level before moving into the specific once again. The routine level allows for his first specifically language management summary in lines 11-16 – this occurs without prompting, likely because language has been the primary topic of his talk with the researcher prior to the start of the interview.

The normative level of reporting here reveals organized management on the part of the church – the missionaries have a prescribed set daily schedule with certain hours dedicated to personal and language study. We do not find reports of individual tokens of language management, but rather, management summaries: “I usually do that in English...because I’m still new enough that I I just don’t get it when I study Czech... (lines 11-14) Elder Fisher because he’s been here longer sometimes will read the Czech...” (line 16).

This is a case in which the routine level of reporting is substituted for the specific level and is used as an explanation or justification for what the speaker perceives as a deviation from the norm. The norm, established by the more experienced companion, is to conduct one’s personal study in Czech. The reported adjustment is to conduct this study in English.

In the next example, we can observe how the routine level of reporting is used as an explanation for the events described in the specific level. Its relationship to the normative level is also presented.

Example 2: Field domain

1. J: I guess (.) um: and then after that we we had to go: home and shop. cause we didn’t
2. get a chance on Wednesday night we had stuff to do on Wednesday
3. T: uh huh
4. J: so we just kinda did it Friday night
5. T: =for food or whatever
6. J: =yeah
7. T: =yeah
8. J: =yeah for food it was just cause evenings are pretty ineffective to talk to people
9. T: mm hmm
10. J: especially Fridays everybody’s going out to the bars
11. T: crowded yeah
12. J: nobody’s home um (.) yeah so we went shopping and went back and called a few
13. more people that’s our goal is to meet with people

14. T: hmm... okay so then you so then you shopped and then what
15. J: mm hmm and then we shopped and then it was pretty much time to go home
16. T: mm hmm
17. J: we we are supposed to be in uh at nine nine or nine thirty in the evening
18. T: mm hmm
19. J: so we went shopping went in um called a few people uh to see if (.) see if you know
20. see if we could set up some meetings or something um? and then had some food
21. T: mm hmm
22. J: planned the next day a little bit wanted to see what are we could do where we
23. could go, and went to bed. so you know it's different some times are different...

This example, taken from an interview with a missionary who had spent ten months on the Czech mission, reveals a management strategy based on the noting of a local sociocultural norm – the low likelihood of meeting people at home of a Friday evening. The normative level here concerns the assumption that the missionaries must try to talk to people as much as possible in work situations, expressed in line 13 as “that’s our goal is to meet with people”. That is, when a missionary was doing something other than meeting with people, as in the specific level formulation of “we had to go home and shop... for food” (lines 1-8), it is necessary to explain or justify that activity. The use of the routine level, “evenings are pretty ineffective to talk to people...especially Fridays everybody’s going out to the bars...” (lines 8-10), does just this. This is what may be referred to as a culture-specific setting strategy. As Nekvapil and Neustupný (2003) note “Times and places are strictly set (this is sometimes referred to as ‘appointments’) and interaction is usually unsuccessful unless the setting strategies are adhered to (321).” This example also contains the concluding of the interview, also with a routine-level summary “so you know it’s different some times are different...” (line 23).

The next examples involve the actual description of interactions with people on the street.

Example 3 – Field Domain

1. J: I went out for the first half hour half an hour there’s usually like three of us out
2. there talking to people
3. T: on Jungmannovo náměstí
4. J: uh huh
5. C: is that when you talked to the [that () lady that and then the other one]
6. J: [uh and I the people were really nice to me] um I
7. talked to one lady I don’t know I talked to I don’t know what you want to know about 8. it
9. T: =yeah.
10. J: =just like
11. T: =everyone you talked to ((laughs))
12. C: ((laughs)) oh everyone that could take a while
13. T: =what you recall yeah
14. J: uh huh some people don’t want to talk to us,

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15. T: mm hmm
16. J: but like they say prosím vás ((Cz. excuse me)) or like () I don't know they just
17. don't want to talk to us
18. C: =spěchám ((Cz. I am in a hurry))
19. J: =and so but I talked to one (.) girl who was really really nice and I just told her like
20. about what the book of mormon is, and how it's helped me, and and (.) I don't know.
21. like I don't understand everything people say but enough that I can like usually like (.)
22. get the gist of it and kinda respond
23. T: mm hmm
24. J: and it's not perfect but people are really patient
25. T: mm hmm
26. J: they're like your Czech's so good and I'm like no it's not. but um they're really (.)
27. like they can understand what I'm saying so
28. C: ((laughs))
29. T: mm hmm
30. J: that's important and then I talked to like an old lady, she was really really nice too
31. T: mm hmm
32. J: just um really open
33. T: yeah?
34. J: really open and just (.) um (.) yeah like just mostly about the book of mormon and
35. about like why we're here
36. T: mm hmm
37. J: and what we believe and
38. C: yeah
39. J: yeah got her phone number so that was good
40. C: yeah

This passage is taken from an interview with a companionship – two female missionaries who had spent six months (C) and two months (J) in the country. The account involves an activity known as “street display” in which the missionaries stand in a group in a public place, where they engage passers-by in conversation.

This account is interesting in that it is dominated by the specific level, including details of the people the missionaries were able to engage in conversation. For this reason alone, we might be able to describe it as an ideal interaction interview report. However, given closer inspection, we can see that interactions in which people did not wish to talk to the missionaries are not described at the specific level, but rather, at the routine level, and also, interestingly, are not evaluated. Instead, the management (in this case, the avoidance strategies) of the passers-by is summarized through the recounting of Czech statements such as “spěchám” (“I’m in a hurry”) (line 18). The reporting of people’s willingness or unwillingness to enter a conversation is also worthy of analysis. The more common unwillingness reported in lines 16-17 was never evaluated negatively in any of the

interviews. The fact that many people do not want to talk may be viewed as a “universal expectation” similar to those of Neustupný (2003), e.g. “no emotional tension should be present” or “language knowledge of participants should be adequate to the situation”, which can be paraphrased in this case as “interactions should not disturb people’s daily routines”. Given the evaluations of people who *did* want to talk as “really really nice” (lines 6, 19, 30) or “really open” (lines 32-34), we could view these situations as positive deviations from that expectation. The ultimate “success” of an interaction is evaluated in line 39. Further contact, the obtaining of the woman’s telephone number, was established. This segment contains management summaries of several interaction situations in lines 21-27 – making oneself understood in the foreign language (Czech) and subsequently receiving a compliment on one’s language skills and responding to the compliment.

The next and final example provides a closer look into the specifics of some of the missionaries’ verbal interactions.

Example 4 – Field Domain

1. C: and then we talked to this other (.) man: probably in his (.) middle twenties
2. T: mm hmm
3. C: and and he had heard of the church but I guess but I guess he’d heard some bad
4. things like
5. T: =mm hmm
6. C: =and so I was wondering like wh- what have you heard? like I wanna like correct
7. like what
8. T: mm hmm
9. C: ((laughs)) like those like bad things you’ve heard
10. T: mm hmm
11. C: but
12. J: mm
13. T: did he tell you?
14. C: uh kind of. (.) well (.) yeah he just had some mis- misconceptions
15. T: mm hmm
16. C: about um (.) uh about the book of Mormon, and (.) I don’t know if you’ve heard of 17. Joseph Smith or... and um: (.) and that he um this man was just saying that Joseph
18. Smith was not a (.) good man and that he (.) he didn’t really translate the records
19. T: [mm]
20. C: [and] that that he had just written some book for some reason and he was a bad
21. man and
22. T: =this was a Czech person.
23. C: uh huh
24. J: yeah
25. T: mm hmm
26. C: yeah yeah (.) and it was hard to hear that just because like I know that (.) Joseph

27. Smith was an incredible man like just

28. T: mm hmm

29. C: pure and like just like

30. J: [a god-fearing man]

31. C:[wanted to do good.]

This is one of the few instances in which we find an account of “what was said”, expressed by the missionary in lines 6-9 and 17-21. How can we explain the presence of this paraphrase of an actual conversation? In this situation we find a deviation from both the universal expectations and other interaction norms – the person who was approached neither avoided further discussion with the missionaries nor consented to discussion in a friendly manner. Rather, this was an encounter with an individual who did want to talk but expressed disagreement with the missionaries’ subject matter. The interaction in question becomes the subject of narrative, which was the only impetus for the missionary to report it in detail and recount utterances (“what have you heard? like I wanna like correct...like those bad things you’ve heard” – lines 6-9).

This observation brings us back to the fact that the analysis and presentation of interview data in transcript form reveal, above all, the relationship between the researcher and the missionaries. The researcher is Czech-speaking but non-Mormon, so details regarding Czech culture are not explained, and examples of Czech expressions are given in Czech (such as in example 3, lines 16-18) and not translated into English, but details regarding church terminology, policy, etc. are often explained, or the researcher’s awareness of them is questioned (such as in example 4, lines 16-17).

4. Conclusion

In examining the processes of interaction management, it is important to remember that the norms, in effect, come from different sources. For the missionaries, language and sociocultural management serves as a means to successful work interactions. The three-leveled (specific, routine, normative) accounts of interactions elicited are valuable in that the levels can be separated from one another in analysis, allowing for the clarification of the different types of norms. In the interviews with the missionaries, the following institutionally imposed norms are reflected:

1. Observe set daily schedule (e.g. with blocks of time determined for eating, sleeping, studying, praying, meeting with people, participating in group activities).
2. Learn and use Czech continually.
3. Talk to as many people as possible.
4. Do not bother people.
5. Secure further contact with people (exchange of addresses/phone numbers, scheduled meeting, flyer handout, etc.).

Norms 1-4 are strategies geared toward the achievement of norm 5. Norms 1 and 2 involve preparation for interactions (pre-management). Norms 3-4, which are specifically interaction-oriented, closely resemble positive and negative politeness strategies. The norms are to be observed in the realm of what is comfortable for the individual missionary. The missionaries arrive with a certain

level of Czech language skills, which gradually grows over the period of the mission. There is no written rule saying that they must speak Czech with any given Czech interlocutor, but rather, there is an understanding they should be able to speak Czech whenever necessary. Similarly, Czech serves as the "default" language for initiating conversations and continuing conversations. English is spoken when it is requested by the Czech interlocutor.

An important methodological question which follows from this is: can the normative and routine levels of account be avoided in the interaction interview? I would contend that the strict maintenance of the specific level of reporting assumes a great degree of knowledge on the part of the interviewer, and that the subjects must necessarily report at the normative and routine levels in order to provide background for the events or behaviors described at the specific levels, in other words, to provide management summaries. In this case, the role of the researcher's identity as a non-in-group member (non-Mormon) influences this.

Further research could move in several directions, one of which would be the extension of the interaction interview to include the one day per week designated as the "day off" (usually Wednesday). Another question which remains is that of the degree to which this management is culture-specific. Attitudes toward privacy, places where socializing is considered acceptable, religious affiliation of the population and the rapidly growing importance of English language competence all influence the missionaries management processes, so it would be valuable to investigate the types of problems might be managed by missionaries in serving in other countries.

Transcription conventions

- ? rising intonation
- . falling intonation
- , continuing intonation
- : lengthening of the previous syllable
- (.) a very short, still audible pause
- (..) a longer pause,
- (...) a long pause
- a cut-off of the preceding word or syllable
- (but) items enclosed within single parentheses are in doubt
- () no words could be distinguished in the talk enclosed within single parentheses
- ((cough)) in double parentheses there is a comment by the transcriber
- out underlining indicates emphasis
- [] the onset and the ending of simultaneous talk of two speakers (overlap)
- = subsequent utterance follows without an audible pause (latching on)
- ... gap in the transcript

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² For more on these types of norms in a multilingual work setting, see Nekvapil and Nekula (forthcoming).

³ Note that this is a trait of the missionaries, who are aged 19-22, and not necessarily one of the other Americans – the mission leader or others higher up in the organization.

⁴ For more on the linguistic aspects of the mission period, see Sherman (2005).

⁵ For more information on Mormon and missionary lifestyle guidelines, see the church's web pages: www.lds.org, www.mormon.org, www.mormon.cz or www.mtc.byu.edu.

⁶ The role of these daily planners was revealed in particular when one missionary realized she had forgotten hers, reacted negatively, and was comforted merely by the fact that her companion had brought hers along.

⁷ See Nekvapil (2004).