Negotiating Understanding in “Intercultural Moments” in Immigrant Family Interactions

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This article aims to advance an interactionally sensitive, emic view of intercultural communication by exploring the organization of “intercultural moments” in conversation—moments during which cultural and linguistic differences between people become exposed. Field video recordings of ordinary face-to-face interactions in Russian–American immigrant families are analyzed using the methodology of conversation analysis. The article focuses on sequences in which participants deal with actual or anticipated understanding problems and examines how participants’ assumptions about their asymmetric cultural and linguistic expertise are revealed in their actions. Some interactional payoffs in adopting the role of a cultural expert vis-à-vis a novice are described to show how an ostensible non-understanding is both a participants’ problem to be solved and a resource for social action.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication; Conversation Analysis; Repair; Language and Social Interaction; Immigrant Families

The article explores the organization of “intercultural moments” in conversation—moments during which cultural and linguistic differences between people become manifest. Focusing on sequences of talk-in-interaction wherein participants deal with (ostensible) understanding problems, I describe how cultural asymmetries between conversationalists are (re)enacted. The article thus aims to advance an interactionally sensitive view of intercultural communication.

What makes a particular interaction “intercultural”? In communication scholarship, any communicative event involving individuals from different “cultures” or...
“differing cultural backgrounds” is often automatically treated as “intercultural” (Kim, 2000, p. 140; Levine, Park, & Kim, 2007). The term “intercultural communication” is traditionally applied not only to communication involving people from different nations, but has also been extended to cover communication between people of different ethnicities, races, and genders, as well as professions, geographical regions, sexual orientations, generations, etc. (Kim, 2000). There are, however, multiple arguments against this view of intercultural communication, some of which have been articulated in intercultural communication literature (see, e.g., Levine et al., 2007). One kind of criticism may be traced to Sacks (1972a, 1972b), who, in his work on membership categorization devices, showed that there are always multiple correct (cultural) categories to choose from when describing people, and, therefore, in any communicative event, there are potentially numerous axes of cultural differences between the participants. This raises the question of how researchers are to recognize when communication should be treated as “intercultural” and along what cultural axis (or axes).

This article offers one type of answer to these questions by focusing on moments in interaction when interlocutors themselves demonstrably orient to differences in their cultural and linguistic knowledge. In other words, this study takes an emic (as opposed to etic) perspective (Goodenough, 1968; Pike, 1954) on “interculturality” by examining participants’ own orientations to and interactional (re)production of categorical differences between them (e.g., Kim, 2000; Martin & Nakayama, 1999; Nishizaka, 1995). The analytic goal is to describe some of the systematic ways in which cultural and linguistic differences between participants become “relevant” and “procedurally consequential” for the unfolding interaction—i.e., how aspects of participants’ identities (such as their cultural and linguistic competencies) are demonstrably taken into account in the production of social actions (Schegloff, 1991). This approach entails a shift from an analytic focus on participants’ exogenous categorical attributes (such as their nationality, language, ethnicity, gender, or age) to the interactional moments in which some aspects of interlocutors’ divergent cultural identities become manifest.

Research in the language and social interaction (LSI) tradition has made pathways into providing a view of interculturality that is grounded in participants’ own conduct. It has been empirically demonstrated that just because people from different “cultures” (however defined) are interacting, they do not necessarily—or at all times—orient to these interactions as “intercultural” (e.g., Egbert, 2004; Hosoda, 2003; Kurhila, 2004; Mori, 2003; Schegloff, 1987). Researchers are thus tasked with elucidating communicative practices through which cultural differences among interlocutors are exposed and “discovering which of the many culturally available distinctions are alive and relevant” at any particular moment (Moerman, 1988, p. 70).

Underlying any definition of intercultural communication is the idea that participants are different in some culturally significant way (Kim, 2000). One way to see how these differences become manifest in interaction is to examine how participants’ assumptions about each other’s cultural knowledge are enacted in their conduct. As Schutz (1932/1967) and Garfinkel (1967) have argued, when people
engage in coordinated action with others, they ordinarily assume that their experiences and knowledge are identical-for-all-practical-purposes to those of their interlocutors (this is known as “reciprocity of perspectives”; see also Heritage, 1984). In fact, Garfinkel (1967) defined “common culture” as “the socially sanctioned grounds of inference and action that people use in their everyday affairs and which they assume that others use in the same way” (p. 76; emphasis added). In contrast to this ordinary assumption that conversationalists share these “socially-sanctioned-facts-of-life-that-any-bona-fide-member-of-the-society-knows” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 76) in the “intercultural moments” analyzed in this article, participants act as if they do not assume that they share this taken-for-granted knowledge, but rather, they treat others as possibly not possessing ordinarily-taken-for-granted linguistic and cultural expertise. In other words, by acting in ways that show that they are not assuming equal competencies, participants in these interactions treat others not as bona fide co-members of their speech community but rather as cultural outsiders or novices. By demonstrably not assuming knowledge of “what everybody knows” (Heritage, 1984, p. 81) in their co-participants, they bring asymmetries in their expertise to light, thereby interactively constructing an “intercultural moment.”

This paper thus draws on Garfinkel’s (1967) approach to “common culture” as a presumed in-group membership.¹ The analytic focus is on sequences of interaction in which a participant is treated by others as a group outsider (a “stranger”; Rogers, 1999). I examine interactional processes for invoking and enacting a person’s outsider (or novice) status without (pre)specifying what communicative conduct should be seen as “cultural” (and in what sense) and what should not.

This article is based on a close analysis of naturally occurring, video-recorded everyday face-to-face interactions in Russian–American immigrant families. Although family members, in many important ways, belong to the same “culture”—for instance, they share much of their life histories—the analysis will show that “intercultural communication” (i.e., communication with a group outsider/novice) may take place in family settings (Coupland, Coupland, Giles, & Henwood, 1988; Fitch, 2003). In my data, particularly prominent are participants’ intergenerational differences in both language competencies (in Russian and English) and cultural expertise (e.g., knowing “basic facts” about Russia). The two are interrelated, however, as the levels of competency in the immigrant and heritage languages are seen in many immigrant communities as central to one’s cultural identity (e.g., Broeder & Extra, 1999; Fishman, 1978). Both the maintenance of the heritage language(s) and the learning of the immigrant language(s) are intimately linked to processes of acculturation and cultural assimilation (Remennick, 2003). In immigrant communities, heritage language maintenance may be driven by and seen as an intrinsic part of the preservation of the heritage culture, whereas language loss might be equated with the loss of culture. In fact, the symbolic connection between language competency and cultural membership may manifest itself quite explicitly in everyday interactions (see Excerpt 9 below).

It should be pointed out, however, that in the “intercultural moments” analyzed in this paper, “Russian” and “American” are not necessarily the relevant and
procedurally consequential identity categories. In these immigrant families, participants’ age (or stage-of-life), generation, national “culture,” etc. are intertwined in complex ways and may not always be oriented to as distinct categories. For instance, a young person might be treated as not knowing a “basic fact” about Russia (and thus, as an outsider/novice) either because she is “American” or because she is too young to have experienced something (or both). The data may not offer evidence for a particular analysis and should be treated agnostically. Rather than attempting to identify a particular (cultural) category being invoked, I examine the underlying mechanisms through which a cultural outsider status is interactionally achieved. Therefore, “intercultural” should be understood broadly, as referring to interaction with those who are treated as not bona fide co-members.

Communication difficulties—whether visible or invisible—are a locus of much intercultural communication research (Bailey, 2000; Carbaugh, 2005; Gumperz, 1982; Kim, 2000). Although this study does not start with the assumption that differences in cultural or linguistic backgrounds will bring about communication problems, the analysis will show that interactional sequences in which participants deal with (actual or potential) understanding problems may well become sites where cultural differences are (re)produced. This article focuses on conversational *repair*, a set of practices for dealing with problems of hearing, speaking, or understanding (Kitzinger, 2013; Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977) and a central mechanism by which people maintain mutual understanding (or intersubjectivity) in conversation (Schegloff, 1992). In the course of repair resolution, participants almost inevitably reveal their understanding of what the problem might be, which makes it an especially useful analytic resource for demonstrating the in-the-moment relevance of particular identities (e.g., Kitzinger & Mandelbaum, 2013; Lerner, Bolden, Hepburn, & Mandelbaum, 2012; Robinson, 2013).

Researchers examining interactions involving novice speakers of a language (e.g., second language learners) have described a variety of ways in which participants’ orientations to differences in their linguistic expertise can emerge in repair sequences. For example, language novices may solicit others’ help when searching for an appropriate word or expression (Kurhila, 2006; Park, 2007) or to produce common words with rising intonation in order to elicit confirmation or correction from a more proficient speaker (Hosoda, 2003), thereby indexing differences in their linguistic knowledge. Pronunciation, grammar, and lexical choices of language novices may be corrected by other (more expert) interlocutors (Kurhila, 2006; Norrick, 1991), which again reenacts participants’ asymmetrical language expertise. In response to a novice’s repair initiation (e.g., *Huh*?), the speaker may simplify or translate the problematic talk into another language (Bolden, 2012; Egbert, 2004; Seo & Koshik, 2010). Furthermore, a participant may act as a language broker or mediator for the purposes of resolving a language-based understanding problem, thereby enacting his or her own expertise vis-à-vis the others (Bolden, 2012; Del Torto, 2008; Ikeda, 2007). The article builds on this line of research to investigate how participants’ assumptions about their co-conversationalists’ expertise may
become enacted in sequences of talk dedicated to dealing with (actual or anticipated) understanding problems.

Even though such notions as “assumptions” and “understanding” are often seen (both vernacularly and in a number of social science fields) as referring to cognitive states and mental processes, here they are used in their interactional meanings: as something that is publicly (and thus, observably) conveyed by participants in interaction. The conversation analytic principle of recipient design (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974, p. 727) provides basis for an interactional (vs. cognitive) treatment of speakers’ assumptions or beliefs about themselves and others. The principle states that speakers design their talk for particular recipients, and in doing so, tacitly demonstrate who they take their recipients to be, including what they expect recipients to know and understand (Kitzinger & Mandelbaum, 2013; Sacks et al., 1974). Details of turn design (including choices of particular words over others and how these words are said) can, therefore, be scrutinized to see what the speaker displays as having assumed about the addressee.

Similarly, an interactional (vs. cognitive) treatment of “understanding” (Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks, 1992; Wittgenstein, 1953) is rooted in the sequential organization of talk (Schegloff, 1992). Because in conversation each turn is, in some way, responsive to the prior one, understanding is ordinarily displayed en passant, with each contribution indexing something about how its speaker understood what has come before (Schegloff, 1992). As Sacks (1992) and others (e.g., Heritage, 2007) have shown, in responding a speaker may claim understanding (either tacitly, e.g., by repeating part of the prior turn or explicitly, by saying something like “I know what you mean”) or display (or exhibit) understanding by operating on the prior turn in some way (e.g., providing a relevant response, telling a related story, reformulating what the prior speaker said). Each subsequent turn also provides an opportunity to repair problems of understanding, speaking, and hearing, so that mutual understanding (or intersubjectivity) is managed on a turn-by-turn (or action-by-action; Robinson, in press) basis (Schegloff, 1992).

The article examines a range of practices participants use to construct “intercultural moments” in conversation—sequences in which a participant is treated as an outsider or novice. After a description of the data and method, three interactional trajectories are laid out. First, I analyze instances in which a participant checks the addressee’s knowledge of a word or a concept (e.g., “Do you know what X is?”) and, in doing so, orients to the possibility that the addressee may lack relevant expertise. Second, I examine situations in which a participant displays an assumption that the addressee does not understand a lexical item or a cultural reference and repairs it. Third, I analyze segments in which a participant initially displays the assumption of the addressee’s competency in the relevant domain and then revises this assumption following a recipient-initiated repair (e.g., “What?”). In all of these situations, interlocutors suspend the conversational activity in progress in order to deal with a potential or actual non-understanding in ways that ascribe to their co-conversationalist the identity of an outsider or novice and, thereby, expose and (re)produce cultural and linguistic differences between them.
Data and Method

The data for this study come from a corpus of everyday, unscripted video-recorded face-to-face interactions between family members and friends who are long-term immigrants from the former Soviet Union currently living in the USA. Recordings come from several families (a total of approximately 40 hours). The participants in the study fall into three generations: (1) Children (college age) came to the USA when they were between 1 and 4 years of age; based on the collected recordings, their primary language is English, but they have proficiency in spoken Russian as well; (2) Parents (and others of the same generation) immigrated to the USA as adults and have lived in the USA for 15–25 years; their primary language is Russian but they have a very good command of English; (3) Grandparents (and others of the same generation) have also lived in the USA for 15–25 years; their primary language is Russian, and they have somewhat limited proficiency in English. In some recordings, friends and children’s romantic partners (some of whom are monolingual English speakers) are also present. The data were transcribed and analyzed using the methodology of conversation analysis (CA) by the author, who is a native speaker of Russian (Sidnell & Stivers, 2013). For a description of the CA transcription conventions, see Hepburn and Bolden (2013). In line with the CA methodology, sequences in which interlocutors demonstrably orient to cultural and linguistic differences among them in the course of repair resolution were collected and analyzed for this report. Other repair sequences (not dealing with language-/culture-based understanding problems) have also been examined as part of a larger study and serve as a backdrop for this report.

Checking a Suspected Non-Understanding

Research in conversation analysis has shown that the principle of recipient design—the idea that speakers design their talk for particular recipients—operates in a number of domains, including word selection (Sacks et al., 1974). Kitzinger and Mandelbaum (2013) showed that an unmarked and effortless use of a specialist term demonstrates the speaker’s presumption that the interlocutors are co-members in an identity category made relevant by the term. On the other hand, “when speakers display the presumption that the recipient may not understand the meaning of a term they are using, they are displaying a judgment […] about the knowledge, expertise and competence of their co-conversationalist” (Kitzinger & Mandelbaum, 2013, p. 183). In other words, both the selection of particular words among possible alternatives and the ways in which the words are incorporated into utterances reveal speakers’ assessments about their own and their interlocutors’ expertise in the relevant domain of knowledge.

Speakers’ assumptions about the addressee’s expertise (or lack thereof) become visible when they check the recipient’s knowledge of a word they have used (or are about to use) with questions such as “Do you know what X means?” (cf. Kitzinger & Mandelbaum, 2013). Such inquiries display the speaker’s orientations to potential
knowledge asymmetries between the participants in that they suggest a possibility that the addressee does not know the word or the concept and thus may not be competent in the relevant domain of knowledge. In other words, the inquiry shows that its speaker does not presume that the recipient is a competent co-member in the membership category associated with the word. However, by posing this as an inquiry, speakers indicate that they do not presume the lack of expertise, given that the recipient has an opportunity to claim (and/or demonstrate) his or her knowledge. In my data, when the recipient claims not to know the word, an explanation or translation is typically provided in the next turn.

This is evident in Excerpt 1, wherein the speaker halts the progress of her talk to check the addressee’s knowledge of a word. Mira (Lena’s grandmother) is talking about the needlework she would like to make for Lena’s parents. At line 1, she reports offering to make natjurmort (“still-life”) for them. Aaron and Zhenya, Mira’s elderly relatives, are also at the table. (Vertical lines mark onset of visible behaviors.)

Excerpt 1: Still-life (I7a; 40:35)

01 MIRA: Ja gavarju davaj ja tebe kakovnibut’ natjurmort/
   I say let’s I you some still-life
   I say let me ((make)) a still-life for you

02   (0.5) ((Mira turns from Aaron to Lena))

03 ⇒ MIRA: Nu- (. ) natjurmort zna?esh sho takoe/
   PRT still-life know what that
   Do you know what still-life is?

04 LENA: [°Net°/  
   no

05 MIRA: [.h Eta znachit vot- (. ) na primer [sto:,l/
   that means such for example table
   It means well for example a table

06 ZHE: [fru:kty,/
   fruits

07   (. )

08 LENA: A-

09 MIRA: Stol (. ) i na stale vot raznye fru:kty lezha[::,t/
   table and on table PRT various fruits lie
   A table and on the table are various fruits
Having reported the offer to make a “still-life” for the parents, Mira turns from Aaron (who was the primary addressee of her talk at line 1) to Lena and immediately checks Lena’s knowledge of the term *naturmort* (line 3). By launching this inquiry, Mira displays her orientation to the possibility that Lena may not know the meaning of the word, thus treating Lena as not fully competent in Russian or in the specialized domain of art (though *naturmort* is a commonly used Russian word). When Lena confirms that she indeed does not know the meaning of the word (lines 3–4), Mira begins to provide an explanation of the term. Mira is soon joined by Zhenya, who (from line 6 on) co-explains the term and thus enacts her expertise in Russian and in the relevant domain of art. By taking on the role of a co-explainer, Zhenya acts as a co-member in the identity category of competent Russian speakers. Furthermore, Aaron also steps in (line 18) to confirm what Mira and Zhenya are saying. This shows that in sequences of this sort, participants take steps to align themselves along the expertise lines, enacting a transient collectivity of cultural experts (cf. Bolden, 2012, 2013; Lerner, 2002).
Excerpt 2 demonstrates that vocabulary checks may be deployed strategically in interactionally delicate contexts. Two grandparents tell their granddaughter Lena about the food Grandma likes to have with her coffee. Grandpa is teasing Grandma by claiming that she eats food in strange combinations: specifically, herring with coffee (lines 1–5). Subsequently (lines 7–12), Grandma defends herself by correcting Grandpa’s characterization of the food: it is not herring that she has with her coffee, but lox and sprats. (English words included into Russian utterances are shown in curly brackets.)

Excerpt 2: Herring (I 5a; 55:40)

01 GRP: Selëdku, ((to Lena))
        herring

02 (0.5)

03 LENA: Mm mm,

04 (1.8)

05 GRP: S koffe/ ((to Lena))
        with coffee

06 (.)

07 GRM: Ne selëdku/ ((to Lena))
        not herring

08 GRP: |HH heh Ne selëdku/ Lasasinu/=|nu¿/|
        not herring  lox  PRT
        Not herring, lox, so what
     |((gaze at Lena))  |((turns to GRM))

09 (0.2)

10 GRM: |Lasasinu={lo:x}, ((to Lena))
        lox
     |((Lena looks at GRM))

11 (0.8) ((Lena slightly nods and looks down))

12 GRM: Ili kilechku,/ or sprats

13 (0.5) ((Lena continues to look down))

14 ⇒ GRM: Zna?esh kilechka shto eta [takoe/
        know sprats what that such
        Do you know what sprats are?

Downloaded by [Rutgers University] at 09:05 16 April 2014
By line 11, Lena is in the position of having to side with one of the grandparents’ opinions, either with Grandpa’s negative assessment of the food combinations or with Grandma’s positive assessment of the combination of lox and coffee. Lena, however, does not take sides and simply acknowledges Grandma’s words (most proximately her repair of lasasina to its English equivalent “lox”) with a slight head nod (line 11). In line 12, Grandma extends her turn by adding ili kilechku (“or sprats”), offering another example of the food she likes to have with her coffee. This provides Lena with another opportunity to respond (i.e., to assess the food combination), but she again remains silent (line 13). Rather than treating this silence as indicative of a disagreement (e.g., Pomerantz, 1984a), Grandma goes on to troubleshoot Lena’s understanding of the Russian word kilechka (“sprats”; line 14) and/or the concept it stands for. This may be an elegant way of dealing with a lack of response from Lena as it recasts the interactionally delicate possibility of disaffiliation as an understanding issue (cf. Bolden, Mandelbaum, & Wilkinson, 2012; Pomerantz, 1984b). At the same time, the vocabulary check (line 14) retracts the assumption of competency conveyed by Grandma’s use of the Russian word kilechka, treating Lena as a language novice. Lena claims to know the word (line 15), so no explanation is provided. Grandma then closes the sequence with a summative statement (line 19), with which Lena finally aligns (lines 20–22). So here the addressee’s possible lack of relevant linguistic knowledge is deployed as a resource for pursing a response in the context of possible disagreement.

In addition to monitoring their own talk for potential sources of non-understanding, interlocutors monitor the talk of others and may interject inquiries
about whether the addressee understands a word used by the speaker. Excerpt 3, from a conversation between Lena and her two grandparents, is one such example. Grandma has been telling a story about a relative named Sergey, who used to darn his wife’s stockings (back in Belorussia).

Excerpt 3: Darning (I3a; 51:40)

01 GRM: A Seržza sidit tam na diva,ne/ i shto:paet/
PRT NAME sits there on sofa and darns
Sergey is sitting there on the sofa and darning ((clothes))

02 >U menja es’gribok< do six por/
with me is mushroom till this time
I still have a mushroom ((darner))

03 Esli Gena vytasche,t/
if NAME take-out
if Gena ((Grandpa’s name)) takes it out

04 .hh fi shtopaet ej kalg|otkif/ heh (. ) heh-heh-heh
PRT darns her stockings
and he’s darning stockings for her
|((Lena smiles))

05 GRM: (.HH[H])

06 ⇒ GRP: [Zn- ]Znaesh sh’o takoe gribo?k/ ((to Lena))
know what such mushroom
Do you know what a mushroom ((darner)) is?
|((Lena turns to GRP))

07 (0.8)

08 LENA: N:et/
no

09 GRM: Nu k[ak
PRT how
Well

10 GRP: [(Tak)Nastajaschij gri[:b derevjanyj,/] real mushroom wooden
It’s a real wooden mushroom

11 GRM: [Nu (grib) ]da/
PRT mushroom yes
(Mushroom) Right
In line 2, Grandma halts the progress of her telling to mention that she still has a mushroom darning: a darning in the shape of a mushroom, referred to in Russian simply as gribok ("mushroom"). After this aside (in lines 2–3), Grandma delivers the punch line of the story (line 4) and then laughs. (The funny part is apparently that a man is darning his wife’s stockings, darning traditionally considered a woman’s chore in Russia.) Thus, Grandma does not orient to the word gribok ("mushroom") as being in any way problematic for Lena. While Grandma laughs, Lena smiles (line 4), which is a way to tacitly claim understanding of the story and affiliate, albeit weakly, with the teller’s stance toward it as funny. The smile, however, does not demonstrate that Lena did, in fact, understand the story or what was funny about it, as it could simply be prompted by Grandma’s smile and laughter in line 4. Nor does the smile constitute a sufficient uptake of the telling, given Grandma’s extended laughter. In line 6, Grandpa asks whether Lena knows what gribok ("mushroom") is. This inquiry displays Grandpa’s orientation to Lena’s relatively low linguistic/cultural expertise in that it suggests that Lena might not know the word or the concept being referred to. The inquiry shows that Grandpa has been monitoring Grandma’s talk to ensure that it is properly designed for the recipient, Lena, treating himself as a consociate in Grandma’s telling. Moreover, the inquiry shows that Grandpa has been monitoring Lena’s reception of the story. The question raises the possibility, but does not presume, that Lena did not understand (part of) the telling. In other words, the inquiry is properly designed to follow Lena’s smile, which claims, but does not display, her understanding of the telling.

After Lena responds that she does not know the word (line 8), Grandpa and Grandma provide an explanation (lines 9–13). Note that they explain the darning-specific sense of the word, leaving the ordinary food meaning of grib(ok) ("mushroom") unexplained, evidently presuming that Lena knows the everyday meaning. In this way, they treat Lena as someone who is (somewhat) unfamiliar with the activity of darning and enact asymmetries of knowledge attributable to generational (older vs. younger) and “cultural” (“old country” vs. “new country”)
differences between them. This is another instance of experts asserting their co-membership in the collectivity of experts by, together, instructing a novice in the ways of the “old country” or “olden days.” This excerpt provides further evidence that a person’s potential cultural novicehood is not always oriented to by all participants in interaction: here, Grandma does not initially treat Lena as (possibly) lacking relevant knowledge, while Grandpa does.

To sum, inquiries into a recipient’s knowledge of a word ascribe to the addressee the status of linguistic/cultural novice by suggesting the possibility that he or she may not know the word or the concept referred to. Such inquiries create opportunities for “teaching moments” whereby experts co-explain the word to the novice (as in Excerpt 1 and Excerpt 3). These inquiries may also be used as vehicles for subtly dealing with interactionally delicate issues, such as disaffiliation (as in Excerpt 2) or insufficient uptake (as in and Excerpt 3).

Assuming Non-Understanding

In this section, I examine how, in repairing their own or another’s talk, participants convey a presumption of asymmetrical expertise and, thereby, (re)produce the lack of co-membership in the relevant cultural domain. An analysis of what is treated as a trouble source and what is offered as a repair solution (Kitzinger, 2013; Schegloff et al., 1977) may reveal a speaker’s orientation to asymmetries in participants’ linguistic and cultural knowledge. I first examine repair sequences in which an addressee is treated as not understanding a word or an expression due to low linguistic expertise (Excerpts 4–5) and then turn to sequences in which a lack of relevant cultural knowledge is assumed (Extracts 6–7).

Assuming Low Linguistic Expertise

Conversationalists monitor their talk for potential sources of mis- and non-understanding and may halt progressivity (i.e., onward movement) of a turn to repair a potentially problematic item (this is known as self-initiated self-repair). In doing so, speakers show (to their co-participants and, secondarily, to outside analysts) what, in their assessment, the addressee may (not) know or understand. Excerpt 4 is taken from a conversation between three members of the “grandparents” generation (Mira, Aaron, and Zhenya) and Mira’s granddaughter Lena. In line 1, Zhenya asks a question about Mira’s grandmother (“Did she work?”). In response, Mira says that her grandmother worked as a secretary (line 2), using a common Russian title for this job: the phrase sekretar’ mashinistka (literally, “a secretary typist”).
Excerpt 4: Secretary (I 7a; 26:10)

01 ZHE: Ana rabotala¿/  
**Did she work?**

02 MIR: .h Ana rabotala: |sekretar¿:m (.) mashinistkaj/ |  
**she worked secretary typist**  
She worked as a secretary  
**|(Mira turns to Lena))|**

03 ⇒  
|.h Nu (.) [kak eta-  
PRT how that  
how ((to say this))  
**|(Mira turns to Aaron))|**

04 AAR: [Nu ja-ja-jasna/ ((looking down))  
PRT clear  
it's clear

05 MIR: D[ã]/  
**yes**

06 AAR: [Jasna/  
clear

07 ⇒ MIR: |Ana- (.) [{secretary},} (.)  
she  
**|(to Lena))|**

08 LEN: |((nod))

09 ZHE: [↑Nu da/  
PRT yes

10 MIR: Ana- (.) rabotala v adnom (0.2) ofise/  
she worked in one office  
**|(continues telling about the job)|**

While producing the Russian job title “secretary typist” (line 2), Mira looks at her granddaughter Lena, addressing this to her. Mira then immediately begins a word search, apparently for an alternative way to say what she had just said: “Nu (.) kak eta-“ (“how ((to say))”; line 3). In initiating a repair here, Mira demonstrates that she monitors her talk for whether or not it is accessible to her addressee (Lena), even though Lena has not expressed any problem with it. While launching the search, Mira looks at Aaron (line 3), apparently enlisting his help and thereby treating him as an expert in the relevant domain of knowledge. When Aaron simply states that Mira’s words are clear (line 4), dismissing the necessity of the repair, Mira turns back to Lena and provides her own English language equivalent of the Russian job title (“secretary”; line 7). Lena nods, claiming understanding (line 8).
The launch and resolution of this repair demonstrate Mira’s orientation to Lena’s relatively low proficiency in Russian. Even though Lena displays no signs of trouble, Mira evidently assumes non-understanding of a rather basic Russian expression, halts her turn in progress, and searches for—and eventually finds—its English-language equivalent. Mira thus ascribes to Lena an identity of a language novice (relative to her own identity as a language expert). This is in contrast to Aaron, who, by dismissing the necessity of repair (line 4), shows his lack of orientation to potential asymmetries in participants’ language competencies. Furthermore, Aaron and Zhenya claim understanding of the trouble source (see lines 4, 6, and 9) and, thereby, assert their expertise and cultural co-membership.

As mentioned earlier, participants in these interactions monitor not only their own talk for potential problems of understanding related to an addressee’s low language expertise, but also the talk of others. This is evident in instances when they step in as language brokers or mediators (Bolden, 2012) to solve a potential understanding problem (these are instances of other-initiated other-repair). In such cases, the intervening speaker displays a presumption of language differences between the participants, in effect asserting that the turn, as it was produced, will not be understood by the addressee(s) and is in need of correction. An instance of language brokering is seen in Excerpt 5. Six people are having breakfast, including Maria and her daughter Irina, and Luba and her daughter Nadia. Leading into this segment, the mothers (Maria and Luba) are lamenting that the kids (who had moved to the USA as small children) complain unreasonably about sharing a living space with others because they have never lived in “communal apartments” (not shown) or even know what they are (line 1). In line 10, Maria is beginning to explain the concept of “communal apartments” to Irina and Nadia.

Excerpt 5: One big apartment (M3-2; 1:15)

1 MAR: Ani dazhe ne znajut shto takoe kamunal'na kvar(h)ir(h)a/ =
   they even not know what is communal apartment
   They don't even know what a communal apartment is

2 =[(Ani)
   they

3 IRI: [What's [that.

4 MAR: [ne predstavlja(j)ut/
   not imagine
   They can't imagine

5 LUB: ekheh-heh-heh

6 IRI: What is it,
7 MAR: Sho takoe kamunal’naja kvarti?ra/ 
    what is communal apartment 
    What is a communal apartment?

8 IRI: [Yeash.

9 LUB: [heh- heh

10 MAR: Eta- (0.5) adna ↑bal’shaja kvar↓tira/ v katoraj mnoga komna,t/ 
    that one big apartment in which many rooms 
    It is one big apartment in which there are many rooms

11 (.)

12 MAR: e- [i v kazhdaj (semje) (. ) v kazhdaj k^omnate= 
    and in each family in each room 
    and in each (family) in each room

13⇒LUB: [One big (. ) apartment. 
    |{(gaze to Irina/Nadia))

14 MAR: =zhivët adna s:em’ja/ 
    lives one family 
    one family lives

15 (0.8)

After Maria produces the first unit of her explanation (“Eta- (0.5) adna ↑bal’shaja kvar↓tira”/“it’s one big apartment”; line 10), Luba turns toward their two daughters, Irina and Nadia, and gives an almost exact English-language equivalent of what Maria said (“one big apartment”; line 13). Luba’s translation demonstrates that she deems Maria’s talk to be problematic to one or both of the girls due to it being in Russian rather than English, even though neither of them has shown non-understanding. Luba’s monitoring of the talk in progress and assuming the role of a language broker demonstrate her orientation to the potential disparities in participants’ linguistic expertise.*

This excerpt also shows that participants make moment-by-moment and sometimes different judgments about each other’s competencies, which underscores the importance of seeing interculturality as a contingent interactional accomplishment. Here, Maria designed her words for her recipients, assuming they are sufficiently competent to understand her, whereas Luba assumed lower expertise for at least one of the addressees (Nadia or Irina). Further, by stepping in, Luba demonstrates her own expertise in the two languages and claims an entitlement to participate in the course of action in progress on the basis of this expertise as a co-explainer (Bolden, 2012). Thus, language brokering can be used as a device for interjecting into the ongoing activity, for example, as a co-explainer or a co-teller (cf. Lerner, 1992).
Assuming Low Cultural Expertise

Cultural co-members are ordinarily seen as sharing “knowledge of the world” (Duranti, 1997, p. 27), including not only linguistic knowledge but also factual knowledge of culturally significant events, places, people, objects, etc. In the data examined in this section, participants’ conduct reveals their assumption that their recipient will not know a cultural fact or a piece of information that cultural co-members are ordinarily assumed to know. This assumption of cultural illiteracy becomes transparent when speakers halt the forward progress of their turn so as to explain or reformulate a cultural reference.

In Excerpt 6 (from the same conversation as Excerpt 4 above), Mira is talking about her grandmother. In describing her grandmother’s (unusually extensive) education, Mira includes a temporal reference do vajny (“before the war”; lines 3 and 9). To anybody who grew up in the Soviet Union, “the war” is an unproblematic reference to the World War II (or, more precisely, to the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945). However, Mira halts her telling and reformulates this reference to “before nineteen forty” (line 11), addressing this reformulation to her granddaughter Lena.

Excerpt 6: Before the war (I7a; 25:30)

01 ZHE: [A ana [uchiq;las’/(Ana kancha-°)] = PRT she study she finish- Did she study? (Did she gradua-)

02 MIR: [Ana- she

03 MIR: =Ana zakonchila do: vajny, / she finished before war She finished before the war

04 ana zakonchila ]h se:m’(.) kla:sa,v/ she finished seven classes she finished seven years |((gaze to Lena))

05 (0.5)

06 MIR: [evre:jskaj ]shko:l[y / jewish school of Jewish school gaze: |((to Aar)) |((to Lena))

07 AAR: [Shkoly/da/ school yes
ZHE: "Hm mm,"

MIR: A sem’ klas av evrejskaj shkoly do vajny,/
PRT seven classes Jewish school before war
And seven years of a Jewish school before the war,

(Mira and Lena continue looking at each other)

MIR: |do: (.) tysjacha devja|cot sarakavova goda/
before thousand nine-hundred forty year
before nineteen forty
|((Mira starts pointing to Lena))
|((Lena looks down))

Eta ja t[ebja eta-]((0.2) leh- shob ty .h
that I you that that you
I ((am saying)) this for you ... so that you
| ((Lena nods))

AAR: [Da/
yes

MIR: sebe predsta[vila]/
yourself imagined
could imagine

ZHE: [Predstavila=
imagine

LEN: =Huh-huh-huh

MIR: skol’ka/.h Esli sejchas dve tysch[ i devvjaty god/.hh
how-much if now two thousand nine year
how long ago this was/ if now it’s 2009

AAR: [Da /
yes

(0.5)

MIR: Tak vot ana akonchila sem kla, sav/
so PRT she finished seven classes
So she finished seven years

(.) i ana byla ochen’ gramatnaja/
and she was very grammatical
and she was very competent ((in writing))

By reformulating (in line 11) something that Russians ordinarily take for granted as understandable—a piece of common-sense history (cf. Schegloff, 1972)—Mira treats Lena as lacking relevant knowledge to unpack the reference, and thus as not a bona
fide cultural co-member. Note that Lena has shown no evidence of non-understanding prior to the reformulation (at line 10, where no response from her is relevant, she simply continues to look at Mira with a neutral facial expression). Mira then goes on to state explicitly (lines 12, 14, and 17) that this repair is done for Lena in order to justify her provision of this commonly known information. At the same time, the reformulation of the time reference (from “event-relevant” to “absolute”; Raymond & White, 2013) has a telling-relevant payoff of emphasizing for Lena how long ago this was (lines 14 and 17), the implication being that “seven years” was an unusually high level of education for that time period. By explicitly addressing the explanation to Lena (with a pointing gesture and “you”; lines 11–12), Mira works to eliminate any possibility that Aaron or Zhenya (Mira’s elderly relatives) might have been understood as also being addressed by this reformulation. By excluding them from the addressed recipients, Mira confirms their status as competent co-members of the community (under-assuming competency would be face threatening; Kitzinger & Mandelbaum, 2013). Note that both Aaron and Zhenya align with Mira in the course of the explanation (lines 13, 15, and 18), thereby affirming that the repair was not done for them.

The cultural lesson is subtler in Excerpt 7, taken from a conversation between Lena and her parents. In lines 1–2, Mom tells Lena about a friend’s parents’ visit, and then asks Dad (named Seva) to provide the location of where these people live (lines 2–4). Dad (who is off camera in the kitchen) responds with V TAI:LI:NE: (“In Tallinn”; lines 6 and 8), referring to the capital city of Estonia—a reference that Lena appears not to recognize.

Excerpt 7: Tallinn (I6b; 4:35)

1  MOM: Knej prizhajut raditeli/
    to her come parents
    The parents are coming to visit her

2  Ani zhivut <SEV GDE ZHIVUT OLINY RADITeli/
    they live NAME where live NAME's parents
    They live <Seva, where do Olya's parents live?

3  (1.0)

4  MOM: SEVA/
    NAME

5  (.)

6  DAD: V TAI:LI:NE:/ {{off camera}}
    in Tallinn

7  MOM: V Ta{line ani zhivut/ {{to Lena}}
    in Tallinn they live
Following multiple proffers of the place formulation (lines 6–9), Lena visibly displays non-recognition of “Tallinn” (line 10), as evidenced by her lack of uptake and a facial expression of confusion (possibly not seen by Dad who is away from the table where Lena is sitting). Dad attributes the apparent understanding problem to Lena’s limited knowledge of the relevant geography and replaces the formulation \(v\) Taline (“in Tallinn”) with a more encompassing, less granular formulation \(V\) Estonii (“in Estonia”; line 12) (Lerner et al., 2012). Knowing that Tallinn is a city in Estonia is ordinarily taken for granted by Russians (due to Estonia’s geographical proximity to Russia and it being part of the former Soviet Union)—it belongs to the ordinarily-presumed-as-shared, “common-sense geography” (Schegloff, 1972, p. 85). Thus, in doing this repair, Dad manifests his orientation to Lena as a cultural novice, somebody whose knowledge of the basic geography cannot be assumed. (It is later revealed that the source of Lena’s confusion is in not understanding who is being talked about; yet it is telling that Dad’s repair assumes lack of relevant cultural expertise.)

To sum, the analysis of instances examined in this section has shown that, in repairing their own or another’s talk, participants may display an orientation to asymmetries in linguistic and cultural expertise between conversationalists and the presumption of the lack of relevant knowledge on the part of the addressee. Importantly, however, this orientation to asymmetrical expertise is not omnirelevant: We have seen that participants may, in fact, take divergent stances about what the addressee will and will not understand, even within the same short stretch of interaction. This demonstrates empirically the importance of seeing interculturality not as an invariable outcome of participants’ differing cultural backgrounds but as something that gets accomplished (or not) in interaction with others, on a moment-by-moment basis (cf. Levine et al., 2007). Furthermore, the analysis has shown that participants may repair basic vocabulary or cultural references with no evidence that the addressee is experiencing a problem of understanding (let alone a problem in understanding the targeted word or reference). This seemingly hyper-vigilant...
orientation to ensuring intersubjectivity is a key feature of “intercultural moments” and it stands in rather stark contrast to the presumption of understanding that operates in communication between bona fide cultural co-members (Heritage, 1984, 2007). The data show, however, that taking on the role of an expert vis-à-vis a novice may have a number of interactional payoffs beyond ensuring understanding, such as setting up a context for a cultural lesson and advancing a telling’s point (as in Excerpt 6) or joining in on a course of action in progress (as in Excerpt 5).

**Assuming Understanding, Then Revising the Assumption**

In the instances discussed in this section, speakers initially design their talk so as to convey a presumption that it will be unproblematic for the addressees, treating the addressees as competent group co-members. This assumption is demonstrably revised when the addressee initiates repair on the prior talk (e.g., with “What?”), as evidenced by the proffered repair solution.

**Downgrading the Assessment of Linguistic Expertise**

Whereas some repair initiations are virtually designated to indicate a problem in understanding a particular lexical item (e.g., “What does X mean?”), most are not. In Excerpt 8, a problem of understanding is attributed to the repair initiator’s low linguistic expertise, even though the repair initiation (line 9) does not specifically suggest a language problem. Leading into this segment, Grandma has been telling her granddaughter Lena about the grandfather’s upcoming appointment with a cardiologist (“he” at line 1 refers to the grandfather).

**Excerpt 8: Lung fluid (I5a)**

01 LENA: Does he have fluid in his lungs?

02 (1.5)

03 ⇒ GRM: Shto?/what

04 (0.8)

05 ⇒ LENA: Zhidkast’v lëxkii?/fluid in lungs Fluid in his lungs?

06 (1.0)

07 GRP: D[a/yes
Grandma initiates repair on Lena’s question (produced in English) with a Russian “open class” (Drew, 1997) repair initiation shto? (“what?”; line 3). Open-class repair initiations (such as “What?” and “Huh?”) are not specific about the kind of trouble their speaker experiences and commonly responded to with (modified) repeats of the trouble-source turn (Drew, 1997; Robinson, 2006; Schegloff et al., 1977). Here, Lena produces a close translation of her English-language trouble-source turn into Russian as a repair solution, which indicates her orientation to Grandma’s repair initiation as indexing a problem of understanding the language of her turn (i.e. English). So, following the principle of recipient design, by producing her inquiry (in line 1) in English, Lena conveys an assumption that Grandma would be able to understand her (and specifically, understand her English), thereby treating her as a co-member of the category of English speakers. However, once Grandma initiates repair, Lena evidently downgrades this assumption of competency (as evidenced by her response in line 5), ascribing to Grandma the identity of an English language novice.

As already seen, interlocutors enact their linguistic and cultural expertise by monitoring the talk of others and, in various ways, participating in resolving potential understanding problems. Excerpt 9, from an interaction between Lena and her two grandparents, is another illustration of this phenomenon. At line 1, Grandmother invites Lena to remember the time when they “did fractions” together. However, Lena does not know the meaning of the Russian word drobi (“fractions”) and initiates repair on it (line 3).

Excerpt 9: Fractions (I3a)

01 GM: I ka’da dro:bi my s taboj resha:li/ po?mnish/ and when fractions we with you solved remember Do you remember when we did fractions with you?

02 (0.2)

03 ⇒ LENA: Dro¿bi/ fractions

04 (0.8)

05 GM: /uni2223 ((sharp head nod and mouthing “da”/yes))

06 GF: /uni2223 Drobi/ fractions

07 (.)
Lena first initiates repair in line 3 by repeating the problematic word *drobi* (“fractions”) with rising intonation (Robinson, 2013). The repair initiation is addressed to Grandmother through gaze. Grandmother takes it as requesting confirmation of a possible hearing, and confirms by nodding and mouthing *da* (“yes”; line 5). Simultaneously, Grandfather repeats the trouble source (line 6), which is another way to confirm a candidate hearing. By responding to Lena’s repair initiation in this way, both grandparents appear to treat her as a competent speaker of Russian, not orienting to this as an “intercultural moment.” Lena, however, pursues the repair further with “*Shto eta*” (“What’s that”; line 8)—a repair initiation that indicates that she does not understand the Russian word. Lena continues to look at Grandmother, thus again addressing her with this repair initiation. It is Grandfather, however, who immediately responds. In lines 9–10, Grandfather takes on the role of a language broker (Bolden, 2012) to explicate what the Russian word...
drobi means. In lines 11–12, Grandmother joins in to also provide a repair solution. Eventually, Lena is able to provide the word’s English-language equivalent “fractions” (line 13), thus demonstrating her understanding. So in this excerpt two interlocutors are acting together as language experts in response to a repair initiation that indexes a language-based understanding problem.

What is also interesting in this case is that, once the repair is resolved, Grandmother goes on to state (in a mocking tone of voice and elaborate gesturing) that Lena’s knowledge of the English word but not of its Russian equivalent is symptomatic of Lena having become anglichanka (“an English lady/woman”; line 18)—that is, having adopted an “English” identity. In other words, in the aftermath of a repair sequence that resolves a language problem, Lena’s linguistic proficiency is explicitly—and mockingly—attributed to a cultural membership category. This lends support to the view that (for these people, in this context, at least) language expertise is tied to cultural identities. Here, Lena’s failure to understand the Russian word is also connected to her apparent failure to remember the experience of doing fractions with her grandmother.

**Downgrading the Assessment of Cultural Expertise**

Similarly, a speaker may at first convey a presumption of cultural knowledge in the addressee and then visibly revise it in response to a repair initiation. Excerpt 10 is from a conversation between Lena, her dad Seva, and two other relatives of Seva’s generation, Ira and Boris. They are discussing why people in Russia start drinking at an early age. In lines 1–2, Ira starts telling about “going for potatoes” (na kartoshku) in order to account for the drinking. “Going for potatoes” refers to an annual activity that involved city dwellers going to farms to help harvest potatoes and other vegetables. This potato harvesting is well known to all who grew up in the former Soviet Union, and Russians refer to it idiomatically as na kartoshku (“going for potatoes”) or “going to the kolxoz [collective farm].” When Ira refers to this activity in the course of her telling, she uses this cultural reference in an unmarked, unelaborated fashion (line 1), conveying an assumption that Lena would understand it (Kitzinger & Mandelbaum, 2013).

**Excerpt 10: Farms (I 12a; 54:10)**

01 IRA: My ezdili na kartoshku i pomnji uzhe/
  we rode on potatoes and remember already
  We went for potatoes, and I remember already

02 Kupili ( )
  bought
  we bought ( )
LENA: What th'hell's kartoshka/potatoes

IRA: A?

LENA: What are you talking about.

IRA: Okej/ Smatri/ Tam ne xvatala: like firm: There wasn't enough

LENA: (firm) <like a firm/

IRA: ((Znachit) meaning

LENA: Farms

IRA: Farm/= kolchoz (abbreviation for collective farm)

SEV: =Kallet- co- that collective farm

IRA: Kallet/ kalchoz yes

IRA: m- (. ) tam- v-na v Rossi:i, v Belarusii, in farms

IRA: vse byli p"janye/ all were drunk

LENA: ((silent laughter))
In line 3, Lena interrupts Ira’s telling to initiate repair. The repair initiation—“... What th’hell’s kartoshka?” (“potatoes”)—indicates a problem with the term kartoshka. Given that kartoshka is a word for the staple Russian food (used by Lena in other recordings) and given the preface “what the hell,” Lena’s repair initiation appears to indicate something rather than a problem with the word’s basic meaning. Ira does not hear or understand what Lena says (line 5) and, in line 6, Lena reinitiates repair with “What are you talking about.” This indicates a more encompassing problem with Ira’s turn than a single word. Although there is a range of issues that “What are you talking about” could indicate (e.g., a challenge to the speaker), Ira takes this repair initiation to index Lena’s lack of understanding of the cultural concept she referred to as “na kartoshku” (“going for potatoes”). In other words, whereas Ira initially attributed relevant cultural expertise to Lena, following her repair initiation, Ira downgrades her assessment. In line 7, Ira begins to explain this cultural practice, and when she has trouble with the English word “farms,” other interlocutors join in on her explanation (lines 14 and 16), thus demonstrating their co-membership in the speech community.

The data discussed in this section (especially, Excerpt 8 and Excerpt 10) show that even repair initiations that do not specifically indicate a problem in understanding a word or a cultural concept may be treated as indicative of the recipient’s linguistic or cultural novicehood. On the other hand, the relevance of cultural or linguistic asymmetries is not automatic, as participants make moment-by-moment decisions about what the source of the problem might be (Excerpt 9). Furthermore, a repair initiation by a novice may become a site for collaborative action by the experts, who together co-produce a repair solution (Excerpt 9 and Excerpt 10). In this way, participants in these interaction (re)produce asymmetrical linguistic and cultural expertise among them.

**Conclusions**

This article takes an emic perspective to address the question of how intercultural communication is constituted in action, with the goal to describe some of the practices that produce a bit of social interaction as an “intercultural moment.” I have analyzed several ways in which participants’ divergent linguistic and cultural expertise become “live and relevant” (Moerman, 1988, p. 70). First, participants may orient to the possibility that the addressee lacks relevant expertise to understand a word they have used, and check their knowledge before proceeding. Second, they may act on the assumption that an addressee lacks relevant competency and repair their own or others’ talk for the benefit of a novice. Finally, participants may initially act on the assumption of competency but then revise that assessment when the addressee initiates repair. All of these are different ways in which linguistic and cultural differences among participants are exposed in action—in other words, ways in which an interaction is rendered “intercultural.”

The analysis of how participants deal with (potential) problems of understanding has shown that their assessments of others’ linguistic and cultural competencies are
neither uniform nor stable, even within short sequences of interaction examined here, but may be shaped by and responsive to local contingencies. This demonstrates that “cultural differences” are not omnirelevant; instead, interculturality is constituted on a moment-by-moment basis—something that participants accomplish or “talk into being” in the course of doing things together (Heritage, 1984, p. 290). The article thus shows empirically some problems involved in automatically ascribing the label “intercultural communication” to interactions between people of differing cultural backgrounds (Levine et al., 2007), offering instead a view of “intercultural communication” that is deeply grounded in participants’ own communicative conduct. Furthermore, the analysis sheds light on a longstanding interest in understanding the “intercultural” dynamics in “interpersonal” interactions. For instance, communication adaptation theory scholars (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979) had long ago noted that any interpersonal interaction may have “inter-individual” and “inter-group” dimensions and that participants may move back and forth between communicating with others on the basis of their personal relationship (e.g., a friend or relative) and their belonging to a social group (e.g., their sex, age, national origins). The analysis presented here allows us to see how, and for what interactional purposes, social identities (e.g., Russian vs. American; young vs. old person) become an oriented to feature of the otherwise “inter-individual” interaction, and to lay out some of the mechanisms through which this is accomplished.

In interactions between presumed cultural co-members, identical-for-all-practical-purposes competencies and shared knowledge are assumed. For instance, as Garfinkel’s (1967) “conversation clarification” breaching experiments (in which an experimenter pretends not to understand what the other says) have shown, requests to clarify common expressions are upsetting to unsuspecting subjects as they violate the shared knowledge assumption that underlies social conduct. Furthermore, Kitzinger and Mandelbaum (2013) have demonstrated that in designing their talk for particular others, interlocutors would rather over-assume than under-assume competency in their addressees since under-assuming competency has negative identity implications (see also Heritage, 2007; Schegloff, 1972). In contrast, in “intercultural moments,” the assumption of equivalent competencies gets suspended and renegotiated. We have seen that asking for clarification, reformulating, and explaining even everyday, typically-assumed-to-be-known-to-all terms and facts are not unusual, and participants clearly do not treat such interactions as social breaches. Not uncommonly, these sequences bring about “teaching moments”—opportunities for older generations to instruct the younger about the language and culture of their heritage country. By examining both the mechanisms through which participants take into account intergenerational differences among them and their interactional payoffs (cf. Coupland et al., 1988), this research sheds light onto the organization of family communication and intergenerational interaction in immigrant (and potentially non-immigrant) families.

In interactions with people who might not be seen as bona fide members of a speech community, interlocutors can draw upon—and in doing so, reenact—their or their addressees’ linguistic and cultural novicehood as an account for action. In other
words, novicehood becomes an interactional resource that can be drawn upon to achieve a range of social actions, beyond the achievement of intersubjectivity. For instance, my data show that interlocutors may use the possibility of non-understanding to pursue a missing response in the context of potential disagreement or to emphasize a key element of a telling. Monitoring for and identifying potential understanding problems in the talk of others can be done to both enact one’s own expertise in the relevant domain and to join in on the action in progress (e.g., as a coteller), and that similar actions can be accomplished by joining in on another’s in-progress explanation of a problematic term. In other words, while participants in these data display a rather vigilant orientation to achieving intersubjectivity, practices for resolving ostensible intersubjectivity problems have a range of (not yet fully described) interactional payoffs beyond ensuring understanding. A large part of intercultural communication scholarship is concerned with “invisible” misunderstandings that rarely come to the interactional surface yet may insidiously affect communication outcomes. However, the article shows that an analysis of seemingly more straightforward “visible” misunderstandings might be as instructive in that it gives a front row view of “misunderstanding” as participants’ problem and resource for social action.

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Notes
[1] This is not unlike the treatment of intercultural communication processes as intergroup communication by communication adaptation theorists (e.g., Gallois, McKay, & Pittam, 2005).
[2] No language proficiency testing or surveys were administered. In this, the study adopts an emic prospective on language expertise. What is important for this study is not a measured or reported language proficiency, but how interlocutors themselves observably orient to each other’s language abilities in particular interactional moments.
[3] Since conversation analysts inevitably deploy their own cultural expertise in analyzing data, it may need to be pointed out that the author shares much cultural background with the participants, especially those belonging to the “parents” generation (having immigrated from the former Soviet Union at the same time period, at approximately the same age).
[4] Kilechka (sprats) are small fish, similar to sardines, usually distributed smoked and canned.
[5] It is not uncommon for Russian immigrants to assume that Americans do not know how to mend clothes. Leading into this story and, again, following this excerpt, Grandma says that “here” (presumably, in the USA) one does not need to darn because clothes are readily available in stores, which was not the case in Belorussia. In this way, darning is treated by the participants as both nationality- and generation-bound activity.
[6] The first element of the job title sekretar’ is a close cognate to the English secretary—and is thus understandable to somebody who has a basic Russian proficiency. However, the second word mashinistka may, in fact, be confusing to a language novice as it invokes the English word machinist rather than typist.
[7] In the literature on immigrant communities, the terms broker, language broker, or mediator are often used to refer to an individual who routinely takes on the task of translating or
mediating between others, such as a bilingual child mediating between monolingual family members and institutional representatives (Del Torto, 2008; Morales & Hanson, 2005). Following Bolden (2012), the term language broker is used here for a (transient) role bound to the activity of resolving (or averting) an understanding problem.

The activity of explaining a common cultural reference (such as “communal apartments”) is, in itself, a practice for ascribing cultural novicehood to the recipients of the explanation (see the following section). Luba’s intervention with a translation further downgrades the recipients’ expertise by ascribing language novicehood to them as well.

Although it may be true that participants in these data have their language preferences or tendencies (e.g., Lena may “prefer” or be more comfortable in English rather than Russian), a choice of one language over another at a particular moment is guided by the speaker’s assessment of what the addressee will or will not understand. For instance, in my data Lena tends to speak English to her parents and Russian to most of her grandparents, and, in making these language choices, conveys her expectations about her recipients’ language competencies.

Note as well that Grandmother, in asking Lena to repeat the English word “fractions” (line 16), adopts an identity of an English language novice and ascribes to Lena English language expertise.

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