

Istvan Kecskes

The Socio-Cognitive Approach to Communication and Pragmatics

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Istvan Kecskes

The Socio-Cognitive Approach to Communication and Pragmatics

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Istvan Kecskes 
State University of New York
Albany, NY, USA

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Introduction

The socio-cognitive approach (SCA) is an alternative to the two main lines of pragmatics research: linguistic-philosophical pragmatics and sociocultural-interactional pragmatics. What is common in these three lines of thinking is that they all originate from the Gricean pragmatics, but they represent three different perspectives on it (cf. Horn & Kecskes, 2013). Linguistic-philosophical pragmatics seeks to investigate speaker meaning within an utterance-based framework focusing mainly on linguistic constraints on language use. Socio-cultural interactional pragmatics maintains that pragmatics should include research into social and cultural constraints on language use as well. The socio-cognitive approach to pragmatics initiated by Kecskes (2008, 2010, 2014) integrates the pragmatic view of cooperation and the cognitive view of egocentrism and emphasizes that both cooperation and egocentrism are manifested in all phases of communication, albeit to varying extents.

It is an important step to bring the two different views together in one theory because not only pragmatics but also humanities research in general overemphasizes the importance of either the individual cognitive side or the socio-cultural contextual side. There have been rare endeavors to accept that both sides are equally important to explain what happens around us in the world.

The basic element of Gricean pragmatics is cooperation which represents the social side of communication. SCA claims that individually privatized social experience that, most of the time, subconsciously motivates intention and communicative action is as important as the effect of the socio-cultural environment and social factors in which the interaction takes place. SCA claims that while (social) cooperation is an intention-directed practice that is governed by relevance, (individual) egocentrism is an attention-oriented trait dominated by salience. SCA pulls together these seemingly antagonistic factors (cooperation and egocentrism) to explain production and comprehension in the communicative process.

The socio-cognitive approach to pragmatics as a theoretical framework has its origin in the view summarized by Wold (1992). In the introduction to his edited book Wold (1992: pp. 1–2) described the approach in the following way:

The dialogically based, social-cognitive approach reflects an insistence on the necessity to study language use, a conception of the world as multidimensional and always only partially understood, and Man as a social being in search of meaning with individual minds embedded in a cultural collectivity. Linguistic meaning is conceived as open and dynamic, and constituted in the dialogic process of communication. It is not to be seen as formal and static representations. Concepts like dialogue, intersubjectivity, intentionality, perspective taking, ‘attunement to the attunement of the other’, temporarily shared social realities, fixation of perspectives and meaning potentials are all frequently used . . . The tension between language as a conventionalized system and specific acts of real communication is a recurrent topic.

However, on certain issues there are significant differences between the view presented by Wold above and SCA. The socio-cognitive approach was developed to synthesize the positivist and social constructivist views into a coherent whole that acknowledges the equal importance of both societal and individual factors in meaning creation and comprehension as well as knowledge transfer. Both the positivists and the social constructivists are aware of the individual and collective factors affecting human relations and their interplay. But, while the positivists put more emphasis on the individual, social constructivists focus on the collective. How does all that individuation get integrated and leveled out in the collective? And how is the collective acquired, preserved, and passed on by individuals? These are crucial questions for research in humanities research.

What is especially important for the SCA is the interplay of three types of knowledge in meaning construction and comprehension: *collective prior knowledge*, *individual prior knowledge*, and *actual situationally co-created knowledge* (e.g., Kecskes 2008, 2010, 2014). What is co-constructed and co-developed in practice contains prior social and material experience of the individual and the given speech community as well as situationally, socially constructed knowledge. Both sides are equally important. Practice can hardly work without the presence of relevant cultural mental models with which people process the observed practice, or which they use to actually create practice. Even when we pass along simple routines by sharing them in practice (e.g., how to use a vacuum or make coffee) we rely on the presence of a large amount of pre-existing knowledge. Social practices are conventionalized routines that may develop into expectations and norms that are shared in speech communities.

The social character of communication and knowledge transfer should not put community-of-practice theory at odds with individualistic approaches to knowledge as it often happens nowadays. After all, social practices pass “through the heads of people, and it is such heads that do the feeling, perceiving, thinking, and the like” (Bunge, 1996: p. 303). While communities of practice exist, members of those communities may still interpret shared practices differently. This is a key issue to understand what communication is all about. Collective knowledge exists but it is interpreted, “privatized” (subjectivized) differently by each individual (see Kecskes, 2008, 2014). Collective cultural models are distributed to individuals in a privatized way. In order for members to share the meaning of a particular practice a huge amount of shared knowledge must already be present to assure common ground.

Pragmatic theories have tried to describe the relationship of the individual and social factors by putting specific emphasis on the idealized social side, and focusing on cooperation, rapport, and politeness. This is what SCA wants to change by adding the not-so-favorable side of communication to the picture, such as the trial-and-error nature of the interactional process, egocentrism of interlocutors, impoliteness, etc.

In the following chapters of this book, I will present some of the important pieces of my theory development. The book does not follow a chronological order, rather the different chapters are organized thematically. Each chapter is based on a previously published paper that is either modified to some extent or not. I am much obliged to the publishers that have given their permission to use the previously published materials.

State University of New York, Albany,
NY, USA

Istvan Kecskes

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Contents

Part I General Issues

1	The Socio-Cognitive Approach as a Theoretical Framework	3
1.1	Introduction	3
1.2	The Idealized View of Communication	4
1.3	The Egocentrism View	6
1.4	The Socio-Cognitive Approach	7
1.5	Intention and Salience	9
1.5.1	Types of Intention	9
1.5.2	Salience Effect: Inter-Label Hierarchy and Intra-Label Hierarchy	12
1.6	Two Sides of Context	13
1.7	Common Ground	15
1.7.1	Common Ground in SCA	15
1.7.2	Nature and Dynamism of Common Ground	16
1.8	Summary, Ongoing and Future Research	17
	References	19
2	The Paradox of Communication: A Socio-Cognitive Approach to Pragmatics	23
2.1	Introduction	23
2.2	Three Problems with Current Theories	25
2.2.1	Hearer-Centered Pragmatics	25
2.2.2	Context-Dependency	26
2.2.3	Cooperation Versus Egocentrism	28
2.3	A Socio-Cognitive View: The Construal of Communication	30
2.3.1	Need for a Socio-Cognitive View	30
2.3.2	The Socio-Cognitive View	30
2.4	Intention and Attention	31
2.4.1	Intentions	32
2.4.2	Attention	33
2.5	SCA as Speaker-Hearer Pragmatics	35

- 2.6 Salience as Guiding Mechanism 37
 - 2.6.1 Differences Between SCA and the Graded Salience Hypothesis 37
 - 2.6.2 Salience in Language Production 39
- 2.7 Conclusion 41
- References 42
- 3 Intercultural Communication and our Understanding of Language 45**
 - 3.1 Introduction 45
 - 3.2 Understanding Language 49
 - 3.3 Role of Context 53
 - 3.4 Creativity in Language Processing 56
 - 3.4.1 The Idiom Principle and Economy Principle 56
 - 3.4.2 An Alternative Way of Looking at Linguistic Creativity 57
 - 3.4.3 Deliberate Creativity 58
 - 3.5 Conclusion 60
 - References 61
- 4 Impoverished Pragmatics? The Semantics-Pragmatics Interface from an Intercultural Perspective 65**
 - 4.1 Introduction 66
 - 4.2 The Relationship of Semantics and Pragmatics 69
 - 4.2.1 Semantic Underdeterminacy 69
 - 4.2.2 Constancy and Conventions 71
 - 4.3 Semantics Growing into Pragmatics in Intercultural Interactions 74
 - 4.3.1 Diachronic and Synchronic Pragmatics 74
 - 4.3.2 Prior Context and Actual Situational Context Revisited 77
 - 4.3.3 How Can Speakers in IC Rely Mainly on What they Have Limited Access to? 81
 - 4.4 Summary 84
 - References 85
- Part II Pragmatic Competence and Linguistic Creativity**
- 5 How Does Pragmatic Competence Develop in Bilinguals? 91**
 - 5.1 Introduction 92
 - 5.2 The Nature of Pragmatic Competence 93
 - 5.3 Change of Pragmatic Competence Affected by another Language 94
 - 5.4 Pragmatic Competence in Interlanguage Pragmatics 95
 - 5.5 How Does Pragmatic Competence of Bilinguals Develop and Change? 97

5.5.1	Question for Bilingual Pragmatic Development	98
5.5.2	Differences Between Conceptual Socialization and Language Socialization	99
5.5.3	Dynamic Move on the Continuum of Conceptual Socialization in L2	102
5.6	How Is Pragmatic Competence Reflected in Language Use? . . .	103
5.7	Conclusion	105
	References	106
6	Linguistic Creativity in English as a Lingua Franca	109
6.1	Introduction	109
6.2	Idiom Principle Versus Open Choice Principle	110
6.3	Linguistic Creativity in ELF	113
6.4	Deliberate Creativity	114
6.4.1	Deliberate Creativity in L1	116
6.4.2	Deliberate Creativity in ELF	116
6.5	Summary	119
	References	120
7	Why Do We Say What We Say the Way We Say It?	123
7.1	Introduction	124
7.1.1	Linguistic Salience and Perceptual Salience	124
7.1.2	Need for Research on How Salience Affects Production	125
7.2	Former Research	125
7.3	The Socio-Cognitive Framework	129
7.4	Utterance Generation in SCA	131
7.4.1	The Mechanism	131
7.4.2	Selection and Ordering	132
7.5	Conceptual Accessibility (CA) and Salience	134
7.5.1	Dimensions of Conceptual Accessibility	134
7.5.2	Salience in SCA	135
7.5.3	Competition Between Inherent and Emergent Situational Salience	136
7.6	Differences Between SCA and the Graded Salience Hypothesis .	138
7.7	Salience as a Guiding Mechanism in Utterance Production	140
7.8	Conclusion	141
	References	142
 Part III Context and Salience		
8	Dueling Contexts: A Dynamic Model of Meaning	147
8.1	The Cognitive View	148
8.2	Understanding Context	149
8.3	Dynamic Model of Meaning (DMM) and Context	151

8.4	Meaning Value of Words	153
8.4.1	Do Words Have Meanings?	153
8.4.2	Two Facets of Meaning Value of Words	156
8.5	Application of the Dynamic Model of Meaning	160
8.5.1	How Can DMM Be Used to Explain Meaning Values of Words?	160
8.5.2	Situation-Bound Utterances in the DMM	161
8.6	The Dynamic Model of Meaning and Current Pragmatic Theories	162
8.6.1	Need for a Dialectic Model of Communication	162
8.6.2	Context and Processing	163
8.6.3	Salience and Situational Context	165
8.6.4	Linguistic Underspecification	168
8.7	Conclusion	169
	References	170
9	Context-Sensitivity in Intercultural Impoliteness	173
9.1	Introduction	174
9.2	Approaches to Impoliteness	176
9.3	Context-Dependency	178
9.4	Norms and Context in Intercultural Interactions	182
9.4.1	Norms and the Discursive Approach	182
9.4.2	Context and Semantic Analyzability	185
9.5	Anti-Normative Politeness or Mock Impoliteness	187
9.6	Conclusion	189
	References	190
10	The Role of Context in English as a Lingua Franca	195
10.1	Introduction	195
10.2	Approaches to Context	196
10.3	Contextual Effect and Semantics in ELF	198
10.4	Two Sides of Common Ground	201
10.5	Reliance on Semantic Analyzability	203
10.6	Conclusion	206
	References	206
11	The Interplay of Recipient Design and Salience in Shaping Speaker's Utterance	209
11.1	Introduction	209
11.2	The Sociocognitive Approach	210
11.2.1	Main Tenets of the Sociocognitive Approach	210
11.2.2	Salience in the Sociocognitive Approach	213
11.3	How Is the Speaker's Utterance Shaped?	214
11.4	Context and Speaker Meaning	217
11.5	The Semantics–Pragmatics Interface in L1 and Intercultural Communication	220

- 11.6 When and How Can Speakers Manipulate Speaker Meaning? . . . 222
 - 11.6.1 Salience Effect 222
 - 11.6.2 Speaker Manipulates Speaker Meaning 223
- 11.7 Conclusion 225
- References 226

Part IV Common Ground and Background Knowledge

- 12 Activating, Seeking and Creating Common Ground:
A Socio-Cognitive Approach 231**
 - 12.1 Theoretical Background 232
 - 12.2 Need for a Socio-Cognitive Perspective 233
 - 12.3 Pragmatic and Cognitive Views 234
 - 12.3.1 Pragmatic View 234
 - 12.3.2 Cognitive View 235
 - 12.4 A Socio-Cognitive View: The Construal of Communication 237
 - 12.4.1 Intentions 239
 - 12.4.2 Attention 241
 - 12.5 Assumed Common Ground 243
 - 12.5.1 Understanding Context 244
 - 12.5.2 Assumed Common Ground in the DMM 244
 - 12.5.3 Common Ground Is an Assumption 248
 - 12.6 Conclusion 250
 - References 251
- 13 On the Dynamic Relations Between Common Ground and
Presupposition 255**
 - 13.1 Introduction 256
 - 13.2 The Socio-Cognitive View of Communication 258
 - 13.3 Assumed Common Ground 259
 - 13.3.1 Core Common Ground and Emergent Common
Ground 259
 - 13.3.2 Dynamism of Common Ground 260
 - 13.4 The Speaker-Assigned Presupposition 262
 - 13.4.1 Categorization 263
 - 13.4.2 The Mechanism 265
 - 13.4.3 Dynamism of Presupposition 266
 - 13.5 The Dialectic Relation Between Common Ground and
Presupposition 268
 - 13.6 The Accommodation Problem Revisited 271
 - 13.7 Conclusion 273
 - References 273
- 14 The Interplay of Linguistic, Conceptual and Encyclopedic
Knowledge in Meaning Production and Comprehension 275**
 - 14.1 Introduction 275

- 14.2 Socio-Cultural Background Knowledge 277
- 14.3 The Relationship of Socio-Cultural Background Knowledge
to Linguistic Knowledge and Conceptual Knowledge 278
 - 14.3.1 Understanding the Three Knowledges 278
 - 14.3.2 Approaches to Separating Linguistic Knowledge
from Conceptual Knowledge 280
 - 14.3.3 The Multilingual Perspective 283
- 14.4 A Possible Model of Knowledge Distribution 284
 - 14.4.1 The Relationship of Three Knowledges in the Model . . . 284
 - 14.4.2 Words and Concepts (the Interplay of Linguistic
Knowledge and Conceptual Knowledge) 286
 - 14.4.3 Encyclopedic Knowledge 287
- 14.5 Socio-Cultural Background Knowledge in L2 288
- 14.6 Summary 291
- References 292

- 15 Processing Implicatures in English as a Lingua Franca**
- Communication 295**
 - 15.1 Introduction 295
 - 15.1.1 Objectives 295
 - 15.1.2 Definition of Implicature from an ELF Perspective 296
 - 15.2 The Need for a Modified Understanding of Implicature 298
 - 15.3 Implicatures in Pragmatics 300
 - 15.3.1 The Gricean Approach 300
 - 15.3.2 Utterer Implicatures and Audience Implicatures 302
 - 15.4 Processing Implicatures 303
 - 15.4.1 A Possible Processing Model 303
 - 15.4.2 Processing Problems 305
 - 15.5 Salience and Implicatures 307
 - 15.6 Conclusion 311
 - References 312

- 16 Formulaic Language and its Place in Intercultural Pragmatics 315**
 - 16.1 Introduction 315
 - 16.2 The Socio-Cognitive Approach (SCA) 317
 - 16.3 Formulaic Language in L1 319
 - 16.4 Psychological Saliency of Formulaic Sequences 321
 - 16.5 How Does Intercultural Pragmatics Explain Formulaic
Language Use? 324
 - 16.6 Conclusions and Future Directions 328
 - References 329

Part I
General Issues

Chapter 1

The Socio-Cognitive Approach as a Theoretical Framework



1.1 Introduction

The socio-cognitive approach (SCA) was introduced by Kecskes (2010, 2014) as a theoretical framework for intercultural pragmatics. The new subfield of pragmatics needed a theoretical frame as an alternative to the existing monolingual Gricean approaches in order to explain what happens in intercultural interactions where the interlocutors represent different first languages (L1) and cultures and not a relatively coherent speech community that is ruled by norms and conventions of language use and usage. Also, the new theoretical framework was expected to account for the far from ideal, untidy, occasionally poorly-structured and full of wrong-word-choices language use of intercultural interactions.

SCA does not intend to be cut off from the Gricean theory of pragmatics rather wants to add to it to help research both in intercultural pragmatics and L1-based pragmatics. The need for addition arises from the unbalanced explanatory power of existing theories. Although the field of pragmatics has a variety of approaches to language use, most pragmatic research can be related to two fairly broad traditions: linguistic-philosophical pragmatics (or so-called Anglo-American pragmatics), and sociocultural-interactional pragmatics (or so-called European-Continental pragmatics). Linguistic-philosophical pragmatics seeks to investigate speaker meaning within an utterance-based framework focusing mainly on linguistic constraints on language use. Socio-cultural interactional pragmatics includes research that focuses on the social and cultural constraints on language use as well. Intercultural pragmatics attempts to combine the two traditions into one explanatory system that pays special attention to the characteristics of intercultural interactions. Consequently, the socio-cognitive approach to pragmatics integrates the pragmatic view of cooperation and the cognitive view of egocentrism and emphasizes that both cooperation and egocentrism are manifested in all phases of communication, albeit to varying

extents. This is important for the analysis of intercultural encounters where socio-cultural factors interact with individual cognitive features.

What is new in the SCA in comparison to other Gricean approaches is two important claims. First, SCA emphasizes that while (social) cooperation is an intention-directed practice that is governed by relevance, (individual) egocentrism is an attention-oriented trait dominated by salience which is a semiotic notion that refers to the relative importance or prominence of information and signs. SCA pulls together these seemingly antagonistic factors (cooperation and egocentrism) to explain production and comprehension in the communicative process. Second, SCA claims that pragmatic theories have tried to describe the relationship of the individual and social factors by putting special emphasis on idealized language use, and focusing on cooperation, rapport, and politeness while paying less attention to the untidy, messy, poorly-organized and impolite side of communication. SCA takes a more down-to-earth approach to communicative encounters than current theories, which may help not only our understanding of intercultural communication but also L1 communication.

In the following sections the idealized view of communication is discussed. Then I will analyze how communication is understood in the socio-cognitive approach. Intention and salience are in the focus of Sect. 1.4. The final sections examine the effect of context and common ground.

1.2 The Idealized View of Communication

Current theories of pragmatics derive from the Gricean idealized view of communication. Grice did in pragmatics what Chomsky did in linguistics but, of course from a different perspective and with a different goal in mind. While Chomsky's target was the linguistic system, Grice focused on language use. What is common in their approach is the idealization of a knowledge system (Chomsky) and the systematization of a usage system (Grice). Grice developed an idealized description of communication so that we can better understand what actually happens when human beings interact. That was an important step forward in the field of pragmatics. Science is based on idealizations. For example, physicists or chemists often work with ideal models of reality that they abstract from the existence of friction. Abstraction also occurs when we analyze the semantics-pragmatics division. Carnap (1942) was quite specific about the relationship of the two by saying: "If in an investigation explicit reference is made to the speaker, or, to put it in more general terms, to the user of a language, then we assign it to the field of pragmatics. [. . .] If we abstract from the user of the language and analyze only the expressions and their designata, we are in the field of semantics (Carnap, 1942, p. 9)." It is clear that Carnap treats semantics as an abstraction of pragmatics. Semantics is said to be abstracted away from the specific aspects of concrete discourse situations in which utterances are used. The theory of meaning, both in philosophy and linguistics, is not different. Approaches to the theory of meaning all presuppose an idealized model, which we

can call the standard model. In that model various idealizations have been made to draw attention to the central aspects of linguistic communication. There is nothing wrong with idealization. But we should know that what happens in real life is not the idealized version of communication. The question is: what can we offer beyond just criticizing the ideal view? Can we propose an alternative approach or theory that can explain “messy” communication too? Well, there have been attempts to that extent.

In a paper Kecskes (2010) argued that current research in pragmatics and related fields shows two dominant tendencies: an idealistic approach to communication and context-centeredness. According to views dominated by these tendencies (Relevance Theory and Neo-Gricean approaches), communication is supposed to be a smooth process that is constituted by recipient design and intention recognition (e.g. Clark, 1996; Grice, 1989; Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Capone, 2020). The speaker’s knowledge involves constructing a model of the hearer’s knowledge relevant to the given situational context; conversely, the hearer’s knowledge includes constructing a model of the speaker’s knowledge relevant to the given situational context. This line of research focuses on the “positive” features of communication: cooperation, rapport, politeness.¹ Kecskes (2010, 2020) argued that the emphasis on the decisive role of context, socio-cultural factors and cooperation is overwhelming, while the role of the individual’s prior experience, existing knowledge and egocentrism is almost completely ignored, although these two sides are not mutually exclusive.

The idealistic view on communication that usually goes together with an over-emphasis on context-dependency gives a lopsided perspective on interactions by focusing mainly on the positive features of the process. But communication is more than just a trial-and-error, try-and-try-again, process that is co-constructed by interlocutors. It is said to be a non-summative and emergent interactional achievement (Arundale, 1999, 2008; Mey 2001; Kecskes & Mey, 2008). Therefore, pragmatic theories are expected to focus also on the less positive aspects of communication including breakdowns, misunderstandings, struggles and language-based aggression — features which are not unique, and appear to be as common in communication as are cooperation and politeness.

It is not just SCA that calls attention to the idealized view of communication that governs pragmatics and linguistic research. Similar criticism has been expressed by Beaver and Stanley (2019, [forthcoming](#)) and Stanley (2018) but from the perspective of political speech. Beaver and Stanley isolated five idealizations (cooperativity, rationality, intentionality, alignment, propositionality) that are used in the vast majority of works in the theory of meaning and argued that these idealizations are scientifically problematic and politically flawed. They use the critique of the standard model of pragmatics to propose a new program for the theory of meaning. What they place at the center of inquiry is precisely the features of communication (such as impoliteness, hate speech, misunderstandings, etc.) that the idealized standard model seem to almost deliberately exclude.

¹Positive in a sense that ensures smooth communication and mutual understanding.

What is common in Beaver and Stanley's and Kecskes' approach described above is that they both underline that the idealized L1-based Gricean theory can hardly explain the messy and sometimes untruthful reality of communication. However, while Beaver and Stanley set out to change the Gricean approach and develop a new theory of "messy communication", SCA acknowledges that there is also need for the idealistic approach that provides us with a basic understanding of communicative actions and processes. In the SCA the Gricean theory serves as a starting and reference point to describe and better understand what is expected to happen and what actually takes place in communicative encounters.

1.3 The Egocentrism View

SCA attempts to offer a theoretical frame that considers ideal and messy not like a dichotomy but a continuum with two hypothetical ends incorporating not only the basics of the Gricean theory but also what makes communication "messy": speaker-hearer's egocentrism. This approach was generated by cognitive psychologists such as Barr and Keysar (2005), Giora (2003), Gibbs and Colston (2012), Keysar (2007) and others who argued that speakers and hearers commonly violate their mutual knowledge when they produce and comprehend language. Their behavior is called "egocentric" because it is rooted in the speakers' or hearers' own knowledge instead of their mutual knowledge and common ground. The term is not negative and has nothing to do with "egotistic" behavior. "Egocentric" here refers to the behavior of the interlocutor that is motivated by her/his individual prior knowledge and experience. Studies in cognitive psychology have demonstrated that speakers and hearers are egocentric to a surprising degree. The individual, egocentric endeavors of interlocutors play a much more decisive role, especially in the initial stages of production and comprehension than is envisioned by current pragmatic theories. This egocentric behavior is rooted in the interlocutors' reliance on their own prior knowledge and experience rather than on mutual knowledge. Speaker-hearers appear to be poor estimators of what their partners know. Speakers usually underestimate the ambiguity and overestimate the effectiveness of their utterances (cf. Keysar & Henly, 2002). Referring to key concept of current pragmatic theories cognitive psychologists claim that cooperation, relevance, and reliance on possible mutual knowledge come into play only after the speaker's egocentrism is satisfied and the hearer's egocentric, most salient interpretation is processed. Barr and Keysar (2005) argued that mutual knowledge is most likely implemented as a mechanism for detecting and correcting errors, rather than as an intrinsic, routine process of the language processor.

The egocentric approach is crucial for intercultural pragmatics because in intercultural encounters individual prior experience is even more decisive than in L1 where membership in a speech community provides a core common ground that helps interlocutors process not only literal but also figurative language. Findings by cognitive psychologists have been confirmed by Giora's (1997, 2003) graded

salience hypothesis and Kecskes's (2003, 2008) dynamic model of meaning. They also underlined that interlocutors appear to consider their conversational experience more important than prevailing norms of informativeness. Giora's (2003) main argument is that knowledge of salient meanings plays a primary role in the process of using and comprehending language. She claimed that "...privileged meanings, meanings foremost on our mind, affect comprehension and production primarily, regardless of context or literality" (Giora, 2003, p. 103). Kecskes in his dynamic model of meaning (2008) pointed out that what the speaker says relies on prior conversational experience, as reflected in lexical choices in production. Conversely, how the hearer understands what is said in the actual situational context depends on her/his prior conversational experience with the lexical items used in the speaker's utterances.

If we compare the pragmatic ideal version and the cognitive coordination approach, we may discover that these two approaches are complementary rather than contradictory to each other. The ideal communication view adopts a top-down approach and produces a theoretical construct of pragmatic tenets that warrant successful communication in all cases. In contrast, the cognitive coordination view adopts a bottom-up approach which provides empirical evidence that supports a systematic interpretation of miscommunication, communication breakdowns and repair attempts. In the SCA framework cooperation and egocentrism are not conflicting, and the a priori mental state versus post facto emergence of common ground may converge to a set of integrated background knowledge for interlocutors to rely on in pursuit of relatively smooth communication. So far, no research has yet made an attempt to combine the two, at least to our knowledge.

Therefore, the aim of SCA is to eliminate the ostensible conflicts between common ground notions as held by the two different views and propose an approach that integrates their considerations into a holistic concept that envisions a dialectical relationship between intention and attention in the construal of communication.

1.4 The Socio-Cognitive Approach

The socio-cognitive approach (Kecskes, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014; Kecskes & Zhang, 2009) highlights the complex role and interplay of socio-cultural and private mental models, explains how these are applied categorically and/or reflectively by individuals in response to socio-cultural environmental feedback and framing mechanisms, and describes how this leads to and explains different meaning outcomes and knowledge transfer. In meaning construction and comprehension interlocutors rely both on pre-existing conceptual and encyclopedic knowledge and knowledge co-constructed (emergent) in the process of interaction.

SCA is based on two important claims. First, it treats speaker and hearer as equal participants in the communicative process. Each interlocutor is a speaker and a hearer in one body. They both produce and comprehend language while relying on their most accessible and salient knowledge. They are the same person with the same

mind-set, knowledge and skills. However, when acting as a speaker or as a hearer their goals and functions are different. Interlocutors should be considered individuals with various cognitive states, with different prior experience, with different commitments, and with different interests and agenda. *An important difference between current pragmatic theories and SCA is that there is no “impoverished” speaker meaning in SCA.* The speaker utterance is a full proposition with pragmatic features reflecting the speaker’s intention and preferences and expressing the speaker’s commitment and egocentrism (in the cognitive sense). The proposition expressed may be “underspecified” only from the hearer’s perspective but not from the speaker’s perspective. This is especially important in intercultural pragmatics where the situational context cannot play selective role to the extent as it does in L1 because of the low level of collective salience and common ground between interlocutors.

Second, SCA considers communication a dynamic process, in which individuals are not only constrained by societal conditions but they also shape them. As a consequence, communication is characterized by the interplay of two sets of traits that are inseparable, mutually supportive, and interactive:

Individual traits:	Social traits:
Prior experience	Actual situational experience
Salience	Relevance
Egocentrism	Cooperation
Attention	Intention

Individual traits (prior experience → salience → egocentrism → attention) interact with societal traits (actual situational experience → relevance → cooperation → intention). Each trait is the consequence of the other. Prior experience results in salience which leads to egocentrism that drives attention. Intention is a cooperation-directed practice that is governed by relevance which (partly) depends on actual situational experience. In the SCA communication is considered the result of the interplay of intention and attention motivated by socio-cultural background that is privatized individually by interlocutors. The socio-cultural background incorporates the situational environment (actual situational context in which the communication occurs), the encyclopedic knowledge of interlocutors deriving from their prior experience tied to the linguistic expressions they use, and their current experience, in which those expressions are put to use. In communication people demonstrate the combination of their two sides. On the one hand they cooperate by generating and formulating intention that is relevant to the given actual situational context. In the meantime, their egocentrism (prior experience) activates the most salient information to their attention in the construction (speaker) and comprehension (hearer) of utterances.

A crucial notion of SCA is *privatalization (making something private, subjectivize something)*. Privatalization is the process through which the interlocutor “individualizes” the collective. S/he blends his/her prior experience with the actual situational (current) experience and makes an individual understanding of collective

experience. This approach is supported by the Durkheimian thought according to which cultural norms and models gain individual interpretation in concrete social actions and events (Durkheim, 1982).

Before continuing our description of SCA we need to explain how SCA relates to van Dijk's understanding of the socio-cognitive view in language use. A major difference is that SCA is an extended utterance-centered pragmatic view while Van Dijk's approach is a discursive view on communication. Van Dijk (2008, p. X) said that in his theory it is not the social situation that influences (or is influenced by) discourse, but the way the participants define the situation. He goes further and claims that "contexts are not some kind of objective conditions or direct cause, but rather (inter)subjective constructs designed and ongoingly updated in interaction by participants as members of groups and communities (Van Dijk, 2008, p. X)." In van Dijk's theory everything is co-constructed by interlocutors in the socio-cultural environment (context). There is strong emphasis on meaning construction in the communicative process, but what is somewhat neglected is the "baggage" that the participants bring into the process based on their prior experience. As mentioned above, SCA considers communication a dynamic process in which individuals are not only constrained by societal conditions, but they also shape them at the same time. Interlocutors rely not only on what they co-construct synchronically in the communicative process, but also on what is subconsciously motivated by their prior experience. It needs to be underlined that there are social conditions and constraints (contexts) which have some objectivity from the perspective of individuals. So, it is not that everything is always co-constructed in the actual situational context as claimed in Van Dijk's approach. It is natural that there may always be slight differences in how individuals process those relatively objective societal factors based on their prior experience. Kecskes (2014, 2020) argued *that blending is the main driving force of interactions that is more than just a process of co-construction*. It is combining the interlocutors' prior experience with the actual situational experience which creates a blend that is more than just a merger. In blending, the constituent parts are both distinguishable and indistinguishable from one another when needed. Blending incorporates the dynamic interplay of crossing (parts are distinguishable) and merging (parts are indistinguishable). Depending on the dynamic moves in the communicative process, either crossing or merging becomes dominant to some extent.

In the following the main tenets of SCA will be discussed.

1.5 Intention and Salience

1.5.1 *Types of Intention*

SCA considers the interplay of cooperation directed intention and egocentrism governed attention the main driving force in meaning production and

comprehension. Cooperation means that attention is paid to communicative partners' intention. Attention is driven by individual egocentrism that is the result of salience.

As mentioned above, the pragmatic view is concerned about intention while the cognitive view is more about attention. But in current pragmatic theories there is no explicit explanation of the relations between these two entities. Relevance Theory defines relevance with respect to the effects of both attention and intention but does not distinguish these two effects and never clarifies their relations explicitly. RT theoreticians claim that "an input (a sight, a sound, an utterance, a memory) is relevant to an individual when it connects with background information, he has available to yield conclusions that matter to him" (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p. 3). SCA accepts the centrality of intention in conversation, but it also takes into account the dynamic process in which intention can be an emergent effect of the conversation. Consequently, intention, on the one hand can be private, individual, pre-planned and a precursor to action, as current pragmatic theories state, or it can be abruptly planned or unplanned, or emergent, ad-hoc generated in the course of communication. It should be emphasized, however that there is not a trichotomy here. Rather, *a priori intention*, *salience-charged intention* and *emergent intention* are three sides of the same phenomenon that may receive different emphasis at different points in the communicative process. When a conversation is started, the private and pre-planned nature of intention may be dominant, or a subconscious, salience-charged intention may occur. However, in the course of the interaction the emergent and social nature of intention may come to the fore. These three sides of intention are always present in the interaction; the question is only *to what extent* they are present at any given moment of the process.

Emergent intention is co-constructed by interlocutors in the dynamic flow of conversation. This dynamism is reflected in emerging utterances: they may be interrupted, unfinished, cut and/or started again. It is not only the actual situational context, but also the dynamism of the conversational flow and the process of formulating an utterance that may affect and change the intention. Kecskes (2021) demonstrated that with the following example

(1) HKM: Hong Kong Male, CZM: Chinese Male, TYF: Turkish Female; GMF: German Female; BIF: Bolivian Female.

HKM: Do you think it's... it's kind of difficult for you to make friends here with Americans?

CZM: Hmm.

HKM: ... generally, you know...

BSF: Yeah.

HKM: ...or it's more directly than it is in China...

TYF: Yeah.

HKM: ...in Singapore or that... it's more difficult... what do you think so? Why it's more difficult?

GMF: I am maybe, thinking, it's because... I don't know...

CZM: I would say the culture issue is the most thing. Because, you know, the background is different and errh... even the value is maybe different.

BIF: Yeah. But we have a lot of friends from other countries.

(continued)

CZM: Aha.

BIF: And we...we really met with each other...

BNF: Yeah.

BIF: ...we aren't from Americans, I don't know why.

CZM: Oh.

BSF: The Americans all the times² I guess would know how are you but they don't really want to know how you are.

CZM: Yeah.

BIF: Yeah. Yeah.

HKM starts the conversation with a *pre-planned intention* to talk about how to make friends here with Americans. When he sees that the exchange takes off with difficulties a *salience-triggered intention* leads to an utterance "...or it's more directly than it is in China.." with the goal to provoke responses. CZM's intention is to explain the issue with cultural differences. BIF's *emergent intention* is triggered by CZM's utterance. She wants to say that they (the international students) have many friends who are not Americans. In the course of this short encounter each of the three types of intentions are represented.

SCA introduced a *third type of intention* in between a priori intention and emergent intention: *salience-charged intention*. It was pointed out earlier that salience leads to egocentrism that drives attention which refers to those cognitive resources available to interlocutors that make communication a conscious action. When intention is formed, expressed, and interpreted in the process of communication, attention contributes to the various stages of the process in varying degrees. There are three factors that affect the salience of knowledge and ease of attentional processing in all stages: (a) interlocutors' knowledge based on their prior experience; (b) frequency, familiarity, or conventionality of knowledge tied to the situation; and (c) the interlocutors' mental state and/or the availability of attentional resources. Considering the effect of these three factors, the knowledge most salient to the interlocutors in a particular interaction is the information that is included in their knowledge base, is pertinent to the current situation, and is processed by the necessary attentional resources.

A priori intention and emergent intention are controlled by the interlocutor to some extent. However, salience-charged intention is not necessarily. This intention is mostly subconscious and automatic and can take the place of either of the other two intentions as we saw in example (1) where HKM referred to a direct friend-making attempt that was triggered by actual situational relevance and relied on prior pertinent information. Salience-charged intention means that interlocutors act under the influence of the most salient information that comes to their mind in the given actual situational context.

1.5.2 *Salience Effect: Inter-Label Hierarchy and Intra-Label Hierarchy*

although SCA considers interlocutors speaker-hearers it acknowledges that cognitive mechanisms may work differently when an interlocutor is a speaker or hearer. Salience effect is a good example for this (cf. Kecskes (2008, p. 401). When a lexical item (labeled for private context) is used by a speaker to produce an utterance, private contexts (prior experience of the speaker) attached to this lexical expression are activated top-down in a hierarchical order by salience. For the speaker, there is primarily an inter-label hierarchy (which item to select out of all possible), while for the hearer intra-label hierarchy (which out of all possible interpretations of the particular lexical item) comes in first. The inter-label hierarchy operates in the first phase of production, when a speaker looks for words to express her/his intention. As a first step, s/he has to select words or expressions from a group of possibilities to express communicative intention. This selection may happen consciously or sub-consciously. Words and/or expressions constitute a hierarchy from the best fit to those less suited to the idea the speaker tries to express. To explain how this works we will analyze an excerpt from a movie (see Kecskes 2020).

(2) This is an excerpt from the film “Coogan’s bluff.”

A man and a young woman are sitting in a restaurant after meal. The woman stands up and with a short move reaches for her purse.

W: - I have to be going.

M: - (seeing that she reaches for her purse) what are you doing?

W: - Dutch.

M: - You are a girl, aren’t you?

W: - There have been rumors to that effect.

M: - Sit back and act like one.

W: Oh, is that the way girls act in Arizona?

When the girl wants to leave the restaurant, she says “I have to be going”. She has had several choices (inter-label hierarchy) to express the same meaning: “I must go now”, “it’s time to go”, “I have got to go”, etc. There is no particular reason for her to use “I have to be going”. This expression is that has come to her mind first out of all possible choices.

When the girl attempts to pay the man expresses his objection with asking “what are you doing?”. This hardly looks like salience effect. The man knew exactly what he wanted to say and how he wanted to say it. The girl perfectly understands what the man is referring to, so she tells him “Dutch”, which means she wants to pay for her share of the bill. This does not look like salience effect rather a well-planned expression. The man understands what the girl means although “Dutch” can mean a number of different things (language, people of the Netherlands). “To split the expense” is not very high on the intra-label hierarchy list. Still, that is the most salient meaning, given the situational context. This is why it is important that

salience effect and contextual effect run parallel as the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora, 1997) says. A less salient meaning gets the intended interpretation because of the contextual force in L1.

The man expresses his disapproval in a very indirect but still expressive way: “You are a girl, aren’t you?” The inter-label hierarchy is governed in this case by a well-planned recipient design. The girl’s response shows that she knows what the man is driving at. Then the man hints at what he expects the girl to do “Sit back and act like one”. The intra-label hierarchy helps the girl identify the figurative meaning of “sit back” which means that the man does not want her to pay her share. This inductively developed sequence in the segment is a good example for elaborated recipient design where nothing is said directly, still there is no misunderstanding because the speaker alerts the hearer to what he means.

1.6 Two Sides of Context

In the SCA context has two sides: prior context and actual situational context. This approach differs from the traditional view on context. What is common in the definitions of context is that they generally refer to the actual situational context of the linguistic sign(s) or utterance. Goodwin and Duranti (1992, p. 2) argued that context is “a frame that surrounds the event and provides resources for its appropriate interpretation”. “Resources” here refer to any factor – linguistic, epistemic, physical, social, etc. – that affects the actual interpretation of signs and expressions. According to George Yule (1996, p. 128), ‘context’ is “the physical environment in which a word is used”. Most of the definitions stick to framing context as the actual situational background. Leech (1983, p. 13) claimed that context refers to “any background knowledge assumed to be shared by speaker and hearer and which contributes to his interpretation of what speaker means by a given utterance.” However, this is just one side of context that is referred to as “actual situational context” by Kecskes (2008, 2010, 2014) and there is no mention about “prior context”, which is an important notion in SCA.

In the SCA context is a dynamic construct that appears in different forms in language use both as a repository and/or a trigger of knowledge. This means that it plays both a selective and a constitutive role. Contextualist theories such as Relevance Theory and Neo-Gricean approaches argue that meaning construction is primarily dependent on situational context. Carston claimed that “... linguistically encoded meaning never fully determines the intended proposition expressed” (Carston 2002: 49). Consequently, linguistic data must be completed by non-linguistic, contextual interpretation processes.

SCA, however, points out that the meaning values of linguistic expressions, encapsulating prior contexts of experience, play as important a role in meaning construction and comprehension as actual situational context. *What SCA attempts to do is to bring together individual cognition with situated cognition.* This view recognizes the importance of an individual’s background and biases (often prompted

by prior contexts, prior experience) in information processing (cf. Finkelstein et al., 2008; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988), but at the same time it also suggests that the context in which individuals are situated is strong enough to direct attention and shape interpretation (Elsbach et al., 2005; Ocasio, 1997). Based on this view *SCA emphasizes that there are two sides of context: prior context and actual situational context*. Prior context is a repository of prior contextual experiences of individuals. Prior context makes things/information salient in a communicative encounter and actual situational context makes things/information relevant. Our experience is developed through the regularity of recurrent and similar situations which we tend to identify with given contexts and frames. The standard (prior recurring) context can be defined as a regular situation that we have repeated experience with, and about which we have expectations as to what will or will not happen, and on which we rely to understand and predict how the world around us works. Gumperz (1982, p. 138) said that utterances carry with them their own context or project a particular context. Confirming Gumperz's stance, Levinson (2003) claimed that the message versus context opposition may be misleading because the message can carry with it or forecast the context. Prior, reoccurring context may cancel the selective role of actual situational context. This can be demonstrated through an example taken from Culpeper (2009).

(3)

Culpeper: Example 3: Creative deviation from the default context (cf. "mock impoliteness")

[Lawrence Dallaglio, former England Rugby captain, describing the very close family he grew up in]

"As Francesca and John left the house, she came back to give Mum a kiss and they said goodbye in the way they often did. "Bye, you bitch," Francesca said. "Get out of here, go on, you bitch," replied Mum. (It's in the Blood: My life, 2007)".

Culpeper explained that the reason why the conversation between the mother and daughter does not hurt either of them is due to the context ("mock impoliteness"), meaning "actual situational context." However, a closer look at the example reveals that actual situational context plays hardly any role here. The real defining factor is the strong effect of prior context, prior experience that overrides actual situational context: "...they said goodbye in the way they often did." Reoccurring context, frequent use may neutralize the impolite conceptual load attached to expressions. This is exactly what happens here.

Context represents two sides of world knowledge: one that is already "encoded" with different strength in our mind (prior context) as declarative knowledge and the other (actual situational context) that is out there in the world occurring in situated conversational events (see Kecskes, 2008). These two sides of world knowledge are interwoven and inseparable. Actual situational context is viewed through prior context, and vice versa, prior context is viewed through actual situational context in interactions. Their encounter creates a unique blend of knowledge that supports interpretation of linguistic signs and utterances. According to *SCA*, meaning is the result of the interplay of prior experience and actual situational experience. Prior

experience becomes declarative knowledge that is tied to the meaning values of lexical units constituting utterances produced by interlocutors. Current experience is represented in the actual situational context (procedural knowledge) in which communication takes place, and which is interpreted (often differently) by interlocutors. Meaning formally expressed in the utterance is co-constructed in the course of communication as a result of the interaction and mutual influence of the private contexts represented in the language of interlocutors and the actual situational context interpreted by interlocutors.

In the next section we will discuss common ground that basically unites salience with contextual relevance.

1.7 Common Ground

1.7.1 *Common Ground in SCA*

Common ground refers to the ‘sum of all the information that people assume they share’ (Clark, 2009, p. 116) that may include world views, shared values, beliefs, and situational context. Much of the success of natural language interaction depends on the participants’ mutual understanding of the circumstances in which communication occurs. Common ground and collective salience are based on prior experience (prior context) of members in a particular speech community. Clark et al. (1983, p. 246) defined common ground as follows: “The speaker designs his utterance in such a way that he has good reason to believe that the addressees can readily and uniquely compute what he meant on the basis of the utterance along with the rest of their common ground.” This means that the speaker assumes or estimates the common ground between speaker and hearer with respect to the utterance. Assumed common ground from the speaker’s perspective is based on an assessment of the hearer’s competence to understand the utterance. Common ground makes it possible for speakers to be economical in wording utterances in a given speech community. This traditional approach to common ground, which can be considered core common ground is clearly based on prior experience. However, common ground has another side. SCA brings a new element into the understanding of common ground: *emergent common ground*. In the SCA common ground is directly related to prior context (core common ground) and actual situational context (emergent common ground). The question is how much of common ground is the result of prior experience (core) and how much of it is emergent, growing out of actual situational experience.

In the SCA we distinguish between three components of the common ground: information that the participants share, their understanding the situational context, and relationships between the participants – knowledge about each other and trust and their mutual experience of the interaction. Similar prior contexts, prior experience and similar understanding of the actual situational context will build common ground. It is important to note that *we should not equate prior context with core common ground*. Prior context is a privatized understanding, privatized knowledge

of the individual based on his/her prior experience. Common ground is assumed shared knowledge. Individual prior context is a part of core common ground that is assumed to be shared by interlocutors. The same way emergent common ground is that part of actual situational context that is assumed to be understood similarly by interlocutors in a given situation.

Present research in intercultural pragmatics (e.g. Kecskes, 2014, 2019; Liu & You, 2019; García-Gómez, 2020), and the application of Kecskes' socio-cognitive approach (e.g. Mildorf, 2013; Macagno & Capone, 2017; Macagno, 2018) with its emphasis on emergent common ground, calls attention to the fact that current pragmatic theories (e.g. Stalnaker, 2002; Clark & Brennan, 1991; Clark, 1996) may not be able to describe common ground in all its complexity because they usually consider much of common ground as the result of prior experience and pay less attention to the emergent side of common ground. In the meantime, current cognitive research (e.g. Barr & Keysar, 2005; Colston & Katz, 2005) may have overestimated egocentric (prior experience-based) behavior of the interlocutors and argued for the dynamic emergent property of common ground while devaluing cooperation in the process of verbal communication and the prior experience-based side of common ground. The SCA has attempted to eliminate this conflict and proposes to combine the two views into an integrated concept of common ground, in which both core common ground (assumed shared knowledge, a priori mental representation) and emergent common ground (emergent participant resource, post facto emergence through use) converge to construct a socio-cultural background for communication.

Based on this view, in the SCA common ground is perceived as an effort to merge the mental representation of shared knowledge that is present as declarative memory that we can activate, shared knowledge that we can seek, and rapport, as well as knowledge that we can create and co-construct in the communicative process. The core components and emergent components join in the construction of common ground in all stages, although they may contribute to the interaction in different ways, in various degree, and in different phases of the communicative process as demonstrated by studies based on the application of SCA (e.g. Mildorf, 2013; Macagno & Capone, 2017; Macagno, 2018; La Mantia, 2018).

1.7.2 Nature and Dynamism of Common Ground

Core common ground is a repertoire of knowledge that can be assumed to be shared among individuals of a speech community independent of the situational circumstances, such as when and where the conversation occurs, between whom it occurs, etc. In contrast, emergent common ground is knowledge that emerges, is co-constructed and/or involved as shared enterprises in the particular situational context that pertains to the interlocutors. Core common ground is a general assumption in two ways. First, although core common ground is relatively static and shared among people, it usually changes diachronically. During a certain period, say a