

# The interplay of prior experience and actual situational context in intercultural first encounters

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The study aims to investigate how prior experience of interlocutors interacts with actual situational context in intercultural interactions when the latter is represented by a well-known frame: getting acquainted with others. It attempts to demonstrate how the cultural frame of the target language is broken up and substituted with an emergent frame that is co-constructed from elements from prior experience with the target language, the first language and the actual situational experience.

Getting acquainted with others is a closed social situation, a cultural frame in which interlocutors usually have to follow a behavior pattern dictated by the requirements of the socio-cultural background in a given speech community. There is a 'skeleton' of these 'getting to know you' procedures that can be considered universal but is substantiated differently in every language. In each conversation in any language, 'flesh' is added to the 'skeleton' in a dynamic and co-constructed manner. However, there is a difference between how this happens in L1 and in intercultural interactions. While in L1 the 'flesh' on the skeleton is predetermined to a significant extent by requirements of core common ground in the given language, in intercultural encounters this 'flesh building' process in the target language (in this case English) is not set but is co-constructed by the interlocutors as emergent common ground relying on their prior experience with their own L1 culture, limited experience with the target culture and the assessment of the actual situational context. In this study the co-construction process, i.e. emergent common ground will be analyzed by examining the use of formulaic language and freely generated language in several discourse segments.

**Keywords:** getting acquainted, actual situational context, prior context, skeleton, co-construction, common ground

## 1. Introduction

Getting acquainted with others is a joint activity (Goffmann 1967; Clark 1996) in any language. It is a closed social situation, a frame in which interlocutors usually have to follow a behavior pattern dictated by the requirements of socio-cultural background in a given speech community (see Svennevig 1999). There is a 'skeleton' of these closed social situations (including 'getting to know you' procedures) that can be considered universal. This universal 'skeleton X' is substantiated and develops into a language-specific 'skeletonE' (English) or 'skeletonR' (Russian) or 'skeletonH' (Hungarian), etc., in each language, with particular expectations for interlocutors to follow. Of course, these expectations may or may not be followed by participants in actual situational contexts. How the skeleton-dictated expectations are lexicalized in each instance is up to each individual speaker participating in the interaction. In every conversation in any language, 'flesh' is added to the 'skeleton' in a dynamic and co-constructed manner. See, for instance, Example (1) where skeletonE<sup>1</sup> is used for a closed social situation: returning books in a library. A librarian speaks with a student in two instances (1A), (1B).

- (1) A. L: Returning?  
       S: Yeah.  
       L: Your ID, please.  
       S: Here you are.  
       L: Anything to check out?  
       S: These two books, please.
- B. L: Can I help you?  
       S: Yes, I am returning these books.  
       L: Can I see some ID, please?  
       S: Sure.  
       L: Thank you. Anything else?  
       S: No, thanks.

There is a skeletonE (2) behind these two fleshed out encounters, which can be modeled as follows:

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1. In this paper skeletonE refers to American English.

- (2) L: [inquiry about goal of visit]  
S: [stating goal of visit]  
L: [request for ID]  
S: [response]  
L: [thanking plus question about else]  
S: [response]

As we can see above, the skeleton of the closed social situation can be filled in with different utterances. Individuals always adapt cultural models to the situation at hand to meet their needs. People use cultural models as devices to facilitate effective interaction with others in the various communities to which they belong. In this way individuals not only shape cultural models, but also are constrained by them. Most of these cultural models come from people's past experience and reoccurring prior contexts, but they are constantly recreated in use (e.g. D'Andrade and Strauss 1992; Gee 1999; Kronenfeld 2008; Liu & You 2019; Lar and Lundell 2019). It is important to note that people are not required to follow cultural conventions (whether in the use of cultural models or in other ways). At any given time they can ignore or modify these models that are triggered in their mind by the actual situational context. Given cultural models can (and often do) show slight variations across groups to which we all belong – groups that can be formal or informal, long-lived or evanescent, imposed or voluntary, and so forth.

However, there is a difference between how these models work in L1 and in intercultural interactions. While in L1 the 'flesh' on the skeleton that constitutes a basis for a model is predetermined mainly by requirements of core common ground and conventions in the given language, in intercultural encounters this 'flesh building' process in the target language (varieties of English) is not set, but is co-constructed by the interlocutors based on their prior experience with their own L1 culture, limited experience with the target language and culture (any inner circle varieties of English)<sup>2</sup> and the assessment of the actual situational context. But we do not claim that L1 (intra-)communication and intercultural communication constitute a dichotomy. In fact, they are two hypothetical ends of a continuum. Any conversation in any language represents an up-and-down move on the continuum, coming closer to or moving further away from either hypothetical end (see further explanation in Kecskes 2015, 2018). However, the 'flesh building' process in intercultural interactions shows some significant difference from that in L1. In this study the co-construction process will be analyzed by examin-

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2. This can be any inner circle variety of English, such as British, American, Australian or New Zealand English. However, as stated before in this paper, I focus only on American English.

ing the use of formulaic language and freely generated language in the discourse segments. But before we look at the data, we will need to discuss the two sides of context that play a decisive role in the ‘flesh building’ process.

## 2. Understanding context

In linguistics, context usually refers to any factor – linguistic, epistemic, physical, social – that affects the actual interpretation of signs and expressions. Context-dependency is one of the most powerful views in current linguistic and philosophical theory going back to Frege (1884), Wittgenstein (1921) and others. The *Context Principle* of Frege (1884) asserts that a word has meaning only in the context of a sentence. Wittgenstein (1921) basically formulated the same idea, saying that an expression has meaning only in a proposition. Every variable can be conceived as a propositional variable. This external perspective on context holds that context modifies and/or specifies word meanings in one way or another. Context is seen as a selector of lexical features because it activates some of these features while leaving others in the background. A context-driven pragmatic process is generally top-down. It is usually not triggered by an expression in the sentence, but occurs for purely pragmatic reasons: that is, in order to make sense of what the speaker says (see Horn 2019; Warner 2019). Such processes are also referred to as “free” pragmatic processes. They are considered free because they are not mandated by the linguistic expressions, but respond to pragmatic considerations only. For example, the pragmatic process through which an expression is given a non-literal (e.g. a metaphorical or figurative) interpretation is context-driven because we interpret the expression non-literally in order to make sense of a given speech act, not because this is required by linguistic expressions. This is demonstrated in Example (3) in the interpretation of the expression *hold your horses*. Actual situational context selects the formulaic, metaphorical interpretation rather than the literal one.

(3) **Bob:** Let’s go. We gonna be late.

**Jim:** Hold your horses, alright? I’m not ready to leave yet.

The opposite view on context is the *internalist perspective*. This approach considers lexical units as creators of context (see Gee 1999; Violi 2000; Gil 2019; Warner 2019). Violi (2000: 117) claimed that our experience is developed through the regularity of recurrent and similar situations which we tend to identify with given contexts. 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. This is why we have cultural frames and 'skeletons' (e.g. Goffman 1974; D'Andrade & Strauss 1992) It is exactly these standard contexts that linguistic meanings tied to lexical units refer to. For instance:

- (4) Help yourself.  
You are all set.  
Be my guest.

These *situation-bound utterances* (SBU) can actually create their own contexts (see Kecskes 2003; Kecskes 2010b). Gumperz (1982:138) said that utterances somehow carry with them their own context or project a context. Referring to Gumperz's work, Levinson (2003) argued that the message-versus-context opposition is misleading because the message can carry with it or forecast the context. Of course, this is not exactly true for each case. But the conventional use is sometimes so strongly encoded in the expression that it is powerful enough to override the selective role of actual situational context. This is especially true with expressions that have a sexual connotation. This is illustrated in Example (5).

- (5) In one of his films titled "Survivors", Robin Williams says the following:  
"I had to sleep with the dogs. Platonically, of course..."

The speaker thinks that the sexual connotation of *sleep with* (collective salience) is so strong that a clarification is indispensable. So he tries to cancel this effect with the adverb *platonically*.<sup>3</sup> Giora (2003) claimed that both salient information and contextual knowledge run in parallel in interpretation, and salient, but contextually inappropriate information may not be discarded. This is the main reason why the speaker thought that the collective salience effect could be canceled with the adverbial *platonically*.

The main problem with the externalist and internalist views of context is that they are both one-sided because they emphasize either the selective or the constitutive role of context. However, the dynamic nature of human speech communication requires that we recognize both regularity and variability in meaning construction and comprehension, and take into account both the selective and constitutive roles of context at the same time. World knowledge is available to interlocutors in two ways: (1) as tied to lexical items and images based on prior encounters and experience, and (2) as provided by the actual situational context framed by the given situation (Kecskes 2008; Kecskes 2010b). Accord-

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3. As one of the reviewers pointed out, this is most likely for humorous effect here, which is possible. Much humor relies on initially misunderstanding the utterance based on salience, then realizing the speaker means something else, or is being deliberately ambiguous. Salience may be the reason that much humor works.

ing to the socio-cognitive approach to pragmatics (Kecskes 2010a; Kecskes 2014), context represents two sides of world knowledge: prior context and actual situational context, which are intertwined and inseparable. Actual situational context is viewed through prior context, and this combination creates, as it were, a third space. Meaning is, in this view, seen as the outcome of the interrelation and interaction of prior and current experience (contexts). In this study, we would like to examine and discuss how this interplay is reflected in ‘getting acquainted with others’ scenarios.

### 3. ‘Getting acquainted with others’ in the first language

#### 3.1 Prior studies

In L1 there are rules and conventions regulating the rights and obligations of social actors to engage in conversation with one another. The ritual procedures that regulate the entry into a conversation give the actors official status as ratified participants (Goffman 1967, 1974). In this study, our focus is on exchanges in which interlocutors are committed to more extensive future interaction, and thus they have a greater motivation in getting acquainted (e.g. Svennevig 1999; Haugh 2011; Haugh & Carbaugh 2015).

Most of the research so far on conversations between unacquainted persons has been carried out within social psychology, where there has been little attention paid to the details of language and social interaction. Relying primarily on experimental data or staged conversations, social psychologists have focused on psychological themes such as “self-disclosure” (Holtgraves 1990; Vittengl & Holt 2000), “uncertainty reduction” (Berger 1992), and “mental scripts” (Kellerman & Lim 198 ). The only work that focuses on the analysis of authentic, spontaneous conversations is by Usami (1994, 2002). She analyzed conversations between unacquainted Japanese speakers from a social-psychological perspective. Using the framework of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory of politeness, Usami found a number of strategies employed in the initial part of conversations between unacquainted persons in both Japanese and (American) English, including laughing/smiling, joking, establishing common topics, and showing interest (Haugh 2011). She also found a similar range of topics across both Japanese and English interactions (Usami 1994). In coding various strategies and topic shifts in a large corpus of 72 conversations, and analyzing the frequency of these relative to age, Usami (2002) argued that the use of strategies, as well as the initiation of topics, depends on both the age of the speaker and the other interlocutor.<sup>4</sup>

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4. The relation between age and power is Usami’s opinion.  
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Haugh (2011) argued that there are very real sequential constraints on how interlocutors introduce and develop personal matters in conversation, as well as the ways in which topics are introduced, as work in conversation analysis has demonstrated (Maynard & Zimmerman 1984; Svennevig 1999). “Pre-topical” (Maynard & Zimmerman 198 ) or “self-presentational” sequences (Svennevig 1999), for instance, generally consist of a presentation eliciting question (first position), minimal or expanded self-presentation from the other interlocutor (second position), and then a response from the initiator of the sequence (third position) (Svennevig 1999:10 ). Deviations from this three-part structure are interpretable as marked, and thus ‘getting acquainted’ constitutes an activity type as defined by Levinson (1992:69). Moreover, such sequential constraints, particularly the ways in which interlocutors orient to their lack of acquaintance through these sequences, have implications for the development of their relationships. Svennevig (1999:136–160) argued that politeness arises by speakers showing attentiveness through their orientation to others. This display of attentiveness is implicit in the self-presentational sequence, mutual self-selection (as speaker) to show involvement, self-revelatory comments that build intimacy, and self-oriented comments to show alignment, the latter two also being noted by Maynard and Zimmerman (1984:313) in their earlier study. The importance of the relational implications of talk between unacquainted persons is also apparent in the ways in which interlocutors deal with (potential) impoliteness or offence. Both Maynard and Zimmerman (1984:311) and Svennevig (199 :236–237) claimed that speakers generally avoid talking about themselves in ways that might offend the other interlocutor, as well as avoiding topics or giving evaluations that could be perceived as offensive. Instead, they seek “safe topics” with which they can establish common ground (see Brown & Levinson 1987: 112–124).

### 3.2 Common features of the frame in L1

All of these studies focused on L1 communication where prior, recurrent context plays a decisive role in the form of predetermined frames and somewhat ritualistic language use requirements in ‘getting acquainted’ scenarios. The studies reviewed above refer to these issues directly or indirectly. They mentioned the structured format that interlocutors follow and the eagerness of participants to seek common ground in the first exchanges. In L1, the ‘flesh’ on the skeleton is predetermined mainly by requirements of core common ground that develops through experience in the given speech community. Oftentimes this core common ground is expressed through prefabricated routines that are recalled automatically, subcon-

sciously in the given frame. Let us look at two exchanges to see how this happens in different 'getting acquainted' scenarios.<sup>5</sup>

- (6) Two students are at the Registrar's office. Jim has been waiting with other students before him. Susan walks up to him.

**Susan** Hi, I am Susan.

**Jim** Nice to meet you, Susan. How are you?

**Susan** Fine, thank you. Have you been waiting for long?

**Jim** Yes, about 30 minutes. And I think we both will need to wait more.

- (7) Josh entering the room in the Department of Physics where he was supposed to meet with Peter to discuss a video-taping schedule.

**Josh** Hi. My name is Josh. Are you Peter?

**Peter** Yes, I am. Hi Josh. I'm glad you have found us.

**Josh:** I didn't have any problems. I found directions on the internet so it was pretty easy to get here. However, the traffic was not that great.

What we see in these two conversations basically confirms what former research has discussed (see above). There is a well-definable frame which is filled in with prefabricated expressions. The skeleton behind the exchanges can be described as below:

[greeting]

[introduction]

[exchange of politeness]

[strong initiative]: question or statement related to common interest

The last part of the frame STRONG INITIATIVE is a crucial element. The progress of the exchange depends significantly on it. What we call STRONG INITIATIVE are conversational contributions with the interactional effect of eliciting information. This has to be a request for some substantial information response, and not just the first part of any adjacency pairs (see Linell & Gustavsson 1987) or some statement, claim or provocative utterance that can trigger further exchanges. In Example (6), Susan's question *Have you been waiting for long?* and in Example (7), *I'm glad you have found us* can be considered strong initiatives. Strong initiatives play an important role in intercultural communication too, as the study described below will demonstrate.

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5. Conversations noted down by graduate students in field reports.



#### 4. The intercultural study

A small-scale pilot study<sup>6</sup> was conducted to identify the unique features (if any) of ‘getting acquainted’ encounters and investigate the interplay of prior context and actual situational context in this type of intercultural interaction. It should be underlined that this is not a comparative study to identify the differences between intracultural and intercultural communication. It is a study on intercultural interaction to find out how language production mechanisms work when there is limited common ground and less support from actual situational context, and how those mechanisms make up for these ‘deficiencies’. Based on the goals of the study, I formulated three research questions:

1. What is the ratio of formulaic language versus freely generated language in the discourse segments? What do this ratio and the types of formulas used say about the nature of the co-construction process?
2. How much do interlocutors follow the target language pattern (English) in the first phase of interaction? What factors trigger deviations from the target norms?
3. What factors in the subjects’ language behavior demonstrate differences in assessment of the actual situational context?

#### 5. Methodology

##### 5.1 Data collection

In order to answer the research questions, I collected data through semi-natural conversations that lasted 30 minutes. These exchanges represented spontaneous speech on topics like health, sports, and living in Albany. The conversations were video-recorded. The participants were as follows: C1 Japanese and Korean, C2 Korean and Turkish, C3 Korean and Chinese, C4 Japanese and Chinese, C5 Chinese and Korean, C6 Korean and Burmese, C7 African-French and Korean. Pairs were set up randomly. They were asked to conduct a spontaneous conversation about the topics mentioned above. No other instruction was given to the subjects. They were told that their conversation would be video-recorded. The subjects were students in the masters program in TESOL at a university in the

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6. I would like to emphasize that this is a small-scale pilot study with the goal of identifying unique features (if any) of ‘getting acquainted’ exchanges. Accordingly, the findings will show **only tendencies** that are expected to give directions for further research rather than make strong claims about the nature of the encounters.

northeastern part of the US. In this study, the focus will be on how the participants started the conversations, how they tried to get acquainted with each other.

## 5.2 Data analysis and discussion

The results of data analysis will be presented in relation to the research questions.

### 5.2.1 *Research question 1*

RQ<sub>1</sub> asked about the ratio of formulaic language versus freely generated language in the discourse segments, and what this ratio and the types of formulas used say about the nature of the co-construction process. In the analysis we counted the number of utterances in the discourse segment and defined how many of those utterances can be considered formulaic.<sup>7</sup> Formulaic expressions were defined based on their possible reoccurrences in similar situations. We categorized formulaic units into three groups: *introductory formulas* (IF), *politeness markers* (PM) and *strong initiatives* (SI). Here are some examples chosen randomly from the conversations to illustrate which expressions we included in the three categories of formulaic expressions:

#### **Introductory formulas**

Can I ask your name?

And who are you?

And what is your name?

I am Hyon. And you?

Call me Jianmin.

Let me introduce myself first. I'm a visiting scholar from a Chinese university. My name is Yi.

My name is Patrick.

My name is Emi.

#### **Politeness markers**

Emi. Nice to meet you.

Me too. Nice to meet you.

Good to see you, Kemal.

The same here.

So glad to meet you.

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7. There were three raters, including the author. We included one-word utterances and unfinished utterances in the count along with full utterances. Formulaic expressions were defined based on their possible reoccurrences in similar situations. The rating process required a 2:1 agreement between the raters.

**Strong initiatives**

Let me ask you, how long you have been here?

So how long have you been here?

How long have you been here?

Hi, do you know where can I swim?

Oh how was it?

There were a couple of expressions that did not belong to any of the three categories, so we considered them to be ‘fillers’, such as *so I just want to ask do you exercise on a regular basis?*, *And what about?*

Table 1 contains information about the three categories. The first column shows the ratio of total number of utterances in the exchange to number of formulaic expressions. Because each discourse segment was different in size and contained a different number of utterances, we had to indicate in the table not only the total number of utterances and the total number of formulas, but also their ratio in percentages. These are the two pieces of information that the first two numbers in the chart show. In the last column, we gave the total number of formulaic expressions (TO) first, then the number of occurrences of introductory formulas (IF), politeness markers (PM) and strong initiatives (SI) that are the main elements of the ‘getting acquainted’ skeleton.

TO-IF-PM-SI	
C1: 11-3 (27.2%)	(3: 2-0-1)
C2: 16-4 (25.0)	(4: 1-2-1)
C3: 15-3 (20.0)	(3: 0-0-1)
C4: 16-5 (31.2)	(5: 2-1-2)
C5: 14-2 (14.2)	(2: 0-0-2)
C6: 19-3 (15.7)	(3: 0-0-2)
C7: 17-6 (35.2)	(6: 2-3-1)

**Table 1.** Results by categories

The numbers show some very interesting things about the co-construction process. If we look at the percentages, we see that as far as formulaic language use is concerned there are no significant differences between the conversations. Lower percentages mean less formulaic language use while higher percentages mean more formulaicity. The lowest percentages are C5 (14.2) and C6 (15.7) and the highest one is C7 (35.2). Most of the subjects tried to stick to the target language norms as regards the formulas they picked and did not seem to try to

reconceptualize the 'getting acquainted' scenario according to their own culture.<sup>8</sup> However, there is much more difference in how people from different cultural backgrounds 'fleshed out' the skeleton that, according to target language norms, requires the following sequence: introductory formula, politeness marker, strong initiative (see above). If we look at this order of turns, we can see that there are no introductory formulas in three cases, no politeness markers in four cases, but there are strong initiatives in every case. *So it looks like subjects use target language formulas, but not necessarily as the target language skeleton requires.* From this perspective it is especially important to note that C3 (Chinese – Korean), C5 (Chinese – Korean) and C6 (Korean – Thai) almost entirely break up the target language skeleton and act according to their own emergent rules in the actual situational context. This is a small-scale study, so it would be a mistake to make an overreaching generalization. However, given that the subjects come from China and Korea, there might be a tendency to reconceptualize the close social situation according to the actual situational context rather than just relying on the target language or L1-based skeleton.

### C3. Chinese – Korean

- **How long have you been here?**
- Oh like a.... getting to be ... almost one year
- One year?
- Yeah, almost one year. But it's like ... ten months ... since ive been here
- Oh it's good.
- Two monthses to go.
- So you live on campus?
- Off campus.
- You live with your classmates or with your friends from Korea?
- My friend .. he ... she is from Taiwan.
- And **what is your name?**
- I am Hyon. And you?
- **Call me Jianmin.**

### C5. Chinese – Korean

- **Hi, do you know where** can I swim?
- Yeah, actually on campus you know there is a gym.
- A gym ... ah I heard... I heard students can swim.
- Yeah go there.
- Yeah.
- For free.

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8. However, we cannot be sure of what exactly their culture would require.

- Did you visit there?
- Mmm I only went to the gym and went swimming .... Like at the very beginning of last semester.
- Oh **how was it?**
- It's good.
- Really?
- You know it was at the beginning of the semester so basically there weren't so many students.
- Ahhh.

As we can see, both conversations start *in medias res*,<sup>9</sup> no introductory formulas, no politeness markers. However, the exchanges are vivid, with the subjects co-constructing their own frame that does not seem to mirror any language- or culture-specific frame, but is created almost from scratch by the participants.<sup>10</sup>

### 5.2.2 Research question 2

RQ2 was about the guiding factors of co-construction. The sequences show that the main guiding force in producing the sequences must have been the individual assessment of the actual situational context. The subjects' mindset did not seem to have been dominated either by target language norms or L1 norms. Instead of using skeletonE or skeletonK or skeletonC,<sup>11</sup> they focused on the process of building up a smooth and informative exchange. Emergent features seem to have affected their behavior more than prior knowledge. Kecskes (2014, 2019) argued that in intercultural interactions there seems to be a shift in emphasis from the communal to the individual. It is not that the individual becomes more important than the societal; rather, since common ground is limited, it should be created in the interactional context in which interlocutors function as core common ground creators rather than just common ground seekers and activators, as is mostly the case in L1 communication. *There is more reliance on language created ad hoc by individuals in the course of interaction than on prefabricated language and pre-existing frames.* So the role of the individual with his/her individual background, understanding of present experience, language use habits and creativity in general increases because interlocutors need to create their own ad hoc frames and 'common' language. Of course, this does not mean that they have abandoned all their prior experience. As we discussed in the previous section, there was some use of target language formulas, which was quite significant in

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9. I.e., 'right in the middle'.

10. However, we cannot know this for sure.

11. SkeletonE = English, SkeletonK = Korean, SkeletonC = Chinese

exchanges such as C7 or C4. They followed the target language skeleton more than the other conversations did.

#### **C7. African French – Japanese**

- My name is Patrick.
- My name is Emi.
- Emi. Nice to meet you.
- Me too. Nice to meet you.

#### **C4. Chinese – Japanese**

- Let me introduce myself first. I'm a visiting scholar from a Chinese university. My name is Yi.
- Ok, so we are familiar. (laughing)

There was one motivating force that was common in each of the seven sequences: the recognition of the fact that *a strong initiative is needed*. The question was where they introduce the strong initiative. All subjects did that at the very beginning of the conversation with the exception of C4 and C7, who followed the target language pattern as we saw above. Here are some examples:

#### **C2. Turkish – Korean**

- **OK, so you are Kim.**
- Yes. How do you know?
- I overheard your conversation with that girl.
- And who are you?
- I am Kemal.
- Good to see you, Kemal.
- The same here.

#### **C5. Chinese – Korean**

- **Hi, do you know where can I swim?**
- Yeah, actually on campus you know there is a gym.
- A gym ... ah I heard... I heard students can swim.
- Yeah go there.

It is not that the subjects give up their prior experience with the target language norms and L1 social constraints. They do use them in a way that the co-constructing process requires, taking into account the actual situational context. They create something almost from scratch, using some building elements from the target language and L1-affected strategies and arranging them as required by the flow of conversation and not as required by the target language norms. So we can see the interplay of prior contexts and actual situational context in the co-constructing process. But that interplay is much less predetermined and con-

strained than it is in L1 interactions, where common ground and prior experience with the frame and formulaic expressions that are expected to be used in the frame may be dominant.

### 5.2.3 *Research question 3*

#### *Power of actual situational context*

The actual situational context in this study required strangers to come into contact and start to talk in the given circumstances.<sup>12</sup> In the exchanges, two people whose relationship was characterized by a low degree of intimacy found themselves in close proximity. This put them under the strain of conversing in order to defuse the potential hostility of silence (see Schneider 1987: 251). There was very little or no core common ground, which resulted in an urge to establish some. As a consequence, in most cases this resulted in breaking up the skeleton, ignoring the introductory formulas and politeness markers and getting right down to business: to create some common ground that could be used for further interaction. So it is not necessarily the case that the subjects did not know the target language frame or the formulas that are usually used in 'getting acquainted' scenarios. They must have been quite familiar with those because they had lived in the US for at least a couple of years.<sup>13</sup> But the need for common ground creation seems to have overridden everything else. From this perspective, two conversations stand out as very interesting.

#### **C3. Chinese – Korean**

- **How long have you been here?**
- Oh like a.... getting to be ... almost one year
- One year?
- Yeah, almost one year. But it's like ... ten months. ... since ive been here
- Oh it's good.
- Two monthses to go.
- So you live on campus?
- Off campus.
- You live with your classmates or with your friends from Korea?
- My friend .. he ... she is from Taiwan.
- **And what is your name?**
- I am Hyon. And you?
- **Call me Jianmin.**

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12. The scenario was not fully natural because they were asked to talk to each other by the researchers.

13. There is much research that confirms that even very fluent L2 speakers can ignore target language frames, formulas and requirements for individual reasons (e.g. Ortaçtepe 2012;

In C3 the interlocutors start with a strong initiative, and at the end of the sequence they ask each other's name. So basically, they do the opposite of what the L1 frame requires. But the strong initiative is a good starter. The conversation continues vividly and the two interlocutors establish a rapport quite easily. In C2 the Turkish student states the Korean student's name, which surprises her. It is a very unusual start for an introductory exchange. But after the Turkish student explains why he knows her name, they exchange some introductory formulas.

## C2. Turkish – Korean

- **OK, so you are Kim.**
- Yes. How do you know?
- I overheard your conversation with that girl.
- **And who are you?**
- I am Kemal.
- **Good to see you, Kemal.**
- **The same here.**
- Do you like the sports?
- I like.

## *Convergence in intercultural interactions*

To answer the research question, we must look at how subjects handled common ground, and why that is an important issue. According to Clark (1996), in order for one person to understand another, there must be a “common ground” of knowledge between them. Duranti (1997) argued that even comparatively simple exchanges such as greetings or getting acquainted are organized according to complex socio-historic cultural knowledge and are dependent for their interactional accomplishment on participants ‘sharing’ that knowledge, having it as part of common ground. Where this knowledge is not shared, one might expect breaches of those taken-for-granted linguistic forms, with all kinds of interactional consequences. The more common ground we share with another person, the less effort and time we need to convey and interpret information. Enfield (2008:223) uses the term “economy of expression” for this phenomenon. People usually infer this common ground from their past conversations, their immediate surroundings, and their shared cultural background and experience.

Kecskes and Zhang (2009) and Kecskes (2014) distinguished between *core common ground* that is directly related to prior contexts and prior experience, and *emergent common ground* that is tied to actual situational context. They claimed that emergent common ground dominates intercultural interactions because most (but not all) common ground needs to be co-constructed by the participants. What intercultural pragmatics research calls our attention to with its emphasis



on emergent common ground is that current pragmatic theories (e.g. Stalnaker 2002; Clark & Brennan 1991; Clark 1996) may not be able to describe common ground in its complexity because they usually consider much of common ground to be the result of prior experience and pay less attention to the emergent side of common ground. In the meantime current cognitive research (e.g. Arnseth & Solheim 2002; Barr 2004; Barr & Keysar 2005a, 2005b; Colston & Katz 2005; Koschmann & Le Baron 2003) may have overestimated the egocentric behavior of interlocutors and argued for the dynamic emergent property of common ground while devaluing the overall significance of cooperation in the process of verbal communication and the a priori side of common ground. The socio-cognitive approach proposed by Kecskes (2008, 2014, 2019) attempts 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, a post facto emergence through use) converge to construct a socio-cultural background for communication.

Basically, this is what our data have demonstrated. In the course of interaction, core common ground and emergent common ground converge to construct a socio-cultural background for the communicative event. But in our data interlocutors do not necessarily follow the route from core common ground to emergent common ground, as is usually the case in L1 interactions in which participants activate and seek common ground (see Enfield 2008; Kecskes & Zhang 2009). As said earlier, our subjects often start with a strong initiative like in C2:

**C2. Turkish – Korean**

- Ok, so you are Kim.
- Yes. How do you know?
- I overheard your conversation with that girl.

Another interesting issue is connected with presuppositions. From the perspective of common ground building, it is interesting to note how presuppositions work in our ‘getting acquainted’ data. The C2 exchange starts with a presupposition: *Ok, so you are Kim*. The information that the Korean student’s name is Kim is not part of common ground in the conversation. As a general rule, what is already part of common ground may be presupposed in the interaction, whereas new information has to be asserted explicitly (Clark 1996). If information that is not part of common ground is presupposed, it may be questioned or objected to. However, this is not always the case. Even presuppositions can sometimes convey new information, as is the case in C2. Then they are accepted, thus they create emerging common ground (see also Lewis 1979). This type of presupposition is quite fre-

quent in intercultural interactions. We have seen it in C2 and also in C3, where the presupposition functions as a strong initiative in the form of a question:

### C3. Chinese – Korean

- How long have you been here?
- Oh like a.... getting to be ... almost one year
- One year?
- Yeah, almost one year. But it's like ... ten months. ... since ive been here
- Oh it's good.
- Two monthses to go.
- **So you live on campus?**
- Off campus.
- **You live with your classmates or with your friends from Korea?**
- My friend .. he ... she is from Taiwan.
- And what is your name?
- I am Hyon. And you?
- Call me Jianmin.

There are two instances in this sequence where questions function as presuppositions. (1) *So you live on campus?* This question presupposes that the Korean student lives on campus. However, it is not confirmed so it cannot become part of common ground. (2) *You live with your classmates or with your friends from Korea?* This is a two-way presupposition that expects choice and confirmation. The answer from the Korean girl does not confirm either. So this piece of information also loses its common ground candidate status.

## 6. Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate how prior experience of interlocutors interacts with actual situational context when that context is represented by a well-known frame: getting acquainted with others. Contrary to what we usually see in L1 close social situations (see Duranti 1997; Enfield 2008), prior contexts and prior experience of interlocutors do not seem to dominate language production in intercultural interactions. There is less reliance on prior experience and core common ground because those are quite limited. The actual situational context usually overrides the influence of prior reoccurring context and prior experience in our data. We have found three factors that confirm this claim. First, there was limited use of target language formulas that are the best representatives of prior experience with target language culture. Although interlocutors might be familiar with

those phrases,<sup>14</sup> they abandoned them or did not use them as the target language skeleton would require them to. Second, subjects gave priority to strong initiatives that were triggered by the actual situational context. Interlocutors needed something to go on with their conversation, so they introduced a strong initiative as early as they found necessary. Third, core common ground that is based on prior experience was overtaken by emergent common ground that reflected actual situational experience. Presuppositions that are important elements of core common ground and usually represent prior information were occasionally used as new information generators.

It was argued that ‘getting acquainted’ scenarios have a universal skeleton which develops into a culture-specific frame in each language. The ‘flesh’ is added to the ‘skeleton’ in a dynamic and co-constructed manner. Our subjects usually kept the universal frame of the open social situation but did not seem to have followed any language-specific frame, not even the target language one. There was no traceable influence of the interlocutors’ L1. Instead they co-constructed their own skeleton (frame) from building blocks including target language formulas, on-the-spot created formulas and strategies that were triggered by the immediate need that emerged in the course of interaction. So the ‘flesh-building’ was characteristic not for a specific language community but for the temporary micro-speech community that the subjects created for themselves during the short interaction.

We must however be careful because this does not mean that they totally gave up their prior experience. Not at all. What they did was that they used their prior experience and knowledge with their L1 and with limited L2 (English) in a creative way, as required by the actual situational context and also their hypotheses about the other interlocutors’ cultural and linguistic background and linguistic competence.<sup>15</sup> They kept the target language code as the medium of communication, but what they did with it was not what is usually done in a ‘getting acquainted’ scenario in L1, but rather what was required by the given situational context and what they found necessary under the strain of conversing.

As has been mentioned several times in the paper, we must be careful about generalizing anything from this study. Its goal was to point out tendencies and raise questions that may justify further research.

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14. This sounds like speculation, but it may not be. The subjects were quite fluent in English so they must have been familiar with which expressions to use when meeting someone for the first time.

15. ....“their hypotheses about the other interlocutors’ cultural and linguistic background and linguistic competence”. I thank one of the reviewers for this suggestion.

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