Navigating face-threatening terrain:
Questioning strategies in cross-cultural military training scenarios

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Abstract

Previous research on interaction has shown that most questions demand a response, which imposes a questioner’s will on their addressee, impinging on the addressee’s freedom of action. We have identified ways that members of the military mitigate the imposition of their questions, using hedging, false starts, changes in questioning strategy, and what we call a “help frame.” Using interactional data from a role play-based Army adaptability training, we examine differences in mitigation strategies used across different interactional contexts, including meetings with village elders, a village police chief, civilians, and suspicious diggers. In each of these contexts, the trainees adapt their questions to the characteristics of the immediate situation.

Keywords: adaptability; cross-cultural competence; military; questions; rapport; role play; training

1. Introduction

Questions, asked in any context, can be seen as threatening, and can impose on the hearer by demanding an answer. In an institutional context like that involving members of the military, questions can seem like an interrogation and an imposition on the hearer to justify himself or herself. How do members of the military show the people they’re interacting with that they do not mean to interrogate, impose, or interfere? We have identified a
number of ways that members of the military mitigate the “face threat” of their questions, using devices such as hedging, false starts, changes in questioning strategy, and something we call a “help frame,” in which the questioner presents their question as being in the interest of helping. Some of these strategies can help build rapport between the questioner and the person being questioned.

This paper presents qualitative and quantitative results from a study of soldiers’ management of questioning across interactional contexts in an Army role-play training. We examine role-play based interactions with potential criminals, suspected of implanting explosive devices near a town, and with authority figures who demand a certain level of respect, and with civilians who pose no obvious danger and demand no particular displays of respect. Each of these contexts influences the ways that Soldiers as questions, with implications for the efficacy of their cross-cultural communication skills.

2. Questions in everyday discourse and institutional discourse

Previous research on interaction has shown that questions can be interactionally problematic. Most questions demand a response, which imposes a questioner’s will on their addressee [1,2,3]. The nature of questions was formalized as part of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) linguistic politeness theory, which argued that human interaction is bound by each individual’s desire to be simultaneously treated as an independent person and as a valued member of a community. Any interactional act that either jeopardizes someone’s freedom or causes them to feel left out or disliked is considered a face-threatening act (FTA) [4]. Additionally, given particular contexts or power dynamics, questions can function as interrogations, in which speakers “doubt, challenge, or accuse through questioning” (Steensig and Drew, 2008, p. 6), demonstrating an even more antagonistic function of questioning [5].

In their discussion of FTAs, Brown and Levinson (1987) point out that there are many linguistic means by which a speaker can mitigate FTAs for a hearer. Tools used will differ based on the context of the interaction. For example, different mitigation tactics will be used in casual phone conversations with a friend than in out-of-hours calls to the doctor [6]. This is also true of cross-cultural contexts. What is considered “polite,” or non-face threatening, in one culture can be offensive or inappropriate in another, and some mitigation strategies may be more or less effective in different cultural contexts. There have been several investigations of the various ways different cultural groups manage conflict and mitigate face-threats in questions [7,8] and other FTAs [9,10,11]. Beebe & Takahashi (1989) argue that FTAs are some of the most common trouble sources in cross-cultural communication [12], and quote an earlier researcher who wrote that the “transfer of the norms of one community to another may well lead to ‘pragmatic failure’ and to the judgment that the speaker is in some way being impolite” [13].

In institutional discourse, questions are a powerful tool for the maintenance of power and control over an interaction [1,14,15]. However, particularly in interview contexts, it is important for institutional representatives to build rapport with their interlocutors to avoid turning information-gathering into an interrogation. Shuy (1998), writing in a police-interview context, argues for the use an interview (rather than interrogation) style, “probing and not cross examining, inquiring and not challenging, guiding rather than dominating, suggesting rather than demanding…” [16]. Vallano and Campo’s (2011) study of mock police interviews showed that increased use of rapport-building strategies, including FTA mitigation, “increased the quality of witness recall by decreasing the percentage of inaccurate and misinformation reported…” [17]. However, there has been no linguistic research done on military-civilian interviews. The present study analyzes questions in this particular context, with a focus on mitigation strategies used by the Army trainees in the interest of rapport building with civilian interlocutors.

3. Data and methodology

The data used in this study are drawn from a larger corpus of video data collected as part of a DARPA\(^1\) program called Strategic Social Interaction Modules. The goal of the project is to design cross-cultural competence training based on new research on human interaction, including research on existing training. As part of the project, the authors of this paper, and other researchers at the Social Interaction Research Group, have visited existing military

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\(^1\) Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, a research office of the US Department of Defense.
and police trainings to gather data in order to identify key elements of interpersonal and cross-cultural communication that are important to include in new training modules [18]. For the present paper, we focus on a subset of our corpus, which comes from one specific Army adaptability training program, with trainees ranging from Sergeants (E5) to Sergeant Majors (E9), and Second Lieutenants (O1) to Majors (O4), with a range of experience levels and Military Occupational Specialties. The relevant segment of the training takes the form of a two-day role play-based training scenario, in which soldiers operate in teams to gather information about local security issues in a cross-cultural context, while maintaining team safety. Different types of interactions occur in the scenario, and the trainees adapt their questions to the characteristics of the immediate situation.

While there are some limitations to analyzing role-play interactions, this rich source of data is still very valuable, and, we argue, falls on a continuum of various types of natural interaction, rather than standing separate from natural interaction. From a practical standpoint, the ability to observe trainees practicing high-stakes communication in a secure environment allows researchers to observe military-civilian interaction without being required to navigate the substantial logistical and security hurdles to deploy alongside the soldiers (for more discussion, see Damari et al [19]). Finally, role-play is ubiquitous as a training method across institutional contexts. It is used in classroom contexts [20,21,22], medical training contexts [23,24,25], and federal law enforcement contexts [26]. It is also heavily relied on throughout the branches of the US Military. Many studies have found that role-playing can significantly change an individual’s behavior and attitudes [24,25,27] suggesting that it is a valuable training tool.

We collected the video data using an ethnographic approach, accompanying teams of trainees through multiple iterations of the role-play training scenario. Because this paper is based on ethnographic data and not experimental data, and we have a relatively low number of participants (17 soldiers whose questions were coded), we do not claim that the analysis presented here is representative of all soldiers or all military personnel. Rather, we present the data and analysis as a means to demonstrate some ways that Army trainees, like interlocutors in any context, can adapt their speech and interactional style in ways that are appropriate to the circumstances. It is important to note that this particular training program utilized interpreters in their role-play scenario, to bridge the language gap between the trainees and the Hindi-speaking role players. We acknowledge that the presence of a language barrier and the presence of an interpreter have substantial effects on interaction. However, this paper is focused on the strategies used by the trainees to mitigate their questions, rather than on the response of the civilians, and so we do not address the effect of interpreter mediation on the questions or the interaction. In future research efforts, we plan to look at civilian reactions to these mitigation tactics, including translated text, and a closer examination of the interpreter's role in the interaction.

The data for this paper are examined using a mixed method analysis. Codes for question mitigation tactics were developed based on detailed qualitative examination of a variety of interactions from this training context, together with mitigation strategies found to be notable in previous research. The corpus coded for this analysis consisted of 31 encounters, totaling 4 hours and 43 minutes. We coded 273 questions across four interactional contexts for mitigation tactics, and we examined them further after descriptive statistics were generated and patterns identified. We ran unifactorial ANOVA tests for each mitigation strategy to determine whether there were any significant differences among the interactional contexts. For those features that had a significant p-value, we ran Tukey HSD tests to determine which contextual differences were significant. Our general framework for the qualitative analysis is grounded in Interactional Sociolinguistics [28,29], Conversation Analysis [30,31], Ethnomethodology [32], and Pragmatics [33,34,35]. In the following section, we offer the quantitative results of our study, and provide a detailed discourse analysis of the differences in mitigation strategies used for the four interactional contexts: (1) the village elders, (2) the police chief, (3) the hotel owners and guests, and (4) the suspicious diggers.

4. Data analysis and discussion

Most soldiers we observed carefully tailored their questioning depending on who they were speaking with, how dangerous they perceived the situation to be, and how important they assessed the interlocutor’s face needs to be relative to the other constraints. In this analysis we illustrate the use of several strategies to mitigate the imposition, face-threatening nature of a question. We examine the use of these strategies across the four interactional contexts mentioned above, each of which has its own characteristics and its own challenges given that the soldiers involved have been sent to this region to assess current security risks and determine how the US military
can help to maintain security in the area. Here we list the four interactional contexts in more detail, along with a brief description of the characteristics of each, and how many questions were coded for each:

1. A meeting with three village elders, which calls for a high level of respect and the appearance of competence and goodwill. (141 questions)
2. A conversation with a local police chief, in which soldiers can potentially be viewed as attempting to undermine the police chief’s authority, since they are also operating as a security force in the region. At the point of this conversation they have identified and brought about the detainment of two diggers suspected of attempting to place explosives near the police chief’s town. (41 questions)
3. Conversations with civilians at a hotel (the hotel owners and two guests), in which the soldiers attempt to gather information about the local activities in the town. (57 questions)
4. The initial interaction with the two diggers themselves, in which the soldiers must ascertain the situational risk quickly, and gather information about the diggers’ associations and intentions. (34 questions)

The following table and chart show the rates of several questioning strategies across interactional contexts. Some of these differences are statistically significant, while others are not. We provide examples and discussion of several of these mitigation strategies and their patterning across the interactional contexts, following the graphics.

Table 1. Patterning of question mitigation strategies by interactional context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interactional Context</th>
<th>Mitigation Strategy</th>
<th>Diggers</th>
<th>Civilians at hotel</th>
<th>Police chief</th>
<th>Elders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help frame</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>False starts</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>39.0%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing tactics*</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedging</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmitigated</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>61.4%</td>
<td>48.8%</td>
<td>58.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Difference between highest and lowest rate significant at p<.005

Fig 1. Patterning of question mitigation strategies by interactional context

4.1 Unmitigated

Of course, we do find quite a few examples in our corpus in which soldiers ask questions without mitigation: the rates for unmitigated questions can be found in the table and figure above. We have found that soldiers were most likely to ask unmitigated questions when interacting with civilians at a hotel. Unmitigated questions from this context include examples such as the following:

- “Why are they in trouble?”
“Do you know where they took him?”
“What kind of meetings do they do?”
“How often do they come?”

These questions use no mitigation strategies, they simply ask for information. It seems to make sense that soldiers would use unmitigated questioning strategies when interacting with civilians at the hotel, since the soldiers’ presence and asking of questions is less threatening to civilians than it may be to either the authority figures (elders and police chief) or possible criminals (diggers). The soldiers may simply view the civilians at the hotel as friendly sources of potential information that can help them understand the situation in the town. Thus they are less likely to use mitigation strategies in this context than in others, showing they are not exercising extra caution about how they ask questions.

4.2 Hedging

We define hedging as the use of expressions of uncertainty, or mitigation other than tag questions, false starts, changes in tactics, or help framing. Hedging has been associated with showing less confidence in a position taken [36], softening dissent [4] or the expression of a potentially controversial opinion [37]. It has also been used as an example of “powerless speech” traditionally associated with women [38,39]. In our data, hedging was most common in two seemingly disparate contexts: with the village elders and with the suspicious diggers. Yet hedging of questions is intuitive in each of these contexts, for distinct reasons. In most cases of hedging with the village elders, the hedging shows deference to the authority of the village elders. The use of hedges infuses what could be seen as interrogation-style questions with more respect. Here are two examples.

Example 1 (In this example the soldier initially addresses the interpreter and then addresses the elder directly.)
Soldier: “Tell him we have pictures, we took pictures of those two guys, and we were hoping to see if you knew who they were, if you’d seen them before?…if you haven’t I understand.”

In this first example, the soldier uses a variety of strategies to mitigate the impositional nature of his question. He gives background information about the question, giving the source of the pictures being provided—information that is not strictly necessary to the exchange but perhaps shows a willingness to share information, given the elder’s position in the village. Next, rather than simply asking “do you know who they are?,” he says “we were hoping to see if you knew who they were,” putting the question in a hedged form that decreases the directness of the question and thus how strongly it demands a response. And finally, he provides an easy out if the elders are unable to answer the question: “if you haven’t I understand,” again decreasing how strongly the question demands a response.

Example 2
Soldier: “Why do you think it’s- suddenly, in your opinion, since you’ve lived here so long, why do you think suddenly there has been this increase in, in problems?”

In the second example, the soldier uses a false start, leading to a hedging strategy, combined with a direct appeal to the elder’s experience and expertise: “in your opinion, since you’ve lived here so long.” These two examples, in combination, illustrate how hedging used with the elders can be interpreted as a show of deference to the elders’ expertise, and a strategy used to decrease how strongly the question demands a response.

In contrast, while the hedging strategies used with the diggers may look similar to those used with the elders, an understanding of the interactional context dictates a different rationale for the hedging. The diggers are suspected of planting explosive devices near the side of the road entering the village. Their intentions are ambiguous [40]. The soldiers need to carefully secure the area, while avoiding antagonizing the diggers, who may or may not have access to weapons. Thus we see an example such as the following, addressed to the diggers via the interpreter:

Example 3
Soldier: “Does he mind?...I’ve got some guys around here...can you...can he just lift up his shirt, he’s got somethin’ under, prob’ly cell phone or somethin’ er...under his shirt can we...”

This excerpt uses the hedging word “just,” in “can he just lift up his shirt,” and also avoids stating an assumption
that the digger is carrying an illicit device, suggesting that the bulge under the diggers shirt is “prob’ly cell phone or somethin’.”

4.3 False starts and changes in tactics

Soldiers used the highest rates of false starts and changes in tactics when interacting with the local police chief—indeed, the rate of soldiers’ changes in tactics is significantly higher when interacting with the police chief from when they are interacting with the village elders. These particular mitigations of questioning seem to make sense given the context. The soldiers’ presence in the village, given their stated purpose of assessing the security needs of the village and ways the US military can help address possible terrorist threats, can threaten the authority of the police chief and his force. In particular, questions about how the police force is run and their current concerns may be seen as undermining the police chief’s authority. Thus these questions frequently contain false starts and changes in tactics, as in the following examples.

Example 4
Soldier: “So his...so your biggest concern right now is kinda...is help for you, more people to kinda... kinda secure this town?”

This example shows multiple false starts, including one associated with a change in tactic (“So his...so your”). The soldier begins his utterance, then stops, in order to change tactics and start again by addressing the police officer directly instead of the interpreter. This example also includes hedging in the use of “kinda.” All of these actions seem to display a hesitation to ask the police chief about the concerns of his force. A second example shows an even more extreme case of false starts, and again concerns how the police chief is running his force.

Example 5
Soldier: “What- what- what is- what is- your force look like? How many people work for you?”

A question such as this could be perceived as questioning the chief’s authority or competency, but the extreme use of five false starts takes the edge off the question, softening its directness and perhaps making it seem more like a casual inquiry than an investigation into the police force’s size or effectiveness. In contrast, in interactions with the village elders, the soldiers may be more focused on presenting themselves as competent and prepared, hence the relative avoidance of false starts and changes in tactics in interaction with the elders.

4.4 Help frames

A final type of mitigation is the use of help frames. Interactional frames have been defined as “schemata of interpretation” that render meaning, organize experiences, and guide actions [41], or, perhaps more simply, as “the definition of what is going on in an interaction, without which no utterance (or movement or gesture) could be interpreted” [42]. Quite a few examples from this corpus show the soldiers framing their presence, and especially their asking of questions, as helping or offering help. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we see that the highest rates of help framing are used in interaction with the police chief, and the second highest with the elders. In both of these situations there is a clear motivation for the soldiers to make sure their audience views their presence as helpful and their question-asking as oriented toward the goal of helping, rather than toward a less attractive goal such as interrogating or snooping. The following are a few examples of how soldiers used the help frame in our corpus.

Example 6
Soldier addressing police chief: “Is there any way we can talk to some members of the community? Is there any way we can walk around, take a look at your town? Is there anything we can do to help you out?”

In this example, a lieutenant is asking permission to talk to members of the community and walk around to observe the town, two actions that could easily be perceived as intrusive or threatening to the authority of the police chief. However, the soldier concludes his series of questions with an additional question that can be viewed as a separate question, but could also be viewed as a follow-up to the prior questions, suggesting that his purpose in speaking to members of the community and walking around the town is to discover ways to help the police chief.
Example 7
Soldier addressing elders: “So what…so what’re your problems? If you tell us, we can tell our higher ups and we can…spread around”

This sequence does not explicitly use the word “help,” but makes an explicit connection between the asking of the question “So what…so what’re your problems?” and helpful actions the soldiers will take if they get answers: “If you tell us, we can tell our higher ups and we can…spread around.”

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have shown how soldiers in a role play training adapt their style of asking questions based on who they are talking with and the interactional context. In each situation, the primary goal of the interaction is to gather information, yet the soldiers approach this task differently across various interactional contexts. When interacting with the diggers, in a high-risk situation, the soldiers used more hedging of questions, likely out of caution. With the police chief, the soldiers’ presence as a potential security force and their questions about the security situation in the village can be taken as a threat to the police chief’s authority. Therefore, the soldiers used more false starts and changes in tactics, as well as a help frame, demonstrating that they are not there to undermine, but rather to help. With the village elders, an audience of the highest social status in the community, it was particularly important to build rapport. Therefore the soldiers used hedges to questions, deference to the elders’ expertise, less direct questioning, and, again, a help frame to show that their goal is to be of assistance.

We argue that identification of this help frame is one of the most important contributions of this paper. More research is warranted on situations outside the military in which a help frame may be used to mitigate the face-threatening and potentially accusatory nature of question-asking—from police interviews to teacher-student interactions, to doctor-patient communication, to conversations in families. Within a military context, the next step of this research would be to examine whether the patterns we have found in this paper hold across different trainings and role play scenarios that take place in different cultural contexts. We would also be interested to consider the response of the civilians across cultural contexts, to look at the extent to which these mitigation strategies appear to be successful with members of different groups.

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