Language Proficiency Interviews: A Discourse Approach

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1 Introduction: Assessing Second Language Speaking Ability

This book begins with a practical question: How can we best assess how well someone speaks a second language? The contributors to the book all examine one particular answer to that question: The best way of assessing how well a learner speaks a language is to get him or her to speak; in particular, to get the learner to have an interview with a proficient speaker of the language. Although there are certain practical problems associated with setting up an interview with a learner—there has to be a native or very proficient speaker available, and there has to be enough time available for a reasonable conversation to develop between the interviewer and each learner—if these problems can be overcome, then interviews have proved to be a very popular way of assessing speaking ability in a second language.

Do interviews deserve their popularity? One way of answering that question is to consider interviews in terms of the qualities that contemporary language testing theory suggests are desirable in language tests. For example, Bachman and Palmer (1996), in their book *Language Testing in Practice*, lay out four qualities of a useful language test: *reliability*, *construct validity*, *authenticity*, and *interactiveness*. The first two of Bachman and Palmer's criteria—reliability and construct validity—are familiar to test designers because they are essential qualities if tests are to be used as ways of measuring learners' abilities. Reliability is the consistency with which a test measures ability and one way in which interviews may be *un*reliable is if two different examiners judge the speaking ability of the same learner differently. Such a threat to reliability, however, is well known, and modern testing agencies take considerable pains to train interviewers and to develop rating scales that minimize the amount of disagreement between interviewers.

Construct validity is the quality of a test that allows us to make interpretations of the scores on the test. By saying that an interview is a good test of speaking ability in a second language, we make a statement about the construct validity of the test, namely, that an interview measures speaking ability rather than, say, second language reading ability or speaking ability in the learner's mother tongue. This clearly requires that we have an understanding of what speaking ability in a second language is, independently of the interview that we use to measure it. If not, we run the risk of circularity by saying that the definition of speaking ability in a second language is simply whatever is measured by the interview. Defining the construct of speaking ability on the basis of test scores is not a good idea because it does not help us think about what is the best way to design the test.

Defining the construct of speaking ability in a second language is in fact a theoretically challenging undertaking. Before we can say what speaking ability is, we have to have an understanding of the properties of naturally occurring spoken language and of what it means for someone to speak a language better or worse than someone else. Many of the contributors to this book have struggled with these questions and have put forward in their respective chapters a broad-based theory of second language spoken ability that we call *interactional competence* discussed in considerable detail below.

In addition to reliability and construct validity, Bachman and Palmer (1996) recognize two other qualities of a useful language test: authenticity and interactiveness. By authenticity they refer to the degree of correspondence between the characteristics of a task that learners are required to perform on a test and the characteristics of a non-test task in the second language. Authenticity is an important quality of language tests because an authentic test allows us to make generalizations from learners' performances on a test to their performances on real-life tasks in the target language community. On the surface, at least, interviews appear to be an authentic task: learners are involved in spoken interaction with a proficient speaker of the language, a task that appears to be very similar to many kinds of face-to-face conversations in the target language community outside the testing room. Until very recently, however, this correspondence between interviews and native/non-native conversations was something that was taken on trust because few researchers had made any systematic comparisons between interviews and conversations. The unique contribution of this book is to make such comparisons available, not only between interviews in English and English conversations but also—and for the first time—comparisons in Spanish, German, and Korean as well. The general consensus among contributors to this book is that, for reasons that we will discuss below, the characteristics of an interview are quite different from the characteristics of ordinary conversation. Interviews, that is, are *not* authentic tests of conversation.

The fourth and final quality of useful language tests recognized by Bachman and Palmer is interactiveness. This refers not to interaction between the test taker and the administrator of the test but to the degree to which the learner simultaneously draws on different kinds of knowledge—both cognitive and affective—in doing a test. There are several kinds of knowledge that according to Bachman and Palmer can interact in the learner's performance of a test task: knowledge of the second language, knowledge of how to overcome communication difficulties in performance (strategic competence), knowledge of how to organize and plan a task (metacognitive strategies), topical knowledge, and learners' emotional reactions to particular topics and tasks (affective schemata). Examples of highly interactive tests according to Bachman and Palmer include a role play and an extended conversation because both tests require language, require learners to plan ahead, and involve learners in topics that interest them.

Bachman and Palmer's emphasis on interaction between and/or integration of various knowledges internal to the speaking individual is largely a psychological model that neglects the social, dialogic dimension of cognition and emotion—that is to say, cognition and emotion are not located in the mind of a single individual, but are instead embedded in distributed systems and are shaped and accomplished interactionally (Hutchins 1995, Lave 1988, Rogoff 1990). As McNamara (1996) points out, an exclusive focus on the learner's internal abilities suggests that the learner be held solely accountable for the results of proficiency interviews; while in fact even the display of what is in an individual's head is mediated by moment-by-moment interactional contingencies.

The two questions that we now wish to address arise from our previous discussion of Bachman and Palmer's qualities of a language test. How can speaking ability be defined independently of a language proficiency interview that is designed to assess it? And to what extent is a language proficiency interview an authentic representation of normal conversation in the target language?

2 Interactional Competence

The ability to speak a second language is a subset of a learner's overall ability—or proficiency—in the language. Thus the question of what speaking ability is, is closely related to the question of what it means to know a second language. Historically, two theories of second language knowledge have been influential in the design of language tests: Robert Lado's structuralist theory (Lado 1957) and Canale and Swain's theory of communicative competence (Canale and Swain 1980). Lado maintained that knowledge of a second language could be divided into five parts: the ability to comprehend the spoken language, the ability to speak the language, the ability to read it, the ability to write it, and an understanding of the culture of the target-language community. Lado's four skills (the fifth skill, knowing about the culture, was often ignored) were the basis for much curriculum development and language assessment in the two decades following the publication of *Linguistics Across Cultures*, and to some extent are still in use today. Within each skill, knowledge was further broken down into knowledge of the traditional linguistic levels of phonology, morphology, lexis, and syntax. According to this view, second language knowledge consisted in knowing the four skills and their components. How well a learner knew a language could be assessed by testing each of the four skills and their components separately in what came to be known as discrete-point testing (Davies 1990).

In language testing, communicative competence has been influential through Bachman's application of the theory to the design of language tests (Bachman 1990). And in the assessment of speaking ability, as Young (1995a) has indicated, several modern language proficiency interviews are designed specifically to assess components of communicative competence such as pragmatic competence (e.g., the functional descriptions of proficiency in the ACTFL OPI) and strategic competence (e.g., the rating scales of the Cambridge Assessment of Spoken English interview developed by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate).

The focus of the Canale and Swain framework is on an individual learner in a social context; that is, the framework helps us understand what an individual needs to know and do in order to communicate. Such exclusive focus on a single individual's contribution to communication should, we believe, be problematized in view of current research that has advanced the position that abilities, actions, and activities do not belong to the individual but are *jointly* constructed by *all* participants. This position has been put forward by—among others—cognitive anthropologists who focus on participants' actions in a social context, by ethnomethodologists whose objective is to understand how participants' actions organize and sustain the context, by cultural-historical psychologists who demonstrate the contributions of social interaction to the development of the mind, and by phenomenologists who have qualitatively described and interpreted experiences in historical and social context (Chaiklin and Lave, 1993).

This constructivist, practice-oriented view of interaction and competence has also been articulated by various applied linguists under different names. In an early paper, Kramsch (1986) referred to it as *interactional competence*.[1] A more recent term was introduced by Jacoby and Ochs (1995:171), who refer to it as *co-construction,* which they define as "the joint creation of a form, interpretation, stance, action, activity, identity, institution, skill, ideology, emotion, or other culturally meaningful reality." Although the term *co-construction* may suggest that joint creations are made by means of cooperative or supportive interaction, Jacoby and Ochs make clear that co-construction is not necessarily affiliative or supportive interaction: an argument, for example, is just as much co-constructed as a conversation.

A second applied linguistic perspective that advances the interactive nature of communicative activity is Hall's idea of *interactive practices* (1993, 1995). In talking of interactive practices, Hall indicates that participation in talk does not involve the individual in spontaneous creation of individual utterances free from social constraints; rather "talk is comprised of interactive practices, structured moments of face-to-face interaction—differently enacted and differently valued—whereby individuals come together to create, articulate, and manage their collective histories via the use of sociohistorically defined and valued resources" (Hall 1995:207–208). Interactive practices, according to Hall, are recurring episodes of talk that are of sociocultural significance to a community of speakers.

Interactive practices are co-constructed by participants, each of whom contributes linguistic and pragmatic resources to the practice. Participants bring the following resources, among others, to a given practice: a knowledge of rhetorical scripts, a knowledge of certain lexis and syntactic patterns specific to the practice, a knowledge of how turns are managed, a knowledge of topical organization, and a knowledge of the means for signaling boundaries between practices and transitions within the practice itself.

A few examples will show the kinds of resources participants bring to different practices. Participants bring knowledge of *rhetorical scripts* (Ranney 1992), or sequences of speech acts that help define a particular interactive practice. For example, He (1993) has shown that students distinguish between acceptable and non-acceptable peer reviews of their written work by whether certain obligatory acts are present in a certain sequence in the reviews.

Second, participants bring to a practice *specific lexis and syntactic structures*. For example, in discussing complimenting behavior in American English, Wolfson (1984) found that a very limited range of syntactic patterns and adjectives were used in compliments and that the choice of adjective depends to some degree on the gender of the person who is being complimented.

Third, different interactive practices involve different *strategies for managing turns*. Research done by Young and others on the discourse of language proficiency interviews (LPIs) has shown that turns in LPIs are allocated in a very similar way in LPIs to how turn-taking is managed in classrooms (Young 1995b, Young and Milanovic 1992). That is, the interviewer (like the teacher) can claim a turn at any time and has the right to allocate a turn to the interviewee by means of questions and other turn-allocation devices. This turn-taking system is very different from turn-taking patterns in ordinary conversations among peers, where no single individual has the exclusive right to allocate turns and where there can be much competition for the floor.

Fourth, the *management of topics* differs in different interactive practices. Topic management includes preferences for certain topics over others and decisions as to who has the right to introduce a given topic, how long a topic persists in discourse, and who has the right to change the topic. A simple example of differences in topic management in different interactive practices comes from a comparison of conversations between couples in intimate relationships (Crow 1983) and conversations in language proficiency interviews. Crow found that the couples in his study shifted the conversational topic on average every 48 seconds. In contrast, in certain kinds of language proficiency interviews, Young (1995a) found that topic shifts were far less frequent: in intermediate level interviews participants shifted turns on average every 67 seconds, and in advanced level interviews they shifted every 84 seconds.

Finally, the means for *signaling the boundaries* of an interactive practice differ from one practice to another. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1992) have shown that the ways closings are managed in academic advising sessions between a professor and a student differ quite markedly from the ways closings have been described in ordinary conversations (Schegloff and Sacks 1973). In closing academic advising sessions, it is not legitimate to reinvoke topics that have already been dealt with during the session, whereas in closing ordinary conversations, reinvocations are used to indicate that none of the participants has any new topics to introduce.

Interactional competence, as we have described it, differs from communicative competence in several respects. In one respect, interactional competence is a further elaboration of second language knowledge; in other words, to discourse, pragmatic, and strategic competence, we must now add competence in (at least) the five interactional features described above. In another respect, however, interactional competence is fundamentally different from communicative competence. Whereas communicative competence has been interpreted in the testing literature as a trait or bundle of traits that can be assessed in a given individual, interactional competence—we wish to stress—is co-constructed by all participants in an interactive practice and is specific to that practice. Participants' knowledge and interactive skills are *local*: they apply to a given interactive practice and either do not apply or apply in a different configuration to different practices.

Because knowledge and interactional skills are local and practice-specific, the joint construction of an interactive practice involves participants making use of the resources they have acquired in previous instances of the *same* practice. According to this view, individuals do not acquire a general, practice-independent communicative competence; rather they acquire a practice-specific interactional competence by participating with more experienced others in specific interactive practices. Interactional competence in a specific practice, that is, involves participants making skillful use of resources, such as those five that we have detailed, in the "joint creation of a form, interpretation, stance, action, activity, identity, institution, skill, ideology, emotion, or other culturally meaningful reality" (Jacoby and Ochs 1995:171). Interactional competence is not an attribute of an individual participant, and thus we cannot say that an individual is interactionally competent; rather we talk of interactional competence as something that is jointly constructed by all participants (including an analyst if the interaction is subjected to analysis). Equally, interactional competence is not a trait that is independent of the interactive practice in which it is (or is not) constituted.

The theoretical framework of interactional competence suggests that we should interpret language proficiency interviews rather differently from the way they have been interpreted up until now. Positivistic language assessment suggests that an individual's language proficiency can be discovered via scientific (i.e., often quantitative) methods. It removes from consideration the situationally and sequentially grounded and culturally shared understandings of LPIs as particular types of speech situations. It encourages us to focus on what each utterance means in isolation from other utterances and neglects the fact that interaction itself creates meaning and constructs proficiency.

In language proficiency interviews, interaction is a medium for comprehension and knowing and judging. Each LPI is an instantiation of interaction between the examiner and the language learner that is socially and institutionally organized and exhibits describable features. LPIs are nothing other than the interactional achievements from which interview results can be extracted. From their interactions with learners, examiners must extract an object that can be heard as an answer upon which an assessment of language proficiency can be made. Like other forms of interview, the LPI is an interaction between two persons who influence each other and react in relation to each other.

LPIs do not simply sample an ability that exists in the learner prior to the interview; rather they actually produce or fabricate the abilities they supposedly measure. (For example, feedback from the examiner affects the amount of information provided by the learners and the manner in which they provide it.) Shared understandings are developed and negotiated between participants in the course of an ongoing interaction. It is through interaction that each participant connects his or her own identities, emotions, tasks, and activities with those of others. These connections, accomplished by ongoing interaction, provide the basis for what Rommetveit (1985) has called *intersubjectivity*. It is from within this dynamically sustained context that what is talked about gets its meaning.

3 Authenticity

Is an LPI an instance of natural conversation? This is a question posed by several researchers in language assessment (Lazaraton 1992, Riggenbach 1991, van Lier 1989) and for educational tests in general (e.g., Schaeffer 1991). Van Lier (1989) questions the supposedly conversational nature of OPIs and proposes an alternative modular approach to the existing OPI format so as to transform an OPI into a conversation. Lazaraton (1992, 1996) examines the overall structural organization of the LPI as well as examiners' question design and the interactively co-constructed nature of the assessment of the learners' language ability. She shows that, although LPIs import their fundamental structural and interactional features from conversation, they are identifiably instances of interviews for the participants.

Contributors to this book continue the discussion by making explicit comparisons between the characteristics of LPIs and the characteristics of naturally occurring conversations. In so doing they delineate the interactional and structural features specific to LPIs. In particular, contributors highlight three salient differences between LPIs and ordinary conversation: (1) as interviews, the topical and turn-taking systems of LPIs differ from ordinary conversation, (2) as instances of institutional discourse, the speech exchange system and the goal-orientedness of LPIs differ from ordinary conversation, and (3) as cross-cultural encounters, participants in LPIs often have very different understandings of what is going on in the LPI, a situation that may not occur in ordinary NS-NNS conversations. These three challenges to the authenticity of LPIs will be discussed below.

3.1 LPIs *as Interviews*

As a research methodology, interviews range from informal and open-ended to formal instruments used in survey research. Interviews have been used in a wide variety of social science disciplines, including sociology, history, anthropology, the ethnography of communication, quantitative studies of linguistic variation, and the sociology of language. Interviews, including LPIs, tell us something that we did not know before. As representational devices, they are means of gathering information.

But what is an interview? A few definitions are presented below. In examining therapeutic interviews, Labov and Fanshel (1977) define the interview as a speech event in which one person, *A*, extracts information from another person, *B*, that was contained in *B*'s biography. In the context of interviews of college students by academic counselors, Erickson and Shultz (1982) take interviews to be a brief encounter, usually between strangers, in which one person has the authority to make decisions that affect the other's future. Mishler (1986) proposes that interviews are a form of discourse having structures that reflect and shape several types of normative rules, including rules of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. As is true of other culturally grounded norms, these rules guide the ways interviewers and interviewees enter into situations, define and frame their sense of what they can appropriately say, and provide the basis for their understandings of questions and responses.

When an interview is conducted for the purpose of assessing second language speaking ability, it is often referred to as an "oral proficiency interview." But that term is also used to refer to the particular kind of interview designed and developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. For this reason, we prefer in this book to use the term *language proficiency interview*—abbreviated as LPI—to refer to any interview used for the assessment of second language speaking ability, including the ACTFL OPI. In particular, we define a language proficiency interview as a face-to-face spoken interaction usually between two participants (although other combinations do occur), one of whom is an expert (usually a native or near-native speaker of the language in which the interview is conducted) and the other a non-native speaker (NNS) or learner of the language as a second or foreign language. The purpose of the LPI is for the expert speaker—the interviewer—to assess the NNS's ability to speak the language in which the interview is conducted. The participants meet at a scheduled time, at a prearranged location such as a classroom or school office, and for a limited period. In the case of scripted interviews, an agenda specifying the topics for conversation and the activities to take place during the LPI is prepared in advance. The agenda is always known to the interviewer but not necessarily to the NNS. In addition to the agenda, the interviewer (but usually not the NNS) has access to one or more scales for rating the NNS's ability in the language of the interview.

Talk in LPIs is subject to global rules of interviewing, resulting from the formal relationship between the interviewer and the learner, who use language to reconstruct their prescribed role identities. The ultimate purpose of the LPI, as one type of interview, is to discover target information—the learner's second language speaking ability—of which the interview result is a sign or representation. It can be characterized as a speech event in which: (1) the interviewer extracts linguistic data from the language learner, data that are supposedly representative of the learner's language use in ordinary settings; (2) the interviewer has the authority to pass judgments about the learner's level of linguistic competence; and (3) specific rules of syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and conversational exchange are exhibited that may or may not be equally familiar to both parties.

3.2 LPIs *as Institutional Discourse*

Conversation and interviews are two kinds of talk-in-interaction. Interviews reflect the institutional context in which they are embedded through their speech exchange system and its goal-orientedness. In ordinary conversation, topics and turns are not prescribed by specific speech activity; none of the participants has a predefined role in managing the interaction. In LPIs, however, there are specific constraints on participants' contributions in terms of turn-taking and reduction or re-specification of conversational options. As it is often the interviewer who controls the topic and who exercises a consistently predominant role in managing turn-taking, the authenticity of LPIs presents itself as a particularly important issue. We suggest that the speech exchange system of the LPI does not necessarily invalidate the learner's responses. After all, linguistic competence that is revealed in the LPI setting is a social, interactional construction and constitutes at least one type of exhibited competence, as long as it is interpreted within the right frame.

Another way in which the LPI, as a genre of institutional discourse, differs from ordinary conversation is in its goal-orientation. While ordinary conversation suggests symmetrical social relations, unconstrained topic flow, and informality of style, institutional discourse involves one speaking party who represents to some extent an institution encountering another person seeking its services. Institutional discourse is characterized by formal task-, role-, or goal-based activities (Agar 1985, Drew and Heritage 1992). As we remarked earlier, interviewers have as their goal to extract language samples from the interviewee and often have a predefined agenda for the encounter. Learners and examiners both contribute to constructing an LPI context, and yet they know different things, have varying linguistic abilities, speak with different interests and different global perceptions of the interview, and bring with them different social and cultural experiences. The learner's global definition of the LPI's purpose may differ from that of the interviewer's, and this may influence his or her contribution to the interaction and hence the interview results, because both interviewer and candidate select what to say and how to say it in ways that are congruent with their own perceptions of the "activity type" (Levinson 1979) of the LPI. The learner's definition of the LPI in general and, in particular, of the purpose of specific questions the examiner asks has important interactional consequences.

LPIs are situated interviews in an institutional setting. The assessment of language proficiency is accomplished through interactional practices involving the language learner and the examiner, who are related to each other in multiple and heterogeneous ways, who may have different interests and goals, and for whom a failure in the LPI is as much a collaborative activity as a success. Despite the unspoken assumption of much previous discussion on LPIs that the interview is seen in a similar light by both participants, many contributors to this book challenge the harmony of interests, goals, and perceptions that is so often assumed in existing research. And they propose alternative views that emphasize the heterogeneous, multifocal character of the LPI.

3.3 LPIs *as Cross-Cultural Encounters*

It might appear superfluous to say that LPIs are most often instances of communication between participants from different cultures: The mere fact that the language learner is a non-native speaker makes it self-evident. What is perhaps easily overlooked, however, is that LPIs constitute instances of cross-cultural communication, not merely because they involve two people who have different native languages and who come from different cultural backgrounds, but more importantly because the parties bring to the LPI different views of the learning process and of communication, which, as Ochs (1982, 1988) argues, are closely related to their views regarding language acquisition, language teaching, and the evaluation of communicative competence.

Briggs (1986), an ethnographer examining the interview, suggests that not all cultures use this interactive practice. He points out that, since some speech communities have methods other than interviews for gathering information, Western researchers may be imposing their folk theories of reality and communication on speech communities organized along different lines. That is, there may exist an incompatibility between interview techniques used in social science research and native systems of communication. Briggs points us to both the nature of the interview itself as a communicative event and the nature of the data it produces. He alerts us to the fact that the interviewee may apply rules learned in other speech events (e.g., those in ordinary conversation or those in another cultural context) and may reject attempts to impose interview rules. He argues that the validity of interviews could be improved if interviewees could use culturally natural forms of talk. Similarly, Gumperz (1992) describes how NNSs map L1 rhetorical strategies onto L2 situations in cross-cultural interviewing.

Clearly, the relationship between learner's language use in the LPI setting and that in ordinary conversational settings requires further investigation. Several contributors to this book address issues of divergent cultural norms, frames, views of face, knowledge structures, and communication strategies in LPI discourse.

4 Interdisciplinary Orientation

Contributors to this book have approached the description and interpretation of LPIs from a number of different methodological orientations. In fact, research into the discourse of LPIs has gained much from the increasingly rich body of theoretical and empirical work on situated language use by linguists, sociolinguists, anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, and psychologists. In philosophy, speech act theorists (Austin 1962; Searle 1969, 1979) have heightened our awareness of the formulaic and performative character of speech. Phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions (Gadamer 1975, Schutz 1962) have brought us increased sophistication in the interpretation of meaning. Literary criticism and socio-historical psychology have provided us with insights into the process of analyzing texts, genres, and performance (Bakhtin 1981, Derrida 1976, Voloshinov 1973). Conversation analysis and ethnomethodology have shown us how sociality resides in and is re-shaped by details of talk-in-interaction (Sacks 1992; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). Work in interactional sociolinguistics (Goffman 1981, Hymes 1974), cross-cultural communication (Brown and Levinson 1987, Gumperz 1992), classroom discourse (McHoul 1978, 1990; Sinclair and Coulthard 1975), and psycholinguistics (Douglas and Selinker 1985) has much to offer in terms of methodology for analyzing LPI discourse.

In this section, we focus on three analytic traditions that we believe will give new impetus to research on LPIs and that the authors of this volume draw on as their theoretical frames: conversation analysis/ethnomethodology, the ethnography of speaking, and speech acts and Gricean pragmatics.

4.1 Conversation *Analysis/Ethnomethodology*

As we argued in Section 3, LPIs are first and foremost talk-in-interaction. The work of ethnomethodologists/conversation analysts (Garfinkel 1984, Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974) thus has particularly important relevance to research in LPI discourse as well as to the study of communication and social behavior in general. Questioning the traditional sociological methods such as questionnaires and interviews, these researchers focused on the actual lived stuff of social reality by closely scrutinizing the very methods used by the participants themselves in managing their lives interactively. Accordingly, in the analysis of talk-in-interaction, rules used to account for the orderly and collaborative nature of interaction are seen as those that the participants themselves use to make sense of their moment-by-moment interaction. This approach to interaction allows for great flexibility and pays special attention to the fluidity of interaction. Some of the major insights offered by CA/ethnomethodology are summarized below.

Central to CA is the concept of *turn taking* (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974), which can be described by a set of rules with ordered options that operate on a turn-by-turn basis as a locally, sequentially managed system. This system explains how speakers ‘earn’ their right to speak, how speaking rights are negotiated and interactionally managed, how the next speaker is selected, how overlaps occur and how they are resolved, and how speakers fix problems in comprehension and miscommunication. A turn is constructed with turn-constructional-units (TCUs) that are mapped onto syntactic, lexical, intonational, or pragmatic units (Ford and Thompson 1996). The rules of turn taking apply at the end of each TCU, which is called a transition relevant place (TRP).[2]

CA focuses on the conversational structural mechanisms through which talk is accomplished and by means of which practical knowledge is realized and created. One such structure is the *adjacency pair* (Schegloff and Sacks 1973): a sequence of two utterances adjacent to each other, produced by different speakers—ordered as a first part and second part—and typed, so that a first part requires a particular second part or range of second parts. Questions-answers are one such type of paired utterances that play an important part in LPI interactions as well as in other institutional encounters such as courtroom discourse (Atkinson and Drew 1979), medical consultations (Heath 1989), psychotherapy (Labov and Fanshel 1977), academic counseling encounters (Erickson and Shultz 1982, He 1994, 1996), news interviews (Clayman 1992, Greatbatch 1988), job interviews (Button 1987), and standardized oral testing discourse (Marlaire and Maynard 1990).

Part of displaying conversational competence in everyday talk is thus appropriately projecting and using possible turn transition relevant places. Questions project a transition relevance place; thus learners need to display comprehension and competence by projecting the beginning of their turn and by recognizing the upcoming completion of the question. Several chapters in this volume (He, Moder and Halleck, Kim and Suh) directly address issues of turn taking and adjacency pairs.

Closely associated with turn-taking is *topic organization* (Button and Casey 1984). Like other institutional representatives (e.g., a counselor, a doctor, a 911 operator), the LPI examiner uses the first pair part in the adjacency pair (question of question-answer) to elicit not just any information, but information that will fit the learner’s specific linguistic abilities to the institution’s definition of language proficiency levels. When the learner does ask questions, it is often at the examiner's invitation. Questions are used by the examiner to control the flow of information, to introduce and/or terminate topics, and to provide an interactional space for the learner to demonstrate his/her linguistic competence.

Perhaps particularly relevant to the LPI interaction, CA provides a powerful tool for understanding and analyzing problems in communication with its description of *repair organization* (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977). When trouble in conversation occurs, it is noticed and then corrected, either by the party whose turn contains the source of trouble or by some other party. This sequence of trouble + initiation-of-correction + correction is known as a *repair trajectory*. Repair occurs when one party corrects his or her own talk or that of another party and can be accomplished in a number of ways.

In LPIs, a common repair sequence is examiner-initiated probing (see Egbert, this volume). Probing often occurs when an answer that would be adequate in ordinary conversation is considered less than adequate for the purpose of language assessment. There seems to be a preponderance of question-answer sequences that differ in systematic ways from question-answer sequences in ordinary conversation, especially in what is accepted as an answer. Often times, elaboration of an answer is required and encouraged in LPIs, whereas a simple straightforward answer might have sufficed in ordinary conversation (see He this volume, Ross this volume).

These and other conversational structural mechanisms serve as resources for the participants to draw on in order to carry out the activity of the LPI. An understanding of the manner in which these mechanisms are used reveals not only the characteristics of the interaction in any particular LPI but also the basis for judgments regarding the learner's level of language proficiency.

4.2 Ethnography *of Speaking*

We stated earlier that LPIs are situated, occasioned activities in the sense that they occur among specific participants, for specific purposes, and in specific settings. The range of parameters that need to be taken into consideration when characterizing the LPI as a "speech event" can be summarized by Hymes' (1972) SPEAKING acronym, which stands for Situation (setting or scene), Participants (addressor and addressee), Ends (goals and outcomes), Act sequence (message form and message content), Key (the affective tone of the event), Instrumentalities (channel, forms of speech), Norms (norms of interaction and norms of interpretation), and Genre (the type of speech event).

Hymes (1972) uses the term *speech event* to refer to activities or aspects of activities that are directly governed by rules for language use. A community that shares rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech is called a *speech community*. As a speech event, an LPI is an activity “directly governed by rules or norms for the use of speech” (Hymes 1972:56). Viewing the LPI as a speech event stresses the role of communicative norms in guiding talk and interaction.

In a similar vein, Gumperz (1982) emphasizes the emergence of meaning through interaction in his definition of a *speech activity* as a set of social relationships enacted about a set of schemata in relation to some communicative goal. According to this view, in different speech activities, such as a lecture or a job interview, participants have specific expectations about thematic progression, turn-taking rules, form, and outcome of the interaction as well as constraints on context.

Defining interviews as speech events (Hymes 1972) or speech activities (Gumperz 1982) alerts us to discourse features of LPIs that hitherto have been largely neglected. Speech events or speech activities occur within a context of situation and context of culture (Malinowski 1923). Situations and cultures with the associated knowledges and norms that native members are assumed to have and observe can impact language use considerably. As knowledges and norms differ from one speech community to another, problems may arise in cases where interactants may be using the same linguistic code but may have different cultural frames and cultural codes. Different ways of speaking can acquire different cognitive and affective values, with some being more appropriate or pleasing than others. Even quantitative features such as amount of talk, length of turns, and rate of speaking can be assessed qualitatively. Fluency, verbosity, taciturnity and so forth are viewed as more or less desirable in different situations and different cultures.

The chapters in this volume address the situatedness of the LPI as a speech event from a variety of perspectives: The chapter by Johnson and Tyler examines whether an LPI is distinctly different from natural conversation as a speech event; The chapter by Koike focuses on the issue of participants; The chapters by He, by Moder and Halleck, by Egbert, by Kim and Suh, and by Yoshida-Morise describe specific act sequences; The chapters by Davies, by Ross, and by Young and Halleck highlight the fact that there can be a lack of fit between the examiner’s ways of speaking and those of the learner and that sometimes it is the examiner’s that are promoted at the expense of the learner’s.

4.3 Speech *Acts and Gricean Pragmatics*

Contributors to this volume address not only the mechanics of talk-in-interaction and the contexts of language use, but also speaker intentions and the associated processes and procedures for interpreting meaning. In this regard, speech act theory and Gricean pragmatics are of particular relevance.

As speech act theory (Austin 1962, Searle 1969) can be applied to the area of second language learning and teaching (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989), so can it be useful to the understanding of language assessment, including LPIs. The concept of a speech act highlights the fact that speakers use language not only to describe things but to do things as well. Austin (1962) points out that some utterances cannot be assessed in relation to truth and falsity, but in relation to felicity conditions for the successful performance of the acts. He focuses on the sorts of things that utterances accomplish and the conditions for their accomplishment.

Searle (1969, 1979), in an effort to systematize Austin, proposes five major classes of acts that utterances perform: representatives (e.g., asserting, stating), directives (e.g., requests), commissives (e.g., promises), expressives (e.g., apologies, compliments), and declarations (e.g., naming). Related to these major classes is Searle's general theory of illocutionary acts, which classifies different rules and conditions according to what aspect of text and context is focused upon in the condition rule. According to Searle, the uttering of words is an utterance act; referring and predicating are propositional acts; and stating, questioning, and promising are illocutionary acts. Illocutionary acts are rule-governed and intentional. The consequences of illocutionary acts are perlocutionary acts.

Equally useful to the understanding of the cognitive, psychological aspect of discourse in LPIs is the work of Paul Grice. Grice (1989) distinguishes between natural meaning (as in "Those spots mean measles") and speaker meaning, which is intended by the speaker to achieve a desired effect in the hearer and is to be recognized by the hearer as such. The notion of speaker meaning makes clear that speakers can use utterances for various purposes and that the same utterance can be used to elicit different responses. Further, Grice (1989) sets out the conditions for communication, which he contends is rational and to which he assigns a general principle—the cooperative principle. He then specifies more detailed maxims that are related to this general principle—maxims of quality, quantity, relevance, and manner (Levinson 1983).

Both speech act theory and Grice's work have developed along different lines, logical, semantic, and pragmatic, and have been subject to debate and revision. For our purposes, we will pursue their role in the analysis of interaction. With these theories, it is possible to analyze language use by combining the analysis of the propositional content of utterances with their illocutionary force, which permits us to draw inferences about conversational participants' inner worlds of beliefs, assumptions, desires, attitudes, stances, and so forth. It is also possible for us to examine participants' intentions and their effects on interaction.

In this volume, several contributors (Yoshida-Morise, Mohan, Katona, Moder and Halleck, and Young and Halleck) discuss directly or indirectly the impact of the illocutionary force of speakers' utterances on the framing of meaning interpretation and meaning negotiation. They compel us to (re)-evaluate the specific rules and conditions of making meaning and making sense of meaning in the LPI context. The contributors to this volume also note that Gricean maxims take on special characteristics in the context of LPIs. For instance, Johnson and Tyler, He, and Ross find that the maxim of quality appears to count for more than that of quantity; the maxim of relevance hardly applies; and the maxim of manner often does not require speakers to be clear but rather to be verbose.

5 Overview of the Book

The following thirteen chapters were all written specifically for this book. Each of the chapters is an in-depth analysis of LPIs recorded on audio- or videotape. It is remarkable to us that this book should be the first such collection of empirical studies, given that the means of assessing second language speaking proficiency through interviews have been around for some time.[3, 4]

We deliberately invited contributions from scholars with a wide range of disciplinary orientations and in order, we hope, to help the reader identify similar research questions and similar approaches in different contributions, we have grouped the thirteen chapters into four sections.

In the first section, *Language Proficiency Interviews and Conversation*, we collect those contributions that make explicit comparisons between the discourse of LPIs and other kinds of discourse. Marysia Johnson and Andrea Tyler in "Re-Analyzing the OPI: How Much Does It Look like Natural Conversation?" compare an oral proficiency interview used in the training of interviewers with what is known from previous research about the structure of ordinary conversation. Heidi Riggenbach in "Evaluating Learner Interactional Skills: Conversation at the Micro Level" conducts a micro-analysis of an informal conversation between a learner of English and her roommate and makes specific comparisons between that conversation and the discourse of LPIs. This section concludes with Dale April Koike's "What Happens When There's No One to Talk to? Spanish Foreign Language Discourse in Simulated Oral Proficiency Interviews." Koike makes a quantitative and qualitative comparison of the discourse of direct oral tests with semidirect tests in which the learner has to respond to prompts recorded on tape.

The three contributions to the second section, *Turns and Sequences in Language Proficiency Interviews*, examine LPI discourse from a conversational-analytic framework. Agnes Weiyun He in "Answering Questions in LPIs: A Case Study" describes the interactional features of an LPI that contributed to an individual failing the test and thus not being granted a teaching assistantship. Carol Lynn Moder and Gene B. Halleck in "Framing the Language Proficiency Interview as Speech Event: Native and Non-native Speakers' Questions" compare interviews with native and non-native speakers and conclude that the interview frame determines the type of questions asked in an LPI rather than the fact that the interviewee is a non-native speaker. The concluding contribution to this section is Maria M. Egbert's comparison of repair in LPIs with repair in informal conversations between native speakers: "Miscommunication in Language Proficiency Interviews of First-Year German Students: A Comparison with Natural Conversation."

The third section, *Knowledge and Communication in Language Proficiency Interviews*, consists of three descriptions of how knowledge is constructed in LPIs through speech acts and practical reasoning. In "Knowledge Structures in Oral Proficiency Interviews for International Teaching Assistants," Bernard Mohan shows clearly how the interviewer and interviewee co-construct knowledge in the interview. Yumiko Yoshida-Morise in "The Use of Communication Strategies in Language Proficiency Interviews" shows how Japanese interviewees at different levels of proficiency in English use their strategic resources to match their speaking ability with the communicative demands of the interview. The final contribution to this section is "Meaning Negotiation in the Hungarian Oral Proficiency Examination of English" by Lucy Katona. In this chapter, Katona investigates the effect of an important variable in face-to-face interaction—familiarity of the candidate with the examiner—on the discourse of LPIs conducted in Hungary.

In the fourth and final section, *Language Proficiency Interviews as Cross-Cultural Encounters*, four chapters examine the differing interpretations placed on the LPI by examiners and candidates from different cultural backgrounds. In "Maintaining American Face in the Korean Oral Exam: Reflections on the Power of Cross-Cultural Context," Catherine E. Davies takes an interactional/socio-linguistic perspective on Americans taking an LPI in Korean with a Korean interviewer. In "Confirmation Sequences as Interactional Resources in Korean Language Proficiency Interviews," Kyu-hyun Kim and Kyung-Hee Suh analyze a particular interactional routine in Korean that is a marker of how well candidates understand and accept the hierarchical structure of social interaction between Koreans. In "Divergent Frame Interpretations in Oral Proficiency Interview Interaction," Steven Ross explains Japanese candidates' reluctance to elaborate on their answers to interviewers' questions in terms of the differing cultural expectations regarding the role of the interviewee in Japanese and American society. Finally, Richard Young and Gene B. Halleck in "'Let Them Eat Cake!' or How to Avoid Losing Your Head in Cross-Cultural Conversations," compare the differences in talkativeness between Mexican and Japanese interviewees in English-language LPIs and suggest that the comparative taciturnity of the Japanese leads to a lower assessment of proficiency.

We began this introduction with a practical question—How can we best assess how well someone speaks a second language? And we have argued that this question needs to be seen within the context of interactional competence of all participants in an LPI. However, none of the contributions to this book provides a practical answer to that question. What our contributors *do* provide are thorough, empirically-based, and theoretically motivated analyses of the discourse of language proficiency interviews. Collectively, we show how LPIs are constructed via specific moment-by-moment, sequential, lexico-grammatical organizations that embody situational, institutional, and cultural contexts. Through these analyses, a rich and detailed picture of interactional competence emerges. It is in the tradition of applied linguistics that good practice develops only after a foundation of empirical research and theory-building. We hope to have provided that indispensable foundation in this book.

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Notes

1. As far as we are aware, the term “interactional competence” was first used by Kramsch (1986). However we have greatly extended the meaning of the term in applying it to a theory of second language knowledge that embraces both co-construction as well as the specific resources that participants deploy in interactive practices.

2. For further readings on the theoretical assumptions of CA/ethnomethodology, see Heritage (1984) and for further readings on the specific rules of turn taking, see Levinson (1983).

3. Spolsky (1995) mentions the Spanish oral interviews conducted at Yale beginning in 1932 as perhaps the first instance of a face-to-face spoken interaction for the purpose of assessing students’ oral ability. However, he specifies (p. 99) that “pride of place for a direct measurement of oral language proficiency is generally now granted to the oral interview created by the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the US State Department, developed originally between 1952 and 1956.”

4. One could argue that Valdman (1987) was such a volume, although with a different emphasis.