

A Pragmatic Assessment of Non-native Speaker Discourse: Interruptions

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally in order to assess a language learner's proficiency level evaluators have taken into consideration his/her grammatical, phonetic and lexical accuracy, and listening comprehension ability. We believe that other areas of non-native speakers' (NNSs) oral production can be included in this evaluation to make it more precise; for example, (Anderson 2004) shows how we can take into account near-native NNS ability to negotiate meaning by engaging the other interlocutor(s) in the exchange. The study-at-hand focuses on yet another skill that affects NNS performance: how well they "do interacting". From a pragmatic and conversational analysis perspective along the lines of Riggensbach *et al.*'s (2000) definition of fluency, the speech of different NNSs in this corpus was compared to see how well they could maintain active participation in discourse when both interrupting a native speaker (NS) and when being interrupted by a NS.

Other studies have failed to consider conversation and/or in many cases any type of oral production at all. Most of the quantitative research done in this area has been carried out using role plays or even simulations that are written out by the English student¹. Many other researchers have worked with oral production, but in order to make it quantifiable have limited the scope of the interaction to some extent². There also exist studies carried out with authentic discourse that focus on skills other than interrupting³. From our perspective we must begin with the idea of *communicative competence* in the sense of language learning (Hymes 1967). Thus, when referring to fluency, we must take into account the understanding that, in this case, the non-native

¹ See: Cenoz Iragui (1996), Lao *et al.* (1996), Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1986) and House & Kasper (1987).

² See: Lennon (1990), Weise (1984), Coppieters (1987), Dogançay Aktuna & Kamish (1997), Heike (1980) and Temple (1992).

³ For requests see Schmidt (1983), for suggestions and rejections see Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford (1993).

speaker, has acquired of *performance rules*. Once a learner has reached a certain level of proficiency, we need to consider not only the easy-to-observe use of language skills, but also the underlying *communicative strategies or abilities* (Brown *et al.* 1996: 197) he or she employs in context; hence, we see a need to utilize natural *conversation* in order to obtain these results. Even though we reject the format of what has traditionally been denominated *Oral Proficiency Interviews*, we believe that at a certain point in language learning conversational exercises with a native speaker allow for a more precise assessment of the learner.

METHODOLOGY

Obviously all studies that come from a conversational analysis perspective are based to some extent on the rules for conversation set out by Sacks *et al.* (1974). Nonetheless, nowadays it is generally accepted that many of the first studies along these lines tended to provide an ideal characterization of human interaction. The skill evaluated in this project was that of interruption. We understand there exist different types of *interruption*; here we are referring to the moment in a talk exchange when the turn of one of the participants is overlapped by another interlocutor and the person who was talking loses the floor. However, we have also observed another type of interruption that occurs in non-competitive way. Since there is no speaker change they are referred to as *collaborative turns* (Gallardo Paúls 1996: 64). Both types of interruption are present in this corpus. Moreover both types of interruptions are considered from two perspectives: at times the NS interrupts the NNS, yet on other occasions it is the NNS who interrupts the NS.

In our corpus there are two main levels of fluency as far as interruptions are concerned. Some of the NNSs demonstrated their high pragmatic fluency level with successful interruption sequences. Other NNSs showed a lower level of fluency since their interruptions were not as fortunate. The corpus used in this study consists of four tape-recorded conversations lasting approximately 45 minutes each. A NS and a NNS were asked to participate in this research project. They were told that they would be recorded and that they should just "have a normal conversation". No further instructions were given. The tape recorder was partially hidden in order to help them forget about its presence and the first four minutes of each conversation were discarded in an attempt to use material that was as similar to that of natural conversation as possible. The conversations were transcribed and studied to provide information about the pragmatic strategies that the non-native speakers used when talking in English with a NS.

LOW LEVELS OF FLUENCY

Since all the names have been changed to insure privacy we will refer to the NNS who demonstrates the lowest level of fluency as MariCarmen. The NS interrupts

her discourse a total of five times during their conversation. In all but two of these cases there is a change of speaker and MariCarmen is unable to finish what she was saying. However, we must also take into account the two times that she is capable of carrying on her turn in spite of the NS' interruption.

In Example A we can observe this latter case. In this example, as in all of the ones that follow it, the NS is represented by A and the NNS as B. In it MariCarmen is telling about her plans for summer vacation; she will be in Britain with her boyfriend who has just returned from London.

Example A MariCarmen / 878 "I'm coming with you"

869	B	so he has been there this month and he is going back there	
870		in July	
871		so I'll try to: : do something also	
872		in [would you like that?	
873	A	[I'm coming with you	[ha ha
874	B		[ha ha
875		yea [I I	
876	A	[(why don't [you take me?) ha	
877	B		[I I
878		I'm plan well I'm doing my Doctoral Thesis also so.	

The NS interrupts by overlapping MariCarmen in 873. However, because of the linguistic content here, one can suppose that there has been some type of extra-linguistic information that leads MariCarmen to break off her narration in order to ask the question that appears as part of 872. The NS has introduced a side sequence with a humorous tone that is successful as seen in their simultaneous laughter in 873 and 874. MariCarmen takes advantage of the turn relevant place (TRP) to acknowledge the intervention of the NS and then recuperate the story line in 875. But, the NS who was successful before, tries another side sequence in the form of a question that interrupts the NNS in 876. Since MariCarmen knows that her turn is at risk, she repeats her pre-start twice at the beginning of the NS's interruption and twice during the NS's interruption. She does not participate in the NS' laughter in 876, but chooses to continue her narration at this TRP as seen in 878.

By doing so, she accomplishes two goals in the talk-exchange: (1) she recuperates her dominance in the interaction and vindicates her role as speaker, at the same time that (2) she projects the role of hearer onto the NS. That is, she maintains her turn and the floor by using this simple strategy of repetition until she can continue her narration. In our evaluation we find that she is sometimes able to deal with native speaker interruptions.

On the other hand, MariCarmen interrupts the NS only twice. On both occasions these turns are collaborative and result in no speaker change. In Example B the NS is explaining the working conditions of language teachers in Great Britain.

Example B MariCarmen / 209 "the problem"

- 206 B are they well well paid there?
 207 A no
 208 this is the um
 209 B problem
 210 A this is the problem
 211 B [ha ha
 212 A [ha ha.

This is one of the only times that MariCarmen breaks the NS' flow of talk. In Example B she takes advantage of the TRP at the end of 208 to provide a collaborative turn in 209 that, in this case, supplies the exact term the NS is looking for. Their agreement on the meaning being constructed is shown by the NS' repetition of the entire utterance in 210 and by their laughter at the end of the sequence.

The NNS' expertise is seen in that she is able to recognize the cognitive frame opened by the NS. MariCarmen applies her background information and the context in the talk-exchange to what is being described, in such a way that she is able to bring the most relevant possible meaning directly into the talk-exchange. Thus, she can assist the NS in completing the idea she is trying to communicate in a way that does not affect the communicative goal of the NS.

HIGH LEVELS OF FLUENCY

Two of the NNSs show a high level of fluency: Luz and Marian. Most of Luz's interruptions are collaborative ones that either add information to the NS' account, or summarize the meaning being generated in the talk exchange. We find this cooperation in Example C. The NS is relating her plans for an upcoming break when her boyfriend will come to visit her. He will be arriving in Madrid and she is trying to decide how to connect his flight schedule with the bus timetable. If they cannot make it to the bus station before three o'clock, they will have to wait for the midnight bus.

Example C Luz / 1043 "travel plans"

- 1037 A so if we don't arrive then we have to wait until midnight
 1038 B right
 1039 A so we would go round up there in Madrid
 1040 B good
 1041 A but
 1042 if we can get the bus at three o'clock
 1043 B you will try to be [in Lugo as soon as possible
 1044 A [I would rather get
 1045 well I don't know.

In this sequence, Luz actively participates in the construction of meaning with her turns. The NS' narration is helped along by the NNS' back channel in 1038 and by her evaluative turn in 1040. Then Luz interrupts the NS' turn in 1043 with a

collaborative turn that correctly completes the NS' utterance syntactically, since grammatically speaking, Luz supplies the second half of a so-called "first conditional" sentence. The well-formedness of the NNS' talk patently demonstrates her expertise. She is fully capable of interrupting the narration of the NS in order to infer and, thus, supply the communicative intent of the NS, and at the same time, of paying attention to the form with which it is expressed. The fact that Luz is capable of using such accurate form in a very continuous sequence corroborates her high pragmatic conversational fluency level.

Apart from interrupting the NS without disrupting her narration, in the evaluation of Luz's fluency we have also found instances in which she interrupts the narration of the NS at a TRP in order to start a new narration herself. As far as the NS interrupting Luz, we have observed that for the most part the NS interrupts Luz in a collaborative way. There is also one occasion in which the NS interrupts and then takes the floor. In our assessment we can say that both of the participants interrupt each other in similar ways.

Marian's expertise is evident although her conversation with the NS is very different. Neither Marian nor the NS interrupt each other *per se* in this talk exchange. However, the NS does finish the sentence for the NNS twice. On both occasions the interruptions result in a change of speaker. Nonetheless, the interruptions occur at TRPs in which a change of speaker is appropriate. Once again, in this conversation we observe the behavior of the two participants to be very similar in their collaborative turns and turns in which speaker change occurs.

There are also several examples of how the NNS interrupts the NS by initiating a side sequence that does postpone the narration of the NS. Due to their similarity only one of the examples is analyzed in detail. In Example D, the NS maintains that she feels more responsible since she has started working because, unlike her class attendance as a student, she has never missed a class as a teacher.

Example D Marian / 947 "knock on wood"

- | | | |
|-----|---|---------------------------------------|
| 943 | A | but I can actually honestly say |
| 944 | | I don't need to touch wood |
| 945 | | because I've finished my classes |
| 946 | | (tap tap of someone knocking on wood) |
| 947 | B | there's not much wood around anyway |
| 948 | A | no |
| 949 | | that |
| 950 | B | I don't know what that is ha ha |
| 951 | A | ha ha |
| 952 | | plastic |
| 953 | B | yeah sort of |
| 954 | A | but I haven't actually missed. |

The NS is in the middle of a narration when she makes reference to a popular saying, i.e. "touch (or knock on) wood". Marian interrupts her at a TRP that is made possible by someone knocking on something to initiate a joke that is related to the

topic at hand. The NS participates in the side sequence with two evaluative turns in 948 and 949. In 950 Marian makes another attempt at initiating the joke which is successful this time as seen in their laughter in 950 and 951. The NS offers an evaluative turn in 952 in the form of the second part of the adjacency pair opened by the NNS in 950. Marian's agreement with her in 953 serves as the closing to the side sequence. After this, the NS continues with the narration she began above.

The fact that Marian can recognize this type of frame and use her communicative abilities to direct the flow of conversation in a jocular way with a side sequence demonstrates her discursive level. She also interrupts the NS in a socially appropriate and accepted fashion as seen by the fact that the NS does not react to this interruption in a marked way, but seems to take it in stride as part of the conversation. Marian's awareness of exactly what is taking place in the discourse setting and her use of relevance is key in making this move successful. Marian initiates a side sequence that links the proverb the NS uses to the physical setting in order to make a joke. The NS recognizes the humorous proposition of the NNS and does not feel threatened with losing the floor. It is Marian's *intersubjective ability to coordinate talk* that helps her to manage this interruption sequence successfully because her talk approximates that of a NS. Schifffrin explains it in this way,

[f]irst, the goal of communication is the achievement of intersubjectivity, i.e. one person's recognition of intentions mirrors the communicator's display of intentions [...] procedures for achieving intersubjectivity are based on prior knowledge: people share the same linguistic code, as well as the same principles of communication (1994: 395).

By appropriately utilizing the norms of turn-taking and making her talk relevant, Marian is capable of projecting her intentions on the NS (and vice versa) so that the exchange is smooth and felicitous.

The fact that when the NNSs interrupt the NS they are demonstrating their communicative expertise is patent in Examples A, B, C, and D above. They interpret what the other interlocutor says in an appropriate manner, to the extent that they can bypass the unstated part of the NS' turn and make relevant contributions; in other words, they are capable of embedding one speech act inside the other. In addition, using interruption correctly exemplifies how NNSs are capable of recognizing and manipulating discourse on a pragmatic level that goes beyond mere linguistic production.

UNSUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

Finally, we must include a reference to the unsuccessful use of interruptions; Trini's discourse includes both successful and unsuccessful strategies. When interrupted by the NS Trini is successful in maintaining the floor 80% of the time. She also demonstrates her ability, as in the examples above, to interrupt with collaborative turns that do not disrupt the talk exchange. Moreover, with the use of conversational

analysis techniques we can provide evidence that these interruptions are appropriate for the context and, thus, successful.

Nonetheless, Trini also uses a strategy for interruption that is unsuccessful in this exchange. She interrupts the NS five times by asking a question. Twice the question is answered and the NS continues so that the flow of talk is not broken, but the other three times the question is answered with a non-preferred response such as silence, or a request for clarification. In Example E we can see how the NNS is forced to reformulate. The NS is telling about how she survives being separated from her boyfriend for long periods of time.

Example E Trini / 237/ "do you have that feeling yourself?"

- 228 A tsk
 229 (inhales)
 230 and he was like ha ha ha
 231 but he hadn't seen me
 232 and everything was fine
 233 and neither of us did anything with anybody else [and you know
 234 B [hum
 235 A an' it was all fine so
 236 when I when I [I mean
 237 B [do you do you have that feeling yourself?
 238 I mean the feeling that he may be with somebody else?
 239 or you don't really care
 240 (1.0)
 241 I mean I [guess
 242 A [well
 243 B [I guess you care but you don't think of it do [you?
 244 A [ha ha [ha
 245 not anymore.

Trini provides a back channel in 234 at a TRP. The NS begins the next turn and maintains the floor until she begins to make a self-repair in 236. Trini, instead of waiting for a TRP, interrupts the NS by overlapping her repair and asking a direct question. She reformulates her question in 238 and again in 239. There is no response on part of the NS until Trini reformulates for a fourth time in 243. The NS responds with overlapping laughter and finally replies to this last question in 245.

By observing the NNS' attempt at interrupting the NS we see that she does not try to insert her turn at a TRP and that her use of a question is not appropriate as evidenced in 240. Nonetheless, her communicative ability is also demonstrated by the fact that she recognizes this silence as a non-preferred response and is capable of employing a face-saving strategy by reconverting to another less personal question—one that the NS does answer. It was interesting for our study that even though this strategy was unsuccessful on several occasions, Trini continued to use it.

FINAL REMARKS

We have studied the oral discourse in conversations of non-native and native speakers as a way of helping to determine their fluency level. We believe that apart from the normal language skill areas of pronunciation, grammar, lexicon, and listening comprehension, other areas of communicative expertise can also be taken into account in the oral evaluation of near-native non-native speakers. More particularly, in this case study, we looked at interruptions and how/if non-native speakers were able to successfully interrupt and be interrupted. We are able to demonstrate that there exist various levels of expertise in this area. The NNSs who are not as proficient in this area may use simple strategies to maintain their turn or may not be able to maintain it at all. The NNSs who show more expertise are able to maintain their turns and interrupt the NSs in a socially acceptable way so that the flow of talk is not disrupted. Finally, we believe that by making use of this kind of analysis we can make the oral assessment of non-native speakers more precise. At the same time, taped conversations with a native speaker might be able to provide feedback for those occasions when reviewing oral work would enable the non-native speakers to incorporate different strategies into their discourse or use the ones they are already aware of in a more successful way.

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