COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE REVISITED

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In this paper I seek to develop arguments first made in ‘‘The Linguistic Bases of Communicative Competence,’’ presented at the 1981 Georgetown Roundtable (Gumperz 1981). The earlier paper made an initial attempt to explore some of the theoretical consequences that arise when we analyze discourse coherence from a speaker-listener oriented interactive perspective. The question can be put as follows: what does an interactive approach to communication in which problems of understanding are studied not in terms of meanings inhering in a given text or stretch of discourse, but rather as outcomes of inferential judgments made in the course of situated processes of conversational exchange, imply for our theories of communication and language use?

Conversing, as we all know, is a cooperative activity that involves active participation and coordination of moves by two or more participants in the joint production of talk. There are good reasons to believe that such coordination presupposes verbal abilities and types of knowledge that are not as yet fully understood. Neither the theoretical linguist’s grammatical analyses nor the commonly accepted sociolinguistic studies that seek to formulate rules of language usage covering what can be said when and under what circumstances can account for this knowledge. Nor do notions of schema or script defined in static terms as extralinguistic knowledge of the world explain how such information enters into discourse understanding.

When we look at problems of understanding from a participant’s perspective we see that what we must explain are on-line processing strategies. Conversationalists employ strategies in inferring the contextual presuppositions about what is expected in an encounter. Related strategies are also used in segmenting the stream of talk into information or idea units, in determining the transition relevant points for turn taking, and in integrating what is said at various points in time into coherent themes. Empirical investigations of conversational exchanges have led to the discovery that in making the judgments relevant to these tasks, participants depend on their own perception of stylistic and prosodic signaling cues that have hitherto not been seen as having semantic import and that are thus not ordinarily covered in sentence level linguistic analysis. These features of speech performance are processed in accordance with contextualization conventions that retrieve schematic information and make it available as an input into the interpretive process.

My claim is that the capacity to contextualize and thus make sense of what is heard in terms of what is already known is governed by cognitive abilities that share many of the characteristics of grammatical competence. They are conventional in nature, learned as part of the everyday language socialization processes, and once internalized are usually employed automatically without conscious reflection. In principle therefore these processing abilities should be analyzable by in-depth qualitative methods similar to those employed in grammatical analysis. But conversational processes also have special characteristics of their own that derive from the very nature of conversations as multiparty interactive performances. These properties require us to look at the multiplicity of linguistic signs involved in conversing from a different perspective.

To begin with, although it is true that all conversations are governed by general and in large part universal organizing principles, these principles operate in a manner that is quite different from the operation of all or none categorical grammatical rules. Conversational principles, as Levinson (1983) has argued, are defeasible; that is, they do not determine what counts as an utterance in a language or what can or cannot be said or understood. On the contrary, they act as guidelines or standards of evaluations that give rise to expectations which when violated generate the implicatures on which interpretation of so much of what a speaker intends to convey rests.

Secondly, the phonetic, prosodic and stylistic cues that participants in face to face encounters rely on in contextualizing their performances are typically quite fleeting or transitory in nature. Since the relevant information is not coded in lexical form, it becomes hard to retrieve after the event. It cannot easily be communicated in contexts other than those in which it originally occurs, so that recalling what was actually perceived at any one time for the purpose of later analysis and preservation of information in the form of adequate transcripts presents a major problem. In fact until about ten years ago, when unobtrusive means for recording everyday talk were only just becoming available, we simply did not have the data necessary for systematic investigation.

Thus while theory suggests good reasons to believe that in depth methods of analysis patterned on those employed in the study of spoken language can yield insights into conversational processes not otherwise obtainable through quantitative correlational techniques, the phenomena to be studied, by their very nature also present serious empirical and analytical problems. It seems clear that although conversationalists build on phonological, syntactic and semantic knowledge in contextualizing what they hear, contextualization conventions are as distinct from sentence-level linguistic rules as phonology is from syntax and syntax from semantics. They must therefore be analyzed in their own terms.

What then does a qualitative, participant-centered approach to the study of conversational phenomena entail? In arguing for methods of analysis patterned on those employed in linguistics, what I mean to suggest is that the analytical goals must parallel the linguist's concern with structural determinants of grammaticality. In other words, conversational analysis should focus on the conditions that make possible shared interpretation, rather than seeking to predict correct or appropriate usage. For this reason I proposed that the notion of communicative competence be redefined as: ''*The knowledge of discourse processing conventions and related communicative norms that participants must control as a precondition to being able to enlist and sustain conversational cooperation*" (Gumperz 1981). In what follows I would like to discuss what this approach to communicative competence implies for the study of the issues of meaning, form and use in context and for enabling us to integrate the ethnographer's insights into culture and cultural variability and context into the study of discourse processing and discourse understanding.

Let me begin with some background. The notion of communicative competence was first proposed by Hymes in the context of the 1960's debate on the limits of formalization in linguistics. In order to highlight the role that cultural and linguistic variability play in speaking, Hymes argued that communication in the sense of engaging in meaningful interaction with others is a function of membership in a speech community and not simply a matter of grammatical competence. Speech communities are human collectivities held together by shared history and long term participation in networks of relationships. Ethnographic evidence shows that such communities are frequently not identical with collectivities defined by control of grammatical rules (Gumperz 1972). We cannot therefore assume that our studies are socially relevant simply by correlating sentence level linguistic categories with independently determined social variables. The extent to which culture is shared in relation to speaking must be empirically determined by examining the norms, values and ecological constraints on behavior as they function in human groups.

Yet no matter how we select the population units to be studied, patterns of language usage are never quite uniform. Apart from individual performance factors, language usage varies with boundaries of class, gender, ethnic allegiance, power relationships, and education. All these are factors which are often quite resistant to measurement in the rapidly changing societies of today. Even in small communities that to the outsider appear as relatively homogeneous, economically and socioculturally uniform entities, detailed ethnographic studies tend to reveal sharp divisions among members who do and members who do not share a sense of local identity. Thus, models of analysis that assume the existence of clear and stable social boundaries will necessarily have difficulty in specifying the social motivations of language behavior.

There are at least two interrelated and partially independent dimensions of variabilities that we must account for in the study of cultural sharing: the societal and the contextual. A major concern of ethnography of communication has been to clarify the relationship between linguistic and sociocultural categories through comparative studies along both of these dimensions. Given the facts of variability, a human community defined in purely geographical terms cannot be the unit of analysis for this comparative endeavor. Ethnographers of communication therefore chose to focus on speech events, culturally defined units of interaction bounded in time and space, such as ritual performances, ceremonies, public meetings. Such culturally sanctioned units of social interaction stand apart from everyday talk, and thus form a convenient starting point for studying the interplay of social and linguistic aspects of communicative behavior. To account for the role of culture and social norms in speaking, it seemed useful to treat events as if they were miniature social systems; that is, as if one could speak of norms of conduct, constraints on choice of communicative content and on roles that participants can play which function like the norms of human communities. The goal of speech event analysis was to formulate rules of appropriateness showing how a speaker's choice from a range of stylistically alternate expressions relates to the norms governing behavior in such events.

The data obtained in this type of study have been important in providing basic background information on hitherto little understood sources of variability in speech form, as well as in speech function, and in demonstrating that the analysis of linguistic form cannot ultimately be abstracted from cultural considerations. But the information we have so far tells about the role of cultural factors in what Hymes calls the communicative economy of human groups. It specifies the knowledge that is potentially available, but does not tell us what aspects of this knowledge are actually used in communicative situations or how they are brought into the communicative process to affect the interpretation of what transpires. If the claim that cultural knowledge forms part of communicative competence is to have anything more than metaphorical significance, we have to find ways of looking at verbal data that enable us to work out empirical procedures for testing hypotheses about how our understanding of what is said at any one point is affected by culture. For this reason we need more detailed insights into how verbal encounters actually work.

By far the largest and most exhaustively described body of information on conversation comes from the work of sociologists working in the ethnomethodological tradition. Ethnomethodologists were the first to look at conversation as social action. Their studies provide empirical evidence showing how the sequential organization of turns at speaking can serve to constrain conversationalists' ability to make themselves understood--to introduce, establish and change topics, and otherwise to affect the course of a conversation. But their goals were quite different from the ethnographer's concern with showing that sociocultural factors are important in communication. Their work must be understood within the context of the internal sociological debate over the empirical validity of commonly accepted social science generalizations. Symbolic interactionists, for example, tended to limit their analysis of human encounters to categories of roles, statuses and motives, derived from theory alone, without raising the question of the relationship of theory to practice. To bring out the limitations of this type of *a priori* theorizing, verbal data were collected to provide empirical evidence of how social control was exerted in everyday interaction.

Since speech act analysis could be seen as an instance of such *a priori* theorizing, its social premises were clearly unacceptable. Instead ethnomethodologists focused on everyday talk which lacked the formal constraints that characterized the ritual and ceremonial occasions that speech act analysts tended to study. As Schegloff (1981) puts it:

> ‘‘quite aside from whatever individual cognitive or processing achievements might be involved, the production of a spate of talk by one speaker is something which involves collaboration with the other parties present and that collaboration is interactive in character and interlaced throughout the discourse. That is, it is an ongoing accomplishment rather than a pact signed at the beginning after which discourse is produced entirely as a matter of individual achievement. The character of this interactional accomplishment is at least in part shaped by the sociosequential organization of participation in conversation, for example, by its turn taking organization...."

What I want to argue here is that while the sociosequential organization of speakers’ moves is as basic to conversational analysis as clause boundaries are to syntax, conversational analysts have gone only part way to giving us an understanding of conversational processes. What they have done is to give us some of the basic constraints that affect the working of conversational processes in societies of all kinds. But these constraints, like the linguist’s grammatical rules, are in large part universal and thus abstracted from actual situations of usage. To see how communication works on the ground we cannot look at organizational features of communication alone, but we must look in detail at the actual processes of conversational inference; that is, the situated interpretations that participants make of each other’s moves at any one point in time. Let me illustrate with an example of the type commonly analyzed by conversational analysts:

EXAMPLE I

Making arrangements for lunch. (Levinson, 1983; pp.316-7)

1. A. Why don’t we all have lunch.

2. B. O.K., that would be in St Jude’s, would it?

3. A. Yes (pause)

4. B. O.K. sooo ?

5. A. One o’clock in the bar.

6. B. O.K. .

7. A. O.K. ?

8. B. O.K. then, thanks very much indeed George.

9. A. All right.

10. B. See you there.

11. A. See you there.

12. B. O.K.

13. A. O.K. bye.

14. B. bye.

This exchange constitutes the concluding portion of an encounter, the rest of which is not reproduced here. A proposes a luncheon meeting and B accepts. They agree on a time and place and then say goodbye. What readers of the transcripts are likely to find odd is the form of the leave taking and the amount of time it takes up. The substantive portion of the event is completed in six turns while the departing formalities extend over eight turns--more than half of the total sequence. B's *O.K.* in turn 6 is followed by A's *O.K.* pronounced with question intonation. This evokes a formulaic expression of gratitude on A's part, presumably an allusion to some favor obtained. B's acknowledgement in 9 is followed by a simultaneous exchange of *see you there, followed by another pair of O.K.*'s and a set of *goodbye*'s.

Levinson in discussing this example suggests that it might reflect a common general schema for closing sections, consisting of the following four basic stages: a) a closing down of some topic, such as the making of arrangements in turns 1-5; b) one or more passing turns (turns 6 and 7); c) a typing of a call followed by a further exchange of pre-closing items; d) a final exchange of terminal elements. Yet neither Levinson's discussion of ethnomethodological approaches to conversations nor Schegloff and others who have done the primary research on conversational processes deal with the theoretical status of such notions as schema and negotiation. Nor do they raise the question of how findings from the empirical study of situated conversational exchanges can be integrated into what we know about discourse understanding.

Most reports of conversational analysts' findings take the form of empirical statements about patterned features of language usage occurring in a variety of conversational texts that can be shown to have a significant effect on the course of an interaction. The most frequently cited examples of such regularities are the so-called adjacency pairs: question-answer, greeting-acknowledgement, offer-acceptance and the like. In characterizing the regularities which underlie the occurrence of such pairs, Sacks and Schegloff (1973) suggest that they reflect conversational rules such as the following: having produced the first part of some pair, the current speaker must stop speaking and the second speaker must at that point come up with a second pair. Yet the status of such rules is not made clear. Does the schema of example 1 reflect such a rule? Given Schegloff's view of conversation as an ‘‘ongoing accomplishment" which is in large part created by the local sequences of moves and countermoves, I doubt whether he would want to say that we are dealing with a fixed script that applies to sequences of all kinds. Such a script would hardly require negotiation of transitions. Moreover, sequences such as conversational closings, extending as they do over a number of moves, are context- and to some extent culture-specific. Thus they contrast with adjacency pairs which occur in conversations of all types.

A more reasonable position--and one that does not inherently conflict with the conversational analyst's basic arguments--would be to assume that schemata such as the one Levinson suggests specify knowledge acquired through previous communicative experience of what could potentially happen in situations like the one at hand. The actual on-line processing and production strategies through which the closing sequence is produced could then be regarded as the outcome of local inferential processes to which schematic knowledge is one of several inputs. A closer examination of both the form and the content of the moves and countermoves that make up the exchange provides some insights into the workings of this inferential process.

After A's confirmation of the meeting in turn 3, the encounter is interrupted by a pause. B then continues the interaction with *O.K. sooo?*. A's answer in 5 indicates that he interprets this as a request for more information. B's *O.K.* confirms this interpretation. When A follows with a questioning *O.K.*, B counters with his formulaic expression of gratitude, which is then confirmed by B's *alright*. What do A and B have to know in order to respond in such a way as to have their moves understood? Seen in purely referential perspective, turns like *O.K. sooo* and *O.K.* can perhaps be regarded as contentless. But the form in which they are spoken--that is, both the elongated vowel and the question intonation used--do have communicative import. They can be paraphrased as a query like: *Is there anything else to be said?* In turn 5 the answer is affirmative, whereas in turn 8 it is negative.

In arguing that message form communicates, I do not mean to say that features such as prosodic contours have meanings. As Bolinger points out, intonation contours are not meaningful elements in the linguist's sense of the word. What we are talking about here are context bound judgments, that build on schematic knowledge generated through previous talk as well as knowledge of contextualization conventions--grammatical and semantic knowledge as well as participants' understanding of the sociosequential positioning of the utterance at hand. These are matters of discourse level interpretations, not matters of meaning as such.

The next two examples provide some further insights into the linguistic and interactional nature of these interpretive processes.

EXAMPLE II

Secretary (B) talking to recently appointed research assistant (A) who has just entered the building.

1. A. Good morning.

2. B. Hi John.

3. A. Howdi.

4. B. How’re ya doin.

5. A. Fine...ah...do you know...did you get anything back on those forms ah...you had me fill out?

6. B. hm... like what.

7. A. I wondered if they sent you a receipt or anything or a copy of

8. B. You mean your employment forms?

9. A. Yeah.

10. B. Yeah I kept a copy. Why is there a question?

11. A. Cause I just left it with the Anthropology Department.

12. B. Oh that’s O.K., they’ll just send them over to L.&S. and they’ll send them on.

13. A. O.K. because the chairman wasn’t there and..

14. B. Oh she called me later... I guess it was you. She said that a student had been over and that she was just going to hold on to the forms and then send them. And she sent you on, you know... She told you to to go ahead and leave them and not wait around.

15. A. I just wanted to make sure they're O.K.

16. B. Oh yeah. Don't worry about it.

The opening of this encounter is an example of what ethnomethodologists have called a presequence. The second of the two greeting exchanges is treated as a bid for further talk. The remainder of the interaction is typical of informal office enquiry or information sequences. A wants to know if his employment forms have been processed and B answers by telling him something about what the procedures are. Yet even though when seen in its entirety the exchange seems familiar, the way in which the two participants go about carrying out the activity makes it seem highly unlikely that either of them has approached the encounter with a predetermined plan or script. On the contrary, the interaction moves forward step by step. Each move is replied to and evaluated before the next one is initiated.

The initial exchange through which entry into the encounter is negotiated also sets the tone for what follows. When B counters A's rather formal *good morning* with an informal *hi*, A follows suit and B continues in the same informal mode. It appears that they have agreed upon a tone of informality which is then maintained throughout the encounter. Note that while sequential organization is crucial in the negotiation process, this informality and the indirectness it entails also makes demands on the participants' ability to infer information not directly reflected in the lexical content of what is said. After A's somewhat vague enquiry in line 5, B asks for more clarification. When A's reply is similarly vague, she guesses that he is referring to his employment forms. Her guess is confirmed and she assumes he wants to know if she kept a copy of the forms in her office. Her misunderstanding is cleared up through further indirect inferences without overt reference to the need for repair. A's statement that the chairman was absent then evokes narrative description of what happened with the form. Throughout the interaction A has pursued a strategy of relying on A's ability to infer non-lexicalized information. Why he should do this is outside the scope of this analysis. Yet what is important is that speaker and listener are able to make such indirect inferences and have them understood and that they do this by appealing to shared knowledge of previous interactions and to organizational knowledge of the workings of University administration.

EXAMPLE III

An Excursion. (Falk, 1979)

The following transcription conventions are used in this example:

____ low falling contour ____ high falling contour

____ low rising contour ____ high rising contour

(The preceding accent marks are doubled for extra loudness.)

____ register shift upwards ____ register shift downwards

____ accelerated tempo ____ latching

( ) unintelligible speech ____ overlap

1. P: Yeah where'd you go. where'd you all go.

2. J: Well, y'wanna tell em, where we went?

3. R: We went uh.., almost everywhere. except that it was foggy.

   for half the time we were over there.

4. M: Yeah, you don't seem too enthusiastic about it.

5. R: Oh it was a good trip. yeah, it was. yeah

6. J: Well, it was a great trip. except that

   it was a foggy day. and we started out by going to Twin Peaks,

   ..at 9:30 in the morning. ..on a foggy day. you know what we

   saw, we saw fog, up to here.

7. R: We saw a fire down the

   hill.

8. J: A fire down the hill, that's right.

9. R: There was a (f) was on
fire.

10. P: That was good ( ).

11. J: And then after the fog, and it was windy,
we.. decided to go to the beach. we went to the beach, and
it was, we saw some sea lions, though,

12. R: There were about
three.

13. J: Then we had ho.. hot dogs on a stick.

14. M: uh-huh.

15. R: Some of them. some of them, had hot dogs on a stick.

16. M: ( ) Hi G. (G. enters)

17. J: Hi G.. . and uh, we uh.. , talked ( ) about the tourists
there. and we left, and went to the Palace,.. of the Legion of
Honor. right?

18. R: Again, for a view of the Golden Gate.

19. J: For a
view, of the Golden Gate Bridge. and there was no view.

20. G: Aaaaah

The content of this exchange readily identifies it as an informal narrative. Two English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors, J and R, have taken a group of students on an excursion to San Francisco to see the sights and are telling their colleagues about the trip. Yet the structural characteristics we normally associate with narrative are nowhere overtly marked. There is, for example, no overt introduction--no initial summary statement of what the trip was about. In response to the question as to where they went, R answers *we went almost everywhere* and then goes on to say that while it was foggy it was a good trip. J then makes the transition into the substantive part of the narrative by first repeating R’s statement and then shifting to slow rhythm and starting to list the things they did. The exchange has some of the characteristics of a picaresque narrative in as much as the action moves forward by the way things are said rather than by what is said. The trip is described in a manner that seems lacking in the kind of detail that we ordinarily expect in such narratives. Mention is made of some of the sites visited (such as Twin Peaks, the beach and the Palace of the Legion of Honor) and of what they saw(a fire, fog, sea lions what they ate: hot dogs on a stick). There is no attempt to explain what it is that is interesting about all this. Considering the fact that speakers and audience are all local residents, the list sounds strangely uninformative. Yet no one queries the account or asks for more detail. On the contrary, in line 10, after the third mention of the fire, P remarks *that was good*. All this seems at first as a violation of Gricean principles of relevance. It is only in lines 13-17, where the we in J’s statement *we had hot dogs on a stick* is corrected to *some of them* by R that we begin to see the communicative import of this apparent violation of relevance. It seems that even though the narrators speak in the first person plural, the story is being told from the students’ perspective and not that of the narrators. There is nothing in the surface form of the description to indicate this. Note that the narrative is not one person’s performance; it is jointly produced by J and R. The transcript reveals many instances of what Falk has called duetting, where two speakers complete each others thoughts so that their utterances together make up a single turn at speaking. For example, R’s *we saw a fire....* in line 7 is latched to J’s *...up to here* in 6. That is, the two follow each other without the rhythmic interval that normally marks transitions between turns. The same is true for J’s line 8 and R’s lines 9 and 12. Lines 17-19 are similarly cooperative, although there is no latching. Furthermore J and R regularly employ parallel syntactic constructions: their lexical choices are stylistically congruent, with one person often anticipating what the other has to say. It would be difficult to imagine that two individuals could be as successful at managing this type of cooperation and entering into the spirit of what the other intends to convey without shared frames of reference and some level of shared culture.

The three examples illustrate the role that turn taking and negotiation of situated interpretations play in everyday encounters. But they also show that conversing involves more than context-free principles and expectations of sequentiality that can be applied by anyone who knows the language. Participants do not enter into the negotiation process relying only on their command of conversational principles, grammar and lexicon. The ability enter into conversations, that is to say, to fit one’s contributions into locally established themes and lines of argumentation depends on largely indirect inferential processes which draw on knowledge of the world to make sense of what is said.

Culture enters into these processes in two ways. It is an integral component of what discourse analysts call schematic knowledge. Although we customarily think of schemata as ways of organizing factual information in terms of basic conceptual structures, conversational analysis shows that assumptions about norms, interpersonal relationships and interactive or communicative goals are also involved. When seen in this perspective schemata come to take on forms that bear great similarity to the ethnographer of communication's speech events in that they reflect values and experiences acquired through participation in culturally bounded networks of social relationships. The difference is that they do not predict action or determine judgments of what is appropriate. They must be seen as cognitive constructs that give rise to expectations about what is to be expected in an encounter, which in turn enter into our interpretations of what transpires.

Cultural background and culturally channeled interactive experience also determine the acquisition of contextualization conventions. It is by virtue of these conventions that the choice among such performance features as *hi* and *good morning* in example 2, the prosodic contour of O.K. in 2, the pausing, utterance latching and pitch register and tempo alternations that mark all three conversations acquires situated significance.

It must be emphasized that what we are talking about here are not context free meanings. Interpretations can be seen as the outputs of inferential processes which have as their input knowledge of lexicon, schemata and control of contextualization conventions. Note that while grammatical knowledge and control of the basic lexicon is shared by speakers of the language, other conventions entering into conversational inference are differentially distributed in accordance with social and occupational boundaries and communicative experience. It is the interplay or tension between context free clause level linguistic competence on the one hand and situational and subculturally specific knowledge of the discourse level conventions that enter into communicative competence on the other and its implication for learning and understanding in everyday communicative situations that promises to become one of the most fruitful areas for future sociolinguistic research.

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