STUDYING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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0. *Corpus*

#2a. Janice (J1) - Jana (J2)
(request)

J1- Jana were you here last
    week?
J2- yeah
J1- yeah uh I didn't make it last
5   week [LAUGHTER] do you
    think I could - take a look at
    your notes from then?
J2- oh sure, I don't know that I
    took a whole lot uh
10 J1- it's alright, your .... is
    more legible than mine
J2- [LAUGHTER] we just went
    over a few of the chapters
    uhm I dont know if you've
15   been keeping up with some
    of those, it's hard to
J1- not too bad (SPECIAL
    INTONATION)

J2- keep up with them as much
20   as we should ....>
J1-   ↑.......↑
J2- but yeah you can take a look
    at them and copy it down
    you know the>
25 J1-   ↑ok↑
J2- information if you want .....
J1- yeah would you rather I do
    that or would it be easier if I
    took them and xerox them
30   or something
J2- uhm that'd be ok too and
    you can just give them back
    to me next week ..... >
J1-   ↑ok ..... >
35 J2- .... then
J1- no problem
J1- ok
J2- ok?
J1- great, thanks

#2c. Maritza - Jana (request)

40 M- Jana I need the notes of the
         - the class last week if you>
    J- ↑class last week?
    M- can
    J- ↑ok yeah I've got them here
45   uh do you want just to take
         them on tonight and copy
         them and give them back to
         me next week?
    M- do you need the notebuk[1]
50   notebook?

    J- uh I just you know I don't
         have it in a binder. I can just
         give you the notes from last
         week and you can just give
55   them .....
    M- I can I can copy if you want
         if you need the notebuk, the
         notes
    J- ok no uh just give them
60   back to me next week
         ....
    M- ok thank you
    J- ok?

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[1] Maritza actually uttered the word "notebook" twice. The reason for the repetition is the mispronunciation in the first attempt.

Transcription symbols:

CAPS	= supra-linguistic features	↑ ↑	= overlapping speech
....	= speech not understood by transcriber	-	= noticeable pause
>	= the turn continues below without any pause or interruption		

1. Introduction

The short verbal interactions with which this paper has been initiated were obtained by means of a role-play session. Both Maritza and Jana were given a role card with the following text:

> "Since you missed class last week you do not have the notes.
> Ask your classmate to lend them to you."

Maritza is a young Puertorican woman in her early twenties. She has had English as a second language from first grade onward. At the university in Puerto Rico, about 70% of her classes were taught in English and used English textbooks. As we all know, English is the second official language of Puerto Rico and it plays a dominant role in the commercial and institutional life of the island. At the time of the experience Maritza had been in the U.S. for about two months in an English for Foreign Students Programme. Jana and Janice are American graduate students in linguistics. They are both in their early twenties.

The first impression one gets when looking at the two conversations is that conversation 2 'sounds' more *direct and interested* than conversation 1. The reason for this is simply the fact that each of Maritza's turns consists exclusively of one clear speech act contributing to the achievement of her ultimate goal in the interaction (obtain Jana's notes of the class). She begins with a request, continues with two attempts to diminish the imposition of requesting, and finishes with a thanking act. On the other hand, when we look at the speech of Janice or Jana, the classification of their turns into speech acts becomes much more difficult. Turns such as "Jana where you here last week?", "it's alright, you ... is more legible than mine", "ok?", etc. do not seem to bear such a clear *interest* and *direct* relationship with the goal of the interaction as those of Maritza.

My purpose in this paper is to show the possibility of explaining conversational competence and the relevance of this task for a full understanding of language use. In order to do this I will first point out some of the main features of the interactional speech of native speakers, contrasted with the speech of a non-nativer speaker. I will continue with a section dealing with the need to study language use in its contest (discourse context, physical context, socio-cultural context). In the last section I will propose an approach to the study of communicative competence based on a series of maxims or variables which the speaker has in mind when producing language.

2.   *Some features of conversational speech*

A close comparison of the two conversations shows some interesting differences which help to clarify the kind of elements conversational competence consists of. In the action of requesting the notes we find the first difference. Whereas this takes Maritza only one turn, the same action takes two turns in the case of Janice:

J1- Jana where you here last week?	M- Jana *I need the notes* of the - the class last week if you>
.....	.....
J1- yeah uh I didn't make it last week [LAUGHTER] *do you think I could* take a look at your notes from then? (lines 1-2, 4-7)	M- can (lines 40-41, 43)

The difference in degree of directness is quite obvious, even if we just compare the two single speech acts in which the request is made (emphasized in italics).

In connection with the degree of imposition exerted through the request we can see
that whereas Janice is able to give a certain freedom of action by proposing Jana
more than one option (in fact, by means of "or something" she is showing her
willingness to accept any option proposed by Jana), Maritza puts her in the
'uncomfortable' situation of having to give a yes/no as an answer

J1- yeah would you rather I do   M- do you need the notebuk
    that or would it be easier if I   notebook? (lines 49-50)
    took them and xerox them
    or something (lines 27-30)

Another difference between Maritza's speech and Janice's can be found in the way
they employ their turns at talk. As we said above, some of Janice's turns (or part
of them) can not be easily identified with a clear pragmatic function. Their
function is basically that of showing her receptiveness and willingness participate
in the conversation, showing at the same time a positive presentation of self.

J1- it's alright, your .... is
    more legible than mine (li-
    nes 10-11)

J1- not too bad (SPECIAL
    INTONATION) (lines 17-
    18)

J1- ok ... no problem (lines 34,
    36)

We saw above that whereas it took Maritza only one turn to open the conversation
and propose her goal, the same operation took Janice two turns. In the closing
section of the conversation a similar contrast appears. While Maritza requires only
one turn in which she combines a 'closing signal' with a thanking expression,
Janice follows the most common procedure of announcing her willingness to close
the conversation, first, and then express gratefulness:

J1- ok   M- ok thank you (line 62)
J2- ok?
J1- great thanks (lines 37-39)

Conversation 1 offers many other features worth commenting on from a linguistic
point of view. One could for example try to explain the different cooperative
attitude which the use of "sure" instead of "yes" shows when responding to a
request. The need for smooth topic transition ("stepwise transition" in Jefferson
1984) and, therefore, textual coherence would explain the use of an apparently
unacceptable structure (from a grammatical point of view) such as "*but yeah* you
can take" (my emphasis). In the same area we could include the appearance of

cohesive particles (see Halliday 1975 for a complete analysis of cohesion in English) such as "yeah" (line 3) or "too" (line 31) or "and" (line 31) connecting at the surface level different parts of the conversation. Use of 'fillers' such as "uh" or "uhm" would also require some analysis, trying to find both psychological and sociolinguistic explanations for their presence.

3. The study of language in context

If we think of language use as the actual realization of "social meanings" (Halliday 1978) we cannot avoid feeling that in order to fully understand what happened during the interaction and the significance of this for each of the participants we have to go beyond what they said, and place it against its situational and socio-cultural context, it is only once we have done this that we can begin to understand the basic notion of *communicative competence* first proposed by Hymes (1966), which Giglioli defines as

> "the psychological, cultural and social rules which discipline the
> use of speech in social settings" (1982:15)

The new perspective offered by the concept of communicative competence allows the possibility of posing the question of whether Janice's verbal behaviour is more appropriate than Maritza's from the point of view of social communication. If the answer to this first question is affirmative we can then enquire into the formal differences between the speech of both.

The answer we would most probably get from native speakers of American English when asked to compare the speech of Janice and Maritza is that the latter sounds too direct, lacking a certain degree of cautiousness and politeness, too goal-directed... The worst, though, is that very rarely is this sort of negative evaluations justified by taking into account a lack of competence in applying the language learnt to the actual situation. What happens all too often is that the evaluator creates a negative stereotype of the non-native speaker's personality as being rude, simplistic, imposing, etc.

What we have said in the previous paragraph reflects a very relevant issue in linguistics, which is the decision between (i) emphasizing the study of language as a system of signs with an inner structure to be described and explained and (ii) considering language as a tool of communication is a given social/situational context. The dichotomy, however, disappears when our final goal is not to describe and explain how the system functions but to train people to behave in another social community using a different linguistic code.

Training people to behave in a different culture must necessarily involve the two aspects mentioned above. The learners of the language must be taught both the way the linguistic system is organized and how the system is used to fulfill the specific needs of the social members of the community.

4. *One approach to the study of verbal interaction*

There are two main aspects of verbal communication which are still being ignored by many language programmes, and which, I think, deserve the interest of both linguists and language educators:

(i) The use of language in connected discourse.
(ii) The socio-cultural and situational constraints impending on the use of language.

Nevertheless, the study of these two aspects cannot be based on the same principles as the study of the linguistic code. It becomes impossible in this case to establish strict rules, the breaking of which would make language *unacceptable*. If we want to provide an explanatory description of what actually happened in the course of a communicative event such as the one between Maritza and Janice we can no longer say Maritza's speech is *unacceptable*. This is because she is not breaking any constitutive rules, neither of grammar nor of verbal interaction. On the one hand, she is following the basic rules of English grammar. On the other hand, she is abiding by the constitutive rules of interaction such as Grice's conversational maxims of quantity, quality, relevance, and manner (Grice 1975) (i. she is providing as much information as is necessary; ii. she is truthful; iii. what she is saying is relevant to the topic under discussion; iv. her speech is neither obscure nor ambiguous, and she is brief and orderly), or the basic principle (in Anglosaxon culture) of allowing for only one person to speak at a time without being interrupted.

As Widdowson's (1982) says, a description of the way in which speakers organize their interactive discourse cannot be based on statements establishing one-to-one symbolic correlations between form and meaning. What the speakers have in mind is a series of 'maxims' or 'principles' which they have been able to internalize in their process of becoming social members of a social group.

> "They are not rules, but guiding schemata of sorts, habitual frames of reference and communicative routines which we have generalized from previous occasions of language use and which we exploit as useful approximations to reality" (Widdowson 1982:235)

It is only by means of these 'maxims' that we can approach the study of the last three of the four components of communicative competence which M. Canale (1983:6-14) proposes to be taken into account when devising a language teaching programme, and which are defined in the following way:

a. *Linguistic competence* refers to the mastery of the linguistic code, the competence required to understand and effect the possible combinations and variations of linguistic elements.

b. *Sociolinguistic competence* refers to the expression and understanding of appropriate social meanings (communicative functions, attitudes and topics) in different sociolinguistic contexts which are based on factors such as status of participants, purpose of interaction, cultural norms and conventions of interaction, etc.

c. *Discourse competence* is concerned with the use of linguistic forms and meanings to shape the development and content of the interaction according to the purposes or attitudes of the participants and, at the same time, achieve a unified text; all of this without breaking any of the rules included in the two previous points.

d. *Strategic competence* involves the mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that are called into action for two reasons: (i) to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting factors in performance (e.g. inability to recall a word) or to insufficient competence in one or more of the other areas; and (ii) to enhance the effectiveness of communication.

With these different components in mind one can start thinking about the applicability of 'maxims' which are part of the naïve speaker's conceptualization of interactive discourse, thereby facilitating his/her access to an *explanatory description* of discourse. This is precisely what the description of the conversational features in section 2 of this paper lacked, that is to say, an explanation of the differences based on different degrees of knowledge and skill in using the language in a specific situation. The existence of a series of 'maxims' for each of the last three levels of communicative competence provides us with a framework for attempting such an explanation.

In the sociolinguistic component of communicative competence a 'maxim' such as *imposition*, would allow us to explain the different ways in which the request is carried out by Janice and Maritza. We could say that Janice uses a less imposing way of requesting by, in the first place, introducing and justifying the problem, and, in the second place, by using a more indirect request (i.e. "do you think I could...") compared to Jana's blunt demand. The utterance "would you rather [...] or something" (lines 27-30) could be explained by means of the same maxim, arguing that Janice is here giving Jana is doing is diminishing the degree of imposition exerced on Jana.

Still in the same component, a maxim such as *social distance* could possibly explain the difference between using a plain "yes" or a "oh sure". The latter response indicates greater willingness in fulfilling the request, thereby increasing the solidarity among social members.

With *presentation of self* we would be able to account for some expressions which bear a direct relation to the image of the speakers want to give of themselves, as having no vanity, acknowledging their defects (eg. "I don't know that I took a whole lot" -lines 8-9-; "your .... is more legible than mine" -lines 10-11-; "it's hard to" -line 16).

In the component of discourse competence the maxim of topic could be used to explain the use of "but yeah" (line 22) as a signal for reintroduction of a previous topic (i.e. responding to the request). With the same maxim we could account as well for the need to announce the wish of the participant to close a topic before it is actually closed. Thus in conversation 1 we have an exchange of 'ok's' before the expression of gratefulness by the initiator of the interaction; in conversation 2 this does not happen because the non-native speaker does not follow this rule.

Another maxim in the same component could help to explain the use of "you know" (lines 24, 51). This maxim could be labelled as *turn-taking* and it would include all those phenomena appearing in conversational discourse which have to do with it interactional structure. In this case, *you know* is a signal to require the addressee's attention (see Schiffrin 1986 for a full treatment of the functions of *you know* as a discourse particle).

Finally, when we get to the level of strategic competence a maxim such as *time constraint* would study all those possible 'time fillers' (both of a verbal and a non-verbal kind) the expert language user has available to gain some extra time to internaliza the information received or to organize it in order to produce verbally. Examples of this in conversation 1 are "yeah uh" (line 3), "uhm" (lines 14, 31), and in conversation 2 "uh" (lines 45, 51, 59).

In another 'strategic' maxim defined as which we could define as a *language constraint* we could all those cases in which the standard usage of the language would require a rather long explanation to express the attitude of the speaker. This may be the use of the particle "just" in those contexts where it cannot be replaced by only (lines 32, 45, 51).

5.   *Conclusion*

My purpose in this paper has been to show that real language use can be described and explained beyond the level of the sentence without requiring a high level of

abstraction, at the same time making use of the intuitions the naïve speaker has about the way he/she use the language. The fulfilment of these two premises is essential when the ultimate goal of the description is a pedagogic one.

I have proposed a new way of looking at language use from the point of view of the different kinds of knowledge and skills required. The framework suggested is rooted in the concept of communicative competence, in which four different components are distinguished according to the different types of problems with which the language user is confronted (linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic).

The description of each of the components is built around a series of 'variables' or 'maxims' which the expert speaker (i.e. any native speaker who has completed successfully his/her process of becoming an accepted member of the speech community) observes when using language to relate to others. These maxims must be understood as guiding principles and not as unavoidable rules such as those of grammar.

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RESUM

L'autor d'aquest article es proposa mostrar la possibilitat d'explicar un aspecte del que s'anomena competència comunicativa, la competència conversacional. L'estudi es basa en la premissa que la tasca de descriure i explicar com funciona una llengua és essencial per a la seva completa adquisició. La primera part del treball apunta alguns trets diferencials entre el discurs conversacional del parlant no-nadiu i el discurs dels parlants nadius. A la segona part l'autor proposa una aproximació a l'estudi de la competència conversacional basada en una sèrie de màximes o variables que el parlant té en ment quan produeix aquest tipus de discurs.

SUMMARY

This paper attempts to show the possibility of explaining one aspect of communicative competence, conversational competence. The study is based on the assumption that the task of describing and explaining how a language is actually used is essential for a complete acquisition of the system. The first part of the study includes a contrastive analysis of some of the main features of the interactional speech of native speakers and non-native speakers. In the second part the author proposes an approach to the study of communicative competence based on a series of maxims or variables which the speaker has in mind when producing language.