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The pragmatics of communicative competence.

The case of interactions between university professors and students.

Volume I

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> (...) l'analyse conversationnelle ne peut en effet être que "stratificationnelle", c'est-à-dire menée à différents niveaux, que l'on peut grossièrement binariser de la façon suivante:
> - analyse "[illegible]": étude de la structuration du dialogue (...)
> - analyse "interactionnelle" à proprement parler: étude des relations s'établissant non plus entre les différentes unités constitutives du text échangé, mais via l'énoncé (la "parole" n'étant alors considerée que comme "intermédiaire") entre les différents partenaires de l'échange communicatif.

Following Canale's (1983) framework of communicative competence I distinguish, first, an interpersonal/interactional component, *sociolinguistic competence*, which is defined as the kind of knowledge and skills necessary to produce and understand utterances *appropriately* (both in form and in content) in different sociolinguistic contexts depending on the contextual factors mentioned in ethnographic studies (Hymes, 1972b): genre, topic, purpose, setting, participants, message form, message content, act sequence, norms for interaction and norms for interpretation.

The textual component is concerned with all those grammatical and semantic devices with the function of achieving a unified text. It has to do mainly with *cohesion* and *coherence* and all those efforts of both the speaker and the listener to maintain them throughout the text. This component also covers all those phenomena whose presence is due to the organization of this type of discourse in turns uttered by different speakers.

The third component of communicative competence I study is one which is of special relevance given the applied perspective of my analysis of conversational discourse. Canale (1983:10-11) defines it as *strategic competence*, and it includes

> verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action for two main reasons: (a) to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting conditions in actual communication (e.g. momentary inability to recall an idea or grammatical form) or to insufficient competence in one or more of the other areas of communicative competence; and (b) to enhance the effectiveness of communication (e.g. deliberately slow and soft speech for rhetorical effect).

Breakdowns and lack of effectiveness in communication are two very common problems in foreign language learners, who rarely have the necessary knowledge and skills to cope with them.

4.3. 'Interactional requirements' as variables of analysis

The kind of 'interactional requirements' upon which the analysis will be based must fulfill two basic requirements: (i) they have been extensively pointed out in the literature as analytic variables; (ii) they have been ethnographically validated by means of the researcher's close acquaintance with the context and the participants in the interactions described.

A second problem which one has to face in this type of analysis is the plurivalence (at the same or different levels of communicative competence) of some segments in terms of their function and the 'interactional requirement' they are meant to achieve. It seems to me that this fact, rather than proving a shortcoming of the type of analysis proposed, is a consequence of the multifunctionality of natural language, both in terms of production and in terms of comprehension[4].

A third problem that we must be ready to bear with is that of the scope and delimitation of each linguistic segment with an interactional function (also defined as *taxeme* by Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1987). What I am referring to is, first, the possibility of having one function which cannot be easily mapped onto a clearly defined linguistic segment but onto a configuration of meaning which is never definitely abandoned throughout the interaction. I think that the approach adopted in this analysis, according to which the language user tries to resolve an interactional problem with whatever resources he has at hand rather than with definite linguistic structures, should allow us to view language use from a dynamic perspective (in accordance with that of ethnomethodology). I would suggest that language use is basically a matter of some segments being coloured more intensively than others, depending on the user's understanding of how that specific interaction develops, and that this colouring, as in the art of painting, does not always have clearly defined borders.

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4 See below, section 6.1, for an analysis of the multifunctionality of different linguistic segments in interaction.

As anthropologists have proved, every society and every culture defines the types of interaction through which social life will be realized. This is why we should not expect a series of necessarily universal 'interactional requirements' to be used as analytical tools. Their validity is based not on their potential universality but on the fact that they are relevant factors to the participants in the interactions. The universal relevance of the 'interactional requirements' remains to be demonstrated, but in any case, it is important to say that the applicability or non-applicability of a specific 'interactional requirement' is in itself a point of contrast. The fact that, for example, Ochs–Keenan (1976) claims that Grice's maxim "Be informative" is not applicable to men in Malagasy society does not necessarily invalidate it as a system constraint, on the contrary, "one must seek its inapplicability to men in Malagasy society in some special ritual constraint which holds there" (Preston 1989: 163).

After proving (or disproving) the relevance of an 'interactional requirement', the next two questions that arise are: (i) is there a group of linguistic structures which is more favoured than others in order to resolve a specific 'interactional requirement'?; and (ii) at which points in the interaction does this specific 'interactional requirement' appear and which participants confront it?

4.4. Sociolinguistic competence

The 'interactional requirements' that are going to be used in this component have been developed from the work by Goffman (1967), Grayshon (1977), Brown and Levinson (1978) and Scollon and Scollon (1981). All of them emphasize the aspect that it is the fact that two (or more) members of the same or of a different social group enter into contact with the aim of establishing, maintaining or destroying a social relationship between them that most influences the way they are going to approach one another.

The concept of status is a specially relevant one at this level of communicative competence, even in the case of institutional transactional encounters of the kind we are analysing, where the main objective of the participants is to obtain/release certain information rather than maintain social relationships. According to Cheepen (1988) the acknowledgement and expression of relative status is useful in order to (i) define the type of conversational encounter, and (ii) to pursue the goal of the encounter.

> Speakers in transactions are (...) strictly constrained to the discoursal pursuit of the transactional goal and equally strictly constrained as to the ideational content, and maintenance of the encounter type is largely dependent on speakers remaining within the confines of their 'fixed status'. (1988: 122)

Cheepen (1988: 24) also distinguishes two types of status for a participant: (i) status external to the encounter (e.g. doctor, friend, adviser), and (ii) status internal to the encounter, i.e. "that adopted by or assigned to a speech participant in a particular encounter (or part of an encounter) with regard to a particular topic under discussion, vis-a-vis his/her co-conversationalists" (e.g. teller of joke/story, listener, introducer).

In spite of their fixed status, the participants in institutional transactional encounters may, if they wish, negotiate the adoption of a more or less dominant/dominated interactional position, thereby transforming the interactional roles which in principle would correspond to them because of their external status (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1987).

4.4.1. Presentation of Self

Sociologists like Mead (1962) and Goffman (1967) claim that the self has no reality of its own but only inasmuch as it is displayed through social interaction. People come to a definition of their own selves through the responses of others. Therefore, the interest of the participants to achieve the highest possible degree of interactional coordination is not only due to a need to communicate certain information but also to construct a desirable self.

Scollon and Scollon (1981) use the concept of *presentation of self* as one of the aspects of discourse to be taken into account when analyzing it. In doing this, they are just retaking the concept of *face* first suggested by Goffman (1967) and later interpreted by Brown and Levinson (1978: 66), as consisting of two options: (i) one's concern to be accepted as part of the social group, and (ii) one's need to preserve one's individuality and independence[5]. According to Brown and Levinson (1978) in every language there is a series of politeness strategies that the speaker can resort to in order to acknowledge the positive or negative face of the addressee.

The concept of *presentation of self* involves not only the content of what is said but also the amount. According to Scollon and Scollon (1983), what is usually defined as a voluble or taciturn self is directly related with the subject's willingness/unwillingness to test and negotiate his/her view of the world with that of others, which, in turn, may be the product of politeness strategies intended to reinforce the addressee's positive or negative face. Each social/cultural group has its own patterns of relationship based on the different conceptions of self. Thus we find, for example that in British families, the father, who is the dominant figure, is expected to be the one who exhibits/displays, whereas the son, in his subordinate role, is

5 See section 3.2.2., on the concept of *face*.

the spectator. This pattern of relationship differs from that of the American family, where the role of dominance is associated with spectatorship and the role of submission with exhibitionism (cfr. Scollon and Scollon 1983).

To conclude, it is important to say that although everything an interactant does may be interpreted as an act of *presentation of self*, our analysis will be circumscribed exclusively to those conscious actions intended to obtain some respect/acceptance from others and legitimize one's position, which is the way in which language users refer to the concept. It is also clear that the possibility of negotiation of the participants' view of the world depends on the degree of acquaintance and the difference in status/role between the participants.

4.4.2. Social Distance

Brown and Levinson (1978: 81-82) define *distance* as "a symmetrical social dimension of similarity/difference within which S [speaker] and H [hearer] stand". The perception of *social distance* between S and H is usually based "on the frequency of interaction and the kind of material or non-material goods (including face) exchanged". The degree of shared experience between the interactants is not always assessed on the basis of personal contacts. In some cases it may be the product of the interactant's ascribed or acquired social attributes such as age, sex, role, etc.). Thus, it may be the case that two unacquainted speakers of the same sex show a lower degree of *social distance* than two unacquainted speakers of different sexes.

The relevance of the *distance* factor in the use of linguistic resources can be seen in the fact that both linguists and non-linguists are aware of different styles, depending very much on the perception of shared experience between speaker and hearer. Joos (1967), for example, established five different levels in American English: intimate, casual, consultative, formal, frozen.

Speakers in dealing with this 'interactional requirement' have two options: (i) to try to get affectionately closer to the listener and, thereby, reduce the social distance between them, or (ii) to emphasize a certain lack of familiarity and, consequently, increase or maintain the *social distance*. Both Scollon and Scollon (1983) and Grayshon (1977) define the first tendency as *solidarity*, and an example of this can be found in a segment of one of the ethnographic assessments of the speech events analyzed in this project:

> "As a T.A. [Teaching Assistant] I'm much more in control of the conversation. I try to put something of myself. Trying to make them feel that I'm a student too and that I understand how it is and I didn't do well as an undergraduate."

In the context where the data have been collected, *social distance* always appears as an effort by the speaker to get affectionately closer to the addressee, that is, to increase the degree of shared experience between the interactants.

Because of the clear difference in *power* between professor and student, it is frequently the case that in those instances in which one of the interactants shows an effort to increase/acknowledge the *social distance* (this was the case of one of the students in the data who addressed the professor as sir), it is doubtful whether the speaker is taking into account primarily this 'interactional requirement' or that of *power*. The potential confusion, however, disappears in other contexts in which there is no relationship of *power* between speaker and hearer, as in the case of interactants not previously acquainted with each other.

4.4.3. Power

Power is defined by Brown and Levinson (1978: 82) as "the degree to which H [addressee] can impose his own plans and his own self-evaluation (*face*) at the expense of S's [speaker] plans and self-evaluation". It is important to remark that *power* as it is understood here is a category which only becomes relevant when a relationship of role dependency is established. In other words, it is not an inherent characteristic of the individual but of the social-institutional role he/she plays in relation to other individuals. When the subjects interviewed talk about "equality", "respect", "superiors" they are making explicit the degree to which the power variable is present in their speech production.

One of the implicit goals with which participants enter a verbal interaction is to determine the *power relationship* between them, and be able to act consequently in future encounters. Preston (1989: 73) mentions ten linguistic features whose inclusion in speech has been proved[6] to be a sign of the adoption of a 'powerless' role in the interaction

1. Hedges, e.g., 'sort of,' 'kind of,' 'I guess'
2. (Super) polite forms, e.g., 'would you please...,' 'I'd really appreciate it if...'
3. Tag questions
4. Speaking in italics, e.g., emphatic 'so' and 'very,', intonational emphasis equivalent to underlining words in written language.
5. Empty adjectives, e.g., 'divine,' 'charming,' 'sweet,' 'adorable'
6. Hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation
7. Lack of a sense of humor, e.g., poor at telling jokes
8. Direct quotations
9. Special vocabulary, e.g., specialized color terms
10. Question intonation in declarative contexts.

Thomas (1985) shows the relevance of the power relationships between the interactants and the institutional norms destined to preserve such relationship to explain the development of the discourse and the interpretation of individual utterances. According to this author, the speech of the dominant participant is characterized by the presence of three different sets of strategies:

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6 Lakoff (1975), O'Barr and Atkins (1980).

(i) Illocutionary force indicating devices (IFID): an expression making explicit the illocutionary force of the utterance containing the expression (e.g. I order you to be quiet).

(ii) Metapragmatic comments, upshots, reformulations: comments, *a priori* or *a posteriori*, with the function of making explicit or clarifying the pragmatic force of an utterance by the same speaker or by the addressee (e.g. I am asking you very seriously, where have you been?; Are you trying to tell me to mind my own business?)

(iii) Appeal to felicity conditions: utterances by the dominant speaker to invoke the rights and power attached to his/her position, and which allow him/her to adopt the dominant role (e.g. As your advisor, I have to ask you to come to class on time)

Power as an 'interactional requirement' has also been studied with an emphasis on the negotiation of control in conversation in terms of turn taking, topic, goal, etc. This is the basis for Goffman's (1969) distinction among different types of conversational moves on the basis of their attempts to control the environment: (i) unwitting: no conscious intention to control the environment; (ii) naïve: accepting unwitting moves; (iii) control: a move arranged for the observer to benefit the performer; (iv) uncovering: response to control moves, trying to cope with the real intention behind the control move; (v) counter-uncovering: attempt to convince an observer that a previous move was unwitting.

By employing the 'interactional requirements' of *presentation of self* and *power*, we are able to account not only for language-use differences in connection with status, goals, etc., but we are also able to include factors such as gender and age as well as the difference in language competence between native and non-native speakers[7].

4.4.4. Imposition

Works such as those by Wierzbicka (1985) and Blum-Kulka (1983), dealing with the different linguistic strategies and cultural conceptions around the speech act of request, show the measure to which this 'interactional requirement' (like all the previous ones) is subject to considerable adaptation to personal and cultural idiosyncracies. Brown and Levinson (1978: 82) define it as "a culturally and situationally defined ranking of impositions by the degree to which they are considered to interfere with an agent's wants of self-determination or of approval". This ranking is established by taking into acount two kinds of expenditure: (i) services (including time), and (ii) goods (including non-material goods like information).

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7 See, for instance Scarcella (1983), Thomas (1984), Woken and Swales (1989).

Brown and Levinson state very clearly that the ranking of impositions is defined intra-culturally, and that what changes from one situation to another is not the rank order but its position in the general scale of *imposition*. Thus, for example, asking for a cigarette is less imposing than borrowing money in two situations as different as a chat between two friends or a service-encounter. In the latter case, however, both actions will occupy a much higher level in the general scale of *imposition*, that is to say, asking a friend for a cigarette is much less imposing than asking a shop-assistant.

In the interviews with language users the relevance of *imposition* becomes manifest in the following way:

> I speak very basic, very formal. People ask, demand, tell people to do, and I'm kind of always asking permission you know. (...). To me it makes sense to tread delicately, to not push, to not be abrasive. If you act formal people think you're polite and, and I'd rather have people think of me in that way than think of me like I'm a gringa.

As in the case of the *social distance* 'requirement', because of the special type of speech event studied it becomes difficult sometimes to classifiy a linguistic feature as the product of *imposition* or *power*. The reason for this is that an action may be considered as imposing only to the extent that it is addressed to someone of a higher status. If the same action was addressed to a hearer of an equal status it would not be intepreted as imposing. For instance, paying a short visit to a friend is not intepreted as an imposing action. However, paying a visit to a professor, even if it is during office hours, can be seen as an act of *imposition*. This is what happened in one of the encounters, in which the student responded to the professor's greeting with the following utterance: **sorry to take up your time, but uh**. The problem in this case is whether to classify the utterance as the result of the speaker taking into account the *power* or the *imposition* factor. The solution adopted in the present research has been to consider it as a sign of *imposition* as long as it occurs in an encounter with a clear difference in status. These utterances must be distinguished from those in which the intepretation of an action as imposing is not (at least, not so directly) influenced by *power*.

The *imposition* factor is also useful to account for all those linguistic actions on the part of the 'powerful' participant in the encounter to reduce the degree to which his/her demands, wishes or opinions may interfere with the addressee's need for self-determination and approval.

4.4.5. Independent existence of *imposition*, *power* and *social distance* as interactional requirements

As has been said in the previous section, the specific participation framework of the kind of interactions analyzed in the present research, in which there is a clear *power relationship* between the participants, may lead one to wonder about the need to distinguish the three 'interactional requirements'. Brown and Levinson (1978: 85–86) provide examples through which they show the need to make use of the three variables separately. Their method basically consists of suggesting pairs situations in which three different tasks are verbally carried out: (i) asking the time; (ii) asking permission to smoke; (iii) asking for money. The independent existence of each of the three variables is proved by means of increasing or reducing one variable while the rest are kept at a relatively low value.

In the first pair of situations *power* and *imposition* are kept constant and small while only *distance* varies:

Function 1: Asking the time

Situation A: complete strangers; social distance = great

(i) *Excuse me, would you by any chance have the time?*

Situation B: workmates; social distance = small

(ii) *Got the time, mate?*

In the second situation, *distance* and *imposition* are kept constant and have small values, while *power* is reduced:

Function 2: Asking permission to smoke

Situation A: student in front of professor; power = great

(iii) *Excuse me sir, would it be all right if I smoke?*

Situation B: student in front of classmate; power = small

(iv) *Mind if I smoke?*

Finally, *imposition* is the variable which is reduced or increased, while *power* is kept small and *distance* great:

Function 3: Asking for money

Situation A: strangers; imposition = great

(v) *Look, I'm terribly sorry to bother you but would there be any chance of your lending me just enough money to get a railway ticket to get home? I must have dropped my purse and I just don't know what to do.*

Situation B: strangers; imposition = small

(vi) *Hey, got change for a quarter?*

When *power* is great, however, the identification of the other two factors, especially *imposition* becomes more difficult. Brown and Levinson's answer is that somewhere in the context there will be 'disambiguating signals' which will clarify which variable was most relevant in the uttering of the expression. Thus, the analysis of an expression preceding a request such as "I'm sorry to bother you" can be clarified through observing what precedes or follows it:

Look
Hey *Henry*, I'm sorry to bother you...
My God

Look Henry, you're a friend, I'm sorry to bother you ...

The expressions preceding the sentence in question indicate that the values of the *power* and *distance* variables are small, and that the 'triggering' factor is *imposition*. In the next situation we present the 'disambiguating signals' (in italics) preceding and following the utterance in question, and demonstrating the primacy of power:

Sir
Excuse me, Officer I'm sorry to bother *you* but *I wonder if you*
Your Excellency
could just possibly do me *a small favour.*

Disambiguating signals do not necessarily have to be in the immediate context of the expression in question; they can be located throughout the speech event. This is one more justification for the analysis of the whole speech event rather than isolated speech acts, if what we are aiming at is an explanation and not just a description of how language is used.

4.5. Discourse competence

The consideration of this separate level of competence is essentially due to the linguists' need to answer the following question:

> (...) why does a naturally occurring text differ from the set of 'kernel' or canonical sentences representing its propositional content? Put differently, why do syntactic and referential options exist for conveying a proposition, and what makes a speaker select one over the others in a given discourse context? (Prince 1988. 166)

The area of communicative competence covered by discourse competence is the result of a process of abstraction from the actors and their social context of those aspects of the speech event which have to do with the form and substance of the message. Thus what we are interested in finding out is whether and to what extent linguistic realizations can be affected by aspects which form part of the definition of any communicative occurrence rather than the definition of a member of a social group: topics, distribution of talk, distribution of information and goals.

4.5.1. Topic

The concept of *topic* is very much related to that of *goal* since it is through *topic* that one individual can cause another individual's mental reality to focus on the state of affairs he/she is interested in altering (e.g. if I want a professor to write a letter of recommendation, I have to start – if I have not done so before – by telling him that I am looking for a job). Thus, by introducing a *topic* we transcend space and time and we still trigger action by others. The achievement of a certain goal involves a great deal of skill in *topic management* or, as Jefferson (1984) calls it, "stepwise transition". However, from an emic point of view, the simple fact that for language users there are interactions with no *goals*[8] (as two of the interviewees

8 See Cheepen (1988:3): "interactions with internal goals".

recognized) forces us to deal with them as independent 'interactional requirements'. Moreover, the fact that there is no clearly-defined *goal* does not exonerate the speaker from using language strategically to ensure communication.

Defining *topic* as 'what the conversation is about at any given moment' is one possible definition, especially when we consider the difficulty analysts have in finding a clear definition which allows the identification of topic boundaries and shifts (see Brown and Yule 1983). A more precise definition of *topic* can be found in De Beaugrande's and Dressler's (1981: 4) standard of textuality defined as *coherence*. According to these authors, *coherence* is concerned with "the ways in which the components of the *textual world*, i.e., the configuration of *concepts* and *relations* which *underlie* the surface text, are *mutually accessible* and *relevant*" (the authors' emphasis). The relationship between *topic* and *coherence* the two concepts can be seen in the following quotation:

> Coherence will be envisioned as the outcome of combining concepts and relations into a NETWORK composed of KNOWLEDGE SPACES centred around main TOPICS. (De Beugrande and Dressler 1981: 94)

We could define, then, *topic* as a cluster of concepts and relations triggered by and underlying specific linguistic structures.

The subject of study with *topic* as an 'interactional requirement' consists basically of all those linguistic tools that allow the speaker to do such things as shift the topic of a conversation, open and close a topic, reintroduce it, etc., all this being done in such a smooth way that the addressee is not led to question the coherence of the speaker. The main aspect of our approach is, however, the fact that topicality and coherence are seen as the product of specific strategies learned by the participants in an interaction in the course of their process of socialization. As Orletti (1984: 56) puts it:

> (...) topic coherence has no intrinsic qualities which may be defined *a priori* in semantic or even purely linguistic terms; rather, it may be considered in line with the methodological approach mentioned earlier –simply as the product of the successful application of procedures such as the three just given, in symmetric cooperative conversations.
>
> On this basis, we may consider that topicality is created by the interactants moment by moment (i.e., that it is locally and interactionally accomplished) and that a thorough understanding of topic structure in conversation will require an integrated linguistic and interactional analysis.

Work on topic management in conversations (Sacks *et al.* 1978, Nofsinger and Boyd 1979) treats messages as combining with each other coherently if there is a semantic overlap among them. What is of interest is the kind of devices the language-user has available to avoid the danger of his/her contribution not being understood as coherent. Sometimes, however, and because of the specific goal the speaker attempts to achieve, the contribution cannot be coherent and so the violation made needs to be licensed (Swan Mura 1983).

4.5.2. Turn Taking

How much a person talks and how much he/she lets others talk is probably one of the first things participants in a conversational event notice. The amount of talk is measured not by means of the topics dealt with during the conversation or the number of sentences or speech acts, but rather by the length of time someone holds the floor and by the opportunities which that individual offers for others to speak. The fact that conversation is an activity involving an organized interplay of acts of some kind, each of them depending on the previous one[9], imposes some important constraints (of a physical nature in this case) on how speech is produced. As Sacks *et al* (1978: 12) put it,

> "Turns are valued, sought, and avoided. The social organization of turn-taking distributes turns among parties. It must, at least partially, be shaped as an economy. As such, it is expectable that, as other economies do, its organization affects the relative distribution of that whose distribution it organizes."

Bygate (1987: 39), building on the work of conversational analysts, suggests five basic abilities that efficient turn-taking requires, and which language educators should take into account when working on the speaking skill:

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9 See above section 3.1.1 on Wittgenstein 's concept of 'language game'.

(i) To signal the willingness (or unwillingness) to intervene in the conversation.

(ii) To recognize the appropriate moment to get a turn.

(iii) To use the adequate turn structure which will allow one to use the floor properly, without losing it before all the information has been conveyed.

(iv) To recognize other people's signals of their wish to speak.

(v) To let someone else take part in the conversation.

The principal objective in analysing speech interaction from this point of view is to examine the degree to which the speaker relies on the fact that he/she is taking part in an activity organized in turns with the immediate physical presence of the interactants. The other aspect to consider is the relationship between the physical activity (taking turns) and the rest of interactional factors as, for example, the extent to which a specific power relationship affects the way one of the participants will manage his/her 'allowance' of turns. A useful analytical definition of this 'interactional requirement' could be that it involves all those linguistic segments that do not appear in (i) written discourse or (ii) oral non-interactive discourse.

4.5.3. Information Management

A very important aspect of using language is its linearity, that is, we can only produce one word at a time. When we attempt to order these single words into utterances and the utterances into turns or contributions to the interaction, we must confront not only the linguistic problem of constructing 'grammatical' sentences (and this is the area covered by the grammatical component of communicative competence), but also the problem of sequentially ordering our information according to their relevance in connection with the intention of the speaker in conveying a specific message.

Thematisation is one of the phenomena to be studied by means of the 'interactional requirement' defined here as *information management*. The process of thematisation at the sentential level can be applied to the discourse level as well[10]. The notion of 'relative prominence' arising from processes of thematisation and staging devices seems to be an area of interest not only in psycholinguistics but also in ethnography (Gumperz *et al.*1979, Robinson 1986), since those processes are not exclusively the product of personal characteristics, but also of cultural values and peculiarities.

10 See section 3.2.4 on the concept of *informativity*.

Although the present research is limited to an analysis of how information is structured using segmental elements, suprasegmentals also play a very important role in the organization of information. By suprasegmentals, we mean factors such as the prosodic system of intonation, rate of speaking, loudness and pitch placement.

From an analytical point of view, the objective of this study is, in the first place, to discover the typical (and, probably, most effective) sequences in which information is structured as well as the linguistic means employed. As stated in the previous paragraph, the term 'means' in the present research refers mainly to lexical items and syntactic structures, leaving aside other suprasegmental components of speech. We could include in that aspect the study of connectors such as those indicating result, consequence, obstacle, example, etc. The analysis of specific syntactic structures used in order to distinguish between old and new information or to emphasize certain items is another aspect of interest from this point of view. Scollon and Scollon (1983) mention the following dimensions of interest with this variable: contrastiveness, givenness, definiteness, point of view, topicality, perspective and grounding.

One of the most systematic attempts to describe the linguistic tools used to structure information in French is Caulmyn (1987). She makes a distinction, in the first place, between "opérateurs de structuration discursive" and "techniques de composition du texte". In the former group she includes four different categories:

(i) Conversational markers of punctuation (e.g. right, ok, well).

(ii) Logico-pragmatic connectors (e.g. so, but, then, because).

(iii) Thematisation/focalization operators (e.g. passive voice, cleft sentences).

(iv) Modal expressions (e.g. I think, I am glad)

By "techniques de composition du text" Gaulmyn understands those processes of reformulation involved in the creation of discourse which refers to the same discourse (e.g. paraphrase, definition, correction, repetition, etc.). These reformulations are in certain cases signalled by more or less stereotyped metadiscursive markers (e.g. I mean; let me insist on it), and can be divided into immediate and deferred (depending on whether the reformulation follows immediately the initial utterance or is separated from it by other utterances) and auto-reformulations and hetero-reformulations (depending on whether the reformulated utterance is by the same speaker or not).

The *information management* 'requirement' , however, studies not only how information is structured and organised, but also how it is transferred. In the first place we have those items that indicate the status of the information (e.g. probability, hope, certainty, etc). Secondly, there are those signals that have to do with participants' reception and comprehension of the message.

Information, both as a cognitive state and as transferable knowledge to be organized and managed plays an important part in Schiffrin's framework for analysing discourse markers (1987: 28-29). In this case the participants in the encounter do not act in their social interactional capacities, but in their cognitive capacities. The pragmatic relevance of information state can be explained by the fact that this is a constantly evolving factor which can be externalized whenever the speaker thinks it is necessary.

4.5.4. Goals

The term *goal* is preferred to Saville-Troike's *purpose* or *function* (1982), for example, because it avoids potential misunderstandings. One of the basic assumptions of the present investigation is that every instance of language-use is purposeful, that is, it accomplishes some function or other, whether the speaker is aware of it or not (as in the case of routines, for example). Nevertheless, when the concept of *goal* is employed here, it is with Craig's (1986) definition in mind, that is, *goal* as intentional (the speaker consciously intends to bring about a certain state of affairs by means of discourse), positive (directly involved in a causal process of producing behaviour) and strategic (rules and standard patterns are not simply followed, but used as resources to accomplish goals). In other words, the concept of *goal* refers to all those things that a language-user can attempt to achieve from other people through the use of language. Cheepen (1988: 3) establishes a difference between two types of goal in verbal interaction: (i) transactional and (ii) interactional. The first type of goal is "concerned with having an effect of some kind on the outside world". The second type refers to "some kind of effect on the 'inner' shared world of the participants of the encounter –the *interpersonal* world, or the relationship between speaker and hearer as operating through a particular encounter".

In the speech events analyzed in this study, *goals* play a decisive role. We may even go further in this statement and maintain that whenever there is not a clear goal the situation becomes uncomfortable or disturbing, at least for one of the participants. Thus, the best way to achieve a harmonious atmosphere is to state the goal of the encounter at the very beginning. Just as constraints are imposed on conversation by organized sequential contributions made by different participants, *goals* may suppose an even stronger constraint. This has been acknowledged by two of the interviewees,

> (i) "Goals put a limit to the subjects of the conversation. (...) When there's a goal other things would get in the way. When there's no goal there's no way."

> (ii) "There are two kinds of conversations: (a) I need something to get done so I tend to be very short; (b) I just like to talk to him, then he takes off and I kind of fit in."

With this 'interactional requirement' one can very clearly see the need for a macro-level in the analysis of discourse beyond that of the speech act, turn or adjacency pair. The accomplishment of the kind of goals mentioned above usually involves some degree of 'negotiation' of different aspects. Furthermore, speakers cannot present themselves as exclusively interested in achieving their particular *goals* without developing a relationship with the addressee. It is because of these two factors that the speaker follows a process in which he/she progresses throughout the event in the accomplishment of his/her *goals*. Thus, in analysing verbal interaction from the point of view of *goals* it is possible to distinguish between the level of the turn (those turns where the speakers make explicit some aspect of their general *goals*) and the level of the speech event (the process the speakers follow to achieve their *goals* from the beginning of the event till the end).

To sum up, by taking *goals* as an 'interactional requirement' we should be able to account, first, for all those phenomena derived from the fact that we are dealing with interactions which have a clear external goal. Secondly, we should be able to distinguish between *general goal(s)* (e.g. get the teacher to write a recommendation letter) with which the event is approached by the participants and *intermediate goal(s)* (e.g. convince the teacher to include certain information) on which the achievement of the former depends.

4.6. Strategic competence

I have already mentioned above that speech interaction takes place under a series of constraints whose presence is beyond human capacity, and which affect both the production and the reception of the message. Strategic competence could be defined, therefore, as the kind of verbal (and non-verbal) strategies language users have developed to cope with these constraints. The aim is very clear: (i) to avoid breakdowns in communication (e.g momentary inability to recall an idea or grammatical form) or in the development of the whole social ritual (e.g. to address a stranger when not sure of his/her social status); and (ii) to enhance the effectiveness of communication (e.g. deliberately slow and soft speech for rhetorical effect) (Canale 1983).

4.6.1. Human Constraint

For conversation to be characterised as 'normal' there has to be a constant exchange of turns with as few and short periods of silence as possible (at least from the point of view of Western culture). What this means is that, in the first place, the individual must have some skills to be able to 'fill out' those potential periods of silence. Secondly, the processing (production or reception) of the message conveyed through speech must be done at a certain speed, in many cases beyond the speed of thinking.

The relevance of time as an interactional factor worth concentrating on for pedagogical purposes has been emphasized by Bygate (1987: 14):

> Time pressure tends to affect the language used in at least two main ways. Firstly, speakers use devices in order to *facilitate* production, and secondly they often have to *compensate* for difficulties. (the author's emphasis)

According to Bygate (1987: 15–20), speakers in order to *facilitate* production can adopt one of the following strategies: simpler structures (e.g. parataxis or coordination), ellipsis (e.g avoidance of complex noun groups by repeating the same sentence structure and adding new items each time), formulaic expressions (not just idioms; e.g. *it's very nice to meet you*)[11] which do not require elaboration, and fillers and hesitation devices (e.g. *well, you know*, repetition, etc.). Compensation strategies fall into the general category of repairs. They basically involve the repetition or rephrasal of previous structures replacing certain items and/or adding others.

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11 See above, footnote 1, on Pawley and Syder's (1983) distinction between *memorized sequences* and *lexicalized sentence stems*.

Apart from the potential presence of periods of silence, there is a second danger which is related to the participants' incapacity for capturing or supplying the required information. The hearing system cannot capture sounds emitted below a certain minimum of loudness. Moreover, in spite of the fact that the hearing system captures them, the human brain is unable to process messages from two or more different sources at the same time.

A caveat is necessary to the last assertion. It is fairly common to find ourselves listening to a person and talking to another, or listening to two different people, coping with both activities at the same time. However this type of situation usually takes place when dealing with not very 'intense' or demanding activities, requiring little concentration. In the type of conversations we are dealing with in the present research, both the rather abstract type of topics and the 'social tension' existing between the participants demand a level of concentration higher than that of the routinary events mentioned above. All these factors will inevitably occasion breakdowns in communication that the participant has to learn to avoid whenever possible and, when not possible, to get out of them as economically and elegantly as he/she can.

The speaker is also susceptible to the lack of certain information or just to his/her inability to provide all the information in an exhaustive way. When this kind of situation appears the competent speaker is not at a loss for words, but has certain linguistic 'tools' available to complete his/her utterance. Carter (1987: 83–84) introduces the concept of 'vague language' to denote a series of linguistic items with one of the three following functions: (i) "signal a lack of knowledge or a failure to find the required words" (e.g. **about; or something**); (ii) display "detachment on the part of the producer from the absolute truth of the proposition asserted" (e.g. **I think; so-called**); and (iii) "convey simply a judgement that, in a certain context, too great a degree of precision would be out of place, or would not be understood by an interlocutor".

Apart from this type of *practical* disruptions caused by human deficiencies in the processess of production and reception of messages, Cheepen (1988) contemplates another cause of disruption: *interactional*. In professor–student encounters this type of trouble may occur when the inferior participant, the student, based on his wrong perception of the differential status of the participants, takes on a role more suited to the superior participant by introducing disallowed topics or using inappropriate grammatical or lexical forms. The repair in these cases is usually effected by the superior participant commenting on the inappropriateness of the action and restoring the differential status.

4.6.2. Language Constraint

The second type of constraint stems from the nature of language itself as a conventional product created by human beings, and it has to do with the fact that there is not a perfect one-to-one relationship between our mental reality and the linguistic system available to express it. In other words, not all ideas, feelings, impressions, attitudes and individual experiences in general can be accurately conveyed through an individual's capacity for verbal expression, something people involved in the fine arts know all too well.

The relative importance of this 'interactional requirement' depends a great deal on the individual's competence in the language in question as well as on his/her knowledge of the different varieties. Another aspect which plays an important role is the socio-cultural background of the speaker and the degree to which experience is verbalized in that specific social group.

Finally, the 'interactional requirement' defined as *language constraint* covers such an idiosyncratic aspect as the expression of emotion (Preston 1989: 182-183), for which speakers can adopt both verbal and nonverbal strategies.

All the interactional phenomena accounted for as part of the strategic competence play an important role in the development of speech events, and competent participants must know how to handle them if they . Strategic competence refers to the kind of solutions the language user adopts to cope with problems posed by the two types of constraints mentioned above.

It is important to mention, however, that the solutions that the participants propose in the face of communicative problems do not do not imply a ready acceptance on the part of the rest of participants in the interaction. The speaker must, in some way, convince the addresse that if he/she is not producing more precise or more extended information, it is because he/she thinks it is not relevant for the outcome of the interaction. This is the reason why strategic competence must be considered as one of the areas of communicative competence where the 'negotiating' nature of human interaction (Riley 1984) can be seen more easily, and it probably helps to understand why Bygate (1987: 22) defines the skills to solve communication problems as *negotiation skills*.

> (...) speakers also develop skills in solving all sorts of communication problems which can be expected to occur in spoken exchanges. These we will call negotiation skills. They consist of skills which are used to enable speakers to make themselves clearly understood whatever the interaction, and to deal with communication problems that may occur. Negotiation skills are skills which are common to all kinds of communication. For example, they include the ability to check on specific meanings, to alter wording, to correct mistaken interpretations, to find words for ideas for which the speaker does not already have some generally accepted phrase.