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**The pragmatics of communicative competence.
The case of interactions between university professors and
students.**

Volume I

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CHAPTER III: BASIC CONCEPTS IN THE ANALYSIS OF VERBAL INTERACTION

3.0. Introduction

In this chapter I will present a series of concepts which have been used to describe verbal interactions. The chapter is divided into two clear sections in order to differentiate between those concepts used to segment and find structure in interaction, and those which have been suggested as tools for explaining interactional phenomena. I will call the first group *descriptive* and the second *explanatory*. It is important to say, however, that this division is somewhat artificial since any analysis attempting to give a full account of verbal interaction requires both types of concepts.

The purpose of this review is to furnish the necessary background to understand the way in which the different concepts will be used in the analysis of the data. The concepts that are included in this chapter are not intended to exhaust the list of possible analytical tools to study verbal interaction. I have only included those which have been found necessary in trying

to explain the conversational phenomena which appear in the interactions analyzed.

The first group of concepts can all be identified with units of talk proposed by the different approaches that have been presented in the previous chapter. The emphasis on the search for patterns and structures can be justified from an epistemological point of view, arguing that it is a natural tendency of human beings to devise patterns and structures in order to cope with variety of experience and be able to generalize in our conception and understanding of the world (Piaget 1954, 1977; Evans 1973). Grimshaw (1974: 423-4) appeals to the object of any scientific task and, in particular, that of the linguist:

Research is facilitated through the narrowing of problems (we know what and what not to look for). (...). Formalization reveals patterns among other domains and systems, as for example the possibility that similar types of rules operate in linguistic, sociological and sociolinguistic systems. There are possibilities for a unified theory of human behaviour.

Dealing with units of talk, however, poses three important problems which have not been clearly solved: segmentation, classification and type-token relation (Talbot and Cameron (1987: 12-14). In the first place there is the problem of establishing clear boundaries between units. The most important dilemma in this aspect is whether to use categories which are meaningful to the users of the language (i.e. *emic*), or *a priori* categories devised by the analyst to facilitate description and

comparison (i.e. etc). Secondly, the problem of classification has to do with the particular conception of the analyst about the necessary requirements in terms of constituents that make one unit. The third problem is related to the different possibilities in which the same stretch of talk can be interpreted from the point of meaning and function.

I have coined the expression *explanatory concepts* to refer to all those methodological tools which appear in the literature with the aim of interpreting particular phenomena rather than describing the syntagmatic structure of verbal interaction in the same way the sentence has been described. The incorporation of this second group of concepts seems to respond to the idea that the analysis of formal features of discourse does not necessarily reveal structure. In order to make full sense of discourse it is necessary to appeal not only to the speaker's intentions but also to processes of construction and deconstruction of meaning about the world and about society. The problem is not one of having to decide between using one method or another but rather integrating both of them in order to give a complete account of interaction. Gumperz (1989: 1-2) reflects the issue very clearly:

(...) by treating verbal exchanges as involving contextualization based, on-line, discourse level inferencing rather than just concentrating on regularities of sequential organization across speech exchanges, we can integrate what is best in such divergent approaches into a more general theory of conversational inference. Such a theory should enable us to show how grammatical knowledge and knowledge of language usage and rhetorical conventions enter into the conduct of verbal

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encounters and to develop an approach to conversational analysis that accounts for the interactive processes that underlie the perception of communicative signs and thus significantly affect understanding and persuasion in everyday conversation.

3.1. Descriptive concepts

3.1.1. Speech event-interaction-encounter

The use I make of three different names to denote the same unit is meant to stress the integrating nature of this study. The unit I refer to indistinctly with any of the three tags can be defined in the following way: a ritualized verbal activity of an interactive nature through which the members of a social group come into contact and attempt to achieve their goals.

The first part of the definition stresses the ritualistic aspects of language use. The notion of ritual involves an agreed recognition by the members of a social group that the activity has a significance beyond the mere exchange of information, thereby, affecting the social network of the human group. The other aspect of the notion is that the success or failure of the activity depends on the accomplishment of a more or less well-defined series of steps.

The philosopher Wittgenstein, with his notion of "language games" was one of the first to suggest the relevance of the ritual organisation of language in order to get to the meaning of

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isolated words. In Wittgenstein's words, "only someone who already knows how to do something with it can significantly ask a name" (Wittgenstein 1958: 15). According to him a verbal experience does not exist in isolation but as part of the infinite variety of combinations that human beings make when they come into contact.

Further support for a ritualistic conception of language use is provided by Goffman (1967). In his attempt to explain the conduct of participants of an interaction he resorts to the idea that human beings in any society learn to behave socially by paying attention to the everyday rituals.

If persons have a universal human nature, they themselves are not to be looked to for an explanation of it. One must look rather to the fact that societies everywhere, if they are to be societies, must mobilize their members as self-regulating participants in social encounters. One way of mobilizing the individual for this purpose is through ritual; he is taught to be perceptive, to have feelings attached to self and a self expressed through face, to have pride, honor, and dignity, to have considerateness, to have tact and a certain amount of poise (Goffman 1967. 44)

The second part of the definition emphasizes the interactive nature of talk and the fact that meaning is cooperatively constructed. This is one of the basic tenets of conversation analysts:

(...) properties of social life which seem objective, factual, and transformational, are actually managed accomplishments or achievements of local processes (Zimmerman 1978: 11)

Gricean pragmatics (Grice 1975) are also based on the idea of a joint construction of meaning. The basic premise of the

researchers working in this direction is that the communicative intentions of one of the parties in the conversation can only be inferred through the active cooperation of the other party and their common use of a set of maxims which form part of what is known as the Cooperative Principle of conversation.

There are still other approaches (e.g. Gumperz 1989) which emphasize the cooperative nature of talk. According to Gumperz the interpretation of situated talk is always a matter of "hypothesis-like tentative assessments of communicative intent" (1989: 1) by the listener of what the speaker is trying to convey. These hypotheses are based on extralinguistic knowledge of the world as well as previous experience of language use

The third part of the definition is intended to account for the transactional aspects of talk. It is by means of talk that the members of a social group fulfill their needs and succeed in having an effect of some kind either on the outside world or on the interpersonal world of the participants (Cheepen 1988: 3). This is an important consideration to bear in mind especially when dealing with clearly institutionalized transactions, in which the social position of the participants and their respective goals can enter into conflict very easily.

The goals of the participants are not only important from the point of view of their future relationship with the world, but also as constraints on the definition of the event involving talk. Goals are also a useful tool for the researcher to integrate the

notion of intention or illocutionary force of an utterance into a larger analytical framework.

3.1.2. Topic

The concept of topic is a common feature of the different approaches to the analysis of verbal interaction, and this is so in spite of the difficulties of the analyst in establishing clear boundaries between topics. The fact that in spite of analytical difficulties researchers still resort to the notion of topic could be explained by saying that it is one of the few notions which participants in an interaction are aware of in order to organize it and evaluate it. Orletti (1984: 52) points out this fact:

We may therefore conclude that conversation is, in terms of communicative awareness of the interactants, an exchange of information about topics which develop non-randomly.

Since topic is a category which is closely connected with the speaker's orientation in an interaction, CA is one of the approaches that has analyzed it in more detail¹. What interests CA in connection with topic is (i) how topics are selected, (ii) the procedures people use in order to define and organize the topics of an interaction and (iii) how topical coherence is

1 See for instance Jefferson (1972, 1984).

achieved. For CA topic is a category which falls between those of conversation and turn and, therefore, it is extremely useful for explaining certain phenomena which cannot be explained looking exclusively at the sequence of turns.

DA has also considered the relevance of topic as one of the basic tools for discovering structure in interaction. Thus, Remi-Giraud (1987: 57-60) points out that in order to classify the different types of exchanges one must go beyond the idea of functional matching and advocate the notion of topic:

(...) il ne suffit pas, pour définir l'échange, de dire qu'il est la plus petite unité dialogale ou conversationnelle; encore faut-il ajouter qu'il est la plus petite unité thématique et non-pas seulement fonctionnelle (...). Nous distinguerons donc l'unité dialogale fonctionnelle, qui est en quelque sorte la cellule de base de tout échange et de tout dialogue, de l'unité dialogale thématique qui englobe la précédente et permet la structuration du dialogue en sous-unités hiérarchisées, c'est à dire en échanges de niveaux différents.

Although message content is considered by ES as one of the components of communicative events, this is an aspect which has been ignored in many of the analyses. Nevertheless, it is interesting to point out that Hymes mentions topic as an essential part of the speaker's communicative competence in the sense that for many communicative events "members of a group know what is being talked about, and when what is being talked about has changed, and manage maintenance, and change, of topic'. (Hymes 1972b: 60).

Because of the dictionary definition of the concept *topic* as

"a particular subject that you write about or discuss"², it has been sometimes identified with two other concepts from classical literary theory: *plot* and *story*³. The most important difference between *topic* as used in the linguistic analysis of discourse and *plot* or *story* is that the two latter concepts incorporate an idea of order in the whole set of propositions underlying the text. In the case of *plot* the order is based on relations of causality among the propositions. With the concept of *story* the emphasis is placed on relations of chronology among the propositions underlying the text.

For the purposes of the present analysis the concept of topic will be appealed to whenever the participants in an interaction agree (implicitly or explicitly) on the introduction of an addition to the constellation of *referents being talked about*, which constituted the "topic framework" (Brown and Yule 1983) up until that point in the conversation. The point of view adopted, then, is intended to account for the existence of a series of metalinguistic devices for establishing boundaries between topics without ignoring the progressive construction of coherence throughout an interaction.

2 Collins (1987)

3 See, for instance, Forster (1927); Boulton (1975)

3.1.3. Turn

One of the most basic facts of talk is that it is organized in a system of reciprocal actions through which the roles of speaker and listener are exchanged. One of the reasons why the turn system might be of interest to the analyst is that it is not a particular type of organisation restricted to verbal interaction. In this sense it is interesting to see how the task of exchanging information by means of language is affected by the fact that participants are expected to take turns. Sacks *et al.* (1978: 8) express this idea in the following words:

(..) an investigator interested in some sort of activity that is organized by a turn-taking system will want to determine whether, how, and how much the sort of activity investigated is adapted to, or constrained by, the particular form of turn-taking system operating on it.

Research on the mechanics of turn management has concentrated on the kind of devices interlocutors use to make of interaction such a highly synchronized activity⁴. Concepts such as *transition relevance place*, *backchannel* and *adjacency pair* are all related to interactional phenomena of local turn management. The concept of *transition relevance place* serves the ethnomethodologists to explain how the next speaker is able to begin a new turn while avoiding overlap or silence. According to

4 See, for instance, Goodwin 1981.

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Sacks et al. (1978), turns consist of one or more than one information units defined both in structural (i.e. sentences) and/or prosodic terms (tone units). The boundaries between two information units are potential transition points for the next speaker to contribute to the conversation. With the concept of *backchannel* the ethnomethodologists are able to distinguish between those turns which provide new information to the conversation, on which the next speaker can build up his/her turn, and those turns through which the speaker indicates (i) understanding of the previous turn and of its incomplete nature and (ii) unwillingness to contribute to the conversation with new information (e.g. *mhm, uhu, I see*). The term *adjacency pair* is used to distinguish those sequences of two related turns in which the first part of the pair creates some definite expectations about the nature of the second (e.g. question-answer; complaint-apology).

Besides the mechanical aspect of investigating how talk is constrained by turns (studied at length by CA practitioners), there is another aspect related to the turn system which has deserved the attention of ethnographers. This is the kind of rules of interaction that apply to different speech events in the same speech community and the rules for the same event across different communities. The goal in this case is not the system *per se* but rather what the system shows about social structure in a community.

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All rules governing speaking, of course, have a normative character. What is intended here are the specific behaviours and proprieties that attach to speaking -that one must not interrupt for example, or that one may freely do so; that normal voice should not be used except when scheduled in a church service (whisper otherwise); that turns in speaking are to be allocated in a certain way. Norms of interaction obviously implicate analysis of social structure, and social relationships generally, in a community. (Hymes 1972b: 63-64)

The interest in the use of turn as a unit of description of verbal interaction lies in the fact that it can be defined independently of interpretation. A turn is a stretch of speech uttered at one time by one interactant in response to and/or in demand of a contribution by another interactant. The extension of turns as well as their distribution throughout the interaction is useful objective information which can corroborate or deny interpretations about role relationships.

3.1.4. Speech act

The concept of speech act has its origin in the work of the philosopher J.L. Austin (1962). The foundations that he laid were subsequently developed by Searle (1969). The central idea around which speech act theory develops is that to speak does not only mean *saying* something but also *doing* something. The concept of action applied to speech production involves three different aspects: (i) the intention of the speaker to perform a specific act (*illocution*); (ii) the actual realization of the act

(locution); and (iii) the effect of this action on its receiver (perlocution).

The potentiality of this conception for the analysis of talk is that it allows us to base a description on a minimal unit outside grammar. At the same time, however, speech act is a unit which implicates both rules of grammar (locution) and rules of social and cognitive conduct (illocution and perlocution). The problem that the concept of speech act is intended to solve is expressed by Searle (1969: 17) in the following words:

(...) a theory of language is part of a theory of action, simply because speaking is a rule-governed form of behaviour. Now, being rule-governed it has formal features that admit of independent study. But a study purely of those formal features, without a study of their role in speech acts, would be like study of the currency and credit systems of economics without a study of the role of currency and credit in economic transactions.

Since the concept involves both grammar and social conduct, it has been adopted by disciplines with different objectives. For DA speech acts are the lowest units in which discourse can be structured and they are defined not only on the basis of their illocutionary force but also taking into account the syntagmatic structure in which they appear. The innovation introduced by DA in connection with early speech act theory is that the analysis of verbal action is situated in a specific context.

Speech act theory as it was proposed by Austin and Searle seems to base the functional interpretation of utterances on the

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presence or absence of a series of illocutionary force indicating devices including explicit performatives like **I order, I apologize** as well as the main sentence types (i.e. imperative, interrogative and declarative). However, it has been shown that it is possible to find utterances whose illocutionary force does not correspond with the force assigned to it, based on the sentence type or the presence of a performative. Thus the utterance **May I ask you to sign here?**, in spite of the presence of the performative 'ask' and the interrogative sentence-form, is understood as a directive rather than as a request for confirmation. This type of utterances are described as *indirect speech acts*. We can say, therefore, that the functional interpretation of an utterance does not depend exclusively on the presence of the inclusion of a series of items. It also depends on the sequential structure of turns as well as on the situational context in which the utterance appears.

For ES the speech act is also the minimal unit of the set **speech situation > speech event > speech act**. What the ethnographers question, however, is the relevance of the speaker's intentions for the definition of the function of a segment of talk. In general, researchers working in this direction are interested in discovering the relationship between the notion of communicative action and local theories of communication and interpretation (Duranti 1988: 222).

3.2. Explanatory concepts

3.2.1. Principles and maxims

The concept of *principles/maxims* appears in the literature on pragmatics as a possible option to the concept of *rules*. According to scholars like Grice (1975), Brown and Levinson (1978), Leech (1983) and Sperber and Wilson (1986), among others, the difference between a principle/maxim and a rule is that whereas rules are basically conventional, principles/maxims are based on conversational goals and, therefore, they have a non-conventional nature. Leech (1983: 8) points out a series of further differences:

The kind of constraints on linguistic behaviours exemplified by Grice's CP [Cooperative Principle] differs from the kind of rule normally formulated in linguistics, or for that matter in logic, in a number of ways. (...)

(a) Principles/maxims apply variably to different contexts of language use.

(b) Principles/maxims apply in variable degrees, rather than in an all-or-nothing way.

(c) Principles/maxims can conflict with one another.

(d) Principles/maxims can be contravened without abnegation of the kind of activity they control.

The common idea among the pragmaticists working within this analytical framework is that in setting up the principles upon which language is used they are providing not only a way of explaining how utterances are linked in conversation, but also

how social relationships are constructed (Brown and Levinson 1978: 60).

Principles/maxims are usually formulated as norms to be followed by the language user. This fact explains the imperative mood in which they are presented. Thus, Grice's Cooperative Principle, for example, consists of the following general statement which is further divided into four maxims (quantity, quality, relation and manner)⁵:

Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged (quoted from Levinson 1983: 101)

Whereas Grice's Cooperative Principle and Sperber and Wilson's Principle of Relevance are essentially aimed at solving the problem of how understanding is achieved (i.e. the question of informativeness), other works like Brown and Levinson (1978) and Leech (1983) are examples of how the same analytical apparatus can be applied to explain the construction of social relationships⁶. One of the best examples is what they define as Politeness Strategies and Politeness Principle

5 See Grice (1975) and Levinson (1983) for a full development of the Cooperative Principle.

6 It is necessary to acknowledge that this idea is already suggested in Grice (1975).

respectively, and which can be stated in the following way (Leech 1983: 81):

- (i) Minimize (other things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs.
- (ii) Maximize (other things being equal) the expression of polite beliefs .

It should be said that the principles/maxims operating in language use must not be understood as a series of prescriptive norms which speakers must follow in every situation. In fact, speakers very often do not abide by them. However, this does not invalidate the existence of certain norms, because it is precisely through the assumption of the presence of the principle/maxim that the contravention of it becomes meaningful. The listener's task in this case involves looking for the reasons which have made the speaker decide to break a specific principle, and this is what makes him/her arrive at the meaning with which the utterance was intended.

A slightly different understanding of the notion of principles/maxims can be found in Widdowson (1984: 234-235), when he attempts to characterize the language user's "capacity for realizing the indexical value of language elements in the communicative process". According to the author, the correlations form-function and form-notion cannot be explained in terms of rules, but rather in terms of "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".

3.2.2. Face

The concept of *face* as an analytical tool for explaining interaction was first suggested by Goffman (1967) in order to explain certain universal features of social conduct. He defines face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman 1967: 5).

According to Goffman the social individual, in order to behave in society, "is taught to be perceptive, to have feelings attached to self and a self expressed through face, to have pride, honor, and dignity, to have considerateness, to have tact and a certain amount of poise" (Goffman 1967: 44). Although Goffman does not restrict the application of his concept of face to the analysis of pure linguistic actions, it becomes clear that the use of language in social encounters is one of the basic 'actions' through which people can accomplish these tasks.

Taking Goffman's concepts of *face* and *face-work* as "the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with his face" (1967:12), Brown and Levinson (1978) developed a theory of politeness strategies used in verbal

interaction which is based on people's universal wants for positive and negative face. According to these authors a person's public face has two aspects. The positive aspect (i.e. *positive face*) is the desire to be accepted as a normal, contributing member of the social group. The negative aspect (i.e. *negative face*) has to do with the person's rights to act freely and not to be imposed by others. Brown and Levinson distinguish four categories of politeness strategies depending on the risk of losing face:

- (i) Bald on record, involving very little risk of losing face.
- (ii) Positive politeness, addressed to the hearer's positive face (his/her desire to be thought of as a contributing member of the social group).
- (iii) Negative politeness, directed to the hearer's negative face (his rights to independence and freedom of action).
- (iv) Off record, introducing ambiguity in connection with the impositive nature of the request; the decision is left to the hearer.

The concept of *face* and the use Brown and Levinson make of it is important in the sense that it provides a clear social and rational basis to Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle. It represents one of the first attempts to describe systematically the subtleness of linguistic action as the product of social and rational thinking, and with a cross-cultural range of applicability. The foundation of their theory is defined in the following way:

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We believe that patterns of message construction, or 'ways of putting things', or simply language usage, are part of the very stuff that social relationships are made of (or, as some would prefer, crucial parts of the expression of social relations). Discovering the principles of language usage may be largely coincident with discovering the principles out of which social relationships, in their interactional aspect, are constructed (...). (Brown and Levinson 1978: 60)

3.2.3. Strategies

One of the concepts that has appeared with great frequency in the previous section is that of *strategies*. The absence of any further precision to the way in which Brown and Levinson (1978) use this concept takes us directly to the meaning of the dictionary. The definition that best fits in with the meaning intended in this research is the following: "The art of planning the best way to achieve something or to be successful in a particular activity"⁷. In this sense *strategy* could be a synonym of *tactics*, with clear connotations of conscious planning and even plotting. However, as Tannen (1989: 15) says, the term, in its linguistic sense, does not include the previous connotations, and "is used simply to convey a systematic way of using language". The important aspect of the notion of strategy is that it involves

7 Collins (1987)

a series of systematic steps, more or less conscious, with an intended outcome

The concept appears very often in the literature on second and foreign language learning to account for errors made by learners⁸. Tarone *et al.* (1983: 5), for example, define *communication strategy* as "a systematic attempt by the learner to express or decode meaning in the target language, in situations where the appropriate systematic target language rules have not been formed".

The definition of the concept which is of interest in the present analysis is one which is not circumscribed to those efforts made by the language learner to make up for lack of competence in the target language. Therefore, our definition of *strategy* is more in the line of Gumperz (1982a) and Brown and Levinson (1983). It refers to the speaker's and listener's systematic use of linguistic and general socio-cultural knowledge to achieve their intended goals when producing or interpreting a message in a given context. A strategy can only be successful if the participants in an interaction share some linguistic experience which they can rely on in order to make either the necessary projection of meaning (in the case of the speaker) or

⁸ See Nussbaum (1990) for a review of some of the literature on the concept of strategy.

the necessary inferences to interpret the other's intent (in the case of the listener).

Gumperz's understanding of the concept of strategies can be seen in the following extract in which he proposes an approach to conversation analysis which, among other things, takes into account the factor of using linguistic and other knowledge strategically in order to achieve certain goals:

A speaker oriented approach to conversation, on the other hand, focuses directly on the strategies that govern the actor's use of lexical, grammatical, sociolinguistic and other knowledge in the production and interpretation of messages in context. (...) The analyst's task is to make an in depth study of selected instances of verbal interaction, observe whether or not actors understand each other, elicit participant's interpretation of what goes on, and then (a) deduce the social assumptions that speakers must have made in order to act as they do, and (b) determine empirically how linguistic signs communicate in the interpretation process. (Gumperz 1982a: 35-36)

Because of the linguistic bias of the present research, the emphasis of the analysis presented in the following chapters will be placed on the second aspect pointed out in the preceding quote, that is the description of the linguistic resources used in order to achieve a specific goal.

3.2.4. Informativity

The notion of *informativity* arises from the fact that language (spoken or written) is linearly organised (i.e. we can only speak or write one word at a time). It presents two aspects

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which need to be taken into account when trying to apply it to analyses of natural data: the first aspect involves the amount of old and new information that is being introduced in the message; the second aspect has to do with the way in which this information is presented both at the level of discourse and at the level of the utterance.

One of the systematic attempts to study the first aspect is De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981). These authors present *informativity* as one of the seven basic constitutive principles "which define and create the form of behaviour identifiable as textual communicating" (1981: 11). By using the adjective "constitutive" they want to emphasize the fact that if one of these principles is defied, the activity known as textual communication breaks down. According to these authors the concept "designates the extent to which a presentation is new or unexpected for the receivers" (1981: 139) and it usually has to do with the notion of *content*.

The second aspect centres around the notions of *thematization*, at the level of the utterance (Halliday 1967), and *staging*, a concept which was introduced by Grimes to study the linear organization of discourse as a whole. His argument is as follows:

"Every clause, sentence, paragraph, episode, and discourse is organized around a particular element that is taken as its point of departure. It is as though the speaker presents what he wants to say from a particular perspective" (Grimes 1975: 323).

The interest of this concept in actual analyses of real interactions can be seen in Schiffrin (1987: 28-29). This author includes *information state* as one of the planes of discourse which must be taken into account in order to analyse discourse markers like *yeah, oh, I mean, you know, etc.* According to her, at this level of discourse speaker and hearer are considered in their cognitive capacities, that is, the ways in which they organize and manage their knowledge about the world and also what they know about their own and the other's knowledge of the world (i.e. their meta-knowledge). The relevance of the notion of *informativity* in the structure of interactions is pointed out in the following way:

(...) although information state involves speakers and hearers in their cognitive capacities, there is still an interactional relevance to knowledge and meta-knowledge. Because discourse involves the exchange of information, knowledge and meta-knowledge are constantly in flux, as are degrees of certainty and salience. (Schiffrin 1987: 28)

From what has been said above, it is clear that the concept of *informativity* involves (i) the cognitive aspects related to information relevance, ordering of events and coherence, and (ii) the grammatical and rhetorical means available in every language in order to transform this cognitive structure into a coherent and cohesive text.

3.2.5. Inference

The concept of *inference* appears in the literature on semantic aspects of language to account for the fact that there are certain aspects of the meaning of naturally appearing utterances that cannot be explained by exclusive reference to their truth conditions and the meanings of their individual words and the grammatical relationships among them. In the words of Gumperz (1989: 1):

Inferencing (...) involves hypothesis-like tentative assessments of communicative intent, that is the listener's interpretation of what the speaker seeks to convey, in roughly illocutionary terms. These assessments can be validated only in relation to other background assumptions, and not in terms of absolute truth-value.

This concept immediately poses the problem of the kind of knowledge that the listener needs to have in order to make these hypotheses about communicative intent, and whether this knowledge can be tracked down to formal aspects of utterances. The answer to this question requires us to distinguish among three kinds of shared knowledge between speaker and listener: (i) knowledge about the meaning and usage of the different levels of the linguistic code (i.e. phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, prosody) and the different registers, varieties or even languages; (ii) knowledge about a series of principles of conversation which have been described as *cooperative principle* (Grice 1975), *conversational principles* (Leech 1983), *principle of*

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relevance (Sperber and Wilson (1986); (iii) knowledge about the extra-linguistic world.

The difference between the first kind of knowledge and the other two is that whereas in the latter two types the speaker relies on the listener's search for coherence, in the former type the speaker requires that a series of conventional cues be present in the utterance in order for the listener to make the intended inferences. In Gumperz (1989: 2) these cues are identified as *contextualization cues* primarily functioning at the following levels of speech production: (i) prosody (i.e. intonation, stress or accenting, and pitch register shifts); (ii) paralinguistic signs (i.e. tempo, pausing and hesitation, and conversational synchrony); (iii) choice of code (e.g. code/style switching, phonetic, phonological and morphosyntactic variants); and (iv) choice of lexical forms or formulaic expressions (e.g. opening or closing routines, metaphors).

To sum up, pragmatic *inference* is not to be identified with the concept of universal deductive inference. Rather, it refers to tentative interpretations based on different kinds of knowledge which are not necessarily (and most probably they are not) universal.

3.3. Folk intuitions about language use

After this overview of the concepts which appear to be most useful for the kind of analysis intended in this project, it might be of interest to the applied linguist to explore the degree to which they correspond to the intuitions of non-expert native speakers.

If we follow Verschueren's assumption (1985) that verbal behaviour, as any other type of social activity, cannot be fully understood without an attempt to grasp the way it is conceptualized by those engaging in it, we need to see how the naïve speaker views his/her verbal actions. The attempt could be defined as one which tries to see whether the 'etic' categories set up by analysts of conversation coincide with the 'emic' categories used by the speakers of the language. The relevance of this ethnographic method in teaching methodology has been pointed out in Robinson (1985: 57):

Ethnography is also a valuable tool for obtaining cultural information on how to teach, e.g., how to organize instruction so as to implement cultural diversity and transmit cultural goals. For example, Chapter 3 discussed how different cultures have different preferred modes of presenting and responding to information. It was suggested that effective methodologies in bilingual, second language and foreign language programs build a bridge between the home and school cultures.

In order to obtain that kind of information five individuals were selected out of the more than twenty that took part in the tape-recording sessions. One of the individuals was a professor

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and the rest graduate students, three male and one female. They were informed in advance that I was going to ask them a few questions about what they thought about conversation in general and their own recorded conversations in particular. The interviews were tape-recorded but, owing to my previous acquaintance with the subjects, the atmosphere was quite relaxed. They were asked first to listen to the recording while simultaneously reading the transcript of the conversation in which they had taken part. After this stage was completed, we engaged in a conversation based on the following questions, which were to serve as guidelines:

1. What do you think of the conversation you have just heard?
2. If you had to divide the conversation into different parts (e.g. styles, topics, things that happen, etc), how would you do it?
3. When you engage in this type of conversation, do you care about anything in particular?
4. How would you define the other person and yourself in terms of the way you participate in the conversation?
5. What is your idea of engaging in a conversation?
6. Who is a good conversationalist in your opinion? Describe the behaviour of someone you enjoy talking to?
7. What kind of conversations do you engage in as part of your everyday life?
8. Tell me about your conversational experience both as a non-native speaker and as a native speaker interacting with non-native speakers?

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The kind of open questions used is the one favoured by experienced ethnographers (Saville-Troike, 1982); the information to be obtained is of two types: (i) hierarchically structured categories, and (ii) sets of features defining each category. Saville-Troike (1982: 129-130) proposes the following methodology:

A possible initial step in data collection is selecting a domain or genre, and then asking (recursively), 'What kind of _____s are there?' One might ask 'What kind of insults are there?', for instance; if the response were 'Friendly insults and unfriendly insults', the next question would be 'What kind of friendly insults are there?' etc. This step is usually followed by questions which elicit the dimensions which the speaker is using for comparison and contrast: e.g. 'In what way are these two things/acts/events different?' 'How are they the same?' 'Of these three which two are more alike and in what way?' 'How does the third differ from them?'

The first thing that came out in the interview was the awareness of the difference between spoken and written discourse (e.g. "I realized how much people tend to run on sentences or jump around without finishing them."), and the degree of 'informality' present in everyday spoken discourse (e.g. "In formal discussions -professional or business issues, answering a questionnaire- you use far more measured terminology, you are more careful to follow the grammatical rules").

Dividing the event into different parts or sections was not an easy task for the subjects. *Topic* seems to be the most relevant aspect, although it is interesting to find out that as relevant as topic is what is done with the topic, e.g. present the

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topic, discuss, sum up. This would appear to agree with the norms of classical rhetoric which divide the exposition of a subject into those three parts. Three of the interviewees recognized a section of 'business' and another section in which the other participant 'went off' the main subject. They also mentioned a stage they defined as 'working back to the main point', a process requiring a certain skill on the part of one of the participants (e.g. "I try to bring him back if he goes off"). *Conclusion* is the last section, the main function of which is to sum up and clarify the outcome of the conversation and, possibly, fix some future action (meeting again, for example).

It is interesting to see that one of the subjects conceived stages in the conversation in terms of the prevalent *mood*. In the conversation we listened to, he only distinguished an initial period of "anxiety and distance" (reflected in the use of formal language) which later shifted to a more "relaxed and friendly" atmosphere. My interpretation of this is that the idea of style plays a significant role in conversation, and in some cases it may overwhelm the primacy of subject. In other words, it may very well happen that participants in a certain situation orient their behaviour as reactions not so much to what one says but to the attitude that person shows in saying it, through the use of a specific style

Among the aspects to which one must pay attention when engaging in the type of conversation being studied, the idea of

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difference in *status* appears to be of extreme importance and this is reflected more in content than in form (e.g. "I must think carefully what I say not to offend him"; "It's more important what I say and when than how I say it."). As important as the *power relationship* is the *presentation of self* (e.g. "The use of technicalities reflects insecurities, I need to demonstrate my credibility so that she will listen to me"; "I want him to respect me" - in both cases the quotations are from students). A third relevant aspect in this type of conversational event was the *goal*. The need to get something definite out of the interaction seems to impose certain strategic movements on the side of the student such as having a clear "agenda" (mentally or in notes) of the things to talk about (e.g. "It's important for me everything I want to say and that all gets said"; "I always go to the office with a clear agenda"), or making specific conversational moves that help clarify the purpose ("I make clear what I wanna get out of the conversation"; "I need to make sure he understands the reason why I'm talking to him").

Asking the subjects to define the other participant and themselves in terms of the way they participate in the conversation was a way of trying to find out on what kind of impressions judgments about people are based. "Taking a back seat" (not saying much) is considered to be a sign of respect in this situation from the point of view of the student's behaviour. Uneasiness and anxiety are signalled in different ways: taking notes, having questions written down, using formal expressions

to mark *social distance* (e.g. "Students come in and call me doctor or professor and they automatically put me in a position of superiority by doing that"); laughter in one case was acknowledged by one of the subjects as a sign of anxiety (e.g. "I use laughter a lot when I'm nervous, when I'm not talking with someone who is my equal."). Definitions such as "wordy, spacy, loves to talk, dominates/leads conversation" were all used to define the same person by different subjects, the emphasis here being on the *distribution of talk*. In other cases definitions such as "talks in an open way; easy person to talk to because he always has something to say; she doesn't have his level of intellectual confidence and that makes her a little more hesitant" refer more to the need for understanding and relatedness among the participants.

When talking about their idea of engaging in a conversation three of the five subjects brought up the fact that the answer depended on the type of conversation, which means that there are different *cultural scripts* for different events, depending on which behaviour is judged. When asked about what they understood by 'ideal conversation' all of them pointed out the need for reciprocity in giving and taking ideas, feelings, facts, stories, etc. (e.g. "Reciprocal wish to offer something to be shared"; "Conversation is two ways"). Creating an affective atmosphere is also an important ingredient for conversation to work out. This can be appreciated in the type of answers I obtained relating to the subjects' idea of the 'good

conversationalist': "Good conversations are intimate, in one level it could be almost intellectually affectionate"; "By definition a conversationalist is somebody who interacts affectively with another person in an exchange of ideas, stories, comments, and so on.". Summing up, we conclude that what the participant looks for in a conversation is *time* and *space* to give his/her own information and take that of the others, and all this in an affective atmosphere which will enhance the willingness to understand and accept. Only one subject mentioned the need for "order and organization, logic and rationality", but even in this case she said that sometimes she prefers "to relax and not be so analytical".

In mentioning the different types of conversational events the subjects engage in during their daily lives, it became clear that the *relationship between the participants* is the decisive factor. This relationship refers to both the *degree of acquaintance* with the other person and to the *social roles* the individuals have in respect to each other (e.g. "differences have a lot to do with the relationship I have with that person"; "I have a lot of different roles when engaging in conversation (student, teaching assistant, student colleague)". The only clear division the subjects established was between *goal oriented* and *non-goal oriented* conversations. One subject pointed to the difference between talking about things and talking about people, suggesting the impression that the first type is more common in an academic setting.

When, in the last part of the interview, the subjects talked about their experience as non-native speakers interacting with native speakers of a language or, *viceversa*, their experience as native speakers of the language interacting with non-native speakers, four of them acknowledged the intimate relationship between language use and presentation of self. They also pointed out their increasing awareness of this relationship in situations where the speaker is not totally competent in the language (e.g. "when talking in Spanish my personality is obscured in the sense I can't express ideas or feelings I have in as complex or subtle a way as I can in English"; "when interacting with non-native speakers I am aware of their anxiety, reflected in hesitancy, timidity, insecurity, produced by their reluctance to not be perceived as equal"; "some people seem to have another personality when they speak another language"; "there's the constant worry of being misunderstood; you have so less in common coming from another culture that even basic understanding is not so basic").

A brief recapitulation of this section shows us the relevance for naïve speakers of some of the methodological tools introduced previously in this chapter. Although perhaps not precisely in those words, concepts such as *style*, *topic*, *goal*, *role*, *status*, *turn-distribution*, *scripts*, *participants' relationship*, *presentation of self* seem to be part of the language-users' conception of language. This coincidence, however, does not mean in any way that the applied linguist should rely on naïve

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definitions of verbal phenomena in order to provide a systematic account of verbal interaction. Rather, they should serve as basic tools through which reflection upon verbal interaction could be started.

CHAPTER IV. ELEMENTS FOR A TAXONOMY OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

4.0. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to suggest an approach to the analysis of verbal interaction which could combine the explanatory strength in terms of specific linguistic strategies triggered off in each interactional circumstance with a dynamic concept of situated meaning, that is to say meaning as the product of context and negotiation.

The analytical framework which will be presented below is based on a modular view of communicative competence proposed in Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983). According to this view, the kinds of *knowledge* and *skills* that speakers require to be considered competent in a language can be divided into four groups: *grammatical*, *sociolinguistic*, *discourse* and *strategic*.

4.1. A description of language use

Language use can be described from two different points of view: (i) *what* the user must know in order to use that language, and (ii) *how, where* and *why* the user activates a particular area of this knowledge in specific instances of language behaviour. From the point of view of language acquisition, the interest in the study of language use lies mainly in the second aspect, that is to say in the user's "capacity for realizing the indexical value of language elements in the communicative process" (Widdowson, 1984: 234).

The option of studying actual performance rather than competence forces the analyst to face the problem of having to live without rules which establish univocal correlations between form and function and form and notion. The user's intuitions as well as the detailed analysis of the data give rise to the idea that the basis for language use is not so much a matter of rule government but rather a matter of internalized fuzzy "schemes of prediction and expectation" generalized and exploited as "useful approximations to reality" (Widdowson, 1984: 235).

What I mean by this is that the analyst should be prepared to cope with the following ideas suggested in Jucker (1986: 58): (i) it is doubtful whether there is a finite set of speech acts; (ii) it is even more doubtful whether speech actions can be mapped onto utterance units and viceversa; (iii) utterance units cannot

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be defined *a priori* without taking into account the function being performed in the actual circumstance. It is much more productive, and true to the speaker's intuitions, to conceive of language use as a punctual need to cope with an 'interactional requirement' which the user fulfils with whatever tools he has at hand. It is often the case that when confronted with a specific 'requirement' the user is able to recall similar past experiences of language use in which he/she had to face the same kind of problem. One of the clearest examples of this can be found in all the communicative routines that are part of our everyday lives, from an exchange of greetings to the opening and closing of a telephone conversation. However, side by side with this capacity to recall and apply unanalyzed linguistic segments learned as communicative routines¹, there is also the possibility for the speaker to use his/her innate creative capacity, and utter

1 See Pawley and Syder (1983: 205-215) on the distinction between memorized sequences ("strings which the speaker or hearer is capable of consciously assembling or analysing, but which on most occasions of use are recalled as wholes or as automatically chained strings") and lexicalized sentence stems ("a complete sentence or, more commonly, an expression which is something less than a complete sentence" which (i) has a meaning which is not (totally) predictable from its form, (ii) behaves as a minimal unit for certain syntactic purposes, and (iii) denotes a meaning which is culturally recognized).

Elements for a taxonomy of conversational responses

either a completely new form or one which differs substantially from that which would normally be expected in a certain situation.

The basis for the analysis of language use cannot be found in the possible range of utterances present at one stage of the conversation but rather in the 'interactional requirements' with which the user is confronted throughout a conversation. It is in the light of these problems that the different linguistic segments must be explained and classified. The interaction itself will allow us to see how successful the strategy applied has been in helping the speaker to meet the 'requirement'.

To the possible argument that the 'requirements' which the analyst decides to work with may be biased by his/her system of values, ideology or presuppositions, and that, therefore, there can be as many descriptions as investigators, I would suggest, just as Schegloff does (1988: 21), that descriptions of language use must be grounded "in the orientations of the participants" in the interaction itself. The analyst's task must be to find out how successful a segment of talk is in reaching a specific outcome, and whether the orientation that he/she initially assigned to it is coherent throughout the interaction.

If we are to tell the foreign language learner not only *how* and *when* but also *why* to use a specific utterance we must aim not only for a description but also for an explanation of the data. This explanation can only be found in the specific

outcomes the practices of ordinary discourse are intended to reach.

4.2. A taxonomy of communicative competence

In setting up a taxonomy of communicative competence based on a functional perspective such as the one proposed above, it is necessary to consider first: whether the kind of 'requirements' the language user must cope with belong to different "modes of meaning" or functional components of the semantic system (Halliday 1978). The question is whether we need to speak of a general communicative competence which is acquired as a whole by the child in his/her process of becoming a social being, or whether it might be better to speak of an acquired pragmatic knowledge of language use which is added to the grammatical knowledge, the basic structures of which are innate².

In spite of the two different perspectives on language acquisition mentioned in the previous paragraph, it is necessary to say that describing and explaining verbal interaction is not the same as accounting for the way language is acquired. The taxonomy of communicative competence presented in this

2 See section 1.1. on the notion of pragmatic competence.

chapter does not attempt to explain the process of language learning. Rather, the goal is to set up an analytical framework capable of integrating the different peculiar phenomena observed by the researcher during a verbal interaction.

The approach that will be presented in this chapter is based on a modular conception of communicative competence which views talk as the product of a combination of different units belonging to different "modes of meaning" (Halliday 1978), "levels" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1987) or "structures" (Schiffrin 1987)³. Halliday (1978: 113) mentions transitivity, modality and theme as examples of the need to distinguish among different "modes of meaning". Whereas transitivity would be classified into the ideational mode of meaning, modality would belong to the interactional mode and theme to the textual mode. Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1987: 321) stresses the need for a stratificational approach to analysing verbal interaction, and distinguishes between the level of the exchange and the level of the interaction:

3 See below, section 6.1, for a more detailed account of Halliday's and Schiffrin's framework.