Unit C6
Assessing interactional competence

INTRODUCTION

We present in this unit a series of data segments taken from conversations between learners of English and native speakers, we examine reports of a child with autism, and we compare autistic behavior with interaction between a mother and her normal 12-week-old son. The aim of the activities that we present here is for you to consider the importance of some fundamental features of interactional competence: it is practice-specific, it is co-constructed, and it requires intersubjectivity.

C6.1 PRESENTATION OF DATA 1

In Unit A6, we defined interactional competence as a relationship between the participants' employment of linguistic and interactional resources and the contexts in which they are employed. The resources that interactional competence highlights are those of language (register and modes of meaning) and interaction (sequential organization, turn-taking, and repair), which together create identities for participants in the participation framework of a specific discursive practice. A discursive practice is anything that participants do through language that is bounded by opening and closing acts. Unlike communicative competence, interactional competence is not the ability of an individual to employ those resources in any and every discursive practice; interactional competence is how those resources are employed mutually and reciprocally by all participants in a specific practice.

Some researchers (Young and He, 1998) have criticized a particular kind of assessment of oral foreign language proficiency that takes the form of an interview because, although the interview is designed to be a general assessment of global speaking ability, the nature of the discursive practice in which the assessment is made limits the role identity of the candidate. In order to investigate the extent to which a candidate’s interactional competence is constrained by the practice in which they are participating and by the role of the other participant, we present here two data segments, one from a formal oral proficiency assessment and the other from a dorm room conversation. Both are dyadic conversations (involving only two speaking participants) and both interactions involve one learner of English and one
native speaker. The learner of English is identified in the transcripts as NNS (nonnative speaker) and the native speaker by NS. Data segment 1 is from Johnson (2001, p. 94) and data segment 2 is from Riggenbach (1998, pp. 59–60).

Data segment 1

1  NS: How long does it take you to get from Salt Lake City to Provo?
2  NNS: I took a bus this morning so it took me about an hour and twenty minutes to get here.
3  NS: Oh you rode the bus?
4  NNS: Yeah I did.
5  NS: Did they have a good bus service from between the two cities?
6  NNS: Yeah they have UTA Utah Transit Service and it's real good.
7  NS: (clears throat) What kind of buses are they uh do they have? Are they big ones?
8  NNS: It's really big one.
9  NS: Oh I see I see. Interesting! Now, is there any kind of train connection between the two cities?
10 NNS: Uh usually I I think they do but I never take a train. They have Amtrak from Provo to Salt Lake and I don't know how much it costs but they have it a Amtrak from Provo to Salt Lake.
11 NS: Now, (clears throat) you say that you have lived in Provo for four years now?
12 NNS: Yeah.
13 NS: Is that the only place in Utah that you've lived?
14 NNS: Yeah, I came I came here in nineteen . . . ninety.
15 NS: Oh nineteen ninety. And from where did you come?

Data segment 2

1  NS: Well what do you think about um mothers who um have their baby [and they leave them in garbage
2  NNS: [Uh-huh
3  NS: cans
4  (1.5)
5  NNS: Huh? What do you (s [ 6  NS: [They have— they have their baby?
7  NNS: My mom?
8  NS: No no (hh) Not your (hh hh) — Mothers.
9  NNS: Uh huh. Mothers uh huh
NS: They have their baby?
NNS: Uh huh
NS: And then— they leave it in garbage cans.
NNS: (.8)
NNS: Garbage?
NS: Garbage cans. Like big garbage c(hh)ans. Outside of businesses.
NNS: Uh huh
NS: [and apartments
NNS: Ahh:: [You know what I mean?
NS: No I don’t know. I d— I understand Garbage.
NNS: Ye[ah. You know dumpsters? where— You know
NNS: (Garbage.
NS: our garbage?
NNS: Garbage?
NS: Uh huh
NNS: Ah yeah
NS: Yeah. And they’ll have a baby and they’ll leave it in there
(2.0)
NNS: Uh yu:h? ((tone displays shock))
NS: Yeah. For someone to- to take it or for it to die.
NNS: Die? Ahh:: Like a (just lea[ve it)
NS: [Mm-hm
NNS: I know. ((clears throat)) What do yo [u
NS: [It’s mean.
NNS: What’s mean?
NS: No— It’s mean. It’s mean.
NNS: Mean.
NS: Yeah(hh hh) It’s bad.
NNS: It’s bad. Uh— I know (( unintelligible [x xx))
NS: [Mm-hm
NNS: Because baby is not thing is y’ [know
NS: [Baby’s what?
NNS: Not thing. Baby is a animal– (hh) I(hh)don’t know.
NS: Humor.
NS: Human ye [ah
NNS: [So I can’t do that. I can’t do that. I can’t
sell, I can’t— I can’t throw garba [ge
NS: [Throw it away.
NNS: [Throw
NS: away.
NS: Yeah.
NNS: But— I can’t kill because it’s human.
C6.1.1 Activity 1: practice-specific interactional resources

Consider the interactional resources that participants employ in these two practices: that is, describe the organization of turn-taking, the sequential organization of speech acts, and the processes of repair that you find in these two practices. Put your descriptions of the interactional resources in the practices side by side and compare and contrast their interactional structure.

C6.1.2 Activity 2: practice-specific linguistic resources

Consider now the linguistic resources that participants employ in these two practices: that is, describe the registers and the modes of meaning that participants employ in the two practices. What differences and similarities and differences do you find? Are the interactional differences greater or less than the linguistic differences?

C6.1.3 Activity 3: interview or conversation?

One of these practices was recorded in a dormitory room where the learner had lived for six months with her native-speaking interlocutor. This data segment is ten minutes into the recording, following a discussion on similar topics that the learner had been discussing that week in her ESL conversation class. The other data segment was taken from a regularly scheduled oral proficiency interview conducted by telephone by a trained assessor working for an agency of the US federal government. Which data segment is taken from which practice? Use interactional and linguistic evidence to support your answer.

C6.1.4 Activity 4: transfer of interactional competence

What are the differences between an interview and an informal conversation? What can you infer about a participant’s interactional competence from those two practices? If someone is a good conversationalist, would you expect them to interview well?

C6.2 PRESENTATION OF DATA 2

One way to understand interactional competence is to define it and to contrast interactional competence with communicative competence and linguistic competence, but another way is to consider conditions where interactional competence does not exist. To do so, we can consider interaction in which the basis for interactional competence is absent, and we can do that by examining the case of people who find it very difficult to perceive the intentions and desires of others, who exhibit very little intersubjectivity.
Autism is the name for a broad spectrum of mental diseases that affect thought, perception, and attention. An aspect of interactional competence that tends to be disturbed in people with autism has to do with knowing how to use language appropriately and in context. That includes knowing how to hold a conversation, thinking about what the other person in a conversation understands and believes, and tuning in to the metalinguistic signals of the other person, such as facial expression, tone of voice, and body language. It is important to remember that communication is as much nonverbal as it is verbal, and people with autism have great difficulty understanding nonverbal language. One way of interpreting this reaction is to say that people with autism have difficulty with intersubjectivity, and often this is observable because people with autism have great difficulty making eye contact with others.

People with autism may have other symptoms besides lack of intersubjectivity, and the range of autistic symptoms is quite wide. Some people with autism like to live very organized lives, to make lists, and dislike too much novelty or new information. Mark Haddon wrote *The curious incident of the dog in the night-time*, a novel in which the narrator is Christopher, a 15-year-old boy who suffers from autism, whom Haddon portrays with sympathy and understanding. The following passage from Mark Haddon’s novel is Christopher’s description of some of his own feelings about communication and about other people.

*I find people confusing. This is for two main reasons. The first main reason is that people do a lot of talking without using any words. Siobhan says that if you raise one eyebrow it can mean lots of different things. It can mean ‘I want to do sex with you’ and it can also mean ‘I think what you just said was very stupid.’ . . . The second main reason is that people often talk using metaphors. These are examples of metaphors*

*I laughed my socks off.
He was the apple of her eye.
They had a skeleton in the cupboard.*

. . . When I try and make a picture of the phrase in my head it just confuses me because imagining an apple in someone’s eye doesn’t have anything to do with liking someone a lot and it makes you forget what the person was talking about.

### C6.2.1 Activity 1: autism and intersubjectivity

What evidence is there in the passage that Christopher has difficulty with intersubjectivity? If you have read the book, you might want to find other examples of the problems that Christopher has taking the perspective of other people.
C6.2.2 Activity 2: autism and lying

Christopher is unable to lie about the events he recounts in the book, and many individuals with autism are known to ‘tell it as it is’ or to never tell a lie. In fact, the advent of lying behavior in people who are being treated with autism is viewed as a cognitive milestone in their treatment and can be seen as a reason to celebrate. Why is the inability to lie associated with autism? Why would lying require intersubjectivity?

C6.3 PRESENTATION OF DATA 3: MOTHER-INFANT INTERACTION

In this activity we look at the normal development of very young infants in order to identify the onset of intersubjectivity. Figure C6.1 shows a communicative exchange between a mother and her normal child. The exchange is analyzed frame by frame from a film recording. The levels of general animation displayed by the body movements of the infant and mother are indicated by Levels I–IV. The horizontal scale is frames of the film and there are 16 frames per second. The pictures below the chart show the disposition of mother and infant at 29 frames (1.8 seconds), 53 frames (3.3 seconds), and 109 frames (6.8 seconds). The mother talks and moves her head; the infant babbles, smiles, waves his arm, and opens his hand.

Figure C6.1 Conversation-like exchange between a mother and her 12-week-old boy.
Source: Trevarthen (1977, Figure 2, p. 240)
Look at the chart in Figure C6.1, which shows the degree of interaction between the mother and her child. Do you see any evidence that the actions of the mother and child are related? As we discussed in Units A4–6, turn-taking is one of the interactional activities in which the onset of a new turn is very finely tuned to the turn-in-progress. Do you see any evidence of that fine attunement in the activities of mother and child in Figure C6.1?

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES FOR FUTURE EXPLORATION

How is oral proficiency in foreign languages assessed at your institution? Ask permission to record an oral proficiency assessment. How valid do you think the procedure is as a measurement of interactional competence?

Read as much as you can about autism and other disorders of social communication. Do you think that Mark Haddon’s portrayal of Christopher in The curious incident of the dog in the night-time is a valid depiction of a child with autism?