THE OUTCOME OF CONVERSATIONAL INTERACTION: AN INTERPRETATION

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In second language acquisition research (SLAR) in the early 1980s, modified interaction (also called conversational modifications or adjustments) emerged as an important area of study. Since Long's (1980) seminal study that provided empirical evidence for modified interaction in second language acquisition, a number of researchers turned their attention to investigating the phenomenon. As a result, as early as the mid-80's a number of studies had dealt with specific aspects of conversational interaction in second language acquisition (see Gass and Madden 1985, Day 1986, Young and Doughty 1987).

Among those studies, a couple of investigations by Varonis and Gass (1985a & b) are particularly important for their theoretical and methodological interests. The studies on native speaker (NS)-nonnative speaker (NNS) and NNS-NNS conversations focus on how speakers negotiate meaning during conversations. These studies adopt certain models for explaining conversational data. In their (1985a) study, Varonis and Gass (V&G) propose a model which assumes that "In most conversations...the discourse progresses in a linear fashion" (p.72). However, differences (linguistic or cultural) between individual interlocutors interrupt this linear, horizontal progression. When such interruptions occur, in order to regain the smooth progression, the interlocutors "compensate by questioning particular utterances and/or seeking conversational help" (p.73). The compensatory process is represented by the model of non-understanding routines, the routines operationally defined as *"those exchanges in which there is some overt indication that understanding between participants has not been complete"* (p.73). Non-understanding routines account for how negotiation takes place, the objective of the negotiation being to regain the flow.

This model of non-understanding adds to the growing descriptive literature on conversational adjustments in the early 80's. However, with such notions as "symmetric contingency" in turn-taking sequence (Jones and Gerard 1967), "side-sequences" (Jefferson 1972), "cooperative principles" (Grice 1975), and "self- vs other-corrections" (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977), its greater contribution to SLAR on conversational interaction lies in providing some theoretical bent to data analysis.

Further theoretical refinement is provided in Varonis and Gass (1985b), which investigates a short NS-NNS phone conversation (two minutes and twenty seconds long). Focusing on miscommunication between a NS and a NNS speaker, the study adopts a goal-based model of conversation and presents a coding system for interpreting participants' utterances. Based on notions derived from such sources as Merritt (1974), Hymes (1972), Levinson (1981), Perrault and Allen (1980), the model takes

into account such significant factors as interlocutors' beliefs and goals. It states that a conversation progresses on the basis of participants' "belief space" (a term borrowed from Bruce and Newman (1978) to refer to knowledge of each other's goals) characterized by a participant's varied interpretation of the other's utterances and mutual reaffirmations and adjustments of one's beliefs and goals in the conversation. By means of this mutual process, the conversation leads to a state of convergence in which the interlocutors come to share a common belief space.

The study adopts a micro-analysis approach and concludes with the claim that "a complete analysis of NS/NNS conversations must minimally invoke notions of correct interpretations, confidence in one's interpretation, goals of conversation, shared beliefs, and linguistic as well as cultural systems" (Varonis and Gass 1985b:342).

This paper takes up V&G's (1985b) study for closer scrutiny. The purpose is to provide another interpretation of the conversational data in their study. By providing an alternative interpretation, the discussion in this paper attempts to argue that the NS-NNS conversation does not necessarily end in a state of convergence. This paper thus raises critical questions about V&G's goal-based model. It refers to an important concept in the Vygotskyan psycholinguistic theory that provides a more satisfactory theoretical underpinning for the alternative interpretation in this paper.

For the convenience of the readers, the entire conversation from V&G's (1985b:332-33) study is reproduced as follows:

1. NS: Hello
2. NNS: Hello. Could you tell me about the price and size of Sylvania color TV?
3. NS: Pardon?
4. NNS: Could you tell me about the prize and size of Sylvania TV . . color?
5. NS: What did you want? A service call?
6. NNS: seventeen inch?
7. NNS: Hunh?
8. NS: What did you want? A service call, or how much to repair a TV?
9. NNS: Yeah. Eh TV color?
10. NS: Seventeen inch?
11. NNS: O.K.
12. NS: (pause) Well is it a portable?
13. NNS: m hm
14. NS: What make is it? (pause) What is the brand name of the TV?
15. NNS: Ah, Sony please.
16. NS: We don't work on Sony's
17. NNS: --sss--
18. NNS: Or Sylvania. [low /a]
19. NS: Sylvania? [/ei/]
20. NNS: un hunh
21. NS: Uh Sylvania. O.K., that's American made
22. NNS: --uh hunh--
23. NNS: O.K.
24. NS: All right. Uhh, portables have to be brought in

25. NNS: m hm
26. NS: And there's no way I can tell you how much it'll cost until he looks at it.
27. NNS: m hm
28. NS: And it's a twelve fifty deposit.
29. NNS: O.K.
30. NS: And if he can fix it, that applies to labor, and if he can't he keeps the twelve fifty for his time and effort
31. NNS: (slight pause) m hm
32. NS: How old of a TV is it? Do you know off hand?
33. NNS: O.K. Nineteen inch?
34. NS: How old of a TV is it? Is it a very old one or only a couple of years old.
35. NNS: Oooooh. So-so (long pause) Umm, about how old?
36. NS: The only thing you can do is bring it in, you know, and let him look at it 'n go from there.
37. NNS: (long pause) new television please. (clears throat)
38. NS: Oh, you wanna know (long pause) how much a new television is?
39. NNS: Yeah, I wan' buy one please.
40. NS: (pause) Do we wanna buy one?
41. NNS: uh hunh
42. NS: (long pause) Is it a Sylvanna?
43. NNS: Sylvania TV color
44. NS: (long pause) Well, even you know even if we buy 'em we don't--we don't give much more 'n twenty dollars for 'em. Cause time we fix 'em up and resell 'm we can't get more'n--
45. NNS: --m hm--
46. NS: --hundred dollars out of 'em time we put our time n parts in it.
47. NNS: Is it the...seventeen inch?
48. NS: (long pause) Well I'd--you know the only thing I can tell you to do is you'd have to come to the shop. I'm on the extension at home. The shop's closed.
49. NNS: Mm. Nineteen inch?... you don't have?
50. NS: (short pause) Do we have a nineteen inch?
51. NNS: Yeah.
52. NS: No. I've got a seventeen inch new RCA.
53. NNS: O.K. Thank you. Bye.
54. NS: Mbye
55. NNS: m hm

In reference to the above conversation, Varonis and Gass (1985b:331-2) provide the following details about the subjects, the task, and the data collection procedure:

> The NNS, Carlos, was a student in a low-level ESL class at the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan. Students were given the assignment of making a phone call to one of a number of possible stores, one possibility being to find out the cost of a TV. Carlos selected that option. He recorded the conversation and brought it in the next day to discuss it with his teacher. It became readily apparent to Carlos's teacher that he had not called a sales store but a repair shop (pp.331-2).

As already mentioned, V&G analyze the conversational data within the framework of their "goal-based model of discourse" (p.335). In this model, the notion of an interlocutors' "belief space" is crucial. The notion refers not only to the beliefs and goals an interlocutor brings to a conversation but also his understanding of the other interlocutor's beliefs and goals. Based on this notion, V&G claim that any conversation involves the following process:

> We claim that for a conversation to proceed in a reasonable fashion, there has to be some shared belief space. If not, one interlocutor's perception of the other's goals must change during the conversation or there will be a complete breakdown. We further claim that an implicit assumption in conversation is that there is shared projected belief space. In other words, participants in a conversation assume that they are talking about the same thing. If this assumption turns out to be false, the problem is generally recognized quickly and they negotiate until a common ground is reached (Varonis and Gass 1985b:336)

In keeping with these claims, V&G argue that at the beginning of their conversational data they find a minimal shared belief space in the NNS's assumption that the "NS sells new TV to NNS" and the NS's assumption that the "NNS has TV repaired by NS" (p.337). However, according to V&G, the interlocutors' different goals quickly result in instances of miscommunication. Subsequently, in the course of the conversation, the NS, in response to the perceived miscommunication, keeps adjusting her beliefs. Eventually, at the end of the conversation, both the interlocutors reach a common ground in terms of shared belief space.

According to V&G, line #50 ("Do we have a nineteen inch?"), which occurs towards the end of the conversation, indicates that for the first time in the conversation the belief spaces of the NS and the NNS seem to match. This is taken as evidence that the conversation ends up in a state of convergence, according to the proposed model. V&G interpret the utterance in line#50 ("Do we have a nineteen inch?") as the NS's attempt "to

check her understanding before again invoking a new goal" (p.339). The NNS confirms her hypothesis in line#51. In other words, according to V&G, the utterance indicates that the NS is willing to adjust her belief space by abandoning her previous belief (i.e., the NNS wants to sell her a used TV) and accommodating the NNS's own belief (i.e., the NNS wants to seek information about the price of a new TV). The subsequent NNS's confirmation in line#51 would result in the actual adjustment in the NS's belief space. Thus, V&G's interpretation fits in well with the notion of the convergence, in their goal-based model of conversation.

It is true that the NNS, a low-level ESL student, lacks formal control of the English language and, consequently, faces difficulties in communicating in his second language. It is also true that, in the course of the conversation, the NS makes certain adjustments in her perception of what the NNS wants from her, while the NNS maintains his original beliefs and goals (in terms of finding out the cost of a new TV) throughout the conversation.

However, upon closer scrutiny, V&G's analysis runs into problems, particularly in their claim that the conversation ends in a state of convergence in which the interlocutors come to share a common belief space. In fact, a reanalysis of the surrounding discourse environment of line #50 itself shows that such a match may not be the case.

The NS' utterance in line #50 may not be confirmation check for a hypothesis but simply a response to the NNS's question in line#49. In other words, the NS may have asked the NNS something like "Do you want to know if we have a nineteen inch TV in our shop?" In asking this, the NS may not have at all entertained the idea that the NNS is seeking information about the price of a new TV.

In fact, the analysis of line#50 should take into account its preceding discourse environment. More fundamentally, it should consider the interlocutors' "situation definitions" in the specific speech activity. The notion of situation definition is borrowed from Vygotskyan psycholinguistic theory and needs some explanation. The notion is defined by Wertsch (1984:8) as follows:

> A situation definition is the way in which a setting or context is represented--that is, defined--by those who are operating in that setting. I use the term definition because I want to emphasize that humans actively create a representation of a situation; they are not the passive recipients of this representation (Wertsch 1984:8)

It is essential to keep in mind that two interlocutors communicating in the same context and apparently doing the same task may have different perspectives and goals (i.e., engaged in different activities). Wertsch (1984) clarifies this point through the following example involving adult-child joint problem-solving activity. In the interaction, involving a problem-solving situation in the form of a puzzle, the task assigned is to construct an object in accordance with a given model. Pieces provided for constructing the copy object have to be selected and put together carefully by matching them with the pieces in the model. However, this is the adult's situation definition in which the principle of representation is something like "object-to-be-used-in-the-copy-because-of-the-presence-of-a-corresponding-piece-

in-the-model" (p.9). On the other hand, the child's situation definition is different in that the concept of a model has not yet entered his mental representation of the task. Thus, even under adult guidance, he picks up the pieces without regard to the requirements of the model. In his mind, each piece is represented as an "object-to-be-used-as-I-see-it-fit" (p.9). Thus, at this point when the adult asks the child "Show me what you need next," the word "next" has different referents for each in terms of the model in their mental representation.

This example of situation definition points out the important fact that even a dialogic communication in which the interlocutors are involved apparently in the same task and setting, it is important to investigate the possibility of different referents in the minds of the interlocutors.

Returning now to the conversational data V&G's study, since it is pointed out that it is the NS who adjusts her belief space several times, her situation definition is particularly crucial for any analysis. The basic fact is that the NS does not sell new TVs but repairs old ones. As such, any inquiry coming to her repair shop would be interpreted by her as either a service or a repair call. Thus, despite the NNS's explicit questions in line#s 2 & 4 about the price of a new TV, she still asks him if his was a service or a repair call. In her established belief system, she expects calls to be either for service or repair. Such a belief system defines the boundaries of her discourse.

It is in this context that line#s 39 & 40, which V&G interpret as the turning point of the conversation need to be understood. In line#39, the NNS makes his goal explicit. For the first time in the conversation, he mentions explicitly that he wants to buy a TV. However, in line#40, it seems that the NS eventually takes into account not the NNS's "I" but his "buy" (in line#39). Her pause seems significant. It indicates that she may be taking time to interpret for herself what the NNS has just said. Thus her silence indicates that her belief system may have been disturbed. However, eventually she interprets his statement according to her preferred world of discourse. Thus, instead of realizing that the NNS actually wants to buy the TV, she decides that most probably he wants to sell his used TV. Afterall, buying a used TV is within her world of discourse more than selling a new TV is. Subsequently, the NS, as shown in line#s 42, 44, 46, and 48, maintains her belief that the NNS wants to sell her his used TV. In this context, as already explained, line#50 (for V&G, the evidence of the state of convergence at the end of the conversation) continues to maintain her belief system.

In fact, the subtle shift from "We" (line#50) to "I" (line#52) as follows is significant:

49. NNS: Mm. Nineteen inch?...you don't have?
50. NS: (short pause) Do we have a nineteen inch?
51. NNS: Yeah
52. NS: No, I've got a seventeen inch new RCA.

Given the NS's belief system, in line#50 she seems to ask something like: "Do we (*at the shop*) have a nineteen inch *in our shop* ?" However, in line#52, she seems to be saying something like: "As an individual, and not as a worker in my shop, I have got a seventeen inch new RCA *in my home*." This could be accepted as a probable interpretation in light of line#48 in which the NS reveals that she is actually talking from her

extension phone at home and not from the repair shop itself. This interpretation would indicate again that line#50 may not actually evidence any attempt to verify a certain hypothesis on the part of the NS.

Significantly, the only place in the conversation which shows the possibility of convergence is line#39, following lines 37 & 38. Until line #36, the NS has maintained her belief that the NNS has called for either service or repair. However, in line#37, after a long pause, the NNS explicitly mentions something about a new television. This evidently disrupts the NS's pre-established belief system as indicated in the long pause in line#38. At the same time, what she says after the pause indicates that according to her belief system the NNS is asking about the price of a new TV. In line#39, the NNS's explicit desire to buy a TV has every possibility of enabling the NS to match her belief space to that of the NNS's. In other words, had she responded to the "I" of the NNS (in line#39), it would have been an indication that she had incorporated his beliefs and goals into her own belief space. However, this possibility does not materialize. Instead, her own discourse world seems to prevail. In line#40, the pronoun "we" (implying that she represents the shop) after some pause indicates that she interprets his statement in light of her own situation definition. After this point, no convergence is evidenced in the remainder of the data. The NS continues to believe until the end of the conversation that the NNS wants to sell her a used TV.

There is another line of interpretation in V&G's analysis which is subject to criticism. V&G make quite a few evaluative judgments about the interlocutors. Eleven responses on the part of the NNS are characterized as inappropriate, e.g., in line#41, he "Unfortunately...misunderstands her"; and in line#53, when he could get the information he wanted from the very beginning, he "opts out" (p.340). Similarly, the NS also shows instances of misinterpretation.

However, the concept of misinterpretation itself is often misleading. In fact, if the concept of situation definition is evoked in data analysis, what appears to the researcher as an instance of misinterpretation may actually be an act of interpretation on the part of an interlocutor. Thus, line#40 may not indicate any misinterpretation on the part of the NS but a logical interpretation signifying the eventual domination of her belief system. Similarly, line#41 may not indicate any "unfortunate" misunderstanding on the part of the NNS but it may be an appropriate response from the perspective of his private world. It could be that while listening to the NS's "Do we wanna buy one?" he heard the word "buy" as salient. Given his situation definition, he may have interpreted it as "Do you want to buy a TV?" Thus his affirmative response in line#41 is in keeping with how he interprets the NS's words in light of his situation definition.

More importantly, V&G categorize line#49 as the NNS's eleventh "incorrectly interpreted utterance" in which he "does not respond to her indirect request to end the conversation and instead continues to ask..." (p.339). However, a different interpretation of line#49 is possible. It must be kept in mind that the NNS (an ESL student) had been given a class assignment of making a phone call to a shop and finding out the price of a TV. Thus, the NNS's motive may have been to satisfy his teacher by achieving the goal of seeking information about the price of a new TV. In line#49, by continuing to ask questions, he may be still trying to get the necessary information. By the same token, a little later in line#53, he may

have felt that the task was getting too difficult or, conversely, that he had done enough to complete the task, and so ended the conversation. Thus, what appears to be "opting out" in the eyes of the researchers may have been, actually, a reasonable act in the face of the task.

In the final analysis, V&G's model upholds the conduit metaphor of communication in which meanings are supposed to be exchanged and understood as originally intended by the interlocutors. Thus, if this does not happen, the interlocutors are found to be misinterpreting each other's utterances, sometimes resulting in communication breakdown. Consequently, the interlocutors are seen as responsible for successful communication. In case of failure, blame is assigned. In V&G's analysis, it seems that the NNS speaker receives such blame, since it is assumed that a NS does not have any communication problems.

On the other hand, in the analysis proposed here, a conversation does not necessarily have to end in a state of convergence. Two interlocutors, with two different private worlds, may attempt to share a reality temporarily in the process of talking but they may also end up upholding their own perspectives. From this point of view, V&G's data actually show the clash of two different private worlds in which the conversation itself ends with both of them upholding their own separate worlds of discourse without any convergence. Both participants maintain their own situation definitions in this brief conversation.

Note: This working paper is based on a part of my doctoral dissertation and is being developed further. A revised version will be presented at the 1992 TESOL conference in Vancouver, Canada.

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