

A Sociocultural Perspective on Everyday Interactions Stressing Grammatical vs. Communicative Competence: The Case of Iranian Taxi-discussions

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Abstract—Conversation analysis as a branch of the vast field of discourse studies, aims to show the structure and the process of social interaction between people in any genre of conversation. This aim is traced in this study as well. This study focuses on Dell Hymes' idea on the notion of communicative competence which is going beyond the structural linguistic properties of language. The purpose of this study is to make a link between communicative competence and sociocultural dimensions of language, which has a determining role in building up interlocutors' shared ground and enabling a course of communication to take place. For this purpose, a case of Iranian taxi discussions is selected. The conversational codes are identified and the reason why a specific code occurred is provided according to the contexts of that taxi discussion (the context is provided by the narrator's detailed description of the detail about that situation and condition). This was a discussion that interlocutors opposed each others' ideas; therefore, the most frequent code was FTA which occurred 6 times.

Index Terms—conversation analysis, communicative competence, sociocultural dimension, Iranian taxi-discussion, background knowledge

I. INTRODUCTION

Language comprises many components of which grammar consists a part and which brings with itself an array of discussions who admit, reject, or modify the previous discussions. One of the prominent figures theorizing on grammar and grammatical competence is Chomsky. He believed that just as physics aims to determine exactly the class of physical processes, and biology the class of biological processes, it was the responsibility of a linguist to bring about 'a precise specification of the class of formalized grammars' (Chomsky, 1962, p. 534). Thus grammatical competence was assumed to be enough for the needs of individuals in every day speech and interactions. This is in contrast with what Hymes believed about socially in/appropriateness of un/grammatical utterances. She stressed that an utterance may be ungrammatical but socially appropriate; and also it may be grammatical but socially inappropriate (Hymes, 1972b, 1989).

The term communicative competence was coined by Dell Hymes in 1966, who aimed to stand against the inadequate notions of competence and performance, formerly coined and introduced by Chomsky's (1965). In his book *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, Chomsky (1965) makes a distinction between competence and performance. In his words, competence refers to the whole knowledge individuals possess in a completely homogenous society. Such an underlying knowledge enables a language user to produce and comprehend an infinite set of sentences out of a set of infinite set of rules. This is justified by Chomsky's cognitive ideas of the innate grammar and the language acquisition device (LAD) that is within the brain of every human infant. Performance, on the other hand, is concerned with the process of applying the underlying knowledge to the actual language use. From these two definitions, it seems that Chomsky obviously equates the term competence with knowledge, and separates it from socio-cultural features. Furthermore, he considers the term "competence" as an absolute quality. That is to say, a static concept that characterizes individuals, and which cannot be compared with another person's competence (as cited in Taylor, 1986).

Hymes criticized Chomsky's definition of linguistic competence. She justified her new ideology by explaining the lack that a child might have when s/he learns the whole grammar with no awareness of social behavior and norms; accordingly Hymes put it: 'a child from whom any and all the grammatical sentences of a language might come with equal likelihood would be a social monster. Within the social matrix in which it acquires a system of grammar, a child acquires also a system of its use' (Hymes, 1974, p. 75).

Chomskyans believe that humans' capacity for acquiring linguistic competence is something innate and it just happens when they are born; communicative competence, however, is not innate but it is something which is learned and is thus more flexible. This shift from grammar to communicative competence stresses the inability of grammatical/linguistic competence in establishing appropriate interactions among individuals in a society. Whereas grammatical competence ignores the sociocultural as well as contextual factors which are vital to communication among people, communicative competence encompasses such factors. Accordingly, Hymes argues:

...that the study of language must concern itself with describing and analyzing the ability of the native speakers to use language for communication in real situations (communicative competence) rather than limiting itself to describing the potential ability of the ideal speaker/listener to produce grammatically correct sentences (linguistic competence). Speakers of a language in particular communities are able to communicate with each other in a manner which is not only correct but also appropriate to the sociocultural context. This ability involves a shared knowledge of the linguistic code as well as of the socio-cultural rules, norms and values which guide the conduct and interpretation of speech and other channels of communication in a community ... [T]he ethnography of communication ... is concerned with the questions of what a person knows about appropriate patterns of language use in his or her community and how he or she learns about it. (Farah, 1998, p. 125, as cited in Johnstone and Marcellino, 2010, p. 4)

From this quotation, Hymes' emphasis on a shared background knowledge for communication among individuals becomes evident. What shapes this background knowledge, based on the above quotation, is considered to be a shared knowledge of the linguistic code, contextual clues, the socio-cultural rules, as well as specific norms and values. Every individual, who is to establish an appropriate and non-offending communication have to be aware of the appropriate patterns within a specific community which has its specific sociocultural rules and patterns.

Speech does not occur alone and out of context, but it occurs in a context. Hymes, does not separate speech from sociological and cultural features of language. The importance of sociolinguistic elements of language is because they are important in the quality of the meaning which is created by the very words and verbs (which are the linguistic aspect of language). So the frame Hymes offers assign equal importance to both aspects of speech.

Conversation analysis (CA) as a branch of discourse studies, is a way which enables researchers to investigate the structure and social interaction processes among people. Per äkyl ähttp (n.d.) explains that CA approaches not only focus on talk, but also brings in focus all the nonverbal factors of interaction in its domain. In CA studies, the data may consist of videos or audio recordings which show a naturally occurring interaction (Per äkyl ähttp, n.d.). From CA perspectives, the social actions of humans are to large extents structured and organized. When interacting, the interlocutors have to obey the rules and conventions that make their speech meaningful to the other party. According to Sacks et al. (1974) there are some rules concerning turn taking in conversations: one *turn constructional unit* (that is TCU, smallest amount of talk that is counted as a turn when two interlocutors are talking in a conversation context). The interlocutors of a conversation aim to complete a TCU in *transition-relevance place* (TRP, where speakers change their turns). Speakers sometimes self-select turns, which occurs when a current speaker does not select or permit the other party to talk. In such cases, participant can *self-select* at the TRP. The specification of these simple rules gives useful insights on how to analyze social interactions. Drew and Heritage assert many institutional settings involve specific applications of these rules (1992).

Discourse analysis can be divided into five categories as far as method is concerned, and Wu (2010) specifies these categories as structural analysis, cognitive analysis, social cultural analysis, critical analysis and synthetic analysis (Wu, 2010). Discourse is regarded as an interactional activity by social cultural analysis; also the social function of language is emphasized in this field (ibid.). This method, Wu asserts, besides analyzing word and sentence form and meaning, analyzes social and cultural factors related to discourse; this method is rooted on the conception that an individual within a society wants both to transfer information, express ideologies or thoughts and to engage in specific social activities with other individuals in different social settings. Wu continues that discourse analysis mainly focuses on aspects of form, meaning, interaction and cognition, whereas social cultural analysis highlights the role of context. The importance of contexts is underlined in Wu's expressions on this issue. He specifies that on differing levels of discourse, there are degrees of social features related to the participants in a conversation which can be accounted as a crucial factor in the formation of the context in which a conversation takes place. Such factors are gender, classes, ethnics, age, and social status, etc. Wu pinpoints to the relationship between discourse and context and believes it is a dialectical one. He asserts that discourse is not only under the effect of context, but also influences, establishes or transforms context (ibid.).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sociocultural research is not a pure discipline, but it make connections with other aspects like communication, thinking and learning, and assumes them to be interrelated processes which are formed by culture. Human activity is possible and that is because of the shared knowledge among individuals which enables them to construct understandings of this shared knowledge and experience. The origins of sociocultural and shared knowledge of individuals can be found in the work of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (e.g. 1978). Mercer pinpoints the fact that when individuals work together, they do not only interact, but they inter-think (2000). There are some studies done by a number of sociocultural researchers who aim to show that for fulfilling a common task, people use language to combine

their thoughts and ‘intellectual resources’ (as Mercer, 2004 cites) in a specific situation. In similar veins, Mercer points to studies done in such perspectives such as Middleton and Edwards (1990), who put ‘collective remembering’ under investigation; to Elbers (1994), who studied ‘children’s play’; and also to O’Connor and Michaels (1996) who scrutinized ‘classroom group discussions’ (In Mercer, 2004, p. 139). In all these studies the process of joint intellectual activity is stressed.

Mercer (2004) explains that studies of joint knowledge construction can familiarize us about the inherent features of spoken language since such cooperative knowledge building is a crucial mandatory requisite in every conversational interaction. Conversations are built on a shared knowledge and it encompasses the formation of shared mutual understanding.

III. DATA

The data consists of a conversation among two individuals in a taxi. Taxis, in Iranian context, are places where rich natural conversations could be recorded. Adhering to ethical issues, the interlocutors remain anonymous. This data is recorded by the present researchers and then transcribed meticulously. For analyzing the data, this conversation was read carefully so that the conversational codes are identified; then, the pertaining extracts were chosen and the relevant codes are elaborated on in more details.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

This section is devoted to the analysis and detailed discussion of the extracts of the taxi-conversation. All the codes, along with their frequency of occurrence will be illustrated in the following table (Table I.). Then, the extracts in which these codes are identified, will be presented. An extract might have several codes within itself, all of which will be explained in details.

TABLE I.
FREQUENCY OF THE CONVERSATION CODES

code	frequency	code	frequency
FTA (face threatening act)	6	TCU (Turn Constructional Units) violated	2
FSA (face saving act)	3	Attributed silence	1
Flouting Grice maxims: manner	1	Minimizing imposition	1
Adhering to Grice maxims: relevance	1	Hesitations/hedges	1
Flouting Grice maxims: informative	1	Self-selecting a turn	2
repeating	2	Floor-holding	2
Insertion sequence	2	Repair segment	2
Overlap	2	Dis-preferred second part	4
LMS (Local management system) violated	2	Sheer turn by turn violation	2
TRP (Transition relevance place) violated	2	interruption	2

As Table I. shows, the most frequent code is FTA, as a general code, with 6 times of occurrence, albeit it encompasses other specific codes like dis-preferred second part, LMS/TRP/TCU violations, etc. Since this conversation is a sort of argument between two individuals who had different/opposing views, the cooperative principle, which is manifested in Grice maxims, is weak, e.g. the dis-preferred second part in this short conversation allocates the number of ‘4’ to itself which is high considering the length of this conversation.

Extract 1.

Taxi-driver: My brother-in-law wanted to get a six-million-dollar loan, and he had to use his car as a bail. Poor he, now he has faced a problem and his car is being seized. **Some thieves are embezzling milliards** and no one is aware and nothing changes. **Now see how they’re giving him the runaround!**

The bold parts of this extract show a general strong FTA. In a process of objection to the present status of economy and the difficulties of life, the taxi driver starts and actually opens the course of conversation like this.

Extract 2.

Passenger: Good appetite to him.

This concise answer, is an evident case of dis-preferred second part or dis-preferred sequence. This answer is opposite to what the taxi driver has expected. In fact, he expected the passenger to comply with and accompany him in the conversation. Furthermore, it can be justified that there is an instance of flouting Gricean maxim of manner because this answer is somehow vague; that’s why it aroused the driver’s surprise. Also, there is no reason why the passenger answered like this in that context, because in such speech events passengers agree with what the driver says!

Extract 3.

Taxi-driver (looking with surprise): Good appetite to whom?

Passenger: Good appetite to the one who has embezzled 3000 milliard tomans.

Taxi-driver (with an angry sneering tone): Isn’t he your relative?

There are two instances of repetition in this very extract. I think it is because of the weird use of this phrase by the passenger. This repetition shows a kind of emphasis; the taxi driver wants to make sure his ears are not faulty! Thus, he asks the passenger by repeating the same words. The 2nd line of this extract, the passenger explains what he exactly

mean, so it can be considered as a repair segment since it clarifies the intentions and meanings behind the sentences. At the same time, this utterance can be considered a dis-preferred second part because it does not meet the expectations of the taxi driver. The last line is an FTA aiming to assert this idea that your relatives are thieves (refer to extract 1. for the word 'thief').

Extract 4.

Passenger: No, he isn't my relative. But he is one like these people, like you! Did he come from Mars to do the embezzlement? Or another bank manager who has become a head, is he from Uranus?

Taxi-driver: No, dear. They are people who are better than us. I have to go to the cooperative-shop for 3 days to buy a pair of tiers, then he has embezzled 3000 milliard tomans and he was dead cool.

The passenger repeats the word 'relative' to stress the fact that the taxi driver is false. Both in his guessing and his ideology. In fact, one reason of this repetition that comes to my mind is that the passenger aims to show the driver's simplistic attitudes. The two questions that are in this utterance can be analyzed as being insertion sequences where instead of a positive answer to a previously stated question, again a question functions as the answer.

Extract 5.

Passenger: Well, if you're not ok with that don't buy; don't buy tiers.

Taxi-driver (with a loud voice): why you're saying a cock and bull story, man? I have to buy; if I don't buy tiers, how should I work with this car?

This extract is the one in which many codes are identified. A dis-preferred second part is the passenger's answer, which in turn rises the taxi driver's anger who then loudly addresses the passenger. The two times repetition of the word 'don't buy' poses a significance. This significance will be clear when the conversation proceeds and it becomes evident that all the naggings of the taxi driver are in vain since he himself is accused of robbery and not being honest, exactly as the bosses and managers who have important roles in the government, a fact that the taxi driver is ignorant of. In the surface and not considering the rest of the conversation, the answer of passenger seems to be irrelevant, but in fact it is not. By this answer, the passenger wants to create a sort of implicature and make the driver curious about his words. That is why I called this 'flouting' of the maxim of relevance.

The words of the passenger become incomplete as this is shown by the three dot marks (...) and it seems that he is interrupted by the taxi driver in an overlap. This overlap is, of course, a case of objection. Here, the LMS, the TRP, as well as the TCU are all violated by the taxi driver. He is also successful in taking the floor from the passenger. His loud voice implies an FTA. But there is an FSA when he says: 'I have to buy' since he is giving reasons of why he buys tires. As there are two questions and one declarative sentence, I assumed this is another case of insertion sequence.

Extract 6.

Passenger: When you -a simple driver who does not have a say in this society- see it's raining and passenger have to get to their destinations as quickly as possible, instead of getting the usual lease, get the lease of an exclusive ride...

The taxi-driver interrupted him and said: Well, if you're not ok with that you could just not take this taxi.

What the passenger says is a dis-preferred second part because it causes the objection of the driver. This objection takes place in an overlap (because of what the narrator tells us: 'The taxi-driver interrupted him'). This can be seen as a case of interruption as well. The sheer turn by turn is violated because of this interruption. The TCU of the passenger is not complete because he was not allowed to complete his words because of the taxi driver's self-selecting turn strategy. Furthermore, the TRP is not managed well here, thus we can say all the instruments that lead to a good LMS are violated. LMS manipulation is therefore weak here.

Extract 7.

Passenger (calmly): You see? Now I have exactly the same situation with you when you were buying tiers for your car. You man, you think now that we've taken this taxi and are forced to pay a lease 3 times more than the usual lease, are satisfied with this? We have to take it. When you, as a simple usual citizen, are misusing the situation, what do you expect a bank manager who has in his hands an investment of million dollars? He is one like you, but in a bigger scale.

The taxi-driver had no choice and thus geared his looks on the steering wheel...

This extract can be analyzed considering the floor-holding techniques. Floor-holding and not letting other interlocutors interrupt you, needs delicate use of words as well as hiring good intonation patterns i.e. good rise and fall in pitch and intonation, and also stress. Of course there are a number of other factors which show you are to continue and say something important, these can be: connectors, asking rhetorical questions (which do not require an answer from listeners, but it is a kind of reinforcement to what you are saying). Three question forms are made and addressed to the driver, and 4 connectors are used to show that his words are still in flow and not ending. As it is clear from what the narrator says about the drivers' reaction, one can infer that this non-backchannelling is a case of attributed silence which, considering the context, is because the fact that the taxi driver finds the passenger's speech logical. Actually he is deprived of any reasoning therefore he cannot continue the discussion (or argument).

Extract 8.

The passenger, who by now, was the winner of this discussion, continued calmly: Robbery is robbery... of course I do not mean you. But honestly, how many of us do our responsibility perfectly, that we expect a bank manager does his responsibility perfectly? But when we don't feel any qualms in faults we do when doing our responsibilities, no one

becomes aware of that. But when a bank manager does such a thing everyone becomes aware. Dear fellow, you correct yourself, so, that bank manager doesn't dare do such a thing.

In that cold weather, the driver whose ears, by now, became red from embarrassment, said: well, what shall I say!

This extract is the continuation of the previous one, and that is why the techniques are similar, like the use of floor-holding strategies (asking rhetorical questions, use of connectors). But there is one difference and it is the FTA used in 'robbery is robbery', and the immediate FSA in the form of minimizing imposition technique that the passenger uses in: 'of course I don't mean you'. The taxi-driver's answer is mixed with a sort of hesitation or hedge like utterance which alludes to his acceptance of the passenger's words and reasons.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Focusing on the communicative sociocultural dimensions of everyday interactions, this study aimed to investigate and analyze a sample of such an interaction. This conversation could not go on as such if one of the interlocutors was not familiar with the social, cultural, economic, political and so many other aspects of an Iranian society. It was this shared background knowledge which made the conversation go. The conversation had not come to any conclusion if the interlocutors were not aware of how and what to say. Whereas some researchers like Middleton and Edwards (1990) tried to show the importance of interactions using a shared background knowledge by the participants in order to come to a common goal, this study showed that interactions sometimes are developed and proceeded in order to show and prove an opposing idea. Surprisingly, this is done by using the share background knowledge which is be the sociocultural status among other factors mentioned earlier. This dialogue was what Mercer (2000) calls 'inter-think'; This dialogue is a kind of inter-thinking because what is said in it is the product of mutual thinking and speaking, i.e. what one interlocutor said is not isolated from what another said. This inter-thinking creates a chain of speech which helps the dialogue or conversation go on, whether to come to a common idea or an opposing one. The whole process which leads the conversation go on, is said to be the result of this inter-thinking. Elbers (1994) and O'Connor and Michaels (1996) also stress the importance of class discussions and the joint construction of knowledge on the improvement of children's remembering. The concept of joint knowledge formation is what was also evident in the results of this study; because such joint knowledge-building, according to Mercer (2000) is an essential requirement of conversational interaction. The results of this study show no break-down in this instance of interaction and we see that this conversation, against all the FTAs, went on well till it reached a sort of agreement; though this agreement was not satisfactory for the other interlocutor (i.e. the taxi driver). In the present dialogue, context was crucial. Its role is so important that if one of the interlocutors were not familiar with the political, economic, and societal issues not only could not continue the conversation, but also could not understand what his partner is trying to convey. This is a sort of contextual support of which Mercer 2004, Gee and Green 1998 also talk. They admit that talk is a means to providing such contextual foundations which helps a shared understanding among interlocutors. What the present study has in common with the existing literature, is the importance of sociocultural aspects of language which effects the mutual understanding and the surviving of the interlocutors in this conversation; but this study differs in that it does not use this shared knowledge for coming to a wholehearted agreement. Instead, it uses the shared knowledge, along with the sociocultural dimensions to let the conversation go and more importantly to convince the other interlocutor an opposing but logical argument.

APPENDIX

The Persian extracts (1-8) are in this part:

Extract 1.

راننده تاکسی: برادر خانم یه وام 6 میلیون تومنی میخواست بگیره مجبور شد ماشینش رو بذاره به عنوان وثیقه. بنده خدا الان خورده به مشکل دارنند ماشینش رو مصادره می کنند. یه عده دزد دارن تو این مملکت میلیارد میلیارد اختلاس می کنند کسی هم خبردار نمی شه و آب از آب هم تکون نمی خوره اونوقت این جوون رو ببین چجوری سر می دوونند!

Extract 2.

مسافر: نوش جونش!

Extract 3.

راننده: (نگاه متعجب) نوش جون کی؟

مسافر: نوش جون کسی که 3000 میلیارد تومن خورده!

راننده: (با لحن عصبی آمیخته به تمسخر) نکنه اون بابا فامیل شما بوده؟

Extract 4.

مسافر: نه! فامیل من نبوده اما یکی بوده مثل همین مردم. مثل شما! مگه این یارو از مریخ اومده اختلاس کرده؟ یا اون مدیر بانک از اورانوس به ریاست رسیده بوده؟

راننده: نه آقا جان اونا از ما بهترن اند. من برای یک جفت لاستیک باید 3 روز برم تعاونی اون وقت اون 3000 میلیارد تومن رو خورده یه آبم روش!

Extract 5.

مسافر: خب آقا جان راضی نیستی نخر! لاستیک نخر...

راننده: (با صدای بلند) چرا نا مربوط میگی مرد حسابی؟ مجبورم بخرم! لاستیک نخرم چجوری با ماشین کار کنم؟

Extract 6.

مسافر: وقتی شما که دستت به هیچ جا بند نیست و به راننده عادی هستی وقتی می بینی بارندگی شده و مسافر مجبوره زود برسه به مقصد میای ماشین که باید تو خط کار کنه رو دربست می کنی...
راننده پرید وسط حرف طرف که: آقا راضی نبودی سوار نمی شدی!

Extract 7.

مسافر: (با خونسردی) می بینی؟ من الان دقیقاً حال تو رو دارم وقتی داشتی لاستیک ماشین می خریدی. مرد حسابی فکر کردی ما که الان سوار ماشین تو شدیم و 3 برابر کرایه رو داریم میدیم راضی هستیم؟ ما مجبوریم سوار شیم! وقتی تو به عنوان یه شهروند عادی اینجوری سو استفاده می کنی از مدیر بانک که میلیاردها تومن سرمایه زیر دستشه چه انتظاری داری؟ اون هم یکی مثل تو در مقیاس بالاتر.
راننده آچمز شده بود و سرش تو فرمون بود...

Extract 8.

مسافر که حالا کاملاً دست بالا رو داشت با خونسردی ادامه داد: دزدی دزدیه... البته منظورم با شما نیستا ولی خدا وکیلی چند درصد از مردم ما اون کاری رو که بهشون سپرده شده رو خوب انجام می دن که انتظار دارند یه مدیر بانک کارش رو خوب انجام بده؛ منتها وقتی اونا وجدان کاری ندارند کسی بویی نمی بره اما گند کاری یه مدیر بانک رو همه می فهمند. برادر من تو خودت رو اصلاح کن تا اون مدیر بانک جرات همچین خلافی رو نداشته باشه...
راننده که گوشاش تو اون هوای سرد از شدت خجالت حسابی سرخ شده بود گفت: چی بگم والا!

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