

LIN 430 - Language Analysis, Dr. John Hedgcock
Interaction Analysis: December 1, 2003

I completed an interaction analysis project with my colleague, Nobuki Kakizaki, to gain experience in conducting field research by analyzing language in natural, unrehearsed conversation. The instructor expected each pair of researchers to collaborate on every step of the project: collecting the data sample, transcribing the conversation, analyzing the transcription, and writing the analysis. This process involved: making a transcript, preserving participant confidentiality, and applying classroom theory in discourse analysis to a practical assignment. The final product for this assignment was a 15-page analysis that included 4.5 pages of transcribed conversation and tables that organize the information on participants, topics of conversation, and bids for the floor.

Over the course of two months, we became very familiar with our data. We recorded several conversations, listened to them and finally selected a segment that contained interactions we were able to transcribe. The more we listened to our data sample, the more we recognized the speech patterns of the participants, and the easier it became to recognize what they said. In addition, the more time we spent writing the transcript, the more ways we found to improve our transcription technique. We learned that transcribing real conversations requires acute attention to detail and an insatiable appetite for perfection. Finally, we researched three sources on discourse analysis that contained relevant concepts to illuminate the events in our transcription. Grice (1975) introduced the Cooperative Principle, Tannen (1990) covered gender issues in speech, and Gee (1999) featured situated meanings.

Our final analysis investigated two sentence-level speech acts, bids for the floor and repairs, a sociolinguistic issue, gender relations, and a discourse-level rule, Grice's cooperation principle. The cooperation principle instructs conversation participants to, "make your

conversational 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,” (Grice, 1975, p. 78).

The lessons that we learned from this project were on two levels: the conclusions to the issues we investigated and the value of transcribing conversations in detail to heighten awareness of language use. My partner and I found three methods of bids for the floor: interruption, attention-getting devices, and direct questions. The men approached the conversation as a contest by sharing increasingly more prestigious experiences with their interlocutor; the females sought to build rapport by backfeeding positive comments to an interlocutor. Repairs occurred in the conversation where a situated meaning, or a “pattern that we assemble ‘on the spot’ as we communicate in a given context, based on our construal of that context and on our past experience,” (Gee, 1999, p. 80) needed to be agreed upon between two or more interlocutors.

On another level, we learned that transcribing a short section of conversation in detail reveals many things that a simple replay of video or audio in real time does not. At the beginning of the assignment, when we had to choose a three-minute segment, we did not observe repairs, gender issues, or maxim violations in the conversation. We simply chose it because we thought we saw a moment in the conversation that was easy to transcribe. Not only were we wrong about the degree of difficulty in transcribing this conversation, we were also wrong to think that just because we cannot see the components of speech acts in the conversation, it doesn't mean they are not there.

References

- Gee, J. P. (1999). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*. London: Routledge.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole and J. J. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics, volume 3: speech acts* (pp. 76-106). New York: Academic Press.
- Tannen, D. (1990). *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation*. New York: William Morrow.