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Conducting an Interview: using the analysis of a speech event to elicit certain varieties of speech

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Abstract

In any research project that attempts to compile a corpus of speech production sampled from any given population there arises the question of appropriate elicitation techniques and the varieties of speech that they tap. This paper takes a closer look at the informal interview and shows how the theoretical analysis of a speech event can serve as a twofold tool: Firstly, it can be used to anticipate the kinds of varieties of speech to be expected in the interview situation. Secondly, it can help the researcher influence the parameters in the interview situation to encourage particular varieties of speech. The analysis of a speech event is based on Hymes' components of speech and Koch & Österreicher's conditions of communication (e.g. degree of familiarity, emotional involvement, spontaneity). Special consideration will be given to the situation of L2 interviewees.

In any research project that attempts to compile a corpus of oral speech production sampled from a given population there arises the question of appropriate elicitation techniques and the kind of language they tap. The focus of this paper will be on informal, non-therapeutic interviews that do not aim to gather extralinguistic information of any kind, i.e. the researcher is not primarily interested in the contents of what is being said but in some formal aspect (e.g. phonetic, syntactic, or discourse structure). The purpose of the interview is thus mainly to compile a corpus of oral speech production.

A corpus is a kind of measurement of the reality of linguistic behaviour, which is multifaceted and complex. There is not only variation within a language community, such as regional and social variation, but also variation within each speaker according to the speech situation, including the interlocutor. An ideal corpus would capture the total linguistic repertoires of the subjects, but in practice, of course, this is not feasible. It is all the more essential, therefore, to identify, out of this total repertoire, the small section represented in the corpus in order to be able to determine to what extent the findings can be generalised.

When carrying out an interview to collect linguistic data, one will therefore have to find out which varieties of a speaker's repertoire are being tapped. This paper will present the theoretical analysis of a speech event as an analytical tool which can serve two purposes.

Firstly, it can anticipate the varieties likely to be produced in the interview situation. Secondly, it can help the researcher influence — within limits — the parameters in the interview situation to encourage particular varieties of speech. It is important to note that this influence is limited, as a large proportion of the parameters is set externally: the presence of a microphone, for example, cannot be done away with in an interview that is to be taped. The researcher can only try to reduce its intimidating effect by other means.

1 The theoretical analysis of a speech event

The theoretical analysis of a speech event is based mainly on Hymes' (1972:35-71) components of speech and Koch & Österreicher's conditions of communication (1990:8ff.) and is summarised in Figure 1.

According to Tajfel & Turner (1979), social encounters can be located, from a social psychological point of view, on an *interindividual-intergroup continuum*, depending on the extent to which the participants react to each other as individuals qua individuals or as representative members of different social groups. At the one pole of the continuum, the encounters are fully determined by interpersonal relationships and individual characteristics. At the other pole, the encounters are fully determined by the participants' knowledge of their memberships in different social categories.

It is important to identify the location of the interview on this continuum because it will determine to what extent the parameters can be anticipated and guided by the researcher.

The more the participants react to each other as individuals, the greater is the uncertainty factor and the greater the variability in the data. On the other hand, the more the participants react to each other as representatives of different social groups, the more "regularized" is the speech event, and the more easily comparable is the data. This is being stated as a fact, not as a desideratum, for certain varieties of speech that are of interest for research occur only in interindividual communication, so that the inevitable uncertainty factor has to be tolerated.

From a linguistic point of view, speech events can be located on *distance language-proximity language continuum* (Koch & Österreicher 1990:12). Distance language is characterized by a high degree of pre-planning and permanence, by intensive and compact texts and a high density of information (e.g. an academic speech). Linguistic features are, for example, a lack of contact signals or hesitation phenomena, hypotaxis, a lexically high type-token relation (1990:50-120). Proximity language, on the other hand, exhibits little pre-planning or permanence, extensive texts and a low density of information (e.g. neighbours chatting across a fence) (1990:11). Linguistic characteristics are, for example, contact signals, hesitation phenomena, parataxis, a lexically low type-token relation (1990:50-120).

When planning an interview it is important to know the target variety (distance or proximity language), which variety is likely to be produced by the interview situation as determined externally, and if the two differ, what parameters the researcher can change in the total setup to come closer to the target.

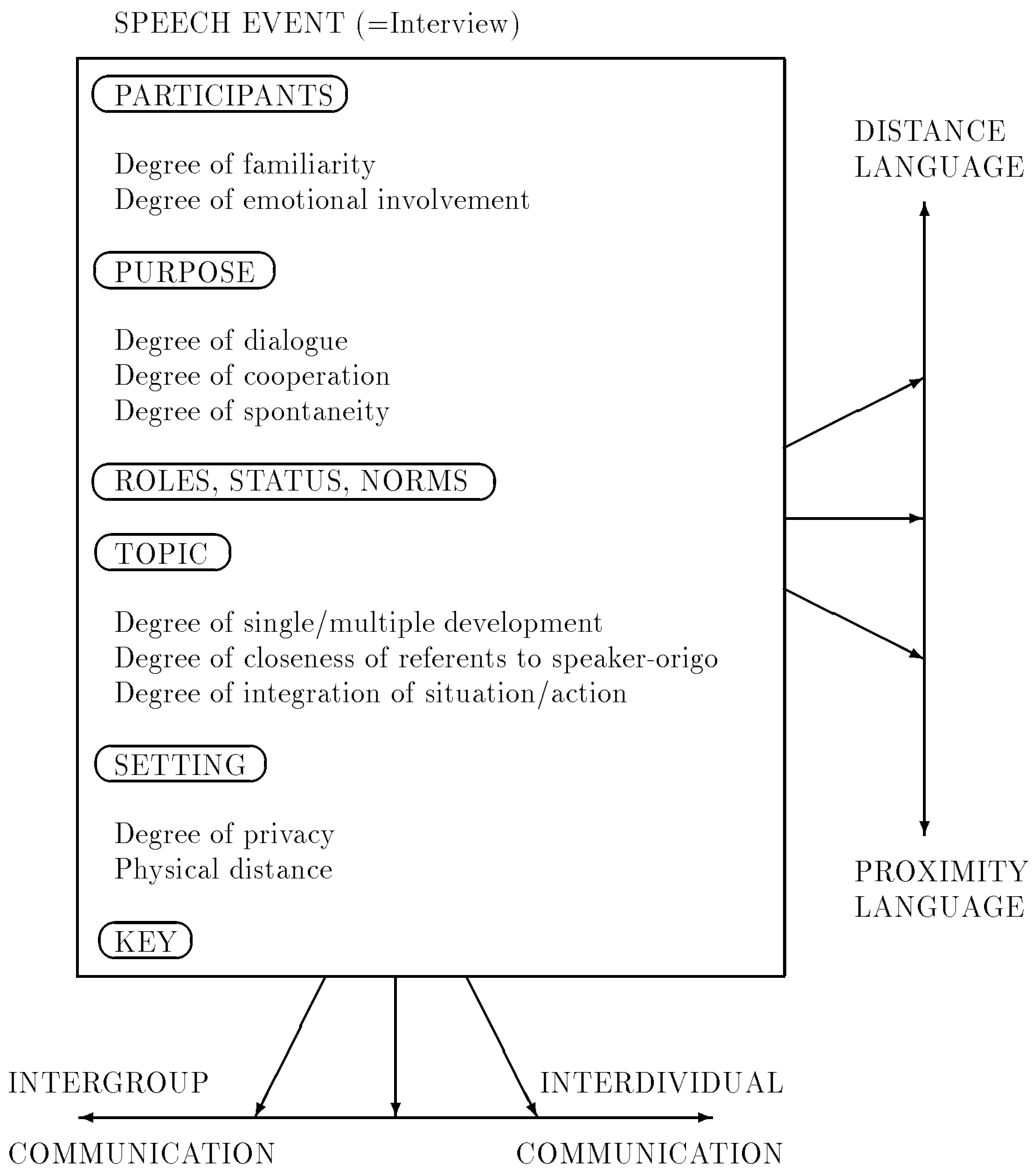

Figure 1: *The theoretical analysis of a speech event.*

2 Applying the analytical tool

Hymes' components of speech that are most helpful in analysing our particular speech event are participants, purpose, roles/status/norms, topic, setting and key.[1] Koch & Österreicher's terms complement Hymes' components in that they point out the conditions under which communication takes place. The detailed analysis of the interview situation according to the two sets of parameters specifies where to locate the speech event on the intergroup-interindividual continuum and which variety of speech to expect on the distance language-proximity language continuum. In the following it will be shown how the analysis is carried out in general. This in turn will indicate which parameters should be influenced by the researcher to approach the target variety (cf. Section 3).

a. With regard to the **participants** in the speech event, one needs firstly to identify the *degree of familiarity* of the interlocutors, which is determined by the number and nature of previous communicative encounters and shared knowledge, i.e. shared extralinguistic information (especially about each other). Total familiarity between the participants will locate the speech event at the interindividual extreme and produce a high degree of proximity language. Complete unfamiliarity is likely to result in an intergroup encounter and a high degree of distance language. Secondly, the *emotional involvement* concerning the other interview partner and/or the topic needs to be estimated. Again, a high level of emotional involvement is likely to entail a high degree of proximity language, complete emotional detachment, and a high degree of distance language.

b. One needs to determine the **purpose** of the encounter for all the participants. If the prime purpose is of an intergroup rather than an interindividual nature, the variety of speech will shift towards the distance language end of the continuum, and vice versa. In addition, the *degree of dialogue* is to be assessed. A high degree of dialogue, that is a high frequency of turn-taking and short turns (1990:9), is characteristic for proximity language while the opposite is true for distance language. A further criterion is the *degree of cooperation*, by which Koch & Österreicher mean the extent to which the interlocutors can influence the direction of the discourse. A high and equal degree of cooperation of all the participants will engender a high degree of proximity language, whereas distance language is likely to follow from a low degree of cooperation from at least one partner. Finally, the *degree of spontaneity* has to be considered, with very spontaneous contributions coming close to proximity language and highly pre-planned ones approaching distance language.

c. The more the purpose of the encounter is defined in intergroup terms, the more important are the **roles, status and norms** attached to the (multiple) social groups the participants are members of. This in turn will determine the power relation between the participants. An interview situation, even if it is an informal and unstructured interview, is a special speech event in that it automatically puts the interlocutors into two distinctly

[1]It is assumed that readers are reasonably familiar with Hymes' components of speech.

different groups, with regard to the power distribution. The "interviewer" is expected to "ask the questions", or at least to initiate the discourse and subsections thereof (cf. Milroy 1987:63). The more the participants are aware of differing roles, status and norms and regard their interlocutors in these terms, the more their speech is monitored and the more the variety of speech shifts towards distance language. The more they regard their partners as individuals, on the other hand, i.e. the less attention they pay to roles, status and norms, the more the discourse approaches proximity language.

d. The next component to be analysed is the **topic** of the discourse. It has already been mentioned that the *emotional involvement* with regard to the topic (cf. 2.a.) and the *spontaneity or pre-planning* of topics (cf. 2.b.) will affect the variety of speech produced. Beyond these criteria, the degree to which there is a *single or multiple development* of topics plays a role. A discourse that is focused on one topic only, digressions from which are avoided, tends to take place in distance language. If, however, topics are abandoned in favour of new, unplanned ones in a fast and haphazard way, they are more likely to be located at the interindividual and proximity language extremes of the continua. Fourthly, the *degree of closeness of the referents to the speaker-origo* will have to be considered: the closer the persons and objects referred to are to the speaker's *ego-hic-nunc*, the more likely is interindividual communication and proximity language. The further they are away, the more likely is distance language. Koch & Österreicher's *degree of integration of situation, action and communicative acts* is in some ways only a special case of the former category. When the environment, the actions and communicative acts in the ongoing speech situation are integrated in the discourse to a great extent, this will go hand in hand with a high degree of interindividual communication and proximity language. When the discourse is entirely detached from these elements, it is probably accompanied by distance language.

e. The **setting** is a fifth important factor in the analysis of a speech event. The location and time of the interview have to be described, including their probable effects on roles/status/norms, purpose, topic and key (cf. 2.f.). In addition, one has to examine the *degree of privacy* of the communication, which Koch & Österreicher define primarily according to the number of participants in the discourse and the existence and size of an audience. A tape-recorded interview is a special speech event, however: Although there may be only two partners with no immediate audience, the tape-recording makes the encounter permanent and potentially available to any unknown audience, which prevents complete privacy.[2] Thus, a high degree of proximity will not be attained as long as the participants are conscious of the recording. The *physical distance* between the interlocutors is a further aspect to be considered. Apart from Koch & Österreicher's dichotomous categorisations of physical presence or absence in space or time (e.g. phonecalls, letters), the actual absolute physical distance in a face-to-face communication may influence shifts in the variety of speech. An optimum physical distance, consistent with the other conditions of communication, like degree of familiarity, emotional involvement, social (and cultural)

[2]In the case of video-taping this effect is of course magnified.

norms etc., is likely to contribute to proximity language, while a great deviance from the optimum (too close or too far) can lead to discomfort (cf. Coulthard 1977:49) and a shift towards distance language.

f. The **key** of the communication, i.e. its tone, manner or spirit, plays a vital role in a speech event. Certain keys have a natural affinity to certain varieties of speech, e.g. a humorous manner to proximity language. More importantly, though, the key helps the participants (re)interpret the components of speech and conditions of communication. A serious tone, for example, can cause the purpose of an encounter which was thought light-hearted to be seen in a different light. Banter can redefine the roles, status and norms of the interlocutors (cf. Leech 1983:144ff.) A laborious development of the discourse (e.g. due to low L2 language proficiency) might affect the degree of emotional involvement. Therefore, it is indispensable to carry out an analysis of the key of the interview as a whole and in parts to correct the other parameters in the analysis where necessary.

The result of the theoretical analysis will be a profile of the specific speech event, with some parameters pointing more towards intergroup communication and distance language and others pointing more towards interindividual communication and proximity language.[3] This profile can then function as a basis from which to effectuate changes in the set-up in order to approach the target variety.

3 Changing parameters in the speech event to elicit the target variety

Planning parameter changes depends to a large extent on the individual research objective, interview set-up and the results of the analysis, which differ greatly from case to case. Therefore a concrete example will be used from the author's own data collection. As the procedure is too elaborate to be presented as a whole, only a few chosen parameters will be examined in an exemplary way.

The subjects in the example interview were 130 German first-year university students with English as the L2. Prior to the interview, they had filled in a questionnaire covering their L2 learning history and attitudes towards the L2 community and culture. The tape-recorded interview was conducted in the L2 at their home university in Germany, and the target variety was proximity language. The research topic was a phonetic one, which, however, is of no great importance to the analysis.[4]

[3]There will also be some variation for the location of each of the factors, since the personality and, in the case of L2 interviewees, the language proficiency of the subjects will influence the components of speech and the conditions of communication.

[4]The research design has been simplified to avoid unnecessary details.

3.1 Degree of familiarity

There were two participants in the interview, the student and the interviewer. The typical complete unfamiliarity of the interlocutors which is criticised by Milroy (1987:25) and which shifts the event towards distance language was reduced by a couple of measures. With every subject, at least three encounters had taken place prior to the interview, two in group setting and one in a phonecall. During these encounters the students were able to gain a first impression of the interviewer's personality and physical appearance. Especially the one-to-one encounter on the phone offered the interviewer the opportunity to increase and reciprocate the familiarity with the subject by taking the conversation beyond the immediate objective and by exchanging personal information in an informal and light-hearted chat, notes of which were taken to individuate (and remember) the subjects.

Shared knowledge was acquired partly in these previous meetings, mostly, however, by way of the questionnaire, which gave the interviewer access to certain events and evaluative reactions in the life of the subject. There continued to be an imbalance between interviewee and interviewer in terms of interindividual and intergroup knowledge, since the subject's opportunities to access individual information about the interviewer in addition to social group information were restricted to the one-to-one encounter. Nevertheless, the degree of familiarity was in general increased, which was hoped would contribute to a shift towards proximity language.

3.2 Purpose

For the subject, the primary purpose of the interview was not a personal interest in the interviewer or wanting to socialise, which would lead to an interindividual encounter. The primary purpose of the encounter was to take part in a research project,[5] i.e. it was first and foremost an intergroup encounter and as such likely to entail distance language. The interviewer had therefore to try to turn the encounter into a socialising event, which would shift it towards the interindividual extreme and promote proximity language.

One important factor in achieving this is generally the alleged purpose of the interview, i.e. the research topic, since subjects tend to focus their speech monitoring on this particular aspect. A personal topic will interfere with social norms set by other parameters like the degree of familiarity (to what extent do you tell personal things to relative strangers, especially if it will be processed?) A knowledge test (e.g. knowledge about the L2 culture) is likely to be seen as a threat of exposure and failure, especially in a university environment, as is any aspect of language proficiency which in the eyes of the L2 learner suggests a prescriptive ("right" or "wrong") answer. The subjects in the example interview were reassured that none of the former was being tested. They were told instead that the research topic was intonation. In German secondary schools intonation is not much emphasized, so it was assumed to be a peripheral topic that the subjects had only a vague idea about,

[5]In addition, there may have been secondary purposes, for example of an instrumental kind (practise L2) or of a psychological kind (help fellow student, feel important).

certainly did not consider in prescriptive terms, and therefore did not regard as a threat. Thus, they would be more relaxed and open to socialising.

A second rule for achieving a socialising atmosphere is to treat the subject as unique (interindividual communication), and indeed for the interviewee the encounter will be unique. The danger of considering and treating the subject as an interchangeable element in a series of identical conversations (intergroup communication) can be avoided by using the subject's contributions as a source of new topics rather than following a pre-planned agenda. This simultaneously confers upon the subject a high degree of cooperation, i.e. he/she shares the influence on direction of the discourse (cf. 2.b.), which ultimately reduces the Question-Answer power relation characteristic for interviews (cf. 2.c., 3.3). Also, a genuine interest should be shown in the person of the subject and his/her answers. This can most easily be achieved by creating a genuine information gap, i.e. the interviewer should not ask questions he/she already knows the answer to or bring up topics he/she knows considerably more about than the subject.

3.3 Degree of dialogue

Interview situations with two participants unfamiliar to each other typically follow a Question-Answer structure (Milroy 1987:63) in which the question turn is short and the answer turn is expected to be long, i.e. the degree of dialogue, as understood by Koch & Österreicher (cf. 2.b.), is not very high and distance language is encouraged. Now, there is an obstacle to the interviewer simply taking turns that are as long as the partner's (as would be the case under uncontrived proximity language conditions) in that the purpose of the data collection is usually to capture maximum speech production from the subject. Other means have therefore to be sought to give the impression of a high degree of dialogue without the interviewer taking a long turn: the interviewer can frequently introduce comments, e.g. emotional reactions (*That must have been awful*), information about oneself (*I love tea but I can't have too much because of my tummy*), backchannel behaviour (Duncan 1973) (e.g. sentence completion, requests for clarification, brief restatements), contact signals, linguistic (*Did you? Really? Hmm*) and paralinguistic (laughter, gestures, facial expression, intonation), overlap of turns. The effect is a high rate of turn-taking and a less rigid Question-Anwer structure: The interviewer's speech now approaches proximity language, shifting the encounter towards a socialising event and relaxing the subject, who is then encouraged to use proximity language himself/herself..

3.4 Roles, status, norms

Since the purpose of the example interview was defined primarily in intergroup terms, it was important to know what roles, status and norms characterised the (multiple) social groups the participants were members of. The interviewer's group knowledge about each subject was that he/she was a research object in one or several categories in the research design and belonged to a certain age group, university course and region in Germany. The common denominator of all the subjects was German as their L1, English as their L2, their status as first-year university students and the cultural knowledge attached to the L1 and L2. The subject's group knowledge about the interviewer was that she was a research student in a particular subject, her L1 was English, her L2 was German[6], and she possessed a certain cultural knowledge attached to the L1 and L2.

In this set-up, the participants' status differs on three levels: (a) as a research student the interviewer belongs to a slightly higher social group than the first-year subject; (b) since the interview is conducted in English, the interviewer as an L1 speaker is at an advantage over the L2 speaking subject; (c) the interview setting is in Germany, where the subject has an advantage over the interviewer in terms of cultural knowledge.

The power relation between the two participants is probably most strongly affected by the L1/L2 imbalance. This can be made up for by bringing up topics that will highlight the subject's superiority in terms of cultural knowledge (e.g. ask about good bookshops, discos etc. in town). Both partners, approaching an equal power relation, are expected to lessen the attention paid to roles, status and norms, and encourage interindividual communication and proximity language. (For the reduction of the Question-Answer power relation cf. 3.2, 3.3)

As a conclusion, it should have become apparent that changing one parameter may well affect a number of other parameters in the entire set-up. Therefore, it is essential to keep the totality of the speech event in mind when planning the interview.

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[6]For the research design it was necessary to make the students believe this. In actual fact, the L1 was German and the L2 English.