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Topic management in oral proficiency interviews

Oral Proficiency Interviews are marked by a paradox: they intend to test the foreign language proficiency displayed by candidates in contexts when they are not being tested. One important thing foreign language users need to be able to do in their lives outside the OPI is produce topical talk. Previous research shows that topic management in the OPI is strongly interviewer controlled. Young and Milanovic (1992) demonstrated interviewer-candidate differences in topic ratification, topic persistence, and topic initiation. Interviewers' topics were ratified twice as often as candidates' topics; interviewer-initiated topics lasted longer than those initiated by a candidate; and candidates talked more, while interviewers initiated more topics. The last finding is, of course, consistent with the purpose of the OPI as an efficient device to elicit speech samples from the candidate for language assessment. But it is also consistent with the more general nature of the beast, because as a particular instantiation of the genre 'interview', OPIs share the fundamental exchange structure of interviews - 'one party asks the questions and the other party gives the answers', as Schegloff (1992) put it. The asymmetrical participation structure of interview discourse is reflected - among other things - in the way topic is managed in the OPI.

In previous research on topic management in OPIs, topic management activities were aggregated over participants (Ross, 1992; Ross & Berwick, 1992; Young & Milanovic, 1992; Young, 1995). In contrast, the focus of our research is on individual differences in interviewer topic management style. Specifically, we are interested in two questions: 1. Do interviewers vary in topic management style and if so, how?2. Do any of the identified styles approximate casual conversation more than others? Both questions address the quality and validity of the OPI as a test procedure, the first question addressing the reliability and the second question the construct validity of OPIs.

Our data is a set of OPIs conducted as in-house assessment of the proficiency in English as a Foreign Language of the employees in a large Japanese electronic corporation. All candidates are native speakers of Japanese, the certified (and actually recently re-certified) interviewers are native speakers of different varieties of English. The total corpus consists of 60 interviews. Of these, we selected 25 for the topic management study, conducted by 11 different interviewers. Candidates in all of these 25 interviews were rated as High Intermediate-Advanced on the ACTFL scale. We decided to limit our study to this bracket of proficiency because we are not interested in proficiency differences at this point, although we might look into possible interactions of interviewer topic management style with proficiency further down the line. The interviews varied between 15-30 minutes in length.

Preliminary analysis of the 25 OPIs showed, as expected, a wide range of interviewer topic management styles. In a previous paper (Ross & Kasper, 1997), we demonstrated that interviewer styles vary between different versions of transactional and interpersonal styles. A high involvement variety of an interpersonal style features various and massive displays of engagement and alignment by the interviewer with the candidate's contributions. Such displays include frequent selection of topics offered by the candidate, topic 'shading' (Schegloff, 1990), i.e., gradual transitions between topics and topic components rather than

moving from one clearly demarcated topic to the next, virtual absence of inter-turn pauses, frequent latching and some overlap at turn changes, and frequent use of emotive assessment tokens and emotive commentary (Jefferson, 1993), many of which are strongly positively polite (in the sense of Brown & Levinson, 1987). The co-occurrence of these features lends the OPI discourse a distinctly more conversational flavor than what might be expected in interviews as a discourse genre.

At the other end of the style spectrum, we find different varieties of transactional style. The most radical variety contrasts with interpersonal styles on all of the features characteristic of the high involvement style as just described. The effect is one of a jumpy or inquisitional style that accentuates the participants' asymmetric discourse roles and firmly casts the candidate in the role of the junior partner.

One feature that stands out in the inquisitional topic management style is the use of repetitions by the interviewer of the candidate's preceding utterance, or a part thereof. We have been wondering what work these repetitions do as topic management devices, and we want to pursue this question in the remainder of this paper.

As documented in the conversation analytic literature (Sorjonen, 1996, for a recent study), repeats are multiply ambiguous in the interactional jobs they can do. As repair initiators, they identify the repeated material as somehow troublesome; as displays of the repeat speaker's hearing or comprehension, they request confirmation; as indices of the repeat speaker's epistemological stance towards the repeated material (Sorjonen, 1996), they display epistemic positions such as surprise or disbelief; as neutral receipts and 'go-ons' (Edmondson, 1981; Schegloff, 1990), they request the recipient to continue the line of talk she is currently engaged in; as requests for elaboration, they project further conversational treatment of the repeated material beyond confirmation. Especially in the latter function, repeats have an active topic-developmental import in that they foreground the repeated information and thus cast it as a candidate topic or topic component. In this function, repeats are one procedure of the stepwise transition of topics, or topic shading (Schegloff, 1990).

The ambiguity of repeats as eliciting topic-non-implicative talk and resulting in topic shift or change vs. eliciting topic-developmental talk and thus keeping the current topic going is something like a mixed blessing in the OPI context. By focusing on material in the candidate's preceding turn, the interviewer's repeat casts this material as possible matter for topical talk. Moreover, because the candidate offered the material in the first place, it is likely to refer to a matter that the candidate is comfortable to talk about. As we know from the interlanguage literature, topic expertise is a major factor in interlanguage performance (e.g., Douglas & Selinker, 1985; Zuengler, 1993). So, repeats - as requests for elaboration, or 'tell-me-more's' - can be an effective conversational technique to elicit optimal performance from the candidate. But since the candidate's understanding of which repeat counts as an elaboration request may be considerably more restricted than the interviewers, repeats may not be heard as inviting talk on a matter offered by the candidate but rather as a means of closing down the current topic. As a consequence of the fundamental exchange structure of the OPI, where the interviewer asks the questions and the candidates gives the answers, nomination of the next topic is invariably performed by the interviewer. Repeats are thus highly potent devices for topic control, but conscientious interviewers should apply them with caution.

Finally, why are repeats one feature of an inquisitional style when elsewhere, they could be elements of a high involvement style? It is certainly true that zooming in on material from a candidate's turn and isolating it as a matter of conversational treatment is a topic controlling activity par excellence and does not in and of itself constitutre any particular style. But there are two structural properties of our interviewer's repeats that qualify them as features of an inquisitional style. One is their falling intonation contour, which mitigates against a smooth alignment of the interviewer's repeat with the candidate's following turn.

The other feature is the entire absence of positively polite assessments or commentary to accompany the repeat. For example, as an alternative to an incredulity-marking repeat,(as in 'a hundred') an interviewer could say 'wow - one hundred! That's a lot, isn't it!'. In the absence of such emotive material, repeats contribute to the structural coherence of the interview but do not create interpersonal alignment.

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