Activity Types and the Structure of Talk in Second Language Learning

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1. Goals

Studies of several registers have shown that the features of talk can be affected by both utility or function, and either customary or metaphorical social meaning.\(^1\)\(^2\) In this study, my focus is on the first aspect, change in syntactic features and structural aspects of talk arising from the circumstances of talk.

Changes in complexity or in particular tense-aspect features may arise from the situational demands. Semantic and structural simplification, and repetition found in foreigner talk and in baby talk (Ferguson, 1977) seem to be responsive to disabilities in the hearers, and even four-year-olds make such adaptations to younger listeners (Shatz and Gelman 1973). Sportscasters' use of present tense seem to be the result of the ongoing action they are describing (Ferguson, 1983).

In this study I have examined the interaction of second language learners and native speakers, within the first to twelfth month of contact. My purpose was to examine (a) how the organization of activities affected language use and (b) the strategies adopted by novices and experts to accomplish communication.

My goal in the activity analysis is a kind of "ecology of language", that is, a study of the distribution of language functions, language complexity, and structural features across activities. Such an analysis can inform our studies of how language is acquired, as well as how language change occurs. For example, it might be guessed from Sankoff's work on Tok Pisin (1977) that there was a functional source for the framing of subordinate clauses by a clause marker, \(\text{ia}\). The change
occurred even in adult second-language (i.e. pidgin) users when the
functions of Tok Pisin were extended to complex social uses, such as
narratives and courtroom testimony.

In turn, activity conditions in which interaction is occurring set up
the context for language acquisition. The relevant features include
shared goals, pertinent objects and actions, and presuppositions which
underlie what is easily understood in talk, and what must, on the other
hand, be made explicit somehow through special tactics when lan-
guage competence is poor. Understanding the effects of activities on
talk would both give a better basis for identifying the utility aspects of
registers, and supply essential information for studying why language
learning occurs much more efficiently in some contexts than in others.

2.1. Subjects

Subjects reported here are of two types:
(a) anglophone children between the ages of four and twelve residing
   in the region of France adjacent to Geneva, Switzerland.
(b) Spanish- or Cantonese-speaking immigrants of five or six years of
   age attending American kindergarten in California.
The children had lived in the region less than a year, and were attend-
ing local public schools.

2.2. Observational method

The children in the California study were observed both in classrooms
and in playroom observations at school with an anglophone friend.
The children in the European study were asked to arrange the visit of a
francophone friend to their household. Since most of them had sib-
lings, there was often a playgroup of 4 or more as a result. They were
each fitted with a recording device, allowing very clear voice separa-
tion for transcription. I observed them to note their actions, which
probably constrained the activities they were likely to choose.

3. Language and activities

It is not usual to analyze the structure of activities in terms of speech
properties, or even how much speech is necessary or usual. Certain
physical work and certain types of play are possible with a minimum
of language because the interactants already know the schema for the
type of activity involved. Some games, like some work, are almost en-
tirely physical and can occur with no speech whatsoever. Even these
games usually require verbal negotiation at the start or at certain criti-
cal junctures. These might be identifying who is to start, whose turn it
is, when a violation has occurred, or to announce some accomplish-
ment. But this talk may be so routinized as to make very limited de-
mands on language knowledge. It may consist merely of a list of names
or titles of acts. Other games are potentially entirely physical but as
normally played are accompanied by so much talk that they may be
seen as primarily a vehicle for social talk or for argument. Some card
games are good examples. At the opposite extreme are arguments that
depend heavily on verbal knowledge and cannot occur at all if lan-
guage cannot be understood.

The cooperative attitude of partners is an important feature of suc-
cessful play with a minimum of language facility. Since information
is not available about the wants or ideas of one partner, except minimal-
ly, the knowledgeable partner has got to be willing to guess what might
be intended.

4.1. Play phone conversations

Telephone conversations are purely verbal, though young children
sometimes act as though they were not, for instance by showing objects
to a homunculus in the receiver. They can structurally be described as
follows:

Greeting
Entry + Reply
Core
Farewell

The components of these exchanges vary in elaborateness. An
eighteen-month old child, for example, was heard on the phone saying
"Hi fine bye." She revealed the most simple one-party structure, Greet-
ing, Reply to an Entry, and a Farewell. These had been learned from
overhearing half of a conversation.

The easiest parts of the phone conversation to learn in dialog are
the Greeting and Farewell, since they are usually mirrors. That is, the
learner can just copy the partner. The Entry is not a mirror but comple-
mentary with its Reply. It is usually conventionalized and may have to be taught, unless a learner can overhear a model. The “fine” of the above example must have been overheard.

The Core is the most structurally complex section since it contains any talk whatever, and is not necessarily predictable. Replies to Core can, however, be conventionalized. Their learning may derive from learning formulaic replies outside of the phone context.

Telephone play provides good examples of learning of predictable routines. In the following, Rosa, a Spanish speaker after 7 months in English replied to an entry, with a reply that was appropriately located in the conversation but matched a different possible Entry.

(1) Rosa: Hello
    Emily: What’s you doing?
    Rosa: Fine.
    Emily: My mommy told me to go to school.
    Rosa: Me too.
    Emily: Ok bye. I’ll call you back tomorrow.
    Rosa: OK Bye.

In this conversation Rosa (Spanish-speaking) has formulae for Greeting, Entry, and Farewell. The formula for replying to an Entry doesn’t differentiate between the two possible entries, “how are you” and “what you doing”. In fact Emily’s entry, “What you doing”, is more typical of these children. The reason for Rosa’s reply is clear. “Fine” is a semantically empty routine. Replies to “What you doing?” require more productive skill, than replies to “How you doing?” or “How are you?” The Core requires productive skill too, but the child’s formula, “me too” appropriately fills the reply turn.

Of course, partners can teach explicitly. This did not usually happen in the high-activity games since meanings mapped so readily and vividly. It does happen in phone conversations which are not scaffolded by physical redundancies. How the child Entry is learned is revealed in the following text from Fillmore, 1976:

(2) Nora (Spanish-speaker): Hello. Come to my house, please.
    E: Who are you?
    Nora: Nora.
    E: Nora, you’ve got to say “What are you doing?”
    Nora: What are you doing?
    E: Making cookies. What are you doing?
    Nora: Making cookies, too.

In this text, the friend criticized Nora for leaping into an invitation without an Entry. Invitations normally precede the Farewell. In this case the friend explicitly taught the Entry form. Because the reply to the Entry is too demanding, Nora simply imitated the model, but with a reply marker “too”.

The structure of telephone conversations thus allows for two kinds of adaptations for speakers with limited knowledge: employing set predictable routines or imitating the partner.

4.2. Soccer

At the opposite extreme is a soccer game, in which the role of speech is theoretically minimal and learning is primarily from observation and action. It is not surprising that teams that do not share a language can play soccer. Those items which require language, such as calling a penalty, can be indicated by conventionalized gestures. In field conditions, language has to play a role at critical junctures including referee identification of a goal, points, and penalties, the coordinating speech of the goalie, and the other players’ commands and evaluations.

There is a second type of language that goes with soccer games. That is sportscaster talk (Ferguson 1983). It includes the announcements of goals, points, and penalties, (but much more elaborated in syntax), and of course a lot of descriptive talk about ongoing action.

A third type is the commentary of fans who are not players, which is less likely to contain announcements or descriptions and contains more emotional expressions, encouragement, and advice. These three types may be called the registers of players, (divided by roles such as referee, goalie, team-mate, and opponent), sportscasters, and fans.

My data on soccer come from a board game which involved physical skill. The French-speaking partner used a sportscaster register. The learner’s speech included both the players’ talk and considerable fan register, which was responsive to his partner’s sportscaster talk. Both boys were twelve and were experienced soccer players.

Soccer has a clear activity structure. In turn games such as card games, the participants alternate in action. In soccer, as in many sports, both teams are usually in action at once. Altercations are over conditions which decide who will re-start, where, and how (e.g. where did
the ball leave the field, who kicked the ball last) and whether some rules have been violated. Fouls occur as rule violations, such as shoving, touching the ball with the hands, or improper positions of forward players. Since the game cannot be played without agreement on these points this communication is essential.

But this essential communication is not all that occurs. A real soccer game is filled with constant talk. There is advice to players about what to do – kick, get rid of it, pass, shoot. There is the coordinating advice of the goalie. And there is evaluation of what has been done – wow, super, idiot – or curses.

The sportscaster register, on the other hand, is structurally more complex. Although it is referentially clear, its complexity makes it more inaccessible to novice speakers than the fan register.

Player talk is largely learned through situated formulae. The contextually redundant use of language makes new terminology or new phrases intelligible even to speakers who know relatively little. The formulae of soccer were conspicuous by their repetition. The learner, despite his limited French, was very vocal. He was extremely excited by the game. He spoke on almost every move. He already knew such vocabulary as the French for shoot, goal, get-rid-of-it (dégage!), penalty (which he pronounced as a French word), and such French exclamations as “bravo” and “oo la la”, praise such as “bien joué” and of course score-counting. Some turns might be verbally limited, like “Wow,” or “Ooh la la” and others were more elaborate, like “S’il te plaît, non” please no. He also evaluated plays, as in “Oh, super, oh. Corner, Keegan, super, Keegan.” (Keegan is the name of a well-known player.) He named or called plays, as in:

(3) Keegan, but. Dégage! Goal. Get rid of it!

Soccer is a physical activity. For this reason, problems of communication across language can be solved often with gesture. The most elaborated efforts to communicate occurred when the learner wanted to impose a penalty, and could not verbally explain the violation. First, he set up the idea of what a penalty kick would look like:

(4) Marcel! Tu (gestures) . . . comme ça. Balle . . . tzn! Penal-ty. Ok?

Marcel! You . . . like that. Ball . . . tzn. Penalty. Ok?

The missing semantic elements, the verbs, were acted out.

Having established how to act out a penalty in the game, the boy asked for a penalty when his opponent’s man bumped one of his:


The soccer game was filled with instances of learning through imitation. As the partner gave his sportscast he produced many examples of vocabulary concerning the game which the learner picked up.

(6) Marcel: C’est un but super. It’s a super goal.

Carl: Oui, super.

Marcel: Le gardien dégage. The goalie gets it going.

Carl: Dégage, oh, non. Gets it going. Oh no.

There were also many instances of delayed imitations in the soccer game.

(7) Marcel: Vraiment superbe ce but. Really superb, that goal.

Carl: C’est un . . . oh là là. It’s a . . . Oh oh.

Marcel: Bon, et voilà un attaque encore. Good, and here’s another attack.

Carl: Oh non.

Marcel: Les rouges dégagent par leur gardien, et un rouge est à position sur la balle. The red goalie puts the ball in motion, and a red is in position with the ball.

Carl: Oui.

Marcel: Et il marque un but magnifique! He makes a magnificent goal!

Carl: Keegan, superbe.

The above text shows how different the verbal skills of Marcel and Carl were. Marcel gives description that goes well beyond the information available on the board, employing the present tense typical of the sportscaster. Carl’s speech is frequently reactive to the sportscaster talk as though he were a fan. It is syntactically minimal, but adequate to convey enthusiastic participation, and understanding of what is going on.

4.3. Card and board games

Card and board games played by the children had certain features in common.
a) They involve games of short duration which require repeated setting-up, or dealing of cards.
b) Dealing of cards occurs at the beginning of each hand, and may require rotating the dealer role.

c) Starting may occur under special conditions, such as highest card, position relative to the dealer, or highest dice toss.

d) In some games the events in a turn are physical, such as moving a piece on a board after tossing dice, picking a card up from the pile, discarding, arranging sets of cards such as three of a kind. Some games require verbal negotiating, such as asking for particular cards in the game of “families” (like Authors). Some games require particular announcements, e.g. “checkmate.”

e) Turns rotate until a criterion of success is reached by one or more players. At this point the game may end, if there is merely a win or lose alternative. In some games points are accumulated or players are ranked by continuing to compete with survivors.

The talk surrounding these games turns on negotiating what game to play, who is to set up, who is to start, whose turn is next in multi-party games, announcements of intentions or results, and disputes about whether someone has won. In all games, of course, there are issues to negotiate about rules, though the complexity of the game and its flexibility can alter the likelihood of such disputes.

Because there are only a few features shared by all the card and board games, there was frequently a problem of learning a new game, which taxed the resources of the children. Some games are difficult to teach from demonstration. These games are only possible if the partners already know them. In other cases, we do see teaching by doing. Language is typically learned by imitation, since roles tend to be repeated in these games, and by situated formulae on occasions such as negotiating turns. Turn exchange is a fundamental principle of games. The terminology of turns is essentially property or territory claiming terminology, such as “Mine”, which is among the first moves learned by children in both first and second languages. For example, in the soccer and card game session of an English child in France less than a month, already there is:


Card games have such predictable properties that it is relatively easy to teach the common games by demonstration. Predictable board game activities provide situated formulae which can be learned by imitation. The cycle of finishing and re-setting the pieces of the game for a new round keeps presenting the same categories for naming. In this scene Karla has been in France about a month.

(9) Anne: On change de jeu, eh. Let’s change games huh.
   Karla: Je suis . . . I’m . . .
   Anne: Non, on change. No, we’ll change.
   Karla: Ah, oui.
   Anne: On range. We’ll put things away. (begins to)
   Karla: On range.

The phrase “on range” is intelligible because of the concurrent activity it referred to. In a similar way, turn shift is so familiar (wait your turn! take turns!) that it is a basis for learning new vocabulary by contextual inference. In the following scene two girls play a game involving inserting colored plastic pieces in a structure. Each has a color. The anglophone knows almost no French. Although she is thirteen, her French is so primitive that her friend speaks “foreigner talk” to her.

   Karla: un. One.
   Later:
   Karla: Uh je suis jaune et toi rouge, uh. I’m yellow and you’re red.
   Anne: Tu commences, tu commences. You begin. You begin.
   Karla: Comm — uh.
   Anne: Tu commences, oui. You start, yes.
   Later:
   Anne: Uh, ben jaune, jaune. Well, yellow. Yellow.
   Karla: Tu commences. You begin.

In this case the referent for the word “commences” is obvious from the activity sequence. The anglophone knows the words “tu” and “toi” so she knows the utterance is about her. She also knows that a restart is in order. So she infers correctly what “commence” must mean. “tu commences” is a directive routine located at the beginning of the game cycle. The meaning of “start” is not tangible. Karla must guess what to do. The term refers to beginning a new game, and could not be understood without an abstract notion of the game as a cycle.

Some games require that players use particular phrases or particular structures. In the card game called “Twist”, the player lays down a card which must be matched either in suit or number by the next player. If that player cannot do so, a draw from the deck is in order. Here the proper phrasing is taught by corrective modelling.
(11) Anne-Marie: C'est quatre, one up. It's four, one-up!
    Anne-Marie: Dix ou carreau. Ten or diamonds.
    Ruth: Dix ou carreau, oui.
    Britt: Allez, Anne-Marie. Go on.

In this text, Anne-Marie clearly plays the teacher role, correcting both the phrasing and pronunciation of Ruth, and even stops the game to evaluate, as a teacher should.

In the game of "Jeu de familles" players ask for a specific card which must be identified both by family (in sets of four) and by number or identity. In the following case, the anglophone both mispronounced a number and did not specify both number and family. The partner asked check questions and kept probing for the necessary information, so that the game was successful.

(12) Nell: Tu as des familles des cer? Have you families of deer?
    F: Le quoi? What?
    Nell: Cer.
    F: Cerf?
    Nell: Oui.
    F: Le combien? Which number?
    Nell: Cerf. Deer.
    F: Le combien. Which number?
    Nell: Cerf, tu comprends? Deer, understand?
    F: Oui.
    Nell: Non?
    F: Non. Le le un de la famille cheval. No. The the one from the horse family.
    Nell: Non. La famille de chien. No. The dog family.
    F: Le combien. Which number?
    Nell: Chien. Dog.
    F: Le quatre? La grand-mère? The four? The grandmother?
    Nell: Oh oh. Attends, le quatre. Oh oh. Wait, the four.
    F: Le quatre?
    Nell: Oui. Family, uh, le family de chat. Oh, trois, merci. Yes. Family, uh, the family of cats. Oh, three, thanks.

In this example, F tries explicit questioning unsuccessfully since Nell does not understand the question "le combien", moves to give an ex-
ample, (le un de la famille cheval), and then tries a kind of multiple choice format which allows confirmation (le quatre? la grand-mère?) and a probe showing the reply is incomplete (le quatre?).

4.4. Role playing

Role playing games were of two kinds. One type involves prestructured roles which have fairly defined activity schemata associated with them. Examples are Teacher, which invokes a classroom scenario with content potentially extracted from whatever the child's classroom currently contains, such as math, reading aloud, and punishments. Nurse implies patients, objects, and activities like taking temperatures and wrapping bandages.

The invoking of role games of this type brings into play disputes about who will play what role, since the named role is likely to have more power, more interesting possessions, more obvious activities to undertake, and less complicated negotiations needed to get what one wants. There are often obvious complementary roles, such as pupil, baby, mother, sick people. Fixed role schemata should be easier for collaboration than novel schemata – unless these are under the control of the learner.

Role playing typically starts with choosing the activity, then assignment of roles and goods, then enactment. A complex exchange is necessary to communicate taking turns at a particular role. In the following role playing text, the children negotiate the teacher role but in addition the anglophone adds the idea of taking turns in it.

(13) F: C'est la maîtresse. (Nell is getting out slate and chalk)
    Nell: Toi ou moi? Quoi, la maîtresse? C'est quoi la maîtresse?
    Toi ou moi? You or me? What's the teacher? You or me?
    F: Comme tu veux. As you wish.
    Nell: C'est moi un petit peu et c'est toi un petit peu. It's me a little and it's you a little.
    F: C'est qui qui commence? Who starts?
    Nell: C'est qui qui commence? Who starts?
    F: à être l'élève. To be pupil.
    Nell: Je ne comprends pas. I don't understand.
    F: Qui c'est qui commence à être maîtresse. Who starts out as teacher?
    Nell: C'est quoi la maîtresse? C'est moi le maîtresse premier . . .
et donc toi le ... et après toi le maîtresse. Tu comprends? What's the teacher? I'm the teacher first, then you the ... after, you the teacher. Do you understand?

The problem in this attempt is to identify the complex idea of role sharing. The terms used are first “un peu” to indicate sharing, then temporal terms: “premier ... donc” which is changed to “après”, with a parallel construction.

Even the enactment of fantasy games could be successful if the knowledge of their basic conventions was shared. In the following scene five year old Kate leads a French boy to two cardboard cartons, and climbs in one:

(14) K: En bateau, viens. In the boat, c'mon.
    K: Bateau, bateau. Boat, boat ... (They both get in boxes and continue talking)
    F: Attention! rrrrrrr. Look out! (motor roars)
    (K talks to herself in English)
    K: En bateau. Houp la, en bateau. In the boat, in you go, in the boat.
    F: J'aimerai doubler ... la route ... rrr. I'd like to pass ... the road ...
    K: Attention! Look out! (both tip over laughing)
    K: En bateau!
    F: En bateau! Au secours! On change de bateau. In the boat! Help! We're changing boats. (They climb in each other’s boat)

In this scene, there was a bit of parallel play in which Kate talked to herself in English and F may have been in a either a motorboat or car. The successful collaboration, in which F even imitated Kate, seems to come from K's knowledge of two important formulae, “en bateau” and “attention”, which in the context of the boat/car play in the boxes evoked the common childhood play scenario of collision for both children. In this scene, both actions and words are essential to the collaboration. This was an example of an object-based fantasy, in that the boat and car play was suggested by the objects available and the activities possible with boxes.

Seven year old Nell successfully played the teacher role despite very limited French by establishing a series of scenes which were familiar classroom activities in which known scripts were used. One was teaching to read. Pupils read passages successively, the teacher taught commutation in multiplication, and the teacher ordered the pupil to certain locations and punished her failure to comply, by whacking with a stick. All of these scenes were direct emulations of scenes from the French village school:

(15) Nell: C’est moi la maîtresse. Alors, excusez moi, tu viens ici ... derrière les enfants. Tu viens ici. Et quoi, c’est quoi, toi. C’est quoi, le nom à toi? I'm the teacher. So, pardon me, you come here behind the children. You come here. And what, it's what, you, it's what, your name?
    F: Stéphanie.
    Nell: (gets out slate): Sept. (writing on slate) Attends, attends, c'est ça, bon. Mais deux fois sept égale - Seven. Wait, wait. That's it, good. Two times seven equals -
    F: Quatorze. 14
    Nell: ou? Or?
    F: Sept fois sept - 7 x 7 -
    Nell: Sept fois deux égale quatorze ... 7 x 2 = 14 ... 
    Nell: Mais, tu comprends, eh? You understand, don't you?
    F: Oui. (runs into corner)

In this classroom scene we can recognize schemata of the familiar scenarios Teaching math, Teaching commutation, Checking, and Naughtiness punished. The directives, assertions, and check questions, reflect standard classroom speech acts, but the structure is simplified by the novice speaker.

5. Arguments

The most ultimately taxing form of language use is an argument, when many disparate language resources may be marshalled. In the following episode between Chinese speakers, the English argument had a very simple structure, and finally when the repetitive idea was inadequate the children reverted to Chinese for the more complex insult. Just a fragment is given from a longer text in Ervin-Tripp (1981).

(16) B: My father bigger you father.
    C: You father big big big big.
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sent in knowledge of activities, how language is used in different types of activities, and how the prior knowledge scaffolds the verbal interaction and language learning, or failing that what remedies speakers have whose language knowledge is too primitive for the demands of the situation.

1) We found that in certain types of activities speakers appear to routinely use their activity knowledge as though there were no language barrier. Certain issues typical of monolingual interaction in the same activities were highlighted repeatedly, namely turn taking, rules, penalties, identifying successes, and negotiating differences.

2) Language use differs considerably in various activities. I am not aware of discussion of this very important issue in the construction of social relations, and in the context for language learning.

There could be non-verbal games in which talk is not only not essential but interferes. In some physically organized games such as sports, communication of some kind is essential, or necessary to the existence of the activity. Language or standardized gestures are used to identify major events that mark changes in activity. We found considerable ancillary talk accompanying games. While this talk did not seem logically to be essential to the conduct of the game (and in some traditions is suppressed, e.g. in traditional tournament tennis, or in chess) it is so usual as to be part of the normal characteristics of some games, or rather of certain game cultures. The expressive talk accompanying games is interpretable because it accompanies unambiguous action. Disputes occur in almost any game context. They can be hard to learn language from because they may be syntactically complex. There are some optional additional talk types or registers, like observer advice in soccer, which may have high learnability, while others, like sportscaster register, are harder to learn.

3) Factors which seemed to facilitate language learning were redundancy with action which made situated formulae meaningful, availability of simple, repetitive, and salient models to imitate, predictable verbal routines, and sufficient abstract knowledge of the activity structure to make contextual inference about meanings possible. In some activities, successful participation is necessary, so partners are facilitative. Cooperative attitudes by the partner led to willingness to gesture, interpret the learner’s tries, probe for appropriate moves, or give language instruction in the form of corrective modelling.

4) The language learned in games varies in complexity. The easiest to learn appear to be syntactically simply, highly repetitive formulae. These are probably the least “progressive” from the standpoint of syn-
tax variety and complexity. The learner’s social success and sense of participation through the language are benefits, however, even from formulaic language used to get launched. Fillmore (1976) has shown how a socially active learner can use formulas as a basis for language elaboration.

Certain activities have demand characteristics with respect to language. We might, for example, find that some types of speech acts are especially common in certain kinds of activity, that some kinds of syntactic elaboration are called for. I have argued here that these activities not only make possible the display of language knowledge, but create some conditions for learning to understand new words and new constructions, to imitate, to recall, and to try to extend what is known.

References


Footnote

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2 Customary social meaning here refers to, for example, baby talk vocabulary and diminutive suffixes, which acquire social meanings from their regular use with children, yet they cannot all be explained as simplifications or as euphemisms to avoid adult embarrassment over children’s uninhibited speech. Metaphorical social meaning is implied by the extension of baby talk to speech to lovers and animals, to whom the functional changes are inappropriate. Clearly metaphorical extension can become customary too.