

Managing roles in the openings and closings of an Italian oral test

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This paper reports on one of the findings of a study of twenty-one interactions that occurred during the 1992 Victorian Certificate of Education Italian Oral Common Assessment Task (CAT 2). One of the main aims of the study was to see how roles are constrained by the institutional character of the setting. This was done by examining the interactions occurring in the openings and closings of each segment of the CAT using a Conversation Analysis approach. Not surprisingly, it was found that the assessors initiate and conclude the opening and closing segments of the CAT. Violations of this format are rare and when they do occur, the assessors act quickly to reaffirm the roles of each of the participants using features of ordinary conversation. The opening and closing boundaries also provide one of the few environments in the CAT where students ask and indeed are invited to ask questions. The major sequences in these boundaries are made up of adjacency pairs such as questions and answers, greetings and leave taking, and basic expansion sequences.

Introduction

Communicative approaches to teaching language require assessment tasks that test both students' knowledge of the language and their ability to apply that knowledge. Such assessment tasks are designed to test language ability in context and require students to meet the linguistic demands of different real life situations. This involves sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence as well as grammatical competence (Canale and Swain 1980; Canale 1983). The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) Languages Other Than English (LOTE) study provides a framework for developing language courses that are based on a language in use model. Its assessment scheme sets out to test students' knowledge of the language and their ability to use this knowledge for a range of authentic purposes. Judgements about students' competence and performance in the language are made against a set of criteria.

One of the critical issues that arises in assessment schemes such as this is that of their validity. In fact, performance based tests have come under attack because of the perceived difficulty in being able to make distinctions between competence and performance. Bachman (1990) holds that failure to make such a distinction casts doubt on the validity of an assessment

task. Equally important to a discussion of the validity of performance-based tests is the actual process of testing and how it might affect the outcome for the candidate. This is important because it raises questions of equity and fairness. There are two issues at play here. The first issue is the quality of the materials themselves and the degree to which they are equally accessible and comparable (Lumley and Brown 1996). The second is the behaviour of the assessor and the quality of the interaction in oral tests. The latter is a relatively new field of investigation despite calls to study oral interaction in the second language classroom and during oral interviews using more qualitative methods rather than the exclusive use of more traditional psychometric analyses (van Lier 1989). Different aspects of the interactional behaviour of the assessor that have received attention include assessor accommodation (Ross 1992; Cafarella 1997), differences in the interactional style of assessors (Filipi 1994 and forthcoming; Lazaraton 1996) and the impact of the test requirements on the interaction (Lumley and Brown 1996). The current study follows on from such research by providing an analysis of the talk occurring at the boundaries of an oral exam where the institutional roles of the parties involved are most clearly defined. It will seek to show how the roles are maintained collaboratively through the turn-taking structure.

Conversation Analysis and Institutional Talk

The oral CAT by virtue of its setting and purpose is a type of institutional talk. The institutional structure of the CAT defines and gives the oral CAT its particular institutional character. This structure, which has been created externally, imposes constraints on the assessors and students. The assessor's role is to initiate proceedings, open and close each section of the CAT, and within each opening, each sequence and each topic. This is most frequently achieved through questions. The student's role is principally to answer, respond and initiate discussion only in specified places. There are clearly differences in the rights and obligations, differences in the uses and ownership of knowledge, and differences in the degree of access to organisational procedures and routines assigned to each role. These differences are manifested through the turn-taking structure of the talk and the pre-allocation of turns.

The pre-specification of what can be achieved in a turn and by whom is one of the identifying features of institutional talk. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) posit that ordinary conversation is the basic form of a speech exchange system. It along with other exchange systems can be arrayed along a continuum ranging from the most formal exchanges to the least formal. They argue that it is the allocation of turns that determines the degree of formality of the exchanges. Hence, at one end of the continuum lies ordinary conversation, which is characterised by local allocation of turns. At the other lie formal types of exchanges, which are characterised by the pre-allocation of all turns. This is what creates the asymmetry of participation in these contexts.

Studies that have examined this asymmetry are well documented. The settings that have been investigated using Conversation Analysis (CA) include medical consultations (Frankel 1990; ten Have 1991; Maynard 1992), job interviews (Button 1992), courtroom proceedings (Atkinson and Drew 1979; Atkinson 1992; Drew 1992), news interviews (Greatbatch 1988; Heritage and Greatbatch 1991), and educational settings (McHoul 1978; Mehan 1985, Lazaraton 1991; Filipi 1994; and Cafarella 1997). At the level of conversational structure, the range of options that are normally at the disposal of participants in ordinary conversation are restricted in these settings. We have already noted the restrictions on turn allocation. There are also limitations that affect what is referred to in CA as sequence organisation – the way utterances fit together. At the centre of such organisation

is the adjacency pair, a paired utterance that provides a systematic technique for the selection of next speaker (Sacks 1992), for example, the question and answer. In addition to the adjacency pair, there are expansion sequences. These may be either a single utterance or clusters of utterances that follow (post expansion sequences such as assessments and acknowledgments), precede (pre-sequences such as announcements) or are inserted (insertion sequences which "break" an ongoing sequence) into a base adjacency pair.

In each of the institutional settings cited above, the most common sequence is made up of the question and answer adjacency pair. This is because the turn-type pre-allocation procedure described by Sacks *et al.* (1974) restricts one party to asking questions and the other to answering. The party who has the right to ask questions regains the floor each time a question has been answered and then sets up the shape of the following sequence. However, despite the institutional restrictions that frame the encounter, the talk is still locally managed by the parties who collaborate to achieve the talk and stay within the confines imposed so that they can achieve the purpose of the interaction. It is this aspect which will be the subject of the analysis in this paper.

The aim of the study is thus not to test the validity of CAT 2 as a testing instrument for communicative performance. Rather it is to examine the constraints imposed on assessors and candidates by the institutional setting and to analyse how the differences in the distribution of rights and duties are manifested through the interaction on a turn by turn basis. The paper ends with a discussion of the implications of these findings for the training of assessors and students.

The study

The VCE is a certificate which is granted on completion of secondary schooling in Victoria. It requires students to complete a number of work requirements and CATs across a range of areas of study. The VCE LOTE is one of the areas of study offered to students. Its formal assessment requirements include three CATs one of which – CAT 2 – "assesses students' knowledge and skill in using the LOTE orally in linguistically and culturally appropriate ways." (VCE LOTE Italian Study Design 1994:46). This is done in a fifteen minute audiotaped encounter between a panel of two assessors and the student, and comprises three sections. The first section, part 1, which lasts for about three minutes, is a

conversation about topics of general interest. At least three of five nominated areas are discussed. In part 2 students present a two-minute oral report which they have prepared in advance. This is followed by a discussion of the issues raised in the report with the panel. Duration of part 2 is about seven minutes. In part 3, the student engages in a role-play scenario. S/he will have been supplied with a scenario, based on a pre-selected situation, fifteen minutes before commencement of the oral exam. This becomes the student's preparation time for the scenario. Part 3 lasts for about 5 minutes.

Twenty-one samples from the Italian oral CAT were chosen for this study. They were transcribed using Gardner's (1993) transcription conventions based on Jefferson (1984), Schegloff (1990) and Atkinson and Heritage (1984). All three sections of the CAT were transcribed except for the students' reports in part 2. The data was then analysed using the conventions of CA. In CA, samples of naturally occurring talk are transcribed microanalytically and analysed for recurring patterns. Features such as the gap between speakers, overlapped talk, disfluency, intonation contours and amplitude shift are all transcribed and considered important features of the talk. The transcription notations used in this approach appear in the endnotes.

Findings and discussion

Analysis of the interactions occurring at the boundaries of talk in the oral CAT revealed that both the assessors and candidates co-participated to achieve talk which was consistent with their roles and duties. The following discussion will focus on this analysis and show how the features of ordinary conversation are used to great affect to achieve smooth and efficient movement through the assessment process.

Commencement of the CAT and Part 1

CAT 2 opens with a greeting which is initiated by the assessor. This is immediately followed by a question or request to elicit the student's examination number that is checked and entered on an Assessment Record Sheet. This establishes the student's identity and, in so doing, the institutional character of the interaction. The following, composed of three adjacency pairs, is a typical opening sequence.

SAMPLE 1 (Assessors 1 & 2)

- 1 Ass 1: *buongiorno.*
- 2 Stu: *buongiorno.*
- 3 Ass 1: *come sta?*
- 4 Stu: *bene grazie=*
- 5 Ass 1: *=ah:: (.) ci legge:: il suo ↑NUMERO. (.) per favore.*
- 6 Stu: *ah ((reads the number))*
- 7 Ass 1: *ALLORA....*

- 1 Ass 1: *hello.*
- 2 Stu: *hello.*
- 3 Ass 1: *how are you?*
- 4 Stu: *well thanks=*
- 5 Ass 1: *=ah (0.1) can you read out your ↑NNUMBER. (.) please.*
- 6 Stu: *ah ((reads the number))*
- 7 Ass 1: *OKAY THEN . . .*

The particle *allora* acts as an acknowledgment of the student's response, thereby ending that sequence, and marks the transition to the next sequence which in this case is also the beginning of the next section of the CAT. Variations to these opening sequences in the data occur when there is a breakdown in understanding, or a problem with the process that has nothing to do with either the assessor or the student. For example, a student's examination number failing to match the number on the Assessment Record Sheet. In such cases we find an insertion sequence or a post expansion sequence before part 1 begins.

Immediately following the opening of the oral CAT, part 1 commences. Again it is the assessor who takes responsibility for initiating the sequence and the topic. The following examples occurring just after the student has provided her number clearly demonstrate how possible violations of this are managed.

SAMPLE 2 (Assessors 3 & 4)

- 1 Ass 3: BE [NISSIMO.]
 2 Stu: [()] .hh [()]
 3 Ass 3: [E] ALLORA, (0.5)
 come sta stamattina.

- 1 Ass 3: VE [RY WELL.]
 2 Stu: [()] .hh [()]
 3 Ass 3: [WELL] THEN, (0.5)
 how are you this morning.

Although the students' utterance is indecipherable because it occurs in overlap, it is still evident that she has initiated part 1 on completion of the assessor's acknowledgment. The assessor thus cuts her off immediately after an inbreath, and restarts the section with a turn holder — *well* — uttered loudly. The longish pause immediately after this token seems to serve the function of restoring the assessor's right to initiate.

A less striking example occurs in the following transcript.

SAMPLE 3 (Assessors 5 & 6)

- 1 Ass 5: ALLORA. (.) di che cosa par::liamo? >i
 tuoi genitori < sono italiani?

- 2 Stu: sì. (.) sì.

- 1 Ass 5: OKAY. (.) what shall we talk about?
 > are your < parents Italian?

- 2 Stu: yes. (.) yes.

In this example the assessor is about to hand over the task of initiating the topic in part 1 through her first question after she has marked the beginning of the next section with *allora*. She realises this and immediately follows her question with a rush through which is talk that is faster than the surrounding talk. In conversation this feature is used as a means of holding the floor. The student is thus not required to answer, which in this case could possibly have lead to the initiation of a topic. By using this strategy, the assessor has re-established her role as initiator of topics and sequences.

Part 2

The assessor begins part 2 of the CAT with a "bridging" statement or question thereby establishing the conditions

for the student to announce and commence her/his report. The effect is similar to that of a pre-sequence, however, it is the assessor rather than the student who announces commencement of the report. In the data, two models for doing this have been identified. In model 1, the assessor uses a prefatory statement that is usually marked by a rise in amplitude as in the following example in lines 3 and 4:

SAMPLE 4 (Assessors 7 & 8)

- 1 Ass 7: °sì.°
 2 Ass 8: °sì. () passiamo°
 3 Ass 7: sì. [PASSIAMO alla seco:onda parte.
 4 Ass 8: [PASSIAMO alla seconda parte.
 5 Ass 7: ecco.
 6 Ass 8: cosa ha preparato?
 7 Ass 7: °ecco.°
 8 Stu: um vorrei parlare della mia vacanza a
 sydneyi (0.2) la mia vacanza . . .
 ((continues her report.))

- 1 Ass 7: °yes.°
 2 Ass 8: °yes. () let's move on.°
 3 Ass 7: yes.[LET'S MOVE onto the second part.
 4 Ass 8: [LET'S MOVE onto the second part.
 5 Ass 7: right.
 6 Ass 8: what have you prepared?
 7 Ass 7: °right.°
 8 Stu: um i'd like to talk about my holidays in
 sydneyi (0.2) my holiday. . . ((continues
 her report.))

In some cases the prefacing statement *passiamo alla seconda parte* (*let's move onto part 2*) is a pre-sequence. Whether this, in fact, becomes a pre-sequence is largely dependent on how the student or the assessor responds. For example, in the above sample, the student has given the assessors the opportunity to come in and respond to her announcement of the topic. Evidence for this is provided by the Spanish question mark followed by a pause at the transition relevance place, a place in the talk where speaker change can occur. The assessors have thus had ample opportunity to respond but have declined to do so. In the following example, however, it is the

assessor who sets up a pre-sequence through the "tag-question", characterised by Sacks *et al.* (1974) as a means for selecting next speaker. All three samples belong to a group of assessors who tend to use more post expansion sequences as a feature of their interactional style rather than the basic question and answer adjacency pair (Filipi forthcoming).

SAMPLE 5 (Assessors 9 & 10)

- 1 Ass 9: →va bene. (.) ↑lei ha dovuto preparare un argomento va benei =
- 2 Stu: = ()
- 3 Ass 9: sì per la seconda parte °di questo (.) orale.°
- 4 Stu: →comincio?
- 5 Ass 10: [sì.]
- 6 Ass 9: [sì] per favore.
- 7 Stu: um (.) il mio . . . ((report commences.))

- 1 Ass 9: →okay, you had to prepare a topic righti =
- 2 Stu: = ()
- 3 Ass 9: yes for the second part °of this (.) oral.°
- 4 Stu: →shall i start?
- 5 Ass 10: [yes.]
- 6 Ass 9: [yes] please.
- 7 Stu: um (.) my. . . ((report commences.))

The other interesting feature here is the student-initiated question in line 4 where the student is seeking clarification. This is one of the few environments where students ask questions.

The second model for initiating part 2 is through a more direct question; a typical example is *va bene. che cosa ha preparato per noi oggi?* (okay, what have you prepared for us today?). Again whether this sequence becomes a pre-sequence is determined by the response in the next utterance or by the assessor's response to the student's utterance. After the student's report, it is again the assessor who initiates the discussion. In none of the samples is there any deviation from this.

Part 3

In part 3 of the oral CAT, similar patterns for initiating emerge as for part 2 in the current corpus of data. There are in fact three models. In model 1, the assessor initiates by simply asking a question to clarify which scenario the student has prepared. The student answers and the assessor then reads the scenario, summarises it and assigns the roles that each is to play. In model 2, a model adopted by the majority of assessors in the sample, a much more procedural approach is used. The assessor may explicitly state that the scenario is about to be read, read it, summarise it and then assign the roles that each is to play. The assessor may also ask if the student has any questions, or provide opportunities for students to ask questions. In model 3, the assessor simply summarises the scenario without reading it, and assigns the roles to each party. It should be noted that in 1992, which was the first year of the VCE LOTE assessment scheme under discussion, more variation was possible in the way assessors initiated part 3. Since 1994, firmer guidelines for assessors to follow have been provided (see *LOTE Italian VCE Study Design 1994:47*).

To sum up, the following similarities in the openings and closings between parts 1, 2 and 3 have been noted. All assessors with the exception of one pair use a "bridging" statement as a pre-initiator. The most common one is *passiamo a* (let's move onto) which in part 3 is used in fifteen samples. The same comments in regard to pre-sequences as in parts 1 and 2 apply to part 3 as well, and finally the same shift in amplitude as part 1 ends and part 2 begins is mirrored in the transition from parts 2 to 3. All of these openings and closings are achieved smoothly without overlap and without gap. In fact, they are marked by a total lack of pauses within the assessors' utterance as s/he moves from closing the previous section to opening the next section using particles such *allora, va bene* — unless there has been a deviation from the expected procedure as in the following example.

SAMPLE 6 (Assessors 1 & 2)

- 1 Ass 1: °mm.° tsk ↑BENISSIMO. allora cosa ha preparato per la
- 2 situazione.
- 3 Stu: ah prima di-
- 4 Ass 1: oh sì sì sì.
- 5 Stu: ((shows photos)) questa è

- 6 Ass 1: bene. (0.3) ↑ALLORA (0.5) come
situazione vediamo (0.6) ah::
- 7 ((reads))
- 1 Ass 1: °mm.° tsk ↑great. okay what have you
prepared for the
- 2 situation.
- 3 Stu: ah before-
- 4 Ass 1: oh yes yes yes.
- 5 Stu: this is
- 6 Ass 1: right. (0.3) ↑OKAY (0.5) let's see which
situation (0.6) ah::
- 7 ((reads))

This is the only instance in the data where a student has initiated an insertion sequence, just as the assessor has opened the next section. This may be explained by the fact that the student, who has just finished presenting her report, obviously feels that it is not quite complete, and initiates an insertion sequence. Interestingly, her opening sequence is marked by *ah*. It is as though the student has to ask for permission to reopen the sequence or feels uncomfortable about doing so. On completion of the insertion sequence, however, the assessor again takes control, closing down the sequence through the use of the particle *bene*. The two pauses here coming after two turn completing particles, has the effect of finalising the topic and perhaps also reaffirming the assessor's role.

The closing of sections, like the closing of sequences, are often characterised by utterances that consist of single lexical items and talk that is soft contrasting with a increase in amplitude as the next section or topic begins. Each of these sections ends with what Bazzanella (1990) has called a phatic connective. Remarkably there is a striking uniformity in the use of these connectives by assessors. We find: *bene allora um.../va bene allora ah...* (good/right/well um/ah), *benissimo* (great), *mm hm, allora* (well). These may be followed by metastatements such as *passiamo* (let's move onto), *raccontaci* (tell us), *parliamo* (let's talk about) which mark the opening of the next section. The final closing sequence ends with a leave-taking formula. In most cases it also coincides with the leave-taking in the role-play. These patterns are consistent across all twenty-one samples.

To conclude, then, it is the assessor who initiates the openings and closings of each section of the oral CAT and in this respect the CAT differs substantially from ordinary conversation. However, despite the fact that the assessor has the role of initiating the openings and closings, they are ultimately achieved collaboratively. Most of the time, in fact, they are achieved smoothly. When there is a potential transgression or "threat" to the roles, there are conversational means for rectifying the situation, and as we have seen in samples 2 and 3 for example, both parties orient to the need to re-establish their institutional roles.

Conclusion

The findings reported in this paper suggest implications for the training of assessors and indeed the preparation and training of students. The sections in the CAT that have been examined here are the sections where the institutional roles of each of the parties are most clearly marked. It is in these sections that the "business" of the oral CAT is conducted and where, as a result, the roles are visibly asymmetrical. The assessor is assigned the right to ask questions, the right to open and close sections and sequences, and the right to initiate topics. The student's role, as it is manifested in the current data, is to respond unless conditions have been created that give the student the right to do otherwise. These roles are realised collaboratively, principally through the question/answer adjacency pair that is very much at the heart of the organisation of the interaction of the oral CAT. We would not expect to see the same interactional behaviours present here replicated within each section of the CAT, unless perhaps the roles in the role-play demanded it, for example. Indeed the CAT requires students to show pragmatic knowledge, control and knowledge of language, and skills in presenting and communicating content. It is therefore important that assessors be trained to elicit the kind of interactions from students that will allow them to make the appropriate judgements about students' abilities explicitly asked for in the performance criteria. It is also important for assessors to be trained to understand the different demands on them as they move in and out of the different sections of the CAT and to adapt their interactional mode accordingly.

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Endnotes

Transcription conventions

- . falling intonation
- ˙ continuing intonation
- ? rising inflection
- i rising inflection not as strong as a question
- [overlapped talk
- ↑↓ a shift in pitch
- CAPS talk that is louder than the surrounding talk
- a glottal stop
- ◦ talk that is softer than the surrounding talk
- > < talk that is uttered at a faster rate than the surrounding talk, also referred to as a rush through (() descriptions of what is going on
- () inadequate hearing
- ... sections of the transcription that are not included

- stress
- : lengthening
- (0.0) gaps are measured in tenths of a second, calibrated to the speed of the preceding talk. The normal gap between speakers in ordinary conversation is between one and two tenths of a second, the maximum gap is one second (Jefferson 1989)
- (.) a micro pause of less than 0.2 within a turn
- something of interest in the transcription
- .hh an inbreath

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