

Where Conversation Analysis meets Language Assessment: Toward expanding epistemologies and validity evidence

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The overarching goal of the papers collected in this special issue is to explore the implications that Ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis (EMCA, or in brief, CA) may have for language testing and assessment across a variety of contexts. At first blush, this may not appear particularly novel – indeed, we feel that this special issue builds directly upon Plough et al.’s (2018a) special issue on assessing interactional competence (IC), and the papers therein that explicitly reference or employ CA (Lam, 2018; Plough et al., 2018b; Roever & Kasper, 2018; Ross, 2018). However, to our knowledge, this is the first collection of studies that actively addresses a number of the epistemological and methodological challenges that arise when attempting to bring together an inherently *emic* field such as CA with an inherently *etic* field such as language testing and assessment. This introduction aims to address these issues. However, some description of how this project came about can help to situate it within the confluence of the traditions that it attempts to draw together.

The initial conception of what became this special issue occurred while the editors watched Plough et al. present upon the “inconvenient truth” of interactional competence (2018c) at the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) conference just prior to the publication of their special issue. The gist of the presentation, echoed in their special issue and in Plough’s subsequent (in press) work is that non-verbal behavior (or *embodied action/embodiment* in CA parlance; cf. Streeck et al., 2011) needs to be accounted for when assessing IC, with the suggestion that CA may provide a path forward. We then contemplated (a) what aspects of embodiment might be of particular importance, and (b) what other aspects of CA’s research tradition may be informative to language testers. This led to a panel at AAAL in 2019 where the studies included in this issue were first presented (Burch & Youn, 2019).

The studies included in this special issue represent efforts to address various IC assessment practices employing CA. The intended uses of IC tests in these studies are either to assess the progress of learning in classroom contexts or to assess learners' IC in a research project setting. Relatively speaking, these studies were not constrained by externally-mandated assessment guidelines that are applicable to large-scale assessment. Therefore, what motivated each contribution is closely in line with core principles and practical underpinnings of formative assessment. Formative assessment, or assessment for learning, emphasizes the role of assessment to promote learning in a systematic way. Moving beyond the dichotomy between formative and summative assessment, the term *learning oriented assessment* has also been increasingly used (Carless, 2007; Green, 2016). In formative assessment, teachers play a central role in developing assessment tools to diagnose the progress of learning and in assessing learners' performance as raters. May et al. (2020) underscore the importance of a detailed checklist of IC that is purposefully designed for learning and teaching. In a classroom assessment context, rating criteria with detailed interactional features that result in positive learning outcomes for students can be meaningful (see Hırçın Çoban & Sert in this issue). Nonetheless, the tension between construct coverage and practicality still prevails, presenting practical challenges for teachers who serve multi-faceted roles as test developers and raters. Thus, creating user-friendly assessments requires additional resources and teacher training. The contributors in this special issue rely on the methodological strengths of CA to explore ways to improve assessment practices of IC focusing on construct definitions, test design, and rater training.

To be sure, some notions endogenous to CA have long been familiar within the testing community, not least among them the recognition that interaction is co-constructed (cf. He & Young, 1998). He and Young's (1998) reference to and further refinement of Kramsch's (1986) notion of interactional competence within the same work, informed greatly by CA, arguably launched a trend within language testing and assessment to consider the approaches to and implications of dealing with IC as a construct (Brown, 2003; McNamara, 1997; Ross & Kasper, 2013; Taylor & Wigglesworth, 2009, *inter alia*). It also provided the then nascent field of CA for SLA with a way to make inroads with the wider field of Second Language Acquisition (cf. The Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Hall et al., 2011). In the remainder of this introduction, we first briefly discuss EMCA's roots and epistemological underpinnings in hopes of clarifying to those unfamiliar with the field some aspects that at first blush may appear incongruous with some expectations about language testing. We then move on to focus on the individual contributions included in this special issue.

EMCA vis-à-vis Assessment

Testing and assessment, in a broad sense, rely on categories and standards; a measurement with nothing to measure against is not much of a measurement at all. These categories and standards (i.e. rubrics and descriptors) are generally prescribed *a priori*, either by the test designers or by the teachers or others who are responsible for curricular (and thus evaluation) decisions. CA research avoids *a priori* categorization, and it is at this juncture where a tension between the epistemologies of testing and CA lie. Indeed, CA's roots in ethnomethodology draw back, at least in part, to Garfinkel's critique of positivism (Heritage, 1984; Garfinkel, 1967) in sociology, itself drawing upon Schutz's (1962) phenomenology, all of which can be arguably seen as radical departures from the very epistemological stances that undergird much of language testing and assessment.

Readers with some background in anthropology may recall Pike's (1954) distinction between *emic* and *etic* perspectives. Etic perspectives can be thought of as "outside", aiming to describe phenomena in ways that provide for generalization across groups but are not necessarily accessible to group members themselves, such as describing the first sound in English word "top" as a slightly aspirated alveolar stop. Emic perspectives, on the other hand, are "inside", describing phenomena from a member's or participant's point of view, such as describing the aforementioned sound as the English letter "T" (as opposed to "thiut" in Korean or "tau" in Greek). When it comes to L2 talk, the difference between etic and emic perspectives can be illustrated using an extract from Carroll's (2004) study of restarts in interactions between Japanese novice speakers of English. (A discussion of key concepts in CA is provided in Appendix A, and the transcription conventions that are used throughout the special issue is provided in Appendix B).

Extract 1 (Carroll, 2004; p. 204).

1 A: yes yes .hh[mm:]
 2 → S: [dyu]: did you: (0.7) did you watch?
 3 (0.3)
 4 A: OO[H!
 5 S: [>did you se[e<
 6 A: [little little=

In line 2, S initiates her turn with “dyu”, then restarts with “did you”, pauses for 0.7 seconds, then restarts and finishes her question. If one were to apply standards of fluency (however one might define the notion), S’s utterance could arguably be described as “disfluent”, with these restarts and the pause. Such standards would be *etic*, as they are measured against expectations that are outside of the immediate interactional context.

However, looking at this extract from a different perspective, these restarts can be seen to have a function. Note first that the initiation of the turn (“dyu”) is produced in overlap with A’s talk. Thus, the first “did you” can be seen to be restarting the utterance in the clear. Furthermore, Carroll examined the video record (a method reflected in Burch & Kley and Hirçin Çoban & Sert, this issue) and found that while S is looking at A throughout, A only shifts her gaze to S as the second “did you” is produced. The pause at this point in the utterance helps to obtain the recipient’s gaze, and once obtained, the speaker can continue. This practice has also been noted in English L1 talk by Goodwin (1981). Such an analysis, relying upon how the participants observably treat each other’s actions (both verbal and embodied), represents an *emic* perspective.

This illustration is not meant to argue for the superiority of one perspective over another, but is used to suggest that the different epistemological stances can draw our attention to different phenomena, as well as to different approaches to analyzing and evaluating interaction. Just as the field of language assessment takes seriously the need to check and understand the underlying assumptions of the statistical measures that are employed, the epistemological assumptions of CA are equally important to consider.

There is yet another consequence of these differing perspectives that warrants consideration: the development and/or application of a rubric, a necessity for any assessment, is by its very nature *etic*. Put another way, even if a rubric’s design draws upon findings from CA (Galaczi, 2014; Ikeda, 2017; May et al, 2020; Youn, 2015), the process of creating these standards “eticizes”, or more to the point, “de-emicizes” the perspective (see also Salaberry & Burch, in press, and Barth-Weingarten & Freitag-Hild, in press). Since the dialogue between language assessment and EMCA is still arguably in its infancy, the practical consequences of this de-emicization remain to be fully seen. However, as the dialogue continues, a consideration of this point may help those coming from differing perspectives to understand the arguments and concerns that arise, and to perhaps develop synergies that draw upon the strengths of both ways of approaching the data.

Summary of papers and contribution to the field

The five papers in this special issue each explore the aforementioned conceptual and methodological aspects of assessing IC in a range of assessment contexts. Starting with Huth's discussion on the fundamental characteristics of IC, the remaining papers extend the already developing body of research on assessing IC by (a) situating their papers at the intersection of CA and language assessment, (b) providing the sequential details of IC in distinct test-taker discourse, and (c) explicating the epistemological and methodological implications for assessing IC.

Thorsten Huth provides a theoretical treatment of the orderly yet context-sensitive nature of interaction, and the implications this has for testing IC. In particular, he emphasizes the value of language teachers and testers having a basic familiarity with the fundamentals of interaction, especially the sequential aspects. With his synthesis of previous IC research, he further argues that the highly structured yet dynamic nature of interaction provides an empirical basis for various IC assessment practices.

Rue Burch and *Katharina Kley* contribute an empirical study of a paired speaking test conducted as a university level German as L2 classroom final assessment. Here, the authors focus on *intersubjectivity* as a key component and outcome of the interaction, particularly in regards to how test-takers do or do not display *that* and *how* they understand each other. This visible orientation to mutual understanding can then be treated as concretely observable ratable features that teachers can consider when teaching and assessing *intersubjectivity* in a classroom context. Furthermore, the study highlights how test-takers rely upon embodied actions such as facial expressions and gestures in order to achieve intersubjectivity and complete the test interaction in rating-relevant ways (Plough et al, 2018a; Roever & Kasper, 2018).

In their empirical study, *Merve Hırçın Çoban* and *Olcay Sert* examine a paired speaking achievement test in a Turkish university EFL context. They highlight *progressivity*, particularly as visible through how the participants move the test interaction forward in the wake of difficulties. Of particular importance is the degree of *mutuality* (Galaczi, 2008) the participants display in the practices they employ to keep the interaction progressing. They argue that the interactional efforts (or lack thereof) made by learners to maintain the progressivity in paired speaking need to be rated as part of learners' interactional conduct. Although the paired speaking test in their study is administered institution wide, the intended use is to assess students'

learning progress as an achievement test. For this reason, the findings have direct implications for teachers' diagnosis of students' learning with regard to IC in a classroom context.

Burch and Kley and *Hırçın Çoban and Sert* share a focus on the implications of co-construction, and particularly the degree to which participants orient to and build upon each other's contributions. Both studies operationalize two related yet distinct components of IC (i.e., *intersubjectivity* and *progressivity*) in concrete terms, and their in-depth descriptive treatment of IC provides teachers and students with examples of varied practices and resources (both verbal and embodied) which can be utilized to display and assess such competencies. They also contribute to strengthening classroom assessment practices in terms of developing learning-oriented rating criteria.

Soo Jung Youn addresses the issue of test design by focusing on the variables that can be considered to create plausible contexts for IC assessment tasks. Using role-plays that differ in terms of interlocutors and formality of pragmatic actions, she describes how higher-level English L2 learners orient to contextual variables (e.g., the relationship between interlocutor, formality of speech act) differently and utilize interactional and grammatical resources in a context-fitting manner. This means that the validity evidence (e.g., evidence of interactional fluency, grammatical complexity) that is gathered needs to differ depending upon the local interactional achievements in each role-play. The findings imply that a systematic approach to test design is necessary, which determines the intended scope of IC and accordingly evidence to rely on to make inferences about learners' IC.

Turning to rating processes, *Erica Sandlund* and *Tim Greer* present an empirical study focusing on rater judgments of EFL paired speaking tasks in Japan and Sweden, and the effect of explicit IC-focused training. They examine how two different rating criteria (a CA-grounded rubric and a rubric with non-CA performance descriptors) impact ways in which teacher-raters interpret the construct of *engagement*. They present emerging themes that compare and contrast raters' uses of two different rubrics when scoring paired speaking performances. Their findings indicate that teacher-raters with no CA background greatly benefit from the descriptive details of *engagement* in the CA-based rubric. However, it was just as valuable that teacher-raters were made aware of the interactional features of engagement in lay terms. Their study illustrates that rating is an interpretive process and signifies CA as an emerging methodology for rater cognition research.

Despite distinct emphases, these two papers share implications for what evidence needs to be collected to strengthen the link between test design and rating processes. We artificially create contexts in which learners engage in assessment tasks. Elicited performance from assessment tasks then becomes a basis for raters to award scores while they apply rating criteria. This also opens an empirical question of the extent to which rating criteria descriptors need to be task-specific. Gathering emically grounded evidence, both in terms of elicited language performance and raters' scoring decisions using rating criteria informed by CA, strengthen the validity of IC assessment.

These five papers in this special issue illustrate how CA contributes to the multi-faceted aspects of assessing IC, ranging from construct validity to rating processes. Despite differing epistemologies and distinct methodologies between CA and assessment, these papers exemplify collective efforts on how CA's descriptive focus on real-time details of interactional conduct contribute to the construct representation of IC. Going beyond the *etic* perspective, integrating *emically grounded* evidence into assessment practices will help to ensure valid inferences about the complex dimensions of L2 learners' IC. Because interactional conduct is locally contextualized and embodies semiotic resources for social action, validity evidence needs to be expanded to reflect this. We hope that this special issue builds on the ongoing and growing cross-disciplinary development between CA and language testing and assessment.

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Appendix A: Key concepts in Conversation Analysis

CA is a descriptive, micro-analytic, and qualitative methodology that examines audio and video records of interactions to uncover the observable verbal and embodied practices and resources that interactants employ in interaction. Fundamentally, CA approaches all interaction as *action*, and views the participants as analysts themselves, as their contributions to the interaction display their practical understanding of the context and each other's actions (cf. the previous discussion of CA's emic perspective). While the field is far too broad to do justice to in a short introduction, some key points are provided here, and readers who are interested in exploring further are encouraged to read the applied linguistics-friendly treatments found in Clift (2016) and Wong and Waring (2010; forthcoming).

Perhaps the most conspicuous feature of printed CA research is the use of detailed transcriptions. These transcripts are designed as aids for both the researcher who refers back to them in concert with audio/video data, and the reader by drawing their attention to particular features of the interaction, including timing, prosody, and embodied actions such as gaze, facial expression, gesture, and orientations to objects or materials in the environment. These transcriptions are the result of extensive recursive work with the audio or video data, and the depth of detail often changes as the researcher discovers details that they had not previously attended to or uses the transcriptions to highlight different practices for different analytic purposes (Jefferson, 2004). An appendix of basic conventions is provided with this introduction. However, each paper herein utilizes variations, and will explicate special conventions as necessary.

What follows is a brief outline of key concepts and terms.

- At the simplest (Sacks et al., 1974) level, interactants take **turns**, the length of which can range from single word displays of surprise such as “really?” to lengthy storytelling. These turns constitute and accomplish actions.
- What constitutes a turn is defined by how the participants themselves treat the turns, especially in regards to grammatical, intonational, or pragmatic completion (Ford & Thompson, 1996). Speaker change *can* but does not obligatorily occur at these completion points (Sacks et al., 1974), which are also referred to as **Transition Relevance Places** (TRPs). Speaker change that happens at other points can be held accountable.
- Each turn is both “context renewing and context shaping” (Heritage, 1984). That is to say that each turn relates to prior turns by building upon them and

displaying an understanding of them, and relates to subsequent turns by becoming the material to build upon (Goodwin, 2018).

- These forward-orienting relationships can occur, broadly speaking, in two ways. One way is through **projection**. For example, when one asks “Are you busy on Saturday?”, that speaker is projecting a limited range of upcoming actions, such as a request or invitation. The other way is that turns can make certain types of next turns **conditionally relevant** (Schegloff, 2007). A question about one’s plans on the weekend makes a response such as a go-ahead (“Oh, not much. Why?”) conditionally relevant.
- The relationship between turns constitutes **sequences**. The most fundamental sequence is the **adjacency pair**, such as a greeting-greeting or question-answer sequence. However, these sequences can be expanded either through pre-expansions (such as the question discussed above functioning as a pre-invitation or pre-request), through insertion expansions (discussed below in relation to repair), or in post-expansions that occur after the pair. Schegloff (2007) provides a book-length treatment of **Sequence Organization**.
- In some adjacency pairs, the action in the first pair part limits what second pair parts are conditionally relevant to a very limited range, such as in greeting-greeting pairs. However, other actions that can be accomplished in a first pair part, such as a request or invitation, are open to a much wider range of relevant next actions. Actions that **align** (Stivers, 2008) with the first pair part, such as an acceptance of an invitation, are described as **preferred**, and are regularly produced forthwith with no hesitation. Responses that do not align, such as refusals, are described as **dispreferred**, and often occur in delayed or hedged ways. The study of this range of phenomena in CA is called **Preference Organization** (Pomerantz & Heritage, 2013).
- There are other related types of preference as well. One is the preference for **progressivity** (Pomerantz & Heritage, 2013; Sacks & Schegloff, 1979), or keeping the interaction moving forward. In general, as long as nothing impedes **intersubjectivity** (mutual understanding), the interaction progresses, and if an impediment does arise, it is typically dealt with in a non-obtrusive manner if possible.
- Another type of preference relates to **repair** (Schegloff et al., 1977), the practice of rectifying trouble that impedes intersubjectivity. Repair is generally described in regards to who initiates the repair (Self or Other), and by who conducts the repair (again, Self or Other). By and large, Self-Initiated Self-Repairs are more preferred (not least because they present the least impediment to progressivity), while other- initiated other-repair are less

preferred (as they often not only impede progressivity, but are also non-aligning in terms of action).

- Repair can also be described in reference to where in the sequence it occurs. Self-Initiated Self-Repair often occurs within or just after the turn in which the trouble source occurred. Other initiations typically occur in the next turn after the trouble source. These can constitute “insertion sequences” (see the prior discussion of sequence organization), as they can come between a first and second pair part. They also can impede progressivity, and are often dispatched with as quickly as possible by the participants.

Appendix B: Conversation Analytic transcription conventions

.	Falling intonation
?	Rising intonation
ˊ	Slightly rising intonation
,	Continuing (non-final) intonation
↑↓	Sharp pitch rise or fall
WORD	Louder volume
°word°	Quieter volume
<u>word</u>	Emphasis
wor::d	Elongation
<word>	Slower tempo
>word<	Faster tempo
\$word\$/£word	Smiley voice
#word#	Creaky voice
w(h)ord	Aspiration or laughter within a word
(hh)	Aspiration or laughter outside a word
(word)	Possible hearing
wor-	Cut off
(0.2)	Pause or gap measured in 0.1 seconds
(.)	Micropause (shorter than 0.2 seconds)
.h	Inbreath
[Overlap
=	Latching (no space between talk)
((comment))	Transcribers commentary