

A comparative task-in-interaction analysis of OPI backsliding

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Abstract

The oral proficiency interview (OPI) is often used in the domain of business English as a criterion for access to overseas assignments and job promotions. Little, however, is known about variation in interaction style across interviewers, which motivates in this study a contrastive analysis of two oral proficiency interviews used for gatekeeping purposes. The two interviews were conducted with the same candidate three months apart, and provide a rare glimpse of contrastive interviewer strategies with a single candidate. The analysis examines evidence that the candidate backslid from an earlier successful interview to a categorically lower level of performance in the second interview. Analyses of the candidate's differential establishment of footing in the interview, misalignments to the tone of the interviewer, and differential tendencies of the two interviewers to accommodate to the candidate are featured. Interviewer differences in proclivity to backchannel indicate how facilitative accommodation in scaffolding the interaction may influence the initial rating. The micro-analyses of interview discourse suggest that differences in interviewer style potentially lead to divergent outcomes in the two interviews. In spite of considerable variation in the interaction styles of the two interviewers, consistency in the outcomes of five repeated second ratings of the candidate's performance suggest a rating system robust against even large differences in interviewer style. © 2007 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. A comparative task-in-interaction analysis of OPI backsliding

Modern high stakes assessments are most often based on candidate performance simulations or specimen samples. Performances may range from observation of on-the-job task accomplishment, analysis of work samples, and virtual reality simulations. In some performance domains, e.g., those that involve the use of language, interviews are the mainstay of assessment.

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Assessment interviews are by their nature many-faceted with simultaneous interaction and assessment. The outcome of the interview, a rating, or decision of competence, is influenced by sources of variation introduced by the characteristics of the interviewer, the raters of the performance, the sampling of tasks used to initiate the performance, and the environmental circumstances of the interview. These different facets may interact with each other to make an apparently straightforward interaction like an interview in reality a complex interplay of factors.

In the context of certification of second or foreign language communicative ability, the gold standard for language proficiency performance assessment has been the face-to-face interview. Although formats for language proficiency interviews vary, all involve the use of an interlocutor who is charged with the task of posing questions and tasks, and a candidate who answers those questions and performs the tasks. The degree of interactive topical flexibility, conversational naturalness, and artificiality varies according to format. The differences observed between interviews and conversational interaction have been the object of critical discourse analysis (Johnson and Tyler, 1998; Van Lier, 1989), comparative discourse models (Johnson, 2001), micro-analysis (Lazaraton, 2001), and institutional discourse analysis (House et al., 2003). These analyses have in the main concluded that interviews differ from conversational interaction, and that the differences undermine claims of validity about the outcomes of interviews as indicators of communicative ability.

A different threat to the validity of oral proficiency interviews (OPI) occurs when there are participant troubles with understanding the procedures of the interview. When candidates do not recognize frame boundaries of tasks constructed in the procedures of the interview, consequential misunderstandings may come at the expense of the candidate's rating outcome (Ross, 1998). When interviewers deduce a lack of readiness by candidates to respond to tasks required to instantiate levels of language proficiency, opportunities to demonstrate such competence may be lost to the candidate through their intentional omission by the interviewer, who is empowered to adapt the assessment tasks interactively as the interview discourse evolves. A key issue then is participants' orientation to the framing of, and alignment with, the sequencing of interview tasks needed to deductively justify ratings of speaking proficiency. Also essential is the candidate's participation or footing (Goffman, 1981:124–157) in relation to the positioning of the interviewer. Goffman's original notion of footing refers to speakers' alignment as expressed in their management and production or reception of utterances (see also Clayman (1992) and Davies (1998) for treatments of footing in different kinds of interviews).

In the present comparative analysis, we will consider how shifts in a repeated-interview candidate's orientation to the assessment tasks, and topical content of interview questions posed by two different interviewers, lead to a categorical difference in the candidate's rating of proficiency; namely, how the candidate apparently 'loses' proficiency after having earlier reached a benchmark threshold. Through analysis of the interview interaction, we will approach the OPI from the perspective of discursive psychology (Potter and Edwards, 2001; te Molder and Potter, 2005) with the aim of drawing inferences about the participants' awareness of the task frames, and their interlocutor's footing in formulating relevant rejoinders to tasks presented in the two interviews.

2. Backsliding on the OPI

Two interviews conducted three months apart are the object of the analysis. The first interview was conducted with a middle aged Japanese male currently employed as an executive secretary in a large financial services institution. The candidate frequently travels overseas to assist in the conduct of business negotiations. His goal has evidently been to achieve an OPI rating of "2,"

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