



# Demonstrating and claiming competence in language: Doing being better or worse than others

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we report on a set of interactional phenomena where interactants deal, in one way or another, with linguistic competence. We maintain that just as language professionals are concerned with the objective measurement of linguistic competence *ceteris paribus*, members themselves may have the same objective concerns in the here and now, situated accomplishment of their daily lives. In this way, our findings can be seen as work towards an Ethnomethodological respecification of these concerns whereby a resource for professional work, linguistic competence, is made into a topic of investigation. The phenomena we investigate range from gaze behavior to outright claims of ability and the sites from which they were gathered range from an asylum center to a global corporation. Working within the Ethnomethodological /Conversation Analytical tradition, we have documented the phenomena in their natural settings, video recordings for speech and original inscribed artifacts for text. We analyze a collection of four cases from multilingual settings in which linguistic competence is demonstrated and/or assessed by the participants, and in which participants orient to linguistic competence in a particular language as a valued interactional resource.

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## 1. Introduction

The globalized multilingual environments that many inhabit today are characterized by linguistic and cultural distinction and the status and authority they afford, all of which have practical consequences for inhabitants in organizing their affairs. How people orient to how competent they are in a language such that they can accomplish the work in which they are engaged, is one such consequence which we will address in this study. We begin with an example.

A group of bachelor students at a Danish university are having a group meeting in connection with a semester-long project they are conducting. English is the official language of the degree program, so all group meetings are to take place in English even though six out of seven group members are native speakers of Danish. The last group member is a native speaker of Hebrew who, despite being present, does not contribute with any turns in the fragment below. Immediately prior to the transcribed fragment, the students have discussed whether and how to include the concept of identity in the research question for their project. Jan proposes a possible formulation of the research question and after some discussion Pia writes it on the blackboard. Jan monitors the writing process, and the following sequence of interaction ensues:

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## Fragment 1:

143 PPP: (1.8)  
 144 ((PIA writing the research question 'to what identity do  
 social darwinian texts subject the readers' on the  
 blackboard))  
 145 JAN: nonono (.) that's it  
 146 (0.3)  
 147 to what identity do  
 148 (0.4) social darwinian texts (.) subject the \readers  
 149 PPP: (4.0)  
 150 ANDY: or [what identity do social darwinians theories]subject the  
 readers \to  
 151 PIA: [but but but then we'll we're forgetting the whole part]  
 152 PPP: (0.5)  
 153 JAN: ja  
 154 PPP: 0.9)  
 155 JAN: maybe that's eh: [he ] more correct eng[lish]  
 156 ANDY: [ha-a] [ja ]

Jan directs Pia not to change what she has written, assesses the sentence on the blackboard as correct (line 145) and seemingly emphasizes this by reading the sentence aloud (lines 147–148). Andy, however, suggests an alternative formulation in which 'to' is placed at the end of the sentence rather than at the beginning (line 150). After a pause, Jan agrees with Andy's alternative formulation (line 153) and adds the assessment 'maybe that's more correct English' (line 155), to which Andy agrees (line 156).

In fragment 1, Jan, Andy and Pia demonstrate linguistic competence in the sense that their production evidences what they are able to do in just this situation with the linguistic resources available to them. Jan and Andy also claim their or others' linguistic competence by assessing the language in play in this particular activity. Jan assesses the accuracy of Pia's rendering of the research question on the blackboard and Andy's reformulation of the question can be heard as assessing Jan's original. This is followed by a subsequent assessment by Jan who evaluates Andy's formulation as 'more correct English', i.e. as better than his own. These assessment actions can be seen as setting up a scale of quality, i.e. more or less correctness, for this occasion and assigning value to the two formulations with reference to that scale. We will discuss such scaling of competence below as a 'member's measurement system' (Sacks, 1988). Finally, Pia's rendering and Jan and Andy's formulations being valued also set up categorical features, i.e. features associated with a certain category of people (Sacks, 1972), with regard to the persons who produced them such that for example Andy, at least in this instance and for this particular activity, can be seen as categorically a more competent speaker of English than Jan.

The introductory example illustrates how participants may demonstrate and make claims regarding linguistic competences as resources for accomplishing the task at hand. Further it illustrates how, when claiming linguistic competence is done through assessment, we can get a sense of the metric upon which this competence is based and the sort of persons such competence describes. That such issues are of concern for participants is, we maintain, particularly related to the globalized environments they inhabit. Linguistic competence cannot be taken for granted as an unnoticed but actively utilized resource in these environments. In the setting above, as for all other settings in our study, activity mandate and the extant biographies of participants make linguistic competences a valued and distributed resource for practical action. For these reasons, participants need to orient to whether and how these competences are available to them.

In line with ethnomethodological conventions, this study approaches linguistic competence as a lay member's concern (Garfinkel, 1967): linguistic competence is locally constituted in and as participants' orientation to and assessment of own and others' conversational contributions. We maintain that just as language professionals are concerned with the objective measurement and development of linguistic competencies among a population through establishing correspondences between some linguistic action and some etic scale of measurable competence, members themselves may have similar, emic concerns for objective measurement in the here and now, situated accomplishment of their daily lives (cf. Garfinkel, 1967). In this way, our findings can be seen as work towards an ethnomethodological respecification of these concerns whereby a resource for professional work – in this case linguistic competence – is made into a discoverable topic in an investigation of lay practices (cf. e.g. Garfinkel, 1991).

## 2. Analytic framework

Within Ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis (EMCA), demonstrations and claims as features of conversational actions are grounded in the early work of Harvey Sacks. A notion of 'showing understanding' was originally mentioned in one of Sacks' lectures (Sacks, 1992) in a discussion of how understanding can be made witnessable in conversation. Sacks describes how showing understanding is done by speakers by means of utterances that perform an operation on a previous utterance as in the following example:

A: Where are you staying?  
 B: Pacific Pallisades.  
 A: Oh, at the west side of town.

(Sacks 1992: 141 vol. 1)

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