

## The Notion of Negotiation of Meaning Revisited

Ken IKEDA\*

Negotiation of meaning has been shown to play a prominent role in describing learner interaction and leading toward comprehensible output. The strong claim, that negotiation of meaning is a necessary step to second language acquisition, is disputed, however. The author examines the studies of Gass and Varonis on paired learner interaction who support this strong claim and finds some problems with their findings. The author believes negotiation of meaning is better served by the weaker claim, as a possible but not essential step in second language acquisition.

**Keywords :** negotiation of meaning, learner interaction

Negotiation of meaning, which involves moves of negotiation, such as comprehension checks, confirmation checks, and clarification requests, has been accepted as one of the communication strategies that native speakers use to understand each other. It has been also argued that second language learners, if they want to actively acquire language, should also display the ability to negotiate meaning. Long (1983) states that native speakers modify interaction and employ two corresponding means for two main ends: to avoid conversational trouble (which he calls "strategies"), and to repair the discourse when trouble occurs ("repairs") (1983: 131-132). Without these means, conversation would break down. Negotiation of meaning has also been linked to Swain's comprehensive output hypothesis, in which she argues "where there has been a communicative breakdown — where the learner has received some negative input — and the learner is pushed to use alternate means to get across... the message" (1985: 248).

The role negotiation of meaning plays in second language construction is undeniable; where its role is questioned is when it is argued that it is "a necessary first step" to acquisition (Swain, 1985). This strong claim has been most advocated by Gass and Varonis. What this paper will look at is one particular study by Varonis and Gass on the spoken interaction of paired non-native speakers of English, which have become

one of the seminal papers on this type of learner interaction. Varonis and Gass look at the talk of fourteen pairs of Japanese and Spanish students, and find as these pairs shared no cultural or linguistic background, the flow of their conversations was often marred by frequent interruptions which often involved negotiation of meaning of "non-understanding" features. Varonis and Gass have constructed a model of these processes, which consists of a trigger by one participant, usually a non-understandable utterance, which initializes a phase of negotiation of meaning. The rest of the model consist of responses by both participants to remedy the non-understanding, what Varonis and Gass label as a "push-down" approach to conversation (1986: 75). They state that as non-native negotiation requires much interaction by both participants, it provides "a good forum for obtaining (the) necessary input for acquisition" (Varonis and Gass, 1986: 83). They also argue that because non-native speakers recognize a "shared incompetence", they may feel they have little to lose in terms of self-esteem when they do indicate a non-understanding, so "this type of interaction facilitates the second language acquisition process" (Varonis and Gass, 1986: 87).

Varonis and Gass seemingly present a strong model for second language acquisition, although they recognize that non-natives could ignore non-understanding situations and continue conversations without negotiation. They choose an extended non-understanding dialogue between

---

\* 一般科 外国人教師  
原稿受付 1998年9月30日

Mieko, a Japanese, and Maria, a Spaniard, to demonstrate their negotiation model (1986: 78-79). Closer re-examination of their data and arguments, however, leads to some serious questions of methodology and analysis. These problems are: 1) the researchers have not considered the equally viable possibility of an alternative perspective of the learner interaction, that what takes place may not be negotiation; 2) an analysis which is based on data of solely spoken utterances and not taking into account paralinguistic signals; and 3) "shared incompetence" is mistaken for a shared reality.

Varonis and Gass argue that the pair of Maria and Mieko negotiate meaning successfully, but reality cannot be captured by only one perspective. An equally plausible and alternative view of this sequence is that these learners do not engage in negotiation but employ two incompatible interactional strategies. Maria tries to assert her dominance over Mieko through knowledge and linguistic prowess. To illustrate this the sequence shows a series of negotiations initialized solely by Mieko, who has trouble understanding the interlanguage of Maria. Mieko tries to understand Maria, but in failing to bridge the gap between them, decides to retreat from the inquiry with increasing desperation. Ten of the last eleven spoken lines between the participants do not show negotiation of meaning of any sort. Instead they show attempts by Mieko to push the conversation forward. Mieko tries to comprehend the interlanguage of Maria while parrying her partner's rather intrusive comprehension checks. Maria first grills Mieko to see if she understands the words "institution" and "state", in a way which belittles her English knowledge. Maria then talks about "her ingress", which might have confused Mieko, because for the first time in the dialogue a female reference is brought up; the only person Maria has been talking about until then is her retired father. Mieko tries four times to understand "ingress", trying to grasp whether this word is English lexically or phonologically. Maria does not seem to realize that "ingress" is not an English word--perhaps a loan word in Spanish which carries different semantic connotations, just like

the English word "snack" in the Japanese language. What is most disturbing is that the meaning of "ingress" is never made comprehensibly clear to anyone--to Mieko, this reader, perhaps Varonis and Gass themselves. To confirm suspicions the author showed this sequence to several Japanese ESL teachers who were also unable to guess the meaning of "ingress". If Varonis and Gass claim to know how negotiation of meaning works between non-natives, they should have at least provided the answer to this mysterious "ingress" to the readers.

At the end of the conversation, Mieko realizes that her quest to understand "ingress" has become a futile exercise (like some things in life), so takes the next best strategy, ignore and to move on, a strategy Foster labels "pretend and hope" versus "check and clarify" (1998: 19). Mieko utters "OK" four times at the end of the sequence to end the negotiation, but her attempts are misunderstood by both Maria and the researchers. Varonis and Gass see these "OK" utterances as confirmations, "true signal(s) of understanding" (1986: 81). However, Fanselow points out that "OK... has little to do with endorsing, or approving or indicating correctness" (1992: 73). "OK"s may simply be used as closure (Fanselow, 1992) or attempts in Japanese discourse to move the conversation along. Varonis and Gass code these OKs by Mieko as "reactions to responses" but this alternative view shows that they can be also "indicators", which are "signals to another that something has gone wrong" (1986: 76-77). Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) also agree that discourse functions such as clarification requests are often multi-varied and multi-functional.

Thus, according to this alternate view, not only have the dynamics of this sequence been misunderstood, something which does not occur has been labeled successful negotiation of meaning. Foster (1998) gave discussion tasks to pairs and small groups, and found while learners in pairs produced more negotiation of meaning, few modified utterances resulted. Extended "non-understanding routines" like the one between Mieko and Maria as reported by Varonis and

Gass, occurred not once. Foster concluded that negotiation for meaning "is not a strategy that language learners are predisposed to employ" in the target language when they encounter gaps of understanding (1998 : 1).

Firth and Wagner recently have tackled studies on second language acquisition research, including the Varonis and Gass study. Concentrating on two relatively minor non-native speaker dialogues from the 1986 study, Firth and Wagner doubt Varonis and Gass' assertion that normal, competent native discourse is problem-free and does not engage in "push-down" sequences (Firth and Wagner, 1997 : 295 ; 1998 : 92). Gass (1998) acknowledges that alternative perspectives of learner interaction exist, but reveals a mindset that prevents her from viewing learner utterances with a new lens. She states her focus of her second language research studies is on the *language used* and not the *use of language* in social context (italics mine) (Gass, 1998 : 84). By claiming so Gass ignores the arguments presented by Halliday that "language is a means for attaining social ends"; "language is as it is because of what it has to do" (1978 : 18-19). She also ignores that learners employ strategies which enable them to carry on interaction despite non-understanding.

Also, Gass and Varonis have handcuffed themselves to a great extent by the narrowness of their transcription procedures. Ellis (1994) advocates there is a need for more sophisticated analyses in learner interlanguage and interaction studies. Recent ethnographic approaches along with conversation analysis illustrate the need to capture interaction in intricate detail, visually as well as audibly (Erickson, 1996 ; Heath, 1997 ; Potter, 1997 ; Schiffrin, 1996). Using these approaches Ikeda (1999) collected data from learners who interviewed each other and prepared detailed transcripts showing visual conduct in hand with the spoken utterances. He found that learners produced meaningful interaction preceded by a series of reacting moves, which consisted of a combination of visual conduct or spoken utterances.

Finally, Varonis and Gass suggest that language acquisition can occur between non-native

learners because they recognize with each other a "shared incompetence" that enables neither to lose face (1985 : 84). This is a parochial view that does not take into account other intangibles involved. One view of interaction is provided by Rommetveit (1980, 1985). He argues when people come into dialogue, they come with their own separate worlds of reality and in the ensuing interaction, they work to construct a reality that is both temporary and shared. This temporary and shared reality is "intersubjectivity", achieved when one aspect of the dialogue is brought to attention by one participant and jointly attended to by both (1985 : 187). Intersubjectivity can be also viewed as a "dyadic constellation" of "speaker privilege" and "listener commitment" (Rommetveit, 1985 : 190). "Speaker privilege" is the right of the speaker to decide what aspect(s) of the interaction are important at that precise moment, and that right is retained even if the speaker fails to make oneself understood (Rommetveit, 1980 : 133). "Listener commitment" requires the listener to comprehend what is said by the speaker by temporarily adopting the viewpoint of the speaker (Rommetveit, 1985 : 190). When intersubjectivity is developed, the participants are speaking about real issues with real motives. The concept of intersubjectivity provides a more constructive view of interaction as ventures into building solidarity and deeper understanding, for it is in these instances that participants can achieve a shared reality akin to rapport. Schiffrin (1996) sees intersubjectivity as shared knowledge and adds that attention is a necessary precedent. Thus in the view of intersubjectivity, we can conclude that Maria retains "speaker privilege" and Mieko does her best to adopt "listener commitment" but in the end the intersubjectivity is not reached as Mieko never grasps the meaning of "ingress". Mieko's predicament can be explained by Lantolf and Frawley as attempts "trying to find the floor" (1985 : 155). It can be inferred that in moments of intersubjectivity negotiation of meaning can be performed and its purpose reached successfully.

Probably because of the inability to replicate results claimed by Varonis and Gass, Larsen-

Freeman and Long have recognized that "it is possible for learners to obtain their own comprehensible input even when they are not negotiating" (1991: 143). They state "neither production nor participation in conversation is necessary for language acquisition...nor are input (linguistic) modifications necessary"(1991: 144). Negotiation of meaning is now seen as a possible, but not essential step towards second language acquisition, and possibly comprehensible output. Vygotskian-based research also provides a different perspective on learner interaction. Lantolf and Frawley (1985) present employ notions of self-and other-regulation and note how learners may adopt communicative strategies in which the discourse is regulated by oneself or by the other. Donato (1994) looks at learners in a group setting and states that their discourse could be explained as scaffolding, in which learners work together to piece information, which may provide clues to language acquisition, but this finding is cast into doubt by Foster (1998). Observers of learner interaction need to be aware that they themselves can miss the intention of strategies employed by learners, but can somewhat remedy their misinterpretations if they are careful to carry out transcriptions that capture visual conduct as well spoken utterances. Negotiation of meaning does not necessarily lead to language acquisition, but is perhaps only one of many possible moves in the process.

#### References

- Donato, R. (1994). Collective scaffolding in second language learning. In J. P. Lantolf and G. Appel (Eds.), *Vygotskian approaches to second language research* (pp. 33-56). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Erickson, F. (1996). Ethnographic microanalysis. In S. L. McKay and N. H. Hornberger (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and language teaching* (pp. 283-306). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fanselow, J. F. (1992). *Contrasting conversations: Activities for exploring our beliefs and teaching practices*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Firth, A., and Wagner, J. (1997). On discourse, communication, and (some) fundamental concepts in SLA Research. *The Modern Language Journal*, 81 (3), pp. 285-300.
- Firth, A., and Wagner, J. (1998). SLA property: No trespassing! *The Modern Language Journal*, 82 (1), pp. 91-94.
- Foster, P. (1998). A classroom perspective on the negotiation of meaning. *Applied Linguistics*, 19, 1-23.
- Gass, S. M. (1998). Apples and oranges: Or, why apples are not orange and don't need to be: A response to Firth and Wagner. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82 (1), pp. 91-94.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language and social man. In Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Heath, C. (1997). The analysis of activities in face to face interaction using video. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research* (pp. 182-200). London: Sage.
- Ikeda, K. (1998). *The paired learner interview: A preliminary investigation applying Vygotskian insights*. *Language, Culture, and Curriculum*, 11, 70-95.
- Ikeda, K. (1999). *The hidden visage of learner interviews: Conversation revealed*. Unpublished masters project. Columbia University, Teachers College, Tokyo.
- Larsen-Freeman, D., and Long, M. H. (1991). *An introduction to second language acquisition research*. Harlow, Essex: Longman Group UK.
- Long, M. (1983). Native speaker/non-native speaker conversation and the negotiation of comprehensible input. *Applied Linguistics*, 4, 126-141.
- Potter, J. (1997). Discourse analysis as a way of analysing naturally occurring talk. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research* (pp. 144-160). London: Sage.
- Rommetveit, R. (1980). On meanings of acts and what is meant by what is said in a pluralistic social world. In M. Brenner (Ed.), *The structure of action* (pp. 108-49). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Rommetveit, R. (1985). Language acquisition as increasing linguistic structuring of experience and symbolic behavior control. In J. Wertsch (Ed.), *Culture, communication, and cognition: Vygotskian perspectives* (pp. 183-204). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schiffrin, D. (1996). Interactional sociolinguistics. In S. L. McKay and N. H. Hornberger (Eds.), *Sociolin-*

- guistics and language teaching (pp. 307-328). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Swain, C. (1985). Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. In S. M. Gass and C. G. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition*, (pp. 235-253). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Varonis, E. M., and Gass, S. (1986). Non-native/non-native conversations: A model for negotiation of meaning. *Applied Linguistics*, 6, 71-90.