The Negotiation of Shared and Personal Meaning Making in Spoken Interaction Tasks

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Abstract

This paper reports on learner foci for jointly-constructed and individual meaning making in three typical spoken interaction tasks. It explores negotiation processes including personal meaning making whilst 'languaging'. Three tasks were analysed: an information gap, opinion sharing and role-play task to ascertain meanings generated by learners as they (re)configured tasks with the semiotic resources available. Audio-transcripts from peer-to-peer synchronous, Computer Mediated Communication (SCMC) tasks were analysed using content analysis for studying learner purposes and an emic perspective for studying learners' mediation of semiotic resources. Results were triangulated with other data sources.

Results suggest that the foci for meaning negotiation through speech across tasks spanned four areas, namely 1) task management 2) completion of pedagogical task 3) relating self to task topic and 4) co-ordinating technological task features. Online tasks require a greater need for dyads to negotiate organisational moves as well as the need to attend to technological aspects, including difficulties. Different task types channelled different task completion strategies and regulated the ability to personalise the topic.

Findings reveal how learners' semiotic budgets can be expanded in relation to technological aspects of tasks, which learners act upon and which can shape how and what is negotiated, offering new opportunities for meaning making. Pedagogical implications for task design are proposed.

1. Introduction

The ubiquity of technology in everyday life as well as the many digital environments inhabited for work, play or socialisation, offers an ever expanding 'semiotic budget' thus providing increased opportunities for languaging …as we engage in diverse activities [1]. 'Languaging' is an action or process involving "making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language" [2] (p.98). In task design, semiotic resources can include images and/or text offering visual and/or audio 'inputs' [3] such as instructions and/or image. Another realm where semiotic resources can reside is within technological tools that can host tasks. Resources can be mediated through learners' physical actions, visual abilities and language during task processes. 'Inputs' e.g. task instructions and an image have typically assumed a fixed, constant learning space and synchronous time mode (i.e. face-to-face classroom). However, in online tasks the semiotic budget is potentially expanded in terms of number of resources residing in different realms and the fact that learners can move across and within different realms. This raises questions as to whether tasks fit digital contexts. This study explores this potential mismatch by focusing on how and for what purposes learners make meaning in three online tasks in order to inform future online task design.

2. Theoretical Framework

A sociocultural perspective encompasses the notion of 'inputs' as 'semiotic resources' or 'tools' [4] as a way of understanding how learning is mediated through the use of printed materials, physical environment, gestures and classroom discourse [5]. Tools (or semiotic resources) can be a physical artefact … or symbolic, as in the case of utterances produced during conversations with others and the self [6]. The environment "is full of potential meanings [...that] become available gradually as the learner acts and interacts within and with this environment" [7] (p.246).

In online tasks, semiotic resources can form part of 'task-as-workplan' [8]: resources that task designers intend users to mediate with e.g. a virtual button on an interface, textual instructions and/or linguistic input from texts or audio/visual images. Other resources may also be employed by learners during 'task-as-process' [9]: resources actually employed. In the mediation process, where meaning making takes place, the analysis of thinking and speaking is not focused on semiotic resources in the task-as-workplan, but on "the active learner, or activity itself" [10] in 'tool-mediated goal-directed action' [11]. However, task 'goals' have been conceptualised differently: 1) as task completion [12]; 2)

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the goal of activity/ies during tasks [13]; 3) learners own goals brought to the task [14] and 4) as emerging during processes according to the needs and goals of the moment [15] (p79). In online speaking tasks goals can be achieved through mediational means using any number and/or combination of semiotic resources. These include intentionally using the language system or 'speech as action' [16] alongside 'sensory and motor systems' [17] to carry out 'agentic actions' [18].

The use of pedagogical tasks has migrated from face-to-face to online contexts. Tasks can be seen as 'a cognitive device' [19] to elicit spoken interaction or meaning negotiation between peers. The term 'Negotiation for Meaning' (NfM) has been conceptualised differently within cognitivist and sociocultural perspectives with different emphasis given depending on "particular theoretical orientations of…writers" [20] (p. 74). Although cognitivist perspectives include using it to refer to non-understanding sequences (from Varonis and Gass, 1985) [21], Block [22] proposes that the term has omitted other interpretations such as negotiation of solidarity and support [23] and face [24]. This study conceptualises meaning negotiation as 'language-as-action' (languaging): exchanging information between peers (or negotiation *for* meaning) *and* for different purposes (or negotiation *of* meaning) because "what is achieved by negotiation varies according to the purpose of negotiation" [25] (p 74). Meaning can also be made through 'conversations with the self' [26].

3. General objectives

This study explores how learners act with semiotic resources to negotiate meaning in order to achieve smaller goals by focusing on tool-mediated goal-directed action across three tasks. The research question is: *What are the foci of learners' goal-directed actions and how do they as dyads and individuals negotiate meaning of content?*

4. Method

Participants were adult learners enrolled on English as a Foreign Language class as part of their degree programme at the *Universitat Oberta de Catalunya,* a 100% online university based in Barcelona. All learners were considered bilingual, sharing Catalan and Spanish. Eight participants (four dyads) from the first data set (completing an Information gap and Opinion sharing task) had a level of B2.1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages whereas participants from the second data set (completing a role-play) had a level B1.1. The technological tool used for synchronous spoken interaction was the Tandem tool http://www.speakapps.eu/#tandem. The first data set pertained to an exploratory study focusing on learner agency [see 27]. The current study combines two data sets in order to focus on meaning negotiation across different tasks. The exploratory study also revealed (through student questionnaires) that cases 2, 3 and 4 looked at answers before recording interaction, impacting on some findings in this study.Regarding instruments, language functions from Kumpulainen and Wray (2002) [28] were used to code turns using content analysis. Speech units were identified on an utterance basis. The unit of analysis was each dyad and individuals within that dyad. A purposive sampling approach was used to include pairs that demonstrated 'good' performance and those who approached the task differently to task design. Data review and analysis was carried out concurrently with data collection.

New language functions, when identified, were added to the original coding system iteratively and mapped across two data sets. New codes were checked for inter-rater reliability. The emic (insider) perspective was taken to examine subjective experiences of participants alongside an interpretative approach to collection and analysis. Activity logs, student guidelines, screenshots of researcher-conducted task simulations and teacher checks triangulated findings.

5. Results and discussion

The analysis of learner talk alongside an identification of what learners were looking at and/or touching revealed how learners shifted their focus and purposes depending on goals moment-by-moment. This spanned across four general areas, namely: 1) task management; 2) pedagogical task completion; 3) talking about individual self in relation to task topic and 4) co-ordinating navigational aspects. Learners made meaning both jointly and/or individually relating to these four foci.

Task Management
Language was the main resource for management of organisational purposes but technological task features and other tools were also used, including the Tandem interface pages. Organisational talk occurred when the need for management emerged: beginning of a task; transition between tasks; end of a task as well as when learners had to manage unpredictable technological problems that 'disrupted' the pedagogical task, such as headphones falling (case 1), being shown a 'time is up' pop-

up while partner was on the wrong page (case 5), or ascertaining whether the recorder had worked (case 7). The need for learners to manage pedagogical and technological task features highlights that opportunities for making meaning are expanded in online tasks. Explanations may include teacher absence to organise learners, learners needing to 'negotiate the unexpected' technological problems. Self-talk was also a feature of this focus.

Pedagogical Task Completion
This focus elicited the use of language functions for task completion, which varied across task types and dyads. The varied combination of language functions by individuals and dyads highlighted different strategies for making meaning. Although language was the main semiotic tool used for task completion, other resources were used: photo, textual instructions and prompts (Information gap and opinion sharing), textual instructions and prompts (role-play task). Cases 2, 3 and 4 prepared their interaction and knew an uncommon word 'awnings', implying that they had used a virtual or paper-based dictionary to find the meaning. In addition, sounds of paper rustling in recordings and reference to "the pdf" from case 7 suggested that apart from official pedagogical 'inputs' and technological features, learners employed other 'non-official' resources.

Talking about Individual self in relation to Task Topic
This focus was achieved through the use of a photo of a London street and textual instructions of an open question in the opinion sharing task. In the role-play task, this was achieved through role allocation. The interviewee gave personal information, related experiences, and preferences in response to a series of questions indicated for the interviewer through textual instructions and prompts. Talking about the self therefore occurred simultaneously to pedagogical task completion through questions/answer sequences. The Information gap task did not support personal meaning making in relation to topic.

Co-ordinating Navigational Aspects
The Tandem tool required both learners to navigate physically through touch and orally through speech using virtual buttons to start, submit answers and go to different task pages. Because learners could not see each other or each other's screens they had to negotiate intentional moves: what they wanted to do and when, co-ordinating navigational aspects. The icons and buttons of the Tandem became resources with which to negotiate meaning around, becoming 'inputs', the focus of interaction. However, the extent of which this occurred depended on if and how dyads followed the 'official' route/sequence in the 'task-as-workplan'. Many icons and buttons were notably (consistently) absent in some transcripts indicating dyads had partially followed the intended navigational route to the task instructions but afterwards created their own 'lines of desire' (an architectural term referring to paths people make, which are often shortcuts that ignore the given route) [29].

6. Conclusions
Online tasks appear to expand the realms and foci for shared meaning negotiation particularly for organisational purposes including unexpected events and negotiating navigational paths. Because smaller goals emerge during task processes according to needs and goals of the moment [30] pedagogical 'task completion' is only one making as learners multi-task. Future research might explore challenges posed by an expanded semiotic budget whereby (pedagogical) input and technological features of host tools are only a few of the potentially multiple foci for meaning negotiation.
The different foci highlights the need to linguistically scaffold learners to deal successfully with multi-tasking such as making specific words/phrases related to technological aspects available (e.g. "timer", "headphones"), particularly if supporting learners maintaining extended recursive interaction in the TL is an aim.

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