

# Discourse Analysis of Job Interview Conversation: what and how to proceed in interaction

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## 1. Introduction

Job interview is widely used as gatekeeping in human resources selection and recruitment by companies and institutions, helping interviewer or employer concerned to judge and assess the competence and suitability of candidates. It has been believed that interviewee's communicative skills, engaging expression of work desire and good display of stance and evaluation are not less important than information regarding candidate's employable skills and work experience (Fox & Spector, 2000; Schuh, 1973). Consequently, as Prazak (1969) comments, it is not surprising that skilled interpersonal communication in the job interview setting may give the candidate an upper hand and a better chance to succeed in the interview. However, the importance of interpersonal interaction at job interview has been studied under such global and conceptual terms as communication strategies, which are not pedagogically desirable and concrete for both EFL teachers and students. Therefore, there is a need to take a linguistic turn to linguistically evidence how interpersonal and pragmatic meaning function in job interview conversation.

This study is going to make discourse analysis of a video clip of job interview between a job applicant (interviewee) and the director (interviewer) of human resources department of Procter & Gamble Company. The analyses are based on appraisal system and generic structure (Martin & White, 2005) under Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and politeness theory and cooperative principles in pragmatics domain and the study sets out to make an analysis of the interpersonal and pragmatic meaning and force of interactive communication in job interview conversation. It endeavors to find out how attitudinal evaluation and generic structure help build solidarity between the interviewer and interviewee and how the interactants give respect to positive politeness considerations and cooperative principle. The findings are expected to offer us a better understanding of ontological discursal features of a job interview and possible pedagogical implications.

## 2. Job Interview: framing the context

As an important genre widely used in organizational and workplace settings, job interview is a strategic conversation with dual purposes with regard to interviewer and interviewee. On the one hand, it assists an employer to evaluate and judge a potential employer in terms of professional skills, work experience, language proficiency, communicative effectiveness and collaborative or leadership ability, for prospective employment in their company. On the other hand, the candidate or interviewee seeks to persuade the employer through job interview that he or she has the skills, background and ability to do the job and is able to comfortably fit into the organization and working environment. In other words, linguistically, the interviewer asks questions concerning the interviewee's various information and elicit the

interviewee's answers and statements on himself or herself and on the company at hand, through which the interviewer evaluates and comments on the interviewee's ability and suitability. From the interviewee's perspective, he or she is supposed to make proper stance and evaluation on himself or herself as well as on the company in addition to politeness and respect consideration.

As a consequence, the interviewer and interviewee interact in uneven power relationship, in which the interviewer holds more decision and power than the interviewee. Therefore, the communicative purposes and power relationship of this genre makes it conventionalized practice that interviewer asks more questions whereas interviewee gives more personal statement in an expectedly prompt and cooperative manner. On the other hand, it is also important to point out both interviewer and interviewee are expected to make allowances for politeness strategy and cooperative principle in a job interview conversation because they ought to display an amiable and cultivated image of the company and individual respectively (Stewart, 2010).

The communicative purpose and power relationship mentioned above in the context of job interview makes the choice of appraisal, politeness and cooperative principle as the research foci of this study.

### 3. Literature review

#### 3.1 Appraisal system: interpersonal meaning

Language in use serves along "autonomous" and "interactive" planes of discourse (Sinclair, 1981), or "ideational" and "interpersonal" meanings (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Ideational meaning is representation of information and ideas communicated, but interpersonal meaning plays an important role in facilitating the delivery of the message and building solidarity between participants. As Halliday (1979, pp. 66-67) comments, interpersonal meaning functions as "a continuous motif or colouring" to ideas communicated throughout discourse and "the effect is cumulative". Appraisal system developed by Martin (2000; 2005) is a set of semantic attitudinal resources of interpersonal meaning, which help to track down linguistically how participants give their stance and evaluation, engage the other and build solidarity (Hunston & Thompson, 2000; Martin & White, 2005).

Appraisal system is achieved by three interacting domains: 'engagement', 'attitude' and 'graduation' (Martin, 2000; Martin & White, 2005). Engagement concerns how participants position towards sourcing facts and opinions, open or close discourse space and negotiate with each other, so it is not appropriate for this study to incorporate engagement resources as the communicative purposes of a job interview is not to negotiate on sourcing facts and ideas (Martin & White, 2005). Therefore I will concentrate the interpersonal meaning on attitude and graduation features. Attitude is concerned with speakers' affective reactions, judgments and evaluation of behavior and things, which in this study are pertinent to the interviewee's own ability and work experience as well as the target company and the interviewer's comments on the interviewee's background and performance. Graduation conveys the ways that speakers intensify or weaken their attitudinal and epistemic evaluations. As is shown in this study, the interviewee strengthens her self-evaluation to an appropriate degree to display her confidence and modesty, while the interviewer also uses graduation features to acknowledge the interviewee's ability and potentials.

#### 3.2 Positive Politeness and Cooperativeness

When we are in conversation, it is necessary to keep conscious of our listeners, 'face' work is one of the most important considerations. Brown and Levinson (1978) pioneeringly points out face is the public

self-image which is emotionally invested and that everyone intends to claim and preserve for himself but it can be lost, maintained or enhanced. Therefore, face work should be persistently attended to in job interview conversation to exhibit and behave politeness. But this study may focus its lens on positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1978), by which interviewer and interviewee acknowledge in response each other's statement, comment, conversational contribution and evaluation.

On the other hand, Grice (1975) shows that there is a general cooperative principle guiding interactants and conversation that people communicate on the assumption that all participants are cooperative, which makes conversation go smoothly. In line with Grice (1975) maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relevance and Manner subsumed to Cooperative Principle, in this study I intend to investigate how the two interactants cooperate in this sense by analyzing their answers and responses. Pragmatics interpretation has been criticized for its dependence on analysts' subjectivity (Parret, 1983; Smet & Verstraete, 2006), but validity and reliability can be reduced if the pragmatic identification and interpretation proceeds systematically throughout the whole chunk of language. Therefore this study tries to carry out recognition and explication of these pragmatic features in a systemic way throughout the job interview.

## 4. Methodology

This study takes an approximately two-minute video clip of a job interview conversation between an interviewer and an interviewee, and I intend to employ a mixed method in which to quantitatively analyze the generic structure and frequency of attitude and graduation features on the one hand and to qualitatively interpret these features' functions as well as positive politeness and cooperative principles observed in the quantitative stage. In preliminary preparation, the video clip has been transcribed into words and the transcription was coded. The transcription and coding have been double examined with help of another researcher. Please see Appendix in xls format.

## 5. Findings & Discussion

### 5.1 Generic structure

I found in this job interview there are four moves occurring, the "Confirmation" stage, the "Warm-up" stage, the "Information Exchange" stage and the "Wrap-up" stage, as is shown in the Appendix. The "Warm-up" stage, the "Information Exchange" stage and the "Wrap-up" stage are in compliance with the three obligatory moves in a selection interview (Canavor & Meiorowitz, 2010). Alternatively, the "Confirmation" stage seems optional, in which the interviewee asks and checks whether it is all right for her to step in the interview room and also confirms by telling her name and the purpose of her visit.

In this interview, four steps are found within the "Information-Exchange" stage. They are concerned with the interviewer's inquiry in sequence about the interviewee's personal particulars, previous job, professional knowledge and her expectations and obligations at this target position. This findings is conducive to current studies on structuring of job interview as there are no specific steps suggested. The overall generic structure of this job interview under study is listed in Table 1.

(1) Confirmation
(2) Warm-up
(3) Information-Exchange

① Personal particulars
② Previous jobs
③ Professional knowledge
④ Job at target position & expectations
(4) Wrap-up

Table 1 Generic structure of the job interview

## 5.2 Attitude and graduation features

Attitude and graduation resources were mainly used by the interviewee when she was asked about the company for which she attended the interview and about her personal particulars. She evaluated the company's reputation and product and brand recognition as "famous" and "popular" to show her appreciation of the company's prestige and her right choice of the company as her desirable workplace. And her attitudinal appreciation is further strengthened by graduation resources "all over the world". Obviously, she put highly positive value to the company's reputation and popularity in order to build solidarity with the interviewer as representative of the company.

In the step of personal particulars inquiry, the interviewee intended and maneuvered her self-evaluation in an appropriate way that she could not overemphasize her ability and also could not understate her competence. If she overstates herself, she may give a sense of self-conceitedness, while if she underestimates herself, she may make the interviewer think she is not qualified for the position. Therefore, she used highly evaluative adjective "good" and booster "very well" as appreciation and graduation resources only in one aspect of her communicative skills. It is viewed as balanced use of appreciation and graduation features in the step of personal particulars within the "Information-Exchange" move.

On the other hand, the interviewer also employed appreciation and graduation wording to give his evaluation of the candidate's competence and background. For instance, he said "you seem to be a good candidate with so wide kinds of experience and personality", when he commented on the interviewee's ability and candidature. "Good" and "wide kinds" are obviously very positive appreciation of the interviewee's potentials; "so" and "experience and personality" are a display of strengthened force and focus on the interviewer's comment and evaluation. A good solidarity is built up between the interactants by mutual use of appreciation and graduation features, even though there is certain distance in their power relationship.

## 5.3 Positive politeness

To start with positive politeness, the appreciation and graduation mentioned above are contributions to positive politeness in the interactants' evaluation of the capability of each other. Less refutably, it is a way to acknowledge the positive face of the other participant in the interaction by means of pleasant and favorable evaluation.

Another evidence of positive politeness lies in the prompt and supportive response mutually given by each other. For instance, after the interviewee's comments on her first acquaintance with the company, the interviewer reacted promptly and positively "really? That's great!". Apparently, this response is a firm maintenance of the interviewee's positive face of desire to gain acknowledgement. Likewise, after the interviewer assured the interviewee that the company would inform her of the decision and gave his appreciation of her qualification, the interviewee candidate said "That's good!" to show her acceptance

and confirmation of the interviewer's guarantee and evaluation on her qualification.

#### 5.4 Cooperative solidarity

Undeniably, the fact that the job interview conversation proceeded smoothly and reached a pleasant outcome can be attributed to cooperation principle observed by both the interviewer and interviewee.

The interviewee's answers to the interviewer's questions start compatibly in harmony with the interviewer's interrogative inquiry. The interviewer's inquired about the interviewee's previous study and work experience. Evidently it is a way to observe cooperative principle for the interviewee to start her answer with "I" as subjects and fill predicative slots with 'material', 'cognitive' and 'behavioral' processes in SFL terms. These 'material', 'cognitive' and 'behavioral' processes completely meet the expectation of quality and relevance maxims in interaction. What she answered was sufficient and clear in terms of quantity, location, time and degree.

For example, in the Warm-up move (00:00:31-00:00:38), the interviewer asked "How **did you know** about our company?", and the interviewee echoed "**I got to know** the name of P&G...from such famous brands as Rejoice, Head & Shoulders and Pantene. Also in the summer of 1997 and 1998 I worked as a sales girl for P & G in Guang Zhou." Obviously, the interviewee used the same predicative structure to answer the question maximally to provide good quality of information. Besides, she mentioned two acquaintances closely related with the company and there was no redundant and irrelevant information.

On the other hand, the interviewer also maintained cooperative principle, which can manifest itself in his keeping all questions closely pertinent to job interview settings throughout the interview such as personal particulars, previous jobs, professional knowledge and job at target position and possible expectations. Besides, he tried to give sufficient and clear answers when the interviewee asked about when the decision would be available.

[Example]

*The interviewee: Yes, only one. When can I have your decision?*

*The interviewer: I need to discuss with other board members. We'll notify you of our decision as soon as possible. But to be honest, you seem to be a good candidate with so wide kinds of experience and personality.*

When the interviewer gave the answer, he claimed honestly to consider realist procedure and difficulty that he needed to discuss with other board members. And he gave promise to notify the candidate of their decision as soon as possible. Even though the followed information "But to be honest, you seem to be a good candidate with so wide kinds of experience and personality" may be taken as a bit irrelevant, such information is important to imply a positive response to the interviewee's question. Therefore this is what a good and cooperative answer should be from the perspective of quantity, quality, relevance and manner.

All these cases of the interviewee's observation of cooperative principle not only contribute to the smooth proceeding of the job interview conversation but also leave good impression on the interviewer that she is effective and skillful in communication.

## 6. Reference

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### **Personal Biostatement**

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