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To Dad –

still my biggest fan

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Series Editors' note

Qualitative approaches to language test validation are now making a significant impact on the field of language testing. We have tried to emphasise the important role such approaches can play in the Studies in Language Testing series, most specifically in this volume which focuses on the area of oral assessment, and in volume 5 authored by Alison Green entitled 'Verbal protocol analysis in language testing research: a handbook'.

We are pleased to be able to publish this volume by Anne Lazaraton, who has been working closely with staff at UCLES for the last ten years. Her contributions to the work of UCLES EFL have not only been stimulating in the academic sense but have also made a very valuable contribution in practical and extremely important ways. They have, for example, helped UCLES staff in the development and revision of speaking tests not only in relation to content but also in the procedures needed to monitor and evaluate how oral assessments are carried out.

Direct oral assessment is one of the cornerstones of the UCLES approach to language testing. However, it is well known that direct assessment is fraught with difficulties. At UCLES we believe it is important that we work towards a better understanding of these difficulties and seek to manage and control them in the most effective way. The Performance Testing Unit, part of the Research and Validation Group within the UCLES EFL Division is specifically charged with conducting research, and co-ordinating the research of others to further our capability to carry out direct assessment in speaking and writing most effectively. The task is on-going but we can see clearly how the quality of our assessments have improved over the years and continue to do so.

Professor Lazaraton's research, related to Cambridge EFL examinations, has engaged with a number of assessments and has built on work conducted by the UCLES EFL Division. Between 1990 and 1992 she worked closely with the UCLES team on the Cambridge Assessment of Spoken English (CASE). This assessment was developed largely as a research vehicle and Professor Lazaraton's work focused on using a qualitative discourse analytic approach to further understanding of the speaking test process with particular reference to the role of the examiner. The work subsequently contributed significantly to the development of monitoring procedures for a wide range of Cambridge examinations.

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The work on CASE was followed by work on the Certificate in Advanced English (CAE), situated at level 4 in the Cambridge/ALTE level system. Specifically this research was intended to evaluate interlocutor adherence to the CAE *interlocutor frame* and analyze interlocutor speech behaviour, which led to the development of the CAE Examiner evaluation template. Professor Lazaraton then conducted similar work in relation to the Key English Test (KET) at level 1 in the Cambridge/ALTE level system and comparative research across the two levels.

Professor Lazaraton also carried out a number of studies that focus on *candidate* behaviour, as opposed to examiner behaviour, in speaking tests. This work focused on CAE, the First Certificate in English (FCE) and The International English Language Testing System (IELTS). The work on candidate behaviour started with a CAE study that was followed by one on FCE, the most widely taken UCLES EFL examination. Professor Lazaraton investigated the relationship between the task features in the four parts of the FCE Speaking test and candidate output in terms of speech production. The project has helped to provide data for the possible development of a task specific rating scheme for FCE. In 1997 Professor Lazaraton was asked to work on IELTS again with particular reference to candidate language. This work made a valuable contribution to the revision of the IELTS Speaking Test, which was introduced in 2001.

Anne Lazaraton has always understood the tensions that exist between researching issues in language testing and delivering reliable and valid language tests. While situated firmly on the research end of the language testing continuum, her energy, enthusiasm and openness have meant that she has been able to share much of enormous value with us. Her work emphasises the value of building research into the on-going validation and improvement of language testing tools and procedures leading to assessments of enhanced quality.

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Preface

Language testers have generally come to recognize the limitations of traditional statistical methods for validating oral language tests and have begun to consider more innovative approaches to test validation, approaches that promise to illuminate the assessment process itself, rather than just assessment outcomes (i.e., ratings). One such approach is conversation analysis (or CA), a rigorous empirical methodology developed by sociologists, which employs inductive methods in order to discover and describe the recurrent, systematic properties of conversation, including sequential organization, turntaking, repair, preference structure, and topic management. CA offers a systematic approach for analyzing spoken interaction from a qualitative perspective, allowing one to make observations about a stretch of talk while at the same time interacting with it. One of its unique strengths as an analytic tool is its ability to validate intuitions about data; in terms of oral test validation, the results that emerge from such analyses make sense not just to researchers who undertake them, but to the test stakeholders, including those who develop, administer, and validate the tests, as well as the teachers who prepare the students who take the tests. In recent years, conversation analysts have turned their attention to various forms of 'institutional talk', including news interviews, job interviews, and standardized testing; CA has also been applied successfully to several EFL Speaking Tests by this author. Unfortunately, conversation analysis principles and techniques remain unfamiliar to many applied linguists, and this lacuna in understanding makes communication about such analyses and their applications to language testing difficult, if not impossible. This book aims to provide language testers with a background in the conversation analytic framework and a fuller understanding of what is entailed in using conversation analysis in the specific context of oral language test validation.

It is important to note that one cannot 'learn to do' conversation analysis by reading about it, although one may learn a great deal about its principles and methods from this book. Although not a 'how-to' text, practice analysis exercises are provided which enable the reader to become familiar with the conversation analytic data transcription system, and to have an opportunity to view and to analyze authentic oral test data and anecdotal accounts of them using the procedures described.

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Chapter 1 overviews the recent accomplishments and current concerns of language testers, especially with respect to oral language assessment. It highlights some of the outcome-based work on speaking test validation, but suggests that this work has not, and in fact, cannot, shed light on the assessment process itself; qualitative research, especially discourse analysis, seems an especially well-suited approach for this task. The chapter concludes by reviewing a number of recent discourse-based studies on oral assessment.

Chapter 2 summarizes relevant literature on the conversation analytic framework, focusing on the organizing principles of interaction (turntaking, repair, sequence structure, preference structure, topic organization), the methodological considerations of the approach (including the analytic units 'turn', 'adjacency pair', and 'sequence'), its application to other forms of interaction (specifically, 'institutional talk'), and some potential shortcomings of the approach. Since one of the major goals of the text is to introduce readers to the historical roots, empirical findings, and current concerns of CA, numerous original sources are summarized and cited, so the reader can follow up on these topics.

The third chapter focuses on the initial stages of undertaking conversation analysis, including data collection, selection, and transcription. A number of points to consider when collecting data for a conversation analysis of speaking test data are made, including the type of equipment to use, camera/tape player set up, participant configuration, etc. This section also covers issues related to the potential intrusiveness of recording equipment and its effects on candidate and examiner performance. Additional suggestions are made about how much data to collect to ensure that a sufficient sample will be available for analysis. Also, criteria for selecting a sample for analysis are presented, if it is unfeasible, difficult, or impossible to transcribe and/or use all the data collected.

With respect to transcription, some philosophical issues in the representation of speech are noted: e.g., that any transcription system is selective in scope, and a 'perfect' transcript cannot be produced. Although there are numerous transcription schemes available to the researcher, the preferred conversation analytic system devised by Gail Jefferson (as in Atkinson and Heritage 1984; see Appendix 2) is presented. Tips for selecting transcribing equipment, setting up the page format, using the notation, and adapting the transcription system are put forward. Ideally, it is the researcher who produces the transcripts, since the analysis really begins in earnest with the emerging transcript at this point in the research cycle. It is also important to remember that the analyst should not rely on a reading of the transcript alone, since transcripts are always an imperfect reflection of how the actual interaction 'sounds'; they should always be used in conjunction with the tapes

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from which they were transcribed. Finally, it is at this stage that previously formulated research questions may take shape, may be discarded as uninteresting, or may suggest new avenues of inquiry to pursue. Because it may be necessary to hire a transcriber, training issues are discussed. This section also deals with transcribing and representing languages other than English as well as nonverbal behaviour.

Chapter 4 covers issues related to the analysis and presentation of speaking test data, once they have been collected and transcribed. The chapter begins by considering six methodological decisions the conversation analyst generally makes: using real, recorded data; segmenting the discourse into turns; looking at data in an unmotivated fashion; analyzing single cases, collections, and deviant cases; overlooking sociological variables; and refraining from coding and counting the data. CA insists on the use of real, recorded data, so that discourse produced in experiments or verbal protocols, and examples that are created or recalled from memory, have no place in this approach. Unlike some other discourse analytic approaches, conversation analysis operates at the unit of the turn, the adjacency pair, and the sequence, as discussed in Chapter 2. Conversation analysts normally eschew the explicit statement of research questions and/or hypotheses, although the researcher may have in mind some general areas of interest that the data may inform and some intuitions about potential outcomes of the analysis. One reason that formal questions are not normally posed before the data are collected is that preconceived ideas may cause the researcher to overlook other interesting or relevant features of the talk. Even if the analysis is intended to replicate a previous one, care must be taken not to be forced into a priori interpretations which were gleaned from another context. The conversation analyst engages in 'single case analysis' with an eye towards developing a collection of standard, marginal, and deviant case examples. Like other forms of qualitative research, CA can best be described in terms of a recursive analytic cycle rather than a linear approach. A solid analysis requires and is based on repeated, prolonged engagement with the conversational materials. Two related issues are covered in this section, the use of coding schemes and the quantification of data. As a rule, conversation analysts do not apply existing discourse analytic coding schemes to their data, although they do attempt to use knowledge gained from related studies (within the same analytic framework) to understand some new data. Secondly, conversation analysts do not quantify their data to determine frequencies, proportions, ratios, or other descriptive statistics that may seem useful or necessary. The justification for this stance is summarized from an important paper by Schegloff (1993) on this issue.

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The second section of the chapter deals with actual analysis of speaking test data. First, five 'analytic tools' suggested by Pomerantz and Fehr (1997) are presented and exemplified with two data fragments. These tools include practice in identifying the boundaries of interesting sequences, characterizing the actions being accomplished by each turn in the sequence, determining how patterns of turntaking, packaging of actions, and timing of turns lead the participants (and the analyst) to certain understandings about what is 'going on' in the sequence, and relating these understandings to the particular roles, relationships, and identities that participants bring to the interaction. Then, several approaches to analyzing monologic data, where the speech of only one speaker is available or of importance, are illustrated. These approaches include rhetorical analysis of narratives and descriptions, functional analysis of a comparison–contrast task, and a structural analysis of linguistic features.

Once the researcher has undertaken an analysis, it is presented in the form of 'argument from example', a procedure which is defined and justified. Decisions need to be made about how to present the data to others who may or may not be familiar with transcribed spoken data, or with the particular form the transcribed data take. Sufficient sequential context for the feature of interest is necessary; it is unwise to shorten segments of talk to save space, if relevant analytic material is omitted. The sheer amount of data produced in conversation analysis (and in qualitative research in general) challenges the researcher to select data judiciously for presentation (unless, of course, the researcher has the luxury of being able to present all of them). Suggestions for selecting cases for presentation, formatting a research report, and evaluating other CA studies are made. The chapter concludes with five practice exercises based on actual data fragments that are either interactive or monologic. Appendix 3 contains guidance for approaching these problems.

Having laid the analytic foundation in previous chapters, Chapter 5 describes several EFL Speaking Test validation studies that employed conversation analytic techniques. After a brief review of Messick's theory of test validity, the Cambridge approach to EFL Speaking Tests is overviewed, followed by a series of validation studies that are summarized in terms of their goals, methods, results, and implications. The first set of studies analyses examiner behaviour in particular Cambridge EFL Speaking Tests (CASE, CAE, and KET), while the latter analyzed candidate behaviour on FCE and IELTS.

The final chapter reiterates the themes presented in the book, re-evaluates the potential contribution of conversation analysis to speaking test validation, and discusses other qualitative methods which are potentially appropriate for test validation tasks.

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