GAMBITS : CONVERSATIONAL STRATEGY SIGNALS USED BY NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH IN NATURAL CONVERSATION

A. Soerjowardhana
(donyswardhana@yahoo.com)
Dian Nuswantoro University of Semarang

Abstract:A verbal spoken communication (conversation) is considered successful when the speaker and listener can understand each other. Unlike children who easily master their native language, adult foreign language learners, although they have learned and practiced the foreign language for years, are in general not able to use the language even for basic communication purposes. To get the success of a conversation people can use gambits (words and phrases that serve regulate the smooth flow of a conversational talk). Although gambits do not have meaning in the traditional sense of the words, they are a very important part of conversational behavior.In this study the data were obtained from a conversation between an Indonesian girl and a Dutch man who was staying in Indonesia for a visit.TheIndonesian girl had an assignment to interview a foreigner who was staying in Indonesia. The interviewer's English is in intermediate level. The finding shows that the four main functions of gambits are demonstrated in the conversation, consisting mainly state consciousness signal which is demonstrated twelve times, semantic framing (eight times), communication control signals (six times), and the last signaling of social context (twice).

 Key words: conversational strategy signals, state consciousness signal, semantic framing, communication control signals, signaling of social context

This small research is to study how an Indonesian learner of English is talking to a tourist Dutch man who is not a native speaker of English. The reason for concentrating on gambits, to me is that on the nature of adult foreign language learning, as Robert Bley-Vroman (1988) points out, is characterized by failure rather than by success. Unlike children who easily master their native language, adult foreign language learners, although they have learned and

practiced for years, are in general not able to use the foreign language even for basic communication purposes.

Since this study concerns with gambits so the definitions of communication strategies can be cited. Some authors have proposed the following definitions of communication strategies:

1. Faerch and Kasper (1983:36) define communication strategy as "potentially conscious plan for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal"

2. Corder, in Faerch and Kasper (1983:16) defines communication strategies as "a systemic technique employed by a speaker to express his meaning when faced with some difficulty." Difficulty in this discussion refers to speaker's inadequate command of the language when he is involved in an interaction.

3. Brown (1987:180) defines communication strategies as "the conscious employment by verbal or non verbal mechanism for communicating an idea when precise linguistic forms are for some reason not available to the learner at that point in communication."

4. Stern (1983) in Bialystock (1990) defines communication strategies as " techniques of coping with difficulties in communicating in animperfectly known as second language."

5. Tarone (1983:65) defines communication strategies as " a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared."

6. Tarone et al. (1983:5) define communication strategies as " a systemic attempt by the learner to express or decode meaning in the target language, in situation where the appropriate systemic target language rules have not been formed."

Those definitions converge on three features, namely: *problematicity, consciousness, and intentionality.* However, Celce-Murcia et al (1995:26) claim that working on communication strategies has typically highlighted three functions of strategy use from three different perspectives.

a. *Psycholinguistic perspective:* Communication strategies are verbal plans used by speakers to overcome problems in the planning and execution stages of reaching a communicative goal: e.g avoiding trouble spots or compensating for not knowing a vocabulary item.

b. *Interactional perspective:* Communication Strategies involve appeals for help as well as other cooperative problem-solving behaviours which occur after some problem has surfaced during the course of communication, that is, various tyoes of negotiation of meaning and repair mechanisms.

c. Communication continuity/maintenance perspective: Communication strategies are means of keeping the communication channel open in the face of communication diffculties, and playing for time to think and to make (alternative) speech plans.

So it is important to note that all the above functions are related to communication *problems* and *difficulties*, following traditional conceptualizations, which posited problem orientedness as a central feature of communication strategies.

Therefore, the list and definitions of communication strategies by Tarone are as follow :

Paraphrase

1. *Approximation :* Use of a single TL vocabulary item or structure, which the learner know is nor correct, but shich shares enough semantic features in common with the desired item to satisfy the speaker. (e.g. *Pipe* for *water pipe*)

2. *Word Coinage :* The learner makes up a new word in order to communicate a desired concept (e.g. *Airball* for *balloon*)

3. *Circumlocution :* The learner describes the characteristics of elements of the object or action instead of using the appropriate TL item or structure.

Borrowing

4. *Literal translation* : the learner translates word for word grom the native language (e.g: *He invites him to drink* for T*hey toast one another*)

5. *Language switch :* The learner uses the native language term without bothering to translate (e.g. *Balon* for *balloon, tirril* for *caterpillar*)

6. *Appeal for assistance* : The learner asks for the correct term (e.g. "what is this? What called?")

7. *Mime* : The learner uses non-verbal strategies in place of lexical item or action (e.g. clapping one's hands to illustrate applause)

C. Avoidance

8. *Topic avoidance* : The learner simply trie mid-s not to talk about concepts for which the TL item or structure is not known.

9. *Message abandonment* : The learner begins to talk about a concept but is unable to continue and stop in mid-utterance.

10. *Repair* (Richards and Schmidt 1983) : "Effort made by the speaker or the hearer to correct trouble spots in conversations."

11. *Repetition* (Tarone & Yule 1987) : "The speaker repeats parts of utterances before getting to the desired terms."

12. *Overelaboration / overexplicitness* (Tarone & Yule 1987) : "The great use of detail in conveying a message or answering more than required."
13. *Comprehension Indicator* (Richards and Schmidt 1983) : "Responses used to indicate that what is being said by the speaker is understood. Implicitly these are signs to let the speaker go on with his/her presentation and also as an expression of appreciation to make the conversation more fluid."
14. *Clarification request* (Richards and Schmidt 1983) : "An explicit or implicit request to the speaker to explain, or clarify what has been said."
15. *Fillers, and gambits* (Edmonson & House 1981) : " words and phrases that serve regulate the smooth flow of a conversational talk. Although they do not have meaning in the traditional sense of the word, they are a very important part of conversational behavior."

Gambits are words or phrases which help a speaker to express what (s)he is trying to say. For example , gambits are used to introduce a topic of conversation; to agree or disagree; to link what the speaker has to say to what somebody has just said; to respond to what the speaker has heard. Gambits do not express opinions; they may only introduce the opinion so in one sense gambits have very little meaning. On the other hand , if a speaker never use gambits in his or her conversation, other people will think (s)he is very direct, abrupt, and even rude - they will get a wrong picture of the speaker as people. So gambits are full of meaning. They show the speaker's attitude to the person (s)he is speaking to and to what someone is saying. (Keller & Warner 1988). In other words , Edmonson & House suggested - as mentioned above -that gambits are words and phrases that serve to regulate the smooth flow of a conversational talk. Although they do not have *meaning* in the traditional sense of the words, they are a very important part of conversational behavior.

Expressions like *the main point is, anyway, um, er, well, indeed, I mean, what do you call that, tell you what, you know,* etc function as "discourse lubricants" (Edmonson & House, 1981). Such expressions serve a variety of functions, such as to introduce a topic, to structure turn-taking, to indicate speaker's readiness to receive some information or to avoid embarrassing silence. Although pauses are commonly observed in spontaneous observed, people generally consider long silence in conversation unacceptable. It is interesting to note that participants in conversation are responsible to fill in any gaps that may hinder the smooth flow to talk. The other function of gambits is to buy time. Unlike a writer who has time to plan, write, revise his written work, a

speaker is constrained by the demand of the situation to produce language without benefit of time. *A speaker has to plan, produce and repair his speech more or less simultaneously.* (S)he can only gain some valuable planning time by using gambits. So gambits will make his/her English sound more natural, more confident, and makeher/him easier to talk to. Finally (s)he will not be misunderstood. Four main functions of gambits can be distinguished into semantic framing, social signaling, state-of-consciousness signaling, and communicative signaling. These four major functions are used in analyzing the data presented. Each functions are illustrated as follows:

Semantic Framing

Gambits most commonly refer to semantic information. They do not signal specific meaning as propositions or idioms but a general frame within such meaning can be conveyed. Gambits serve to signal that the stretch of utterance to follow is to be taken in a specific manner, for example as a piece of unpleasant realism or an opinion. For instance, the statement "in my opinion, he is right" contains the specific meaning, "He is right", a meaning which is qualified by the gambit as an opinion. This function of gambits here is named "semantic framing". There are some categories can be named "openers" (Keller 1979) since they can be used to open a new topic or subtopic without reference to the previous topic. The remaining ones are called "links" since they are likely used for linking a topic under discussion into a topic or subtopic to be opened up.

1. Major semantic field indicators
   - Congruent major semantic field, e.g: I have a question on that ….
   - Incongruent major semantic field (a disgression), e.g: This reminds me…

2. Various aspects of a topic
   - A list : Beginning, e.g : first of all
     Middle, e.g : Second, next, another thing is
     End, e.g : And finally, and the last thing is
   - A main aspect, e.g : The main thing is
   - A surprising aspect, e.g : Believe it or not
   - An unpleasant aspect, e.g : To be realistic
   - An emphasized aspect, e.g : The main thing is

3. Opinion

- Guessing, e.g : My guess is
- An opinion, e.g : I'm pretty sure that
- A conviction, e.g : I honestly feel
- A personal viewpoint, e.g : To my mind, I personally believe
- A personal evaluation, e.g : As far as I can tell, as I see it
- Personal Circumstances, e.g : In my case, what I'm concerned
- Confidential information, e.g : Just between you and me

4. Action Strategy
   - A suggestion, e.g : Why don't you do the following
   - A plan, e.g : What we have in mind is, here's is what we'll do

5. Subject-expansion
   - Expanding a point, e.g : As far as that is concerned
   - Adding items, e.g : And another thing , what's more
   - Giving a reason, e.g : The reason why, for the reason
   - Explaining a result, e.g : As a result, consequently
   - Positive Contingency, e.g : In case of, by the time, as soon as
   - Negative Contingency, e.g : Unless
   - Restatement, e.g: What I mean is, what you're saying is
   - Appearance and reality, e.g : You may think ….. but in fact

6. Subject-evaluation
   - Reservations, e.g : Yes, but consider, but the problem is
   - Taking into account, e.g : Keeping in my mind
   - Seeing the other side, e.g : All the same, but then again

7. Argumentation
   - Generalization
   - High frequency, e.g : Most of the time, again and again
     = As a rule,e.g : In general, ordinarily
     = Low frequency, e.g : Once in a while, every now and then
   - Exceptions, e.g : As an exception
   - Examples, e.g : As an example, for one thing
   - Summarizng, e.g : In short, Summing up

The Signaling of Social Context

There are some other gambits, which is used to signal a speaker's wish to place him/herself and his/her listeners into certain social structural formations.

Two main types of social signals are "turn taking" and "social role". The first social signals might be used to signal a wish to take turn in the conversation, to get another participant to answer, or to express a wish to end the conversation. Social role or status signals is a set of signals that can only be used by a speaker if she/he occupies, or claims to occupy a particular social role.

State-of-consciousness signals

State-of-consciousness signals focus on what the speaker is ready to do, say, think, and the like. On the other hand, communication control signals serve to assure that listener is in state of consciousness permitting the reception of the message. There are four types of signals as follow :

a. (Do you understand/hear me?) : Is that clear? ; Are you following me?
b. (I understood/heard you) : Okay; Sure
c. (I did not understand/hear you) : Pardon me ?
d. (You must have misunderstood me/not heard me right) : That's not what I said.
    "Hearing" and "understanding" clearly denote different segments of the communication channel.

METHOD

The interviewer is an Indonesian girl and her English is in intermediate level. She had an assignment to interview a foreigner who was staying in Indonesia. So she had made some preparations for the interview. On the other hand the interviewee had not known that he would be interviewed so he did not have any preparations for it. The interviewer happened to meet a Dutch man who was staying in Indonesia for a visit. The conversation took about fifteen minutes in a Mall in Semarang and it was very informal since they just talked about the interviewee's background and purpose to visit Indonesia. In the conversation both the interviewer and the interviewee used their conversation strategy signals, their own communication strategy and tolerance to keep the communication understandable for both of them. The whole conversation was tape-recorded and then transcribed, but only some of it was used for this investigation.

General Characterization of the Conversation

The conversation was in a natural and informal way. The interviewee could express freely what he wanted to say in English. It seems that the interviewee's English was better than the interviewer's. The interviewee was

talking naturally and the interviewer mainly understood what the interviewee said, gave good responds and was able to talk much more than the interviewer did. The tempo was generally not normal. Both of them produced many gambits such as *"...er...."* to regulate the smooth flow of the conversation. It seems that it is better to keep the conversation going (though without saying anything much) rather than to allow intolerance silence.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Both the interviewer and interviewee used their conversational strategies signals (The Four Main Functions of Gambits). It can be seen on this table :

Table 1. Conversation Strategies Used in the Conversation

The Four Main Functions of Gambits:			Total
1. Semantic framing	a. Gambits of introducing a topic as a main aspect b. Incongruent major semantic field c. Subject expansion (= restatement)	6 1 1	8
2. The Signaling of Social Context	a. Signaling the interviewee to take turn b. Indicating that the interviewer wants to end her interview	1 1	2
3. State-of-consciousness signals	a. Sharing an opinion with the interviewer b. Sharing an opinion with the interviewee c. The interviewer is ready to receive more information d. Ready to provide information e. Sharing an emotion with the interviewer	3 4 1 2	12
4. Communication control signals	a. The interviewer assures that she receives the message b. The interviewee assures that he receives the message c. The interviewee assures that he understands the message	3 2 1	6

Conversational strategies signals mainly used in the conversation are *state of consciousness signals*, which are used twelve times during the conversation. It can be identified that there are five different states under state of consciousness signal, they are as follows :
a. Sharing an opinion with the interviewer (three times)
- line   4 : *Yes.... I'm with family here in Semarang*
- line 21 : *I said in Semarang*
- line 35 : *Yes ...I visited...*

b. Sharing an opinion with the interviewee (four times)

- line   7 : *You said that you* …
- line 27 : *You said your parents lived here* …
- line 44 :*Emmm,so you know about Indonesian people*
- line 57 :*So you like..er..*

  c. The interviewer is ready to receive more information (once)
- line 29 : *So your parents have many memories?* …. *(pause)…*

  d. Ready to provide information (twice)
- line 37 :*Well, this house has gone of course, yeach!*
- line   4 :*Yes…. I'm with family here in Semarang*

  e. Sharing an emotion with the interviewer (twice)
- line 48 :*That's ashamed..*
- line 49 :*So, I like the people*

In the conversation *Semantic framing* is demonstrated eight times. There are six gambits of introducing a topic as a main aspect demonstrated by the interviewer:

- line   1 : *Can I know your name sir?*

- line 14 : *..can I know where do you come from, sir* ?

- line 16 :*er… what do you do in Indonesia ?*

- line 40 : *And what other countries..er..*

- line 51 :*Do you like ..er.. Java's food ?*

- line 53 :*What ..er.. Java.. Javanesse food do you like ?*

By using gambits of this section the interviewer tries to change the topic of the conversation. It can also be identified that there is one subject expansion – restatement by saying *"I mean…"* to assure her question about where the interviewee's parents live in Semarang. It is also evident from the conversation that there is one incongruent major semantic field – initiation that is demonstrated by the interviewee as can be seen on lines 38-39 : *er..good to see few things for me..because…for me these things are roots…*). By using this strategy he wants to say that what he has seen in Semarang reminds him of his roots. On the other hand, I have been able to identify two types of *the signaling of social context* demonstrated by the interviewer such as signaling the interviewee to take turn (e.g.: *What do you think about Indonesian people?)* and

indicating that she wants to end her interview (e.g.: *Okay, so thank you…er… I can interview you.*) as we can see lines 45 and 62. As the focus of communication control signals is to assure that the listener is in a state of consciousness permitting the reception of the message, so it can be identified that there are three types of communication control signals (instead of four) as follow :

    f. The interviewer assures that she receives the message (demonstrated three times),   - line   3 :*Your name is Jacob*….*er*…
       - line 10 :*With your wife*….
       - line 18 : … *for holiday*.

    g. The interviewee assures that he receives the message (demonstrated twice)
       - line 15 :*Yes, I come from* …
       - line 17 :*In …in Indonesia I'm here right now* …

    h. The interviewee assures that he understands the message (demonstrated once)
       - line 52 :*Javanesse !?*

So it was found out that the four main functions of gambits are demonstrated in the conversation, consisting mainly the state of consciousness signal, which is demonstrated twelve times. The interviewer demonstrates this signal more than the interviewee. The detail analysis of the conversation are as follows :

1.   I (Indonesian as interviewer) : **Can I know** your name sir?
      • *semantic framing (introducing a topic as a main aspect)*

2.   D (Dutch as interviewee): My name is Jacob

3.   I : **Your name is Jacob**….er… Are you alone in Semarang or with your family ?
      • *communication control signals (assuring that she receives the message)*

4.   D : **Yes**…. I'm with family here in Semarang
      • *State of consciousness signal (sharing an opinion with the interviewer)*

5. I : er…. Where do you live in Semarang?

6. D : er… I live in Semarang, here in the hotel Merbabu jalan Pemuda.

7. I : **You said that you** … er… here in Semarang with your….family…er… are you with your parents or your daughter or your son?
    - *state of consciousness signal (sharing an opinion with the interviewee)*

8. D : I'm here with my parents and my wife.

9. I : **With your wife**…ehmmm… what do you do in your country? What's job do you do in your country?
    - *communication control signal (assuring that she receives the message)*

10. D: In my country…er…er… I work…er…as a …er…advisor for the government…a regional government.

11. I : er…**can I know where do you come from, sir** ?
    - *Semantic framing (introducing a topic as a main aspect)*

12. D : **Yes, I come from…**er… Holland and I … er… live in the town of Livenstad
    - *communication control signal (assuring that he receives the message)*

13. I : **er… what do you do in Indonesia** ?
    - *semantic framing (introducing a topic as a main aspect)*

14. D : **In…in Indonesia I'm here right now** … er … for holiday.
    - *communication control signal (assuring that he receives the message)*

15. I : er… your … **for holiday**. How long have you been in Semarang ?
    - *communication control signal (assuring that she receives the message)*

16.   D : I've been in Semarang … er… around three weeks. More or less
          three weeks.

17.   I : And what place you visited in Semarang, sir ?

18.   D : **I said in Semarang** … er… I visited some Malls. Some … er…
        tokos, yach ?! Some … er… pasars and … er … we … we walk around
        a bit.
        - *State of consciousness signal (sharing an opinion with the
          interviewer)*

19.   I : er … What do you like … er … from Semarang ?

20.   D : er… er… Semarang … er … is … er … not so … er … not so much
        … er ..er..
         visit … er…er … town for … er … tourists cause it is important for me
         to visit it because my parents have lived here.

21.   I : You said **your parents lived here** … er… where they lived …er ..in
        Semarang ?
        - *state of consciousness signal (sharing an opinion with the
          interviewee)*

22.   D : My parents have lived in Semarang. And they lived in jalan dokter
        Sucipto.

        I : **So your parents have many memories?** …. (pause)… When your
        parents … … er … live Semarang ?
        - *state of consciousness signal (the interviewer is ready to receive
          more information)*

23.   D : My parents lived here in Semarang…er…for the moment they were
        born..er..
        until..er..year of the war…er..about..about twenty to twenty two years.

24.   I : You know where your parent live in Semarang? **I mean**..er..when..
        where they in this town ?
        - *semantic framing (subject expansion-restatement)*

25. D : **Yes** …I visited…I…visited a house where my parents was..er..born and grewup.
- *state of consciousness signal (sharing an opinion with the interviewer)*

26. And I've seen..er.. the school and…er..the house where my father ..er.. lived..er..
was gone. **Well**, this house has gone of course, yeach! It's about fifty or sixty   *state of consciousness signal (ready to provide information)*
years ago… so..of course..it's..**er..good to see few things for me.. because…**
for me these things are roots. Before my parents is a soldier.
- s*emantic framing (incongruent major semanticfield)*

27. I : **And what other countries**..er..do you visited..er..except Semarang ?
- *semantic framing (introducing a topic as a main aspect)*

28. D : I visited..er..Jakarta, Bogor..er..for..Bandung..for short a while..er..of course

29. Semarang and ..er..we made some trips to..er..Jepara..er..Jogjakarta..er..

30. Borobudur and..er.. Prambanan.

31. I : <u>Emmm</u>, so you know about Indonesian people ..er..
- *state consciousness signal (sharing an opinion with the interviewee)*
What do you think about Indonesian people ?
- *signalling of social context (signalling the interviewee to take turn)*

32. D : I like Indonesian people ! Especially on the country side because…
they are relax and friendly and they just also the same with people in the city.
but some are more stressed. **That's ashamed**..it's..It's happening all over the
- *state of consciousness (sharing an emotion with the interviewer)*
World. In Holland people in city are also more stressed. **So, I like the people** in
- *state of consciousness (sharing an emotion with the interviewer)*

er… Indonesia very much.

33.   I : **Do you like ..er.. Java's food ?**
- *semantic framing (introducing a topic as a main aspect)*

34.   D : **Javanesse !?** Jav…Indonesian food, Java food…I like it very much ! Yes!
- *comunication control signal (assuring that he understands the message)*

35.   I : **What ..er.. Java.. Javanesse food do you like ?**
- *semantic framing (introducing a topic as a main aspect)*

36.   D : Well, ..it is sate and..er..er..ikan! ..er..ikan? Ya..yes!..er..yes all kinds of food
…so it is..well! My wife doesn't like durian but I like it. And.. er.. mangga..er..
rambutan.. well just that kind of stuff I like it very much.

37.   I : **So you like**..er..foods in Semarang..er..when will you leave from Semarang ?
- *state of consciousness (sharing an emotion with the interviewee)*
As it is near Christmas.

38.   D : We will leave here with in..er..with in a week in a few days and then we go
Back to Holland and then..er.. we'll have few days .. er.. to rest after flight
..too long flight and..er..well then we go back to our work..vacation is over..

39.   I : **Okey, so thank you**..er..I can interview you and..and..I hope you have a nice day. thank you !
- *signaling of social context (indicating that she wants to end her interview)*

45.   D : Thank you

CONCLUSION

This small research reveals how conversational strategy signals have been used in an oral communication between non-native speakers of English in a personal view. The investigation found out that both parties (interviewer and interviewee) have tried to build a mutual understanding in the conversation by demonstrating their own conversational strategy signals. The analysis of the data has shown that the four main functions of gambits are demonstrated in the conversation, consisting mainly state consciousness signal which is demonstrated twelve times, semantic framing (eight times), communication control signals (six times), and the last signaling of social context (twice). In a conversation we may focus on correctness or comprehensibility and particular types of conversational strategies use are necessary. Last but not least this small research might teach us how conversational strategy signals are demonstrated in a conversation to regulate the smooth of a conversation talk. In a conversation a speaker has to plan, produce and repair his/her speech more or less simultaneously since long silence in conversation is sometimes uncomfortable, or even unacceptable.

REFERENCES

Bley – Vroman, R. 1988. The Fundamental Character of Foreign Language Learning. In W. Rutherford and M.S. Smith (Eds), *Grammar and Second Language Teaching: A Book of Readings* (pp. 19-30). New York: Newbury House.

Brown, H. Douglas. 1987. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc.

Celce-Muria.M., Dornyei. Z, Thrurrell. S. 1995. Communicative Competence : A Pedagogically Motivated Model with Content Specifications. *Issues in Applied Linguistics.* Volume 6 Number 2. December 1995

Clause, F and Kasper, G. 1983. *Strategies in Interlanguage Communication.* New York: Longman Inc

Edmonson, W & House, J. 1981. *Let's Talk and Talk about it: A Pedagogic Interactional Grammar of English*. Munchen: Urban and Schwarzenberg

Faerch C. and G Kasper. 1983. *Strategies in Interlaguage Communication.* New York: Longman Group Limited

Fairlough, N. 1992. *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press

Keller, E. 1979. *Gambits: Conversational Strategy Signals*. Journal Pragmatic 3, 219-238

Keller, E. & Warner Sylvia T. 1983. *Conversation Gambits*. Ottawa: Language Teaching Publications

Richards, JC. 1985. *The context of Language Teaching.* In Gusti Astika (eds)

Tarone, E. 1983. *Some Thoughts on The Notion of Communication Strategy*. In C. Faerch and G Kasper (eds)

Tarone, E., Andrew D Cohen and Guy Dumas. 1983. *A closer look at some interlanguage terminology: a framework for communication strategies.* In C Faerch and G Kasper