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1 Assessing second language pragmatics: An overview and introductions

Gabriele Kasper & Steven J. Ross

Pragmatics is a key domain in language assessment. For more than two decades, advances have been made in conceptualizing the domain, developing assessment instruments, and applying current methods of data treatment to the analysis of test performance. This book, the first edited volume on the topic, brings together empirical studies on a range of well-established and innovative strategies for the assessment of pragmatic ability in a second language. In this introductory chapter, we will first offer an overview of key concepts, situate theoretical models of pragmatic competence within the larger frameworks of communicative language ability and interactional competence, and consider the relationship between pragmatics and language testing. We will then introduce the chapters, organized into two Parts. The chapters assembled in Part I investigate assessment instruments and practices for a variety of assessment constructs, purposes, and contexts, guided by different theoretical outlooks on pragmatics. Part II comprises studies of interaction in different forms of oral proficiency interview, conducted from the perspective of conversation analysis.

1 Key concepts

1.1 Assessment

Mislevy and colleagues describe assessment as “a machine for reasoning about what students know, can do, or have accomplished, based on a handful of things they say, do, or make in particular settings” (Mislevy, Steinberg, & Almond, 2003, p. 4). In the context of applied linguistics, Chapelle and Brindley specify that “‘assessment’ refers to the act of collecting information and making judgments about a language learner’s knowledge of a language and ability to use it” (2002, p. 268). Assessment has a broader purview than testing. Assessment processes typically involve subjective interpretation in real time. For example, in classroom-based assessment (Rea-Dickins, 2008; Ishihara, this volume) and dynamic assessment (Lantolf & Poehner, 2011; van Compernolle, this volume),
assessment is an integral part of the instructional process and serves to support student learning, based on the teacher’s or peers’ ongoing appraisal. In the case of oral proficiency interviews, the inter-subjectivity of the interlocutor and candidate is produced in a co-constructed discourse that is assessed later by a trained rater. Testing, in contrast, starts with subjective decisions about content sampling, as well as considerable subjectivity in the test moderation process before a test is deemed ready for objective scoring. Tests are generally of knowledge accessible to declarative memory, while assessments are of performances that integrate knowledge into action.

1.2 Second language
Following convention in applied linguistics, the category “second language” includes languages of any status in a person’s linguistic repertoire, whether foreign, second, heritage language, or lingua franca, regardless of the order in which the person has learned that particular language, how strong their command of the language is, how important it is for them, or how much and for what purposes they currently use it. Since many people learn multiple languages throughout their lives, some of them concurrently, it may be difficult to establish a meaningful order of a person’s various languages, and in some cases the “second language” may be the language they learned first. Depending on assessment context and purpose, it can be important to distinguish the status that the target language has in the test takers’ linguistic repertoire. To take an example from this volume, Youn and Brown investigate whether the status of Korean as a foreign language or as a heritage language influences the test takers’ performance of speech acts in Korean. Finally, languages may change status in the lives of societies and individuals. In persons’ language biographies, what started to be learned as a foreign language becomes a second language when the person uses that language in the target environment. Two common settings for such shifts in the domain of education are study abroad contexts and study at English-medium universities. In this volume, Tominaga examines how a candidate in oral proficiency interviews changes his production of extended turns and stories in Japanese as a foreign language after study abroad in Japan. Seedhouse compares the interactional architecture of the IELTS Speaking Test, the most frequently used test of proficiency in spoken English for international applicants to British universities, with the organization of L2 classrooms and university content courses. For many of the candidates in the test, English is used as a foreign language in their home language classrooms, and the test examines whether they are prepared to use English as a second language to participate in instructional activities at the university.

1.3 Pragmatics
In the applied linguistics and language assessment literature, pragmatics is often described as the study of “meaning in context” or “language
use in a social context”. On this definition, pragmatics includes such context-sensitive language use as the co-variation of postvocalic (r) with speaker’s social class, gender, and attention to form (Labov, 1966/2006) or the Northern cities vowel shift (e.g., Labov, 1994). Such a view is fully compatible with the scope of the pragmatics component in the Bachman and Palmer model (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010), the standard framework of language ability as a target construct for language assessment, about which we will have more to say below. As the examples indicate, the broad conception of pragmatics that many applied linguists favor renders pragmatics virtually co-extensive with sociolinguistics. In light of the history of pragmatics in North American applied linguistics, this is probably no coincidence. Before the second half of the 1980s, work that focused on language-mediated action sorted under sociolinguistics and discourse analysis in North American second language research and education. Disciplinary boundaries are, of course, matters of institutional politics as much as of intellectual traditions, and this is not the place to engage with either. In the context of language assessment, formulating the global assessment construct as a person’s ability to use language for specifiable practical purposes coherently meets the overall goals of assessment, that is, to serve as a basis for accountable evaluation and decision-making (Bachman & Palmer, 2010).

But an argument can be made for a concept of pragmatics that is independent of any particular model of language ability as a target assessment construct, and that therefore can serve as a theoretical resource to develop alternative models of pragmatic ability in assessment contexts. For that purpose, it is useful to replace the underdefined description of pragmatics as “meaning in context” with a formulation that unfolds the notion into several constitutive dimensions. We will therefore repeat here David Crystal’s (1997) well-known definition. He describes pragmatics as “the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication” (p. 301, italics added). Crystal references pragmatics to the semiotic theories of C. S. Peirce (1958) and Charles Morris (1946), in which pragmatics refers to the relation between the sign and its interpreters (users) in the semiotic triangle. The selections that speakers necessarily make from their semiotic (not limited to their linguistic) repertoire are not described as conscious or intentional, suggesting that consciousness and intentionality are not definitional to pragmatics. While the inclusion of choices highlights participants’ agency, these choices are subject to various constraints, first and foremost constraints in social interaction as the proximate environment for language use. The description of language use as a matter of interactionally constrained choices is compatible with Giddens’ (1984) dialectic relation of structure and agency in his structuration theory, and his very helpful notion of context as both “brought along” and “brought about” (Giddens, 1976).
The constraints that impact semiotic choices may include social factors such as participants’ educational background, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, political affiliation, occupational status, family status, age, and possibly other macrostructural influences; psychological factors, both cognitive and affective, the participants’ relationship, and the type of activity and wider social and cultural context. However, it is significant for Crystal’s vision of pragmatics that none of these categories of participant external and internal factors are specified. In fact, his formulation does not make any mention of “context”, something that readers across the epistemological spectrum might find deeply troubling. From a sociostructural and rationalist vantage point (Coupland, 2001; Kasper, 2006a), this absence is an under-specification and therefore a conceptual flaw. Poststructuralist and critical applied linguists as well will miss the appeal to the “usual macrosociological suspects” (McHoul, Rapley, & Antaki, 2008, p. 43). On the other hand, under a discursive constructionist and ethnomethodological perspective, Crystal can be understood to suggest that social and psychological context is not a given but becomes a legitimate consideration for the investigator only to the extent that the participants themselves invoke context through their interactional conduct (Schegloff, 1992a). The view of context as interactionally occasioned contrasts with the rationalist stance of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory, which specifies power, social distance, and imposition as pre-given context dimensions, and its sociostructural transformation in speech act research (Arundale, 1999; Kasper, 2006a).

In Crystal’s vision of pragmatics, the key unit, the “act of communication”, is firmly embedded in social interaction, and the effect of a party’s action on other participants is expressly nominated as a topic for study. By including the consequences of action in interaction as part of pragmatics’ remit, Crystal invokes Austin’s notion of uptake and so offers a perspective on pragmatics that integrates both speaker and recipient as participants. In other words, Crystal does not limit pragmatics to the study of speaker meaning. His interactional perspective contrasts with Searle’s speech act pragmatics, in which the recipient’s uptake falls outside of the theory’s explanandum. Crystal’s view is compatible with discursive pragmatics (Bilmes, 1993; Kasper, 2006a), an effort to furnish pragmatics with a conversation-analytic foundation. But although Crystal’s description of pragmatics aligns with the study of social action in interaction, it does not confine pragmatics to talk. “Social interaction” can also be understood in a broader sense, extending to written and hybrid forms of communication (e.g., Widdowson, 1984). As a perspective on pragmatics that can inform language assessment, Crystal’s conceptualization of pragmatics is useful because it maintains the centrality of action that is in the name (πρᾶγμα ‘pragma’ – ‘act’, ‘deed’) and specifies several constitutive components that lend themselves to further specification and operationalization in all modalities of language use.
Second language speakers’ pragmatic abilities entered the research agenda for language assessment by way of two sources: theoretical models of communicative language ability as a target construct in language assessment, and empirical research on second language pragmatics (Roever, 2011). Both sources are well-documented in the literature and discussed in several of the chapters in this volume. In order to situate the data-based studies reported in the chapters, we will review the most prominent theoretical frameworks in which the assessment of pragmatics is embedded.

2 Pragmatic competence as a target domain in language assessment

2.1 Communicative competence

Among several multicomponential models of communicative language ability (reviewed in Purpura, 2008), three proposals include pragmatic ability as one of their components: Canale and Swain’s (1980) original framework of communicative competence for language teaching and testing, Bachman’s model of communicative language ability (Bachman, 1990; in later versions, Bachman and Palmer’s model of language ability, 1996, 2010), and Purpura’s (2004) theoretical model of language ability. The more recent of the models elaborate the earlier proposals in various ways, and although they synthesize a wide range of theoretical resources from across the social sciences, Dell Hymes’ theory of communicative competence (1972) has shaped their fundamental outlook more than any other work. At the core of Hymes’ communicative competence theory is, of course, knowledge of “whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated” (1972, p. 281, italics in original). The dimension of appropriateness has become most closely associated with pragmatics and is often treated as definitional of pragmatics. Social and cultural appropriateness anchors communicative competence firmly in the social world and enables relevant descriptions of the target use domain in language assessment contexts. Yet while communicative competence theory remedied Chomsky’s reductionist perspective on language competence, it maintained the competence–performance dichotomy. By retaining the distinction between competence as a capacity of the individual mind and performance as the domain where competence is used in social life, Hymes adopts, in Halliday’s much-quoted formulation, an “intra-organism perspective on what are essentially inter-organism questions” (Halliday, 1978, p. 37). With their foundation in Hymes’ “psychosociolinguistics” (Halliday, 1978, p. 38), the three models of communicative language ability take on board the fundamental ontology that Hymes’ theory of communicative competence shares with Chomsky’s theory of language competence, namely that competence is located in the individual mind and is separate from performance.
Rival theories from sociology, anthropology, sociolinguistics, and linguistics that reject the competence-performance dichotomy and a cognitivist perspective on language did inform the models of communicative language ability for language assessment, yet such alternatives were subsumed under the concept of language knowledge as an underlying individual trait. In addition, Bachman and Palmer’s (1996, 2010) framework carries forward an important elaboration of competence from Hymes (1972): the distinction between underlying language knowledge (in their model, organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge) and ability for use.

Bachman and Palmer conceptualize ability for use as strategic competence, defined as three sets of metacognitive strategies – goal setting, appraising, and planning. Plans are implemented through cognitive strategies, the component in the model that directly interfaces with the language use task. Taguchi (2012) recently proposed an empirically grounded multicomponent model of pragmatic competence with a similar structure. As do its predecessors, the model maintains the distinction between competence and performance, and it adopts the components of language ability from the Bachman and Palmer model. Drawing on Bialystok’s two-dimensional model of language proficiency (e.g., 1993), pragmatic competence is conceptualized as a two-component construct. Pragmatic knowledge refers to the ability to understand and produce “speech intentions” (Bialystok’s “analysis of knowledge”) and processing refers to the ability to use pragmatic knowledge efficiently in real time (Bialystok’s “control of processing”). As in her earlier research, Taguchi (2012) operationalizes pragmatic knowledge as accuracy of pragmatic comprehension and appropriateness of pragmatic (speech act) production, while processing is operationalized as fluency in comprehension and production. The processing dimension comprises both strategy categories from Bachman and Palmer’s model, metacognitive and cognitive strategies. In this volume, Roever connects his study on advanced L2 English speakers’ understanding of implicature to Taguchi’s work on this receptive domain of L2 pragmatic ability. Roever utilizes an untimed reading test that enables inferences on the participants’ knowledge of implicature but does not assess their real-time processing capacity. Taguchi’s model offers a theoretical basis for assessing the processing dimension in pragmatic comprehension and production that lends the assessment of pragmatics a stronger psycholinguistic foundation.

Perhaps unavoidably, what may be gained by achieving a better understanding of pragmatic ability from a psycholinguistic perspective comes at a cost to the social dimension. The conceptualization of pragmatic competence as knowledge and processing, or of the wider construct of language ability as language knowledge and strategic competence, offers no theoretical perspective on social context as environment of language use in the target or test situation. Analysis of a language use situation in the target domain becomes rather a matter of the individual language user’s cognitive
processing and representation. In their discussion of Bachman and Palmer’s model, McNamara and Roever (2006) observe

a feedback loop between context and ability: The target language use situation is conceptualized in terms of components of communicative language ability, which, in turn, is understood as the ability to handle the target language use situation. The situation or context is projected onto the learner as a demand for a relevant set of cognitive abilities; in turn, these cognitive abilities are read onto the context. (p. 32)

For the assessment of pragmatic ability in particular, undertheorizing social context, the main focus of McNamara’s and Roever’s critique, is a profound concern, since how the appropriateness of language-mediated action is evaluated depends in large measure on how context in the target domain and the test task is conceptualized and analyzed.

2.2 Action

The pragmatic component in the Bachman and Palmer framework has seen a significant transformation between the original and the later versions. In the 1990 model, pragmatic competence had as one of its branches illocutionary competence, a concept that Bachman referenced to Austin’s and Searle’s speech act theories and elaborated by drawing on Fraser and Nolen’s (1981) research on speech act realization. Speech acts were distinguished from “language functions”, the use of language according to different purposes, drawing on Halliday (1973). In the later versions of the model, illocutionary competence was replaced by functional knowledge, and speech acts as a category no longer figure in the model. To some extent, actions reappear as “functions”. “Instrumental functions” (“performed to get other people to do things for us”) are illustrated by “requests, suggestions, commands, and warnings”, and “interpersonal functions” (“used to establish, maintain, and change interpersonal relationships”) include “greetings and leave-takings, compliments, insults, and apologies” (Bachman & Palmer, 2010, p. 47). Possibly, Bachman and Palmer dropped language-mediated actions as a component from the model because they appear to duplicate some of the language functions. The difficulty with this apparent simplification is that the concept of language (or communicative) functions, anchored in functional-structuralist models of text (Jakobson, 1960), grammar (Halliday, 1970), language development (Halliday, 1975) or communicative events (Hymes, 1964), is neither designed, nor has the capacity, to replace a concept of action. Without delving into the theoretical impasses, we can build on Bachman and Palmer’s observation that multiple language functions are typically co-present in an utterance or unit of text. For instance, a student disagreeing with a peer in some small group activity may do the action of disagreeing with an utterance that has some topical content (ideational function), mitigates the disagreement (interpersonal
function), and advances the collaborative construction of knowledge in the group (heuristic function). On the other hand, at a reception, the interpersonal function may dominate all others, but participants in the “small talk” may do a number of actions – greeting, asking about the other person’s well being, complimenting, commenting on issues of shared interest, agreeing, telling a story, offering someone to get them a glass of wine, excusing themselves to join another group, and so forth. Actions do not absorb well into language functions, and for the purposes of pragmatic assessment, it would seem imperative to maintain actions as a distinct category. The empirical literature on the testing of pragmatics clearly testifies to the centrality of action as the target construct. Lastly, functions do not have the inbuilt sequential structuring that actions do. Which brings us to the topic of interaction.

2.3 Interaction

Another consequence that the trait models of pragmatic competence share is that they undertheorize interaction. The Bachman and Palmer (2010) framework incorporates interaction in two places. Within the language knowledge component, “knowledge of conversational organization”, including topic nomination, turn-taking, pre-sequences, and preference organization, is one category of textual knowledge, in turn a component of organizational knowledge. Two noticeable absences in the model are sequence organization, without which neither pre-sequences nor preference organization are possible, and repair, although participation in interaction requires that interlocutors can deal with their own and the other party’s problems in speaking, hearing, and understanding. Since such problems occur on a regular basis in the talk of fully competent speakers (Coupland, Wiemann, & Giles, 1991; House, Kasper, & Ross, 2003), the repair apparatus is an indispensable organization in speakers’ interactional competence (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). Furthermore, in the structure of the model, the entities that occur in sequence and that can be preferred or dispreferred, that is, social actions, are not included as part of conversational organization but appear, in part, in the guise of functions in the pragmatic knowledge component, as we discussed in the paragraph above.

While social interaction is partially conceptualized as an individual participant’s “conversational knowledge”, it is also modeled by duplicating the “attributes of the individual” in “non-reciprocal language use” (Bachman & Palmer, 2010, p. 36) in a model of “reciprocal language use”. Reciprocal language use connects the individual attributes of two language users, engaged in a shared task in a shared language use situation, through an input-output component (p. 38). Reciprocity operates through two defining features, feedback and the effect of what has been said on what is said later (p. 80). How feedback and the “back-and-forth interplay” between two individuals are made possible, and how they engage the components of their language ability, is rather unclear. The input-output metaphor suggests a transmission model of communication, the idea that communication takes place
when the cognitive states of speaker and hearer are given a mutually perceptible form through the conventions of language (Coulter, 2005; Hauser 2005, for critical discussion). This idea is fully compatible with Gricean pragmatics and the psychometric interest in individual cognitive traits as assessment construct, but it is difficult to reconcile with the fundamentally inter-individual character of interaction as a social, co-constructed, and contingently evolving activity.

Having said this, we recognize that the Bachman and Palmer model is designed to enable the development of assessments for any form of language use. In the diverse landscape of language assessment, language-mediated social interaction between co-present parties, fundamental as it is to social life, is one arena of language use in possible target and test domains among others. Keeping the framework’s intended use in perspective, we have to look elsewhere for the conceptual resources needed to develop strategies for assessing how test takers participate in interaction in the target domain. For such resources, we have to turn to perspectives on interactional competence.

3 Interactional competence

3.1 Interaction and interactional competence(s)

In a rather obvious paraphrase, ‘interactional competence’ is the competence to participate in interaction. The paraphrase highlights that there cannot be a theory of interactional competence without a theory of interaction. Ever since Goffman (1959) put the organization of face-to-face interaction – the interaction order – on sociology’s agenda, conversation analysts have elucidated how the most fundamental of all social institutions is built and operates. Empirical studies of natural interaction in a vast array of activities show that there is indeed “order at all points”, as Harvey Sacks proposed. The orderliness of interaction rests in an apparatus of highly interconnected “ethnomethods”, the socially shared procedures through which participants produce and understand talk. At its most fundamental, interaction requires that participants take turns at talk, and that turns, as habitats of actions, appear in an emergent sequential structure. Participants orient to the structural procedures of turns and sequences as normative: that is to say, if a turn or action is not forthcoming when it is due, the breach generates inferences and accountability. The excerpt from an oral proficiency interview (taken from Kasper & Ross, 2007) gives an example:

IR: Um (.) have you done any traveling at all? (.5)

IR: Have you taken any trips to other countries?

After the interviewer’s (IR) question, the first pair part of an adjacency pair, the candidate’s answer is due in next turn. Instead of the projected turn
there is a gap of silence. The interviewer self-selects for another turn, in which he reformulates the question through lexical choices that make the topical content of the question more explicit. Through the position and form of his turn, the interviewer shows several things. First, by reissuing the question instead of abandoning the sequence, the interviewer orients to the normative structure of the adjacency pair organization, which requires the recipient of the first pair part to produce a relevant second pair part in next turn. In the economy of interaction, the candidate owes the answer. Secondly, the redesign of the question displays what the interviewer inferred from the absent answer. By giving the second version of the question a form that makes its topical content more transparent, the interviewer shows his inferences that (a) the candidate’s silence indicates difficulties in understanding the question, and that (b) the understanding problems are attributable to the candidate’s limited English lexicon. Either inference may or may not be correct. For instance, it is possible that the candidate understood perfectly well but needed more time to assemble her answer. Correct or not, the interviewer’s inferences are on public display through the format of the revised question. Thirdly, by pursuing an answer to his question, the interviewer orients to his institutional identity as examiner in a language test and his category-bound charge to get the candidate to produce ratable speech samples (Okada & Greer, this volume).

The brief example shows some ways in which turns and sequences operate as “building blocks of intersubjectivity” (Heritage, 1984, p. 256), even when a participant contributes to a sequence with silence. It also demonstrates a further constitutive structural property of interaction, the context-building work of turns. A current turn is shaped by a preceding turn, for the most part but not necessarily, the immediately preceding turn. The current turn, for its part, creates a context for the next turn. In this way, interaction progresses by continuously generating its own context (Schegloff, 1987). In addition to the relationship between turns, a further order of interaction is the conversational practices within turns. While turn-taking, sequence organization, and repair are generic to interaction, conversational practices can be closely tied to the grammatical structure of specific languages. Heritage and Clayman (2010) require that in order to qualify as a practice, “a feature of talk must (1) be recurrent, (2) be specifically positioned within a turn or sequence (or both), and (3) have some specific interpretation, consequence, or set of consequences” (p. 16). Some examples are turn-initial well in dispreferred responses (Schegloff & Lerner, 2009), upgrading second assessments (Pomerantz, 1984), or reversed polarity questions (Koshik, 2002).

The ensemble of interactional organizations and practices, the “procedural infrastructure of interaction” (Schegloff, 1992b, p. 1299), furnishes at the same time the “architecture of intersubjectivity” (Heritage, 1984, p. 254) that enables intelligible, coordinated participation – the joint accomplishment of
interactional projects – in social activities. Like grammar, in this respect, the architecture of interaction is abstract, context-free – and highly adaptable to any specific occasion of social interaction. Whenever and wherever people interact, they configure the context-free organizations and practices to the local site of interactional engagement, whether in ordinary conversation or the many forms of institutional activities that social actors participate in throughout their lives. Through repeated participation in a particular social activity, actors learn the specific interactional configurations that constitute the activity. All specialized forms of interaction – “interaction for special purposes”, as it were – are built on the architecture of ordinary conversation as a “master institution” (Heritage & Clayman, 2010, p. 17).

The structural relationship of ordinary conversation and specialized institutional talk has important implications for our understanding of interactional competence. To illustrate, question-answer adjacency pairs are a generic interactional sequence. Asking and answering questions intelligibly is a basic, surely universal, interactional competence. For a wide range of institutional purposes, question-answer sequences furnish an interactional structure that optimally advances institutional goals. To do so, participants’ access to the positions in the sequence is constrained so that the first position, asking the question, is pre-allocated to one party, typically the institutional representative; the second position, the answer, to the other party. The complementary distribution of questioning and answering actions between the parties is the distinctive feature of the interview. Other than turn-type preallocation, interviews are configured to their particular institutional purpose. A talk show interview is distinct from a standardized survey interview, an employment interview from an initial medical interview, and so forth. In order to participate competently in these activities, participants must have access to domain-specific registers, invoke institution-specific inferential frameworks, observe constraints on allowable contributions, and orient to the rights and obligations associated with their institutional identities (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Heritage & Clayman, 2010).

The research literature shows that participants are sometimes differentially competent in an interview type. For illustration, we will limit the following discussion to one party, the interview respondent. This is, of course, a reductive perspective because participation in interaction is both constrained and enabled by the co-participants’ actions. In that sense, interactional competence is distributed between the participants; no-one owns it. But it is equally important to recognize that the co-participant’s prior turn opens up an opportunity space for the current speaker’s actions, it does not determine them. Individual participants do show themselves as more or less interactionally competent at particular interactional moments. With these cautions, we proceed. To take respondents to survey interviews (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000) and oral proficiency interviews (Part II, this volume) as an example, respondents regularly show themselves as
competent in the defining speech exchange system of the interview. That is to say, they treat questions as questions by producing candidate answers as second pair parts (“candidate”, because the interviewer may not treat the response as an answer, or as an acceptable answer), and they show recognition of turn-type preallocation by limiting their participation to answering the interviewer’s questions (except in repair initiations which serve to answer the interviewer’s question). In that sense, survey interview respondents and oral proficiency interview (OPI) candidates are interactionally competent in these social activities. Not uncommonly, the same participants show in their responses that they have difficulties understanding the question formats, constraints on their own and the interviewers’ contributions, and the peculiar institutional logic of the standardized survey interview. OPI candidates’ responses show an orientation to the interview as an arena to talk about their experiences and opinions rather than as a platform to produce speech samples for the assessment of specific L2 abilities. In both types of interview, then, the respondents do not display an orientation to the institution-specific inferential frameworks and constraints on allowable contributions. In that regard, their interactional competence in these types of interview is limited. The respondents’ differential interactional competence in the survey interview and the OPI suggests that interactional competencies from ordinary conversation and interviews for different institutional purposes are a necessary condition for respondents to participate in novel interview-structured activities at all, but activity-specific competencies must be available to participate effectively. Interactional competencies, then, are partially transportable. Just what is transportable from where, and what is not, requires sustained empirical investigation. Lastly, interactional competence is continuous not categorical. How novices – children, second language speakers, professionals – move from novice to expert, that is, how they develop interactional competence, is a topic of intense current research efforts (Gardner & Forrester, 2010; Hall, Hellermann, & Pekarek-Doehler, 2011; Nguyen, 2012).

3.2 Interactional competence in applied linguistics

The ascent of the communicative competence paradigm in applied linguistics in the early 1980s established pragmatics as a target concept in language teaching and testing, and it brought with it the view of pragmatic competence as an individual trait. But there were other voices even at that time. In their influential edited volume Language and Communication (1983), Jack Richards’ and Richard Schmidt’s chapter on “conversational analysis” takes a decidedly socio-interactional orientation. Drawing on ethnomethodology, Goffman’s microanalysis, and Gricean conversational implicature, Richards and Schmidt give focus to the fundamental interactional organizations discovered in conversation analysis, turn taking, sequence organization, and repair. As they argue, the ensemble of the “dimensions of
conversational discourse that second language learners need to master”, their “conversational competence”, is “just as important as a dimension of second language learning as (...) grammatical competence” (pp. 149–150).

In the context of second language acquisition, Schmidt’s longitudinal case study on the development of communicative competence (1983) was the first to document empirically the make-up of a second language learner’s conversational competence and how it evolves over time, including the speaker’s prompt delivery of second pair parts, use of recipient tokens and discourse markers, topic management, and production of stories and descriptions. The speaker’s competence to participate in talk extended to activities beyond conversation (such as ordering in a restaurant) and was therefore better captured by the broader concept of interactional competence, as Schmidt proposed.8

In language testing, interactional competence was brought to the table in critical discussions of the proficiency movement (Kramsch, 1986), the treatment of interaction in performance tests (McNamara, 1997), and the oral proficiency interview as a test format (He & Young, 1998). Drawing on the notions of co-construction (Jacoby & Ochs, 1995) and interactive practices (Hall, 1993, 1995), He and Young emphasized that interactional competence is not an attribute of an individual participant, and thus we cannot say that an individual is interactionally competent; rather we talk of interactional competence as something that is jointly constructed by all participants (...). Equally, interactional competence is not a trait that is independent of the interactive practice in which it is (or is not) constituted (1998, p. 7).

The second of the two propositions, that interactional competence is tied to specific discursive practices, was a central question that Young and He’s volume Talking and Testing (1998) examined, namely whether language proficiency interviews have the same organization as ordinary conversation. The empirical evidence from several studies shows systematic differences between conversation and the oral interview, as we will further discuss in the Introduction to Part II. The first proposition, that interactional competence is jointly constructed during interaction, finds support in the conversation-analytic perspective on interaction, as we discussed in the section above. It is also well documented in research on oral proficiency interviews, including the contributions to Part II in this volume, showing how the interviewer’s participation shapes candidates’ contributions to the interview. Yet if interactional competence is inexorably distributed among participants, it poses a challenge to the purpose of language assessment in the psychometric tradition, that is, to generate inferences from individual test takers’ behavior to the underlying target trait and enable decisions that affect that individual’s future (Chalhoub-Deville, 2003).
Young (2009) proposes a solution to this tension from the perspective of his theory of discursive practice. Extending his earlier conceptualizations of interactional competence (He & Young, 1998; Young & Miller, 2004) through a complex synthesis of theories on context, activity, practice, and language, Young glosses practice as “performance in context”, “the construction and reflection of social reality through actions that involve identity, ideology, belief, and power” (pp. 1–2). Discursive practices are constructed through practice-specific configurations of verbal, nonverbal, interactional, and identity resources. However, as Young argues, practices may be constituted through similar configurations of resources. The portability of resources between practices may enable valid inferences from test performance to performance in the target domain if comparative analysis of both practices identifies essential commonalities. Young’s recommendation is a call for extensive comparative analysis of discursive practices, which would seem to offer an indispensable source of information for constructing a validity argument. Directly pertinent to this research agenda is the institutional talk program in conversation analysis (Heritage & Clayman, 2010; see discussion in the preceding section). Institutional CA, for short, has delivered a wealth of studies on interaction in social institutions, some of them comparative, including health, law, education, counseling, and the media. In the Introduction to Part II, we will further describe CA’s approach to institutional talk. A direct answer to Young’s call is the chapter by Seedhouse in Part II, which reports a comparative study of interactional activities in the test context, the target domain, and the source domain, as it were – that is, the activity in which the test takers participated prior to taking the test. Seedhouse does find some commonalities in the interactional architecture of the activities, suggesting that the associated resources are portable.

While Young’s practice theory offers an insightful approach to identifying some of the discourse-based research that is needed for a validation argument, it does not solve the problem of co-construction. It would be unreasonable to expect that it would. But it is possible, as we argued above, to isolate particular competencies that do show individual participants’ understandings or availability of resources in interaction. Such identifications must be the outcome of analyzing interaction in relevant activities in the target and test domains. One source is, again, institutional CA. Much of the research focuses on the professionals’ contributions, such as the structure of journalists’ questions in political interviews or physicians’ questions in primary care consultations (Heritage & Clayman, 2010). In CA research on OPIs as well, interviewers’ question formation and use of repair have been given particular attention (see Part II). A second source is the literature on the development of interactional competencies. While these studies take as their premise that social interaction is the parties’ irredeemably shared accomplishment, many of them seek to understand how individual participants change their use of specific interactional practices over time, whether
the focal participants are parties in ordinary conversation, language and content classrooms, or professionals in training (Nguyen, 2012; Hall et al., 2011, for studies in all three categories). The conceptual lens and analytical strategies embodied in this work can usefully inform performance testing and the assessment of pragmatics.

4 Tests of pragmatics and pragmatics in language testing

In their profound discussion of the social dimension of language testing, McNamara and Roever (2006) examine tests of L2 pragmatics and oral proficiency interviews as two contrasting assessment traditions that embody the social in distinctly different ways. In tests of pragmatics, the assessment construct is strongly theory-informed (Roever, 2009, 2011). When the first tests of L2 pragmatic ability were developed in the early 1980s, two pragmatic theories ruled the day, and their influence lingers in the research literature generally and in the pages of this book. Via Searle’s speech act theory (1969), speech acts became the dominant target construct. Via Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory (1987), the ways that speech acts are produced with language forms came to be seen as varying systematically with three *a priori* defined context properties, i.e., power, distance, and imposition. Both theories are grounded in a rational actor model and a cognitivist paradigm, the view that thought and affect, and in particular intention, prefigure action, and that action, conversely, expresses speaker intention and other mental states (Edwards, 1997). With their rationalist and cognitivist foundation, speech act theory and Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory fit seamlessly with the epistemological perspective that dominated the field of second language acquisition in the 1980s and continues to do so, albeit now in the company of well-established rivals. The two rationalist pragmatic theories are also fully compatible with, and indeed informed, the frameworks of communicative competence reviewed earlier in this chapter. Lastly, speech act and politeness theories have an excellent match with psychometric concerns to enable inferences on the cognitive abilities of individual test takers in a target domain. A proposal for a pragmatics test that antedates the standard theoretical sources is what we believe to be the first published proposal for a pragmatics test, Edward A. Levenston’s (1975) instrument to measure the oral proficiency of immigrants to Toronto, Canada. Levenston designed written discourse completion tests (DCTs) as well as oral role plays as vehicles to represent situations from immigrants’ daily lives “which were suspected of being common causes of cross-cultural misunderstanding”. These scenarios required the test takers to produce a wide range of speech acts, including “requests, complaints, apologies, excuses, invitations, congratulations, praise, blame, criticism and reactions to all the above” (Levenston, 1975, p. 68). Starting with Cohen and Olshtain’s (1981) test of “sociocultural competence”, operationalized as the ability to
perform apologies, tests of L2 pragmatics were theoretically anchored in rational actor models. The theoretical orientation had two methodological consequences. First, if knowledge of speech acts and their contextual distribution is seen as a static trait and does not include their oral production in real time, there are, in principle, no construct-related prohibitions to written discourse completion tests, multiple choice, or scaled response formats. Secondly, if test takers are required to produce speech acts in oral DCTs (aka closed role plays), any differences to written DCTs or other written formats must be attributed to method effects. Thirdly, if test takers participate in open role plays, i.e., in a form of elicited interaction, scores are still based on the test taker’s production of the focal speech act, without considering how the confederate’s contributions may have shaped the test taker’s turns. Taking the confederate out of the equation is entirely consistent with the speech act model plus context factors that define the target construct. The difficulties of grounding a conceptualization of the target domain in rationalist pragmatics should by now be obvious. As we will see, several studies in Part I of this volume offer alternatives.

Oral proficiency interviews (OPIs) have a much longer history, are far more commonly used, and have no discernible basis in social theory, language philosophy, or pragmatics. As a form of talk, they require a conceptual perspective that recognizes the OPI as social interaction specialized to meet the institutional goal of language testing. Detailed and profound understanding of how interaction in OPIs works, and how it relates to other forms of institutional talk and ordinary conversation, is a critical precondition for appraising its use as an assessment instrument, for the training of interviewers and raters, development and revision of rating scales and guidelines, and the interpretation of scores. The study of OPI interaction brings to light what kinds of actions, sequences, and turn formats sustain participation in the activity, including and beyond the type of question-answer sequence that gives the test format its name. All of these are, fundamentally, pragmatic, although in the sense of discursive pragmatics rather than speech act pragmatics. The chapters in Part II offer new insights into the interactional organization of OPIs. Several of them examine how action sequences unfold in OPI role plays, designed to elicit contextualized requests, complaints, or suggestions from candidates. The role-play activities may be more recognizably pragmatic from a speech act perspective. They bridge the gap between tests of pragmatics and the pragmatics of OPIs.

5 The chapters

5.1 Introduction to Part I: Instruments and strategies for assessing pragmatic competence

The chapters in this section examine instruments developed to assess a range of pragmatic competencies. The measured constructs vary in scope,
from receptive abilities such as understanding implicature and recognizing action types in interactional sequences to productive abilities of speech act performance, comprehensive multidimensional constructs of pragmatic competence that encompass receptive and productive abilities, and constructs that embed pragmatic ability in the wider context of interaction. While some of the studies apply well-established measures to new populations and assessment objectives, others document the development and validation of innovative assessment instruments, including single-method and multi-method formats. The studies also demonstrate how instruments for pragmatic assessment may serve as measures of achievement or proficiency, serve diagnostic purposes, and simultaneously assess students’ progress while supporting their ongoing L2 pragmatic development. These efforts are grounded in different theoretical perspectives on pragmatics, including speech act theory, Gricean theory of conversational implicature, Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory, and conversation analysis, and their applications to pragmatic ability as target construct for language testing in the models proposed by Bachman and Palmer (Bachman, 1990, Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2010) and Purpura (2004).

Carsten Roever’s chapter reports on a multiple choice test of implicature that was used as a section in a screening test for health science majors at Australian universities. The purpose of the diagnostic test was to identify students in this high-proficiency population who might benefit from language support in order to be successful in their programs. The test was adapted from Roever’s test of implicature comprehension in American English as a second language (Roever, 2005). As with the original version, the Australian adaptation followed Bouton’s (1999) division of implicature types into relevance implicatures (called “idiosyncratic” implicatures) and a heterogeneous group of implicatures with certain formal properties, including indirect criticism and topic change implicatures (called “formulaic” implicatures). The item below is an example of an idiosyncratic implicature and illustrates the item format:

Cathy and Alan are sharing a flat.
Alan: “Has the mail come yet?”
Cathy: “Alan, it’s not even noon.”
What does Cathy probably mean?

a. There was mail for Cathy but not for Alan.
b. Cathy doesn’t feel like going to check the mail.
c. There is no mail because the mail never comes before noon.
d. There is a lot of mail even though it’s early in the day.

Previous research (Bouton, 1999; Roever, 2005, 2006) consistently shows that L2 speakers understand idiosyncratic implicatures more easily than
formulaic implicatures such as indirect criticism (Teacher A: *What did you think of Jim’s essay?* – Teacher B: *I thought it was well typed.*). Roever’s earlier studies also indicate a positive correlation between general L2 proficiency and implicature understanding. In this study, Roever asks, among other questions, whether item difficulty differed according to implicature type and between L1 and L2 test takers, and whether exposure to English was related to understanding indirect criticism implicatures correctly. In general the high-proficiency L2 speakers interpreted the implicatures successfully, but their comprehension scores were still significantly lower than those of the L1 participants. As in the antecedent studies, implicature type was a factor in success of comprehension. Relevance implicatures that draw on context analysis and general inferencing heuristics were easier to understand than formulaic implicatures. In particular, indirect criticism proved challenging, but examination of exposure conditions suggested that difficulty associated with this implicature type might be offset by L2 speakers’ participation in the target community.

Roever’s study is the first to use a test of L2 pragmatics for diagnostic purposes. As he points out, this application context raises different validity issues than a general proficiency test does. Whereas a test of pragmatic proficiency has to aim for high discrimination and a wide spread of test takers along the scale, the current test sought to identify students whose low scores in implicature comprehension indicated that they needed language support in order to successfully participate in their majors. Since implicature tests target an essential dimension of pragmatic ability and are highly practical, we can look forward to further development of test instruments with enhanced authenticity, including empirically derived test items (Taguchi, 2012) and multimodal delivery formats.

*John Rylander, Philip Clark, and Rick Derrah* report on the development of a test of speech act comprehension in the instructional contexts of English as a foreign language at high school and college level in Japan. The larger study aims to examine the effectiveness of video dialogues from TV dramas and feature films for explicit instruction in the pragmalinguistic formats and sociopragmatic meanings of a variety of speech acts. The video format has the advantage of contextualizing the talk in a multimodal, temporally evolving space and the actors’ embodied action. Although fictional representations of social scenes cannot be taken to be equivalent to natural interaction (see Rose, 2001, for a comparison of compliment sequences in feature films and natural interaction), they offer a closer approximation than written descriptions. The film material might also engage students’ interest to a greater extent and in this way enhance attention and learning. The test items, organized in three parallel forms of the instrument, were designed as scenarios in which one of the participants performs an initiating action to which another participant responds. Test takers had to identify the illocution of the initiating action by selecting one of five
speech acts listed in a multiple choice format. The assessment instrument comprised ten different target speech acts, more than three times the number of speech acts that are commonly included in tests of pragmatics. With this design choice, the authors went a long way to counter the risk of construct-underrepresentation – a problem endemic in tests of pragmatic ability (McNamara & Roever, 2006) – for the construct under examination, the students’ comprehension of speech acts.

Over a 15-month period, the authors administered the three test forms several times to large samples of secondary and post-secondary students with the intent to uncover how the items in each version of the instrument discriminated between the different populations. Rasch analysis showed high item reliability and item separation, indicating that the speech acts and items were distinct from each other rather than sharing common properties. In contrast, estimates of person reliability and person separation were low, suggesting a narrow band of student ability that might stem from very similar experiences of EFL instruction across the student groups. Further analysis of item difficulty revealed that the speech acts clustered in three aggregates of difficulty, with farewells, greetings, and introductions as the easiest; compliments, complaints, apologies, and suggestions as moderately difficult; and requests, invitations, and offers as the most difficult speech acts to recognize correctly for the students across different levels of EFL instruction.

Pursuing the linguistic factors that influence item difficulty, Rylander, Clark, and Derrah classified each item according to 21 factors devised to capture the complexity of the information presented in each scenario. In this part of their study, the item difficulties from the Rasch analysis of each type of items occurring on three occasions across the parallel forms were the dependent variables in the analyses. Their correlations of the factors with item difficulty metrics suggest that the factors do not consistently influence item difficulty across the three parallel forms of the test.

The video-based instrument designed by Rylander, Clark, and Derrah for the assessment of speech act comprehension achieved high construct validity and authenticity while also being easy to administer and score. Thanks to its high practicality, the video test meets the institutional constraints of tightly structured language programs. When the assessment construct is the ability to produce speech acts and participate in interaction, satisfying test quality criteria becomes an even more challenging task. The following four chapters report on the assessment of L2 pragmatics in production and interaction.

With the chapter by Noriko Ishihara, we are turning from the testing of pragmatics in EFL instruction in Japan to Japanese as a foreign language in the US. Ishihara conducted a study on the assessment of pragmatics in a third-year college level Japanese course that ran over an eight-week period. Drawing on Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory as a theoretical perspective
on classroom-based assessment, Ishihara conceptualizes classroom-based assessment as an activity that supports ongoing classroom learning and is therefore an integral part of the teaching process. In the version of the Zone of Proximate Development that Ishihara engages for her study, the teacher mediates students’ learning of Japanese pragmatics by entering a written dialogue with individual students about their responses to a set of pragmatic activities. In an iterative cycle of written student–teacher interaction, students responded three times to the same assignments, two multiple rejoinder DCTs featuring a request as the focal speech act. The first time that the student responded to the DCT was in the first week of a teaching sequence on requests. The responses were not assessed but offered the teachers diagnostic information that they were able to take into consideration in their lesson planning. Towards the end of the instruction sequence on requests, student responses were evaluated with a rubric for the assessment of pragmalinguistic ability and the teacher’s narrative comments intended as formative assessment. After having received and responded to the teacher’s comments, the students filled in the DCT a third time for summative assessment at the end of the teaching cycle. Changes seen in the third round, as well as in the students’ own reflective writing, are interpreted in light of the support offered by the teacher and its benefits for the students’ pragmatic awareness. Following the teacher’s detailed comments and students’ responses, Ishihara finds evidence for pragmatic development between the students’ versions of their DCT responses in weeks 6 and 8, for instance in their choice of more contextually appropriate request forms and supportive moves. Heightened pragmatic awareness is also in evidence in the students’ reflections, which in some but not all cases has its counterpart in students’ improved production. For some of the students, making more context-appropriate choices of speech styles remains a challenge despite the teacher’s assistance through sociopragmatic commentary. The study shows that in general, integrating classroom assessment through written dialogue with the teacher in the teaching process fosters improved pragmatic awareness and performance, although in different ways for different types of pragmatic knowledge.

The chapter by Soo Jung Youn and J. D. Brown continues the focus on speech act production as the target construct, moving from requests in Japanese to apologies, requests, and refusals in Korean as a foreign language taught at college level in US universities. The study examines two comparable sets of data collected from different samples of students of Korean by Ahn (2005) and Youn (2008), and uses the Many-facet Rasch approach to test development. Both of the earlier investigations selected from the Hudson, Detmer, and Brown (1992, 1995) framework for assessing cross-cultural pragmatics the three production instruments – a written DCT, an oral DCT, and a role play – translated into Korean. Scoring both sets of items with the Many-facet Rasch Model, Youn and Brown compare the item difficulties and the performance of heritage and non-heritage learners sampled in the two studies,
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