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The construction of interactional incompetence in L2 interaction

In this presentation, I will adopt a radically non-cognitive and situated perspective on interactional (in)competence as something which is constructed by the participants in and through the interaction, rather than something which individual participants bring to the interaction. The presentation will focus on one instance of Japanese interaction in which one of the participants, an L2 user of Japanese, is constructed by other participants (L1 Japanese users) as interactionally incompetent.

The interaction occurs prior to the start of a meeting of a neighborhood organization in a residential area of Tokyo. At the time of this interaction, the researcher, who is a member of the organization and the L2 user mentioned above, has already set up video cameras for the purpose of collecting data on Japanese interaction. Consent to record the meeting was obtained from most members of the organization at a prior meeting. The interaction is occasioned by the arrival of an organization member who usually does not attend, so that the researcher approaches him in order to explain, in Japanese, the research and recording equipment and ask him to sign a consent form. Early in the interaction, this person asks another participant, an L1 user of Japanese, for clarification of what the researcher is telling him. A third L1 Japanese user joins the interaction, which continues for several turns between these three participants. The researcher, having been moved to the periphery of the interaction, is thus constructed by these three participants as interactionally incompetent. By doing this, the three L1 Japanese users make manifest a language ideology in Japan according to which Japanese is an unusually difficult language and one which is especially difficult for non-Japanese to master.

Multi-modal Conversation Analysis is used to explicate how this construction of the researcher as interactionally incompetent is accomplished. This allows for analysis not only of the talk, but also of various other semiotic resources used by the participants, such as gaze, gesture, and body posture. (Incidentally, I will also attempt to provide a transcription of the interaction which does not privilege talk over these other semiotic resources.)

One implication for L2 interactional competence is that there may be no direct connection between it and proficiency in the L2. The researcher's relatively high proficiency in Japanese does nothing to prevent the construction of him as lacking interactional competence. A second implication is that, while it certainly makes sense to conceive of the development over time of the resources that an L2 learner can draw on in specific instances to collaboratively construct his or her interactional competence, if it is conceptualized as constructed and situated in specific instances of interaction, then it does not make sense to conceive of interactional competence as something which develops over time.