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Kidwatching Going beyond the Language of the Test

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ABSTRACT

A study examined the linguistic forms in the discourse of speakers during a language test to indicate why they use certain specific forms over others. Ten children were given the Grammatical Analysis of Elicited Language--Simple Sentence Level Test (GAEL), a language proficiency test for hearing-impaired children in the age group of 4 to 8 years. Three students were videotaped during administration of the test, and the other students' final responses (omitting the intermediate discourse) were recorded. Some of the test items on which the maximum number of children deviated from the target response were analyzed for common traits and classified in different linguistic categories, including redundancy, ellipsis, negation, conjunction, and nominalization. Results indicated that as many as 10 and as few as 1 of the children deviated from the target response on many test items. However, analysis of the children's previous discourse indicated that many of the deviations were still pragmatically appropriate responses even though they did not match the target response exactly. Pedagogical implications are that teachers can use language tests as a "kidwatcher's" guide by observing language usage of children during test administration without having to feel "guilty" and by using dialog to go beyond test language to obtain more information on a child. (One table of data is included; 18 references are attached.) (RS)

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Kidwatching : Going beyond the language of the test

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

- (1) Tester: Which chair is this?
 - (2) Jeany: Yellow.
 - (3) Tester: The yellow chair.
 - (4) Jeany: Yellow chair.
 - (5) Tester: What happened?
 - (6) Jeany: The girl jumped over the chair. (Child's Response)
 - (7) Tester: Mommy jumped over the yellow chair. (Target response)
- (Jeany's response was marked as omitting adjective *yellow*)

These are correct English sentences. They are correct in their grammar and in their usage. Yet the fact that the chair is yellow and visible to both interlocutors makes it unnatural for the adult to elicit from child *yellow chair* rather than *chair*. Once it is established that the chair is yellow, the color of the chair need not be repeated every time "the chair" is mentioned. In fact, the occurrence of determiner "the" is enough to specify the chair in question.

It has been observed that, in English, new information is characteristically introduced by indefinite expressions and subsequently referred to by definite expressions. This observation was made more than two centuries ago by Harris (1751:215-16): "To explain by an example. I see an object pass which I never saw till then. What do I say? There goes A Beggar, with A long Beard. The man departs and returns a week after. What do I say then? There goes The Beggar with The Long Beard. The article only is changed, the rest remains unaltered."

Once the information is shared between speakers, the status of the information changes from new information to given information (Halliday, 1967) because the addresser believes it to be known to the addressee either because it is physically present in the context or because it has already been mentioned in the discourse. The new information is what the addresser believes as unknown to the addressee. In the light of the psychological status of "givenness"

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(Brown and Yule 1983:179) this paper will examine the linguistic forms in the discourse of the speakers during a language test to indicate why they use certain specific forms over others. The methodology used here for the purpose of examination is discourse analysis, particularly Halliday's (1967) "Given-New Information" Model. The analysis also ties up with Grice's Conversational Implicatures (1975). The article has implications for teachers to use test as 'kidwatching guide' to observe language usage of the students.

The speech act at the beginning of the article is taken directly from the videotape of Jeany who was being administered a language proficiency test called the Grammatical Analysis of Elicited Language (GAEL) - Simple Sentence Level (Moog and Geers,1985). Jeany was an eight year old hearing impaired child whose primary language was oral rather than sign. The test required the tester to perform some activities with toys and prompt the child to give the target response. In this case the target response that the tester wanted was (7):

Mommy jumped over the yellow chair.

Jeany's response to the test (6) was different from the target response because she omitted the adjective.

A girl jumped over the chair.

In her response to the activity, Jeany substituted a noun phrase [a girl] for [mommy] and omitted the adjective [yellow]. The immediate question this linguistic act raises is: should the child be penalized for omitting the adjective in her response to the test item?

Before we answer this question, let us get familiar with the test. GAEL is a language proficiency test for hearing impaired children for the age group of 4 to 8. The children were administered the Grammatical Analysis of Elicited Language--Simple Sentence Level Test (GAEL). The test is designed to evaluate hearing impaired

children's use of grammatical aspects of spoken and/or signed English in a standardized test setting. The GAEL test consists of series of activities with a set of toys and games designed to elicit specific sentences which constituted a sampling of syntactic structures. The test is administered individually one-on-one and is about 45 minutes long.

The purpose of testing the children was to find out about their language proficiency. The testers were classroom teachers who were familiar with the child. Ten children were individually tested, three of whom were videotaped. The videotapes of these three children were transcribed verbatim. The other seven children's verbal responses to each test-item were also transcribed. The examiner verbally modeled the sentences to each child while simultaneously manipulating objects that enacted events appropriate to the test sentences. The test consisted of a total of 21 activities eliciting 94 sentences. The two components of the test were - prompted and imitated. For the prompted component, the examiner modeled similar sentences prior to eliciting the target sentence from the child whereas for the imitated component the child had to repeat after the examiner modeled the correct sentence.

The videotapes of the children's test performance provided language discourse between the tester and the child, that preceded each test item since the entire administration of the test was videotaped. Whereas the transcripts of other seven children provided only the final responses to the test items which were transcribed on the transcription sheet. This was limited to only the final utterances and there was no access to prior discourse unlike the videotapes of the three children. Thus based on the language occurrence of the three children's case studies, we re-examined the responses of the other seven children to find if they were making similar deviations. The information obtained from this analysis made us examine the validity of the test items and the ecological validity of the expected test responses. We then pulled out all the test items on which maximum number of children deviated from the target response.

This resulted in a range of test items on which different children deviated -- from maximum of ten children to a minimum of one child [Table 1].

Some of these test items on which maximum number of children deviated were further analyzed for common traits. We then classified these test items in different linguistic categories, based on the predominant linguistic feature which occurred in the elicited responses of the test items. These linguistic features were : 'redundancy', 'ellipsis', 'negation', 'conjunction', and 'nominalization' . I will discuss two of these, "redundancy" and "negation" with examples from children's responses below.

Redundancy

The example mentioned at the beginning of the article was an instance of redundancy in the context because some of the linguistic elements that the test was eliciting were already established in the prior discourse. For instance, on the test item mentioned above, nine out of ten children were marked as omitting adjective [yellow] given the test criteria. The item required the tester to manipulate a mommy doll by making her jump over the chair. The varied responses of other children were:

Examiner: What happened?

The girl jumped over the chair.	(6 children)
Mommy jump chair.	(1 child)
He jumped over.	(1 child)
Jumped.	(1 child)

Mommy jumped over the yellow chair. (Target Response)

It is not surprising that nine out of ten children omitted the adjective. According to Grice's (1975) Implicature of Quantity: "Make your information as informative as is required for the current

purpose of exchange. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required." The color of the chair is obvious to both interlocutors. In addition, the prior discourse between the tester and the child establishes that the chair is yellow. Once established, the color of the chair becomes "old information" and need not be stated again.

Ellipsis

Elliptical utterances are shorter versions of a longer grammatical structure which has occurred in the prior linguistic discourse. According to Lee (1974:85) "In a conversational exchange, one speaker may ask, "What do you see?" and the other speaker may reply, "A dog". Such fragmentary remarks are called "elliptical". Both speakers have the entire sentence in mind and the single word or two-word reply is merely an ellipsis of the entire sentence. Adults regularly include elliptical sentences in conversational speech, indeed, an adult's language would sound stilted and pedantic if every utterance were in subject-predicate form. These elliptical clauses refer back to the context (either some feature of a preceding utterance or the real-life situation) and complete it.

On test item number 55, nine out of ten children consistently deviated and made similar deviations. It was a guessing game in which the child puts the dog on a bed or a chair behind a screen. The examiner tries to guess where the dog is. The test activity was as follows:

Child: (Puts the dog somewhere behind the screen).

Examiner: Is he in the boy's bed?

Child: He is not in the boy's bed. (Target Response)

(The game goes on until they guess)

The children's responses varied as follows:

No	(4 children)
Not here	(1 child)
No, not chair	(1 child)
Not in baby's bed	(1 child)
No, is not in baby's bed	(1 child)
He is not in the baby's bed	(1 child)

All of the above responses are pragmatically appropriate in answer to the test question. These responses are elliptical because they omit some of the information provided by the question. Thus in a linguistic discourse, these responses would be considered appropriate as sufficing information that is needed in answer to the question. This brings us back to the question we raised earlier, whether a language user should be penalized for omitting the "noun modifier" category or for using elliptical utterances, not accountable for in the test.

The answer will be 'yes' if one simply examines the isolated occurrence of children's responses and compares them with the target sentences of the test. However, if one examines the preceding discourse between the tester and the child then one would not be penalizing the child. If the test is eliciting the grammatical category of adjectives in a child's responses then the examination of child's final utterances will not be a true indicator of his or her linguistic competence. As we observed in Jeany's case, her test response (6) showed omission of the adjective [yellow], although she showed linguistic acquisition of adjectives in response to the preceding question which required her to elicit the color of the chair. However, the preceding question was not a part of the test, thus Jeany's prior response was not taken into consideration. This is a major limitation of any linguistic assessment which focuses on sentence level analysis.

These examples demonstrate the importance of doing discourse analysis in language proficiency tests, even if the test claims to assess only the formal aspects of the language i.e., grammar, syntax, vocabulary. The formal properties of language which are concerned with grammar cannot be separated from the functional properties of language i.e., with what the speaker uses the language for.

Since Dell Hymes' seminal paper on communicative competence (1964), language researchers distinguish "what is said" by the language from "what is done" with the language and are interested in exploring these functions. Sociologists and linguists such as Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974); Austin (1962); Searle (1969); Grice (1975), Brown and Yule (1983) have provided the foundation for a more effective approach to the teaching and assessment of language. One of the fundamental aims of discourse analysis is to discover the rules for the production of coherent verbal interaction. To understand a specific speech act (Austin 1962) one must go beyond the act itself - namely to the context in which it was spoken. It is inexplicable from the following example why Jeany substituted the pronoun for a noun phrase:

They carried the table.

The target response expected here was :

Two boys carried the table.

Jeany's unexpected response shows that she substituted a pronoun for a noun but does not give a clue as to why she did so. An examination of the prior discourse reveals why the pronoun was used:

Tester:	How many boys do I have?	
Jeany:	two of them.	
Tester:	What happened?	
Jeany:	They carried the table.	(Test Response)
Tester:	Two boys carried the table.	(Target Response)

Once it was stated that there were 'two boys', it becomes redundant to repeat it again. Goodman (1990 pc) calls this the "economy of language". Thus, 'two boys' becomes given information for the following activity. In recent years, a number of psycholinguists working on information structure have taken the 'given / new' distinction as expounded by Halliday and applied it to various forms of discourse, both - oral and written (Chafe (1976), Clark and Clark (1977), Haviland and Clark (1974)). In order to determine what, in a sentence, has the status 'new' and what has the status 'given' one needs to go beyond a sentence level analysis.

Discourse Analysis provides a powerful tool in language assessment. It reveals underlying rules that guide the participants' behavior and the interpretation of others' behavior in accomplishing the interaction. Scollon's work (1973) on children shows that the 'horizontal' structures produced by children develop out of the 'vertical' structures of their interaction with the another speaker:

Tester:	Where is the dog?	
Jeany:	On the bed.	(Jeany's Response)
Tester:	Tell me, the dog is on the bed.	(Target Response)

The prepositional phrase "on the bed" uttered by Jeany is new information which fills the slot that was sought by the tester. When adults ask for more information on a topic by means of questions, they ask for a syntactic constituent to fill out the construction. What children learn is conversation, and the syntax grows out of the necessities of the conversation. "This suggests," says Scollon (1973), " that discourse structure is at the heart of sentence structure from the beginning of its development." Also, given the Transformational Generative Grammar Model (Chomsky 1965), we need to focus on the deep structure since the surface structure of a sentence is but a manifestation of it's underlying structure. K. Goodman says that we need to move away from counting errors to analysis of performance,

to get at the underlying competence. Diagnostic tests in particular need to examine language as it occurs in a conversational context and not focus on isolated instances.

Discussion and Pedagogical Implications:

Researchers continue to debate on the use of tests. As a result of the debate, a new movement is taking place in education producing alternative ways of doing assessment - portfolio assessment, outcome based or Quality Performance Assessment, etc. As Regie Routman (1991: 300) states, " there seems to be little likelihood that we as a society will be doing away with standardized tests in the near future, it is imperative we monitor how such tests are used and interpreted."

If language proficiency tests are testing what is being taught in the classroom then claiming a test to be a test of grammatical competence as opposed to communicative competence, is implying that formal aspects of grammar are being taught. This results in highly developed grammatical skills, not just conversational skills. The students learn to give a response that satisfies the teacher, because they take this rightly as a grammatical exercise and not a conversational exchange. By ignoring the functional communicative component of language, one would be rewarding structural linguistic forms such as Chomsky's famous example "colorless green ideas sleep furiously" (while this is grammatical with an adjective, noun, verb and an adverb it is semantically anomalous) and penalizing children for forms which omit an adjective as in Jeany's response.

Teachers can make use of information obtained from a test not only as a product but also as a process. Many whole language teachers who are constrained by school / district policy feel 'guilty' for using standardized diagnostic tests because of the mismatch of theoretical stance. The pedagogical implications here refer to how one can use language tests as kidwatcher's guide by observing language usage of children during test administration without having to feel 'guilty' and by using dialog to go beyond test language to obtain more

information on a child. The examples discussed here demonstrate that it is possible to obtain more information on a child, by going beyond the specific target skill that a test is eliciting. For instance, Jeany's language demonstrates that she has acquired the linguistic category of noun modifier even though her response to the test item didn't show it. Teachers can use their linguistic knowledge and their insight into language use and be efficient "kidwatchers" (Goodman 1985, 1991) not only *in class* but also during *test-taking* process. Thus the primary issue raised in this study is how teachers can use tests to gain maximum information on the child. Yetta Goodman talks of "kidwatching" as observing children's language and understanding why they use language the way they do. In the examples mentioned in this article we observed why Jeany and some other children were omitting adjectives or prepositional phrases in the test responses. Paul Crowley (IRA : 1989) said it very appropriately, "materials in the hands of a teacher who holds a skills model are skills materials. Materials in the hands of a teacher who holds a whole language model are whole language materials." It is the way we use materials that determines the effectiveness of materials, be it a book or a test.

TABLE 1

Number of Children Deviated on Each Test Item

Number of children	Test Items
10	28, 29, 47, 48, 49, 50, 58, 61, 75, 78, 81
9	4, 6, 10, 15, 17, 19, 21, 24, 27, 32, 33, 37, 39, 40, 41, 54, 55, 57, 59, 60, 62, 74, 76, 85, 87, 89
8	7, 9, 11, 16, 18, 26, 31, 38, 42, 51, 64, 65, 71, 72, 73, 77, 79, 80, 83, 84, 88, 91
7	2, 5, 8, 12, 13, 14, 20, 30, 34, 35, 43, 53, 56, 63, 82, 86, 90, 92, 93
6	1, 22, 23, 25, 52, 66, 68
5	3, 36, 44, 46
4	67, 70,
3	45
2	69
1	94

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