

LANGUAGES AND LIVES



ESSAYS IN HONOR OF WERNER ENNINGER

EDITED BY JAMES R. DOW
AND MICHÈLE WOLFF

1997



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MEMBERS-ASSESSMENTS AND ASCRIPTIONS OF (IN-)COMPETENCE IN BILINGUAL CONVERSATION

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0. Introduction

It is frequently observed among bilinguals that they explicitly or implicitly assess their own or their coparticipants' linguistic competence in one or in both languages. Thus, members may *ascribe* (bilingual) *competence* to each other or to themselves by the use of predicates such as 'know both language A und B,' 'understand language B,' 'can read language A better than language B,' and the like. They may also *display* their own (in-)competence by the very way they use the languages in question, and they may *orient* to their *assessments* of co-participants' competence by the way they organize their own utterances.

Although linguists have often tried to measure bilingual speakers' abilities, they have largely failed to see the interactive relevance of members' ascriptions and assessments of the above type. In this short contribution, I want to investigate some of the methods used by bilingual members to treat linguistic competence as a constitutive feature of the situation in which they converse. In order to do so, bilingual competence will be looked upon not as a cognitive structure, but as a thoroughly social phenomenon that can be inspected, displayed, negotiated, even tested, in the course of interactions among (candidate) bilinguals.¹ The data are taken from a study on code-switching and other forms of bilingual behaviour among Italian-German (migrant) children of the second generation in a Southern German town (Constance).

1. Ascriptions of bilingual competence: a preliminary typology and some examples

Bilingual competence as a member's assessment is 'tacit,' that is, it is used, but not necessarily made explicit. However, there are occasions in which participants may describe their own or their co-participants' or other members' linguistic abilities in the form of explicit ascriptions of (bilingual) (in-)competence. In doing so, they attempt to explicate in 'so many words'

the pattern for which linguistic appearances in their or others' speech is evidence.

As a preliminary way of structuring the presentation, instances of such explicit competence-ascriptions may be differentiated on two parameters: (a) *the assessed referent*, since the ascriptions may be predicated over co-present or absent parties, and over co-participants in different 'roles' (speaker assesses his/her own competence-, speaker assesses addressee-recipient's competence; speaker assesses a non-addressed hearer's competence; speaker assesses a non-present party's competence), and (b) *the reflexivity* of the ascription relative to the interaction in which it occurs and on which it is based, since an ascription may either describe an aspect of the same interaction in which it is said and upon which it is based (being a *formulation*: in Garfinkel & Sacks' sense [1970: 350]), or be based on evidence (and thus describe) another — past or even future, factual or possible — interactive episode.

An example for a self-ascription & formulation is the following:

(1) [PRANZO 38A: 116/I]

[b, a are adult participants, Fiorella and Gabriella are bilingual children]

- 08 b: ehm: — du — Fiorella — erzähl mal was hat / was
 09 habt/ oder — öh —
 → 10 a: (devi) parlare italiano se no/
 ((fast))
 11 b: capi[sci un [poco [no
 → 12 a: [no [no [no °° ()°°
 13 b: allora che cosa — che cosa c'era;
 ((heavy expiration))

-
- 08 b: ehm: — listen — Fiorella — tell us what did / what did you
 09 or — öh —
 → 10 a: (you must) speak Italian if not/
 11 b: you [understand a [little [don't you
 → 12 a: [no [no [no ()
 13 b: so what — what was it;

In this case, b. addresses Fiorella, not a.; however, a. criticizes her language choice (German) by ascribing incompetence to understand German to herself. This is first done in line 10 by an incomplete utterance (*devi parlare italiano se no*) to be completed by *io non capisco* ('I don't

understand'); b. refuses this self-ascription of incompetence by producing a diverging probably non-formulating other-ascription (line 11). Yet, a. insists on her ascription in line 12. Consequently, b. switches to Italian; her heavy expiration in line 13 shows that this switching is done because of a.'s intervention, and against her original intention. a.'s self-ascription(s) of incompetence in lines 10 and 12 are formulations of an aspect of the conversation in which it takes place, i.e., of a.'s non-understanding of b.'s utterance produced just prior to it, and of a.'s likely non-understanding of Fiorella's elicited next utterance.

Extract (2) is an example of an ascription to a *co-present third party*, and at the same time another *formulation*:

(2) [MEMORY-ERKLÄRUNG 14: 3]

((r is a German, m an Italian adult, Veronica and Sabina are Italian-German bilingual children))

- 01 r-> Vr.: du kannst doch erklären — wie's geht. — du kannst
 02 kannst ja sagen, — es sind Karten, — und die s —
 03 zwei sin sin immer= [sin sind immer gleich
 → 04 Sb.: [die weiss es doch überhaupt nicht
 05 auf Italienisch
 06 r: hö?
 → 07 Sb.: die weiss es gar nicht —
 08 m: wieso du — v [vielleicht
 09 r: [vielleicht kannst du's erklären
 ((etc.))

-
- 01 r-Vr.: you can surely explain it — how it's done. — you
 02 can can say, — there are cards, — and the — two of
 03 them always are are= [they they are always same
 → 04 Sb.: [but she doesn't know it at all
 05 in Italian
 06 r: hm?
 → 07 Sb.: she doesn't know it at all —
 08 m: why you — p/[perhaps
 09 r: [perhaps you can explain it
 ((etc.))

Whereas in the examples given so far, the intervening party criticizes the current speaker for overestimating a recipient's linguistic knowledge by

either be heard as the result of non-hearing or of non-understanding on the level of linguistic competence. Whereas Clemente has selected the latter reading (and thereby implicitly ascribed incompetence to x.), Alfredo takes up the first reading; his appeal to speak clearly (*aber deutlich!*) underlines his contention that x.'s *come* was not due to his complete incompetence in German, but to Clemente's bad presentation of the German quote (also cf. his 'speak up' in line 25). When Agostiono repeats the punchline, x. signals understanding (line 06).

In extracts (1)-(3) competence ascriptions rescue interactive situations which are at the verge of communicative breakdown, and in all cases, the present speaker's language choice is considered to be responsible for this situation.

In contrast, the *non-formulating self-ascriptions* in the following extract does not relate to observable elements of the interaction in which (and as a part of which) they are produced:

(4) [FRIEDRICHSHAFEN 1806/1-2]

- 01 m: ma Marino parli anche tedesco? —
 → 02 Mn.: si,
 03 m: bene? —
 → 04 Mn.: o un poko (povero), —
 05 m: perché — non bene?
 06 Mn.: em: perché non so parlare (ad) °si bene°
 07 m: [ma:: tu parli — forse tu parli il dialetto di
 08 Mn.: [°()°
 09 m: qui: ? — di — Costanza? —
 → 10 Mn.: si!
 11 m: si! —
 12 Mn.: aha

-
- 01 m: *but Marino do you also speak German?* —
 → 02 Mn.: *yes*
 03 m: *well?* —
 → 04 Mn.: *well a — little (poor)*, —
 05 m: *why — not well?*
 06 Mn.: *ehm: because I don't know how to speak so well*
 07 m: [*bu::t you speak — perhaps you speak the local*
 08 Mn.: [()
 09 m: *dialect? — of — Constance?* —
 → 10 Mn.: *yes!*

- 11 m: *yes!* —
 12 Mn.: *aha*

The same holds for the following *non-formulation* and comparative ascription of competence to a *non-addressed recipient* by which a child assesses his friend's ability to use Italian swearwords in relation to his own. This turn is responded to by alleged superior participant with a disagreement in the format of a self-ascription of incompetence:

(5) [VIERER A:67/II]

- 05 x: adesso tu ci devi dire le parolacce che sai in
 06 italiano.
 07 Al.: aj [o
 08 Cm.: [ich!! — °wei/°
 ((f))
 → 09 der Alfre:do [weiss am/weiss am meiste;
 ((f))
 10 Ag.: [he he he
 ((f, laughing))
 11 x: come?
 → 12 Cm.: =(lesch)/ — ehm ehm Alfredo sa eh: —
 ((mp))
 13 [più
 → 14 Al.: [a eh: ich weiss echt nicht
 ((mp)) ((dim.))

-
- 05 x: *now you will tell me all the swear-words you know*
 06 *in Italian.*
 07 Al.: oh ye [ah
 08 Cm.: [me!!! — kno/
 → 09 Alfredo [knows m/knows most;
 10 Ag.: [he he he
 11 x: *what? =*
 → 12 Cm.: =()/ — *ehm ehm Alfredo knows* —
 13 [*more*
 → 14 Al.: [a eh: I really don't know

Only in the *non-formulating* case do we also find ascriptions to *non-present persons*:

(6) [PRANZO A:748/1]

- 01 a: e () con la tua mamma — non parli in italiano, —
 02 Da.: si:, io se:mbre pa:rlò mia ma:dre n italian,
 03 a: e il tuo papa?
 04 Da.: a:nche.
 05 (2.5)
 06 b: non è vero — — °Daniela°,
 07 Da.: si:
 ((f))
 08 b: (quando) io —
 09 Da.: io parlo:: il dialetto: con mia ma:dr perché:: —
 → 10 il tedesco: non lo capiscø;=l'italiano:: °mhm° certø
 ((laughing))
 11 volte:: — non so che cosa: dire:.. — — °°quin°°

- 01 a: and () with your mother — you don't speak Italian,
 02 Da: — yes, I always speak Italian with my mother
 03 a: and your father?
 04 Da: also.
 05 (2.5)
 06 b: it's not true — Daniela,
 07 Da: ye:s
 08 b: (when) I —
 09 Da: I speak dialect with my mother because —
 → 10 German she does not understand;=Italian; mhm
 11 sometimes — — I don't know how to say. — therefore

In this case, it is the mother of a co-participant who is assessed by her daughter. The assessment is embedded into an argument between Daniela and adult b. concerning Daniela's language use at home. Daniela ascribes incompetence to understand German to her mother in order to justify her prior claim that she speaks Italian at home, which had been challenged by b.

2. Local ascriptions and global assessments

The local ascriptions of (in)competence exemplified by extracts (1)-(6) cannot be linked in a straightforward way to the more global assessments which participants may use to evaluate their own or other members' bilingualism in transsituationally stable ways. More global assessments

differ from ascriptions as in (1)-(6) particularly because of the latter's local sensitivity: ascriptions are indexical objects. Although they purport to describe the global interpretative pattern, they are bound to do so (like all conversational objects) in an open-textured and loose way. Every explicit ascription of competence is therefore subjectable to elaborations and clarifications; for instance, a global statement like 'A. does not speak German,' may be elaborated by detailing with whom A. is or is not able to talk, on which occasions, and so on. Statements which sound as definitive and categorical turn out to be occasioned abbreviations, done for the specific environment in which they are produced. Frequently, the indexical properties of these ascriptions already become apparent through the use of certain deictic elements; for instance, in extract (2), Sabina here ably ties her formulation-explanation by the pronoun *es* ('it') to the utterance-situation.

Note also that what we have called 'ascriptions of bilingual competence' is usually produced in the format of a monolingual ascription (containing reference to one language only). This format can be used because of the contextual embeddedness of the ascription which provides additional information about the other language. For instance, in the specific of extract (2), it is not difficult to infer that Sabina's sister will be able to explain the game 'Memory' in German, and that Marino in extr. (4) speaks Italian anyway.

In slightly more theoretical terms, answering the question of how ascriptions of co-present or absent speakers' bilingual competence(s) relate to participants' more global ways of seeing their own or other members' bilingual abilities requires a theoretical explanation of the lay uses of the predicate "true" (cf. Sacks 1978: 58-61). Participants will consider an explicit ascription to be true if they can assume its convergence with the assessment used and valid in other situations. Unless there is evidence to the contrary, they will take such a convergence for granted. However, quite often the sequential surroundings in which an explicit ascription is produced suggest that ascribers have to a greater or lesser degree shifted away from this more global assessment. The systematic character of such a divergence is understood if we consider that (how) global assessment patterns and explicit ascriptions serve different interactional functions. 'Bilingual competence assessment' as a global pattern is a way to structure elements of one's social and linguistic environment, to make sense of them, to see them as belonging together, etc.; the more linguistic evidences it can integrate, the more useful it is.

Completely different considerations are relevant on the sequential level of explicit ascriptions. Such ascriptions may be used to show off, as compliments, as attempts to change the language of interaction, as rescue

operations for nearly broken down communications, as 'tickets' to leave a 'precarious' topic, as explanations, and so on. If they are to do this interactive work, they will often have to diverge from the more global assessment; for instance, compliments will systematically select positive features of the assessee, although the ascriber may have a much more negative picture of the person in question. Several of our extracts containing non-formulating ascriptions — to be more precise: same and third party non-formulating ascriptions — suggest the possibility and systematicity of such a divergence.

For instance, in extract (5), Camillo's ascription is not based on evidence from this same interaction which could make it plausible or implausible. As co-participants have not used swear words up to this point in the interaction, it does not include any documents for or against the boy's claim. This opens up the systematic possibility of lying with non-formulating ascriptions. The potential of such ascriptions to completely distort the 'truth,' that is, of being diametrically opposed to the interpretive pattern used or displayed by the ascriber, is especially relevant in those "situations in which the selection of a known-to-be-false answer can occur by virtue of its offerer's orientation to the sequential implications of alternative answers" (Sacks 1975: 75); in fact, the divergence between certain sequential consequences of a 'true' statement and those of the locally preferred 'false' one, captures, according to Sacks, a generally correct sense of lying.

Such a preference for one, and a dispreference for the other sequentially following activity can indeed be shown to hold in extract (5). What x. requests/commands one of the Italian boys to do here (to produce Italian swearwords in his presence) is, by its very nature, embarrassing. Camillo finds himself in a situation in which an activity is sequentially relevant which is otherwise sanctioned in similar interactional constellations with a not-too-well-known adult.

Now, one of the general features of ascriptions of (in-)competence is their potential to do *relief work*. A dispreferred activity can be evaded and avoided by recurring to the incompetence of the person who is to organize it. For instance, Sabina's intervention in extr. (2) does such relief work. In extract (5), Camillo, in order to rescue the situation, does not overtly ascribe incompetence to himself, but he ascribes 'more' competence to his co-present friend Alfredo — he 'passes on' the task. This is a generally available strategy: requesters are routinely transferred to the 'most competent' person to meet their demands. The mechanism is employed by Camillo in his ascription of superior competence to Alfredo: x. wants to hear swearwords, now here is the one who is most apt to fulfill this wish. For the sequential reason of being interested in delegating a dispreferred task to another person. Camillo will have to ascribe (relative) incompetence to himself. Only this can avoid an otherwise sequentially necessary activity.

The ascription is a way out of an interactive dilemma. However, its production does not rule out that Camillo will dispose of (and also make explicit in other situations) a more global self-assessment of perfect knowledge of Italian *parolacce*. Indeed, we can assume that the latter are rather prestigious objects, and not at all sanctioned, in interactions between Camillo and his friends when no adult Italian is present. Thus, Camillo has at least good reasons to lie with the ascription in lines 9/12. (Of course, the same applies to Alfredo's ascription of incompetence in line 12.)

Notice that it is much easier to lie with ascriptions of incompetence than with ascriptions of competence. The former are sequentially terminating: they justify the assessee's non-production of a sequentially appropriate turn without initiating further talk on that subject. The opposite is true with self-ascriptions of competence. They can be heard as a statement for which documents can be brought forwards. If those documents have not yet appeared in the interaction, recipients are free to take self-ascribers as being able to produce evidence 'right now' (as is indeed the case in ex. 7 below).

3. The sequential organization of ascriptions

As social activities embedded in, and orienting to the sequential environment in which they occur, ascriptions are not 'just' incomplete, indexical descriptions of more global interpretive patterns (assessments); inevitably they have a local function as well. What ascriptions do in addition to ascribing competence is dependent on the type of ascription used. Other-party and non-present party, formulating and non-formulating, addressee and self-ascriptions serve different interactional purposes. For instance, assessments of competence may be made explicit for the organization of one or several of the following verbal activities:

- criticism of a co-participant's language choice; this is obviously the case in formulating self-ascriptions (cf. ex. 1), but it also applies to formulating ascriptions of (in)competence to third co-present parties as in ex. (2) and (3), where a hitherto non-participating party intervenes in order to rescue an interaction running into problems due to first party's 'inadequate' language choice;
- attempts to influence future language choice by co-participant; in addition to those instances in which this is attempted via a critique of the present language choice (see above), this is mostly done with non-formulating self-ascriptions (other-invited or volunteered) or with comparative non-formulating ascriptions (cf. ex. 4 and 5);
- causal explanations and justifications of interactive phenomena in same or other interactions (cf. for the latter case ex. 6);
- arguments.

One aspect of ascription work, however, is prominent and calls for special treatment. Ascriptions of (in-)competence are often treated sequentially as *evaluations*, such as self-praise (boasting), self-deprecations, compliments, reproaches (cf. Pomerantz, 1975, 1978 as well as Auer/Uhmann 1980 for a conversation analytic treatment of such activities). Usually, competence in a language is treated as a positive feature of a person, whereas incompetence is treated as a 'non-mentionable.' As with all evaluations and assessments, what is positive and praiseworthy for one group of people may be thoroughly negative for the other. This also applies to competence, and opens up an interesting way to analyze language attitudes: the problem of values attached to languages is not independent, but instead an integral part of the way members organize evaluations via competence ascriptions. In our case, the usual ranking of the elements of the linguistic repertoire is: German (standard or dialect), Italian (standard), local Italian dialect.

Considerations of the sequential treatment of 'praise' are involved in several types of ascriptions. *Formulating other-ascriptions* have a potential for being used as *compliments*. For instance, in extract (5), Camillo's ascription of 'best' knowledge of Italian swearwords to Alfredo has, in the given network of male adolescents, such a potential. And indeed, Alfredo responds in one of the standard ways of dealing with compliments: he downgrades his knowledge.

Self-ascriptions pertain to the organization of *self-praise* and *boasting*. For instance, in the following extract (7), Ernesto (line 14) and Vittorio (lines 16 and 01) readily volunteer self-ascriptions of dialect competence, whereas Daniele's positive self-ascription is prompted by m. (lines 10f) and is only given reluctantly (cf. the low amplitude and 'deletion' via concurring production with Ernesto's turn in line 12):

(7) [MARIENSCHLUCHT A:233.9:1,2]

((several Italian boys and m., an adult Italian, inside a minibus driven by m.))

- 10 m: lo sai parlare — — e mica lo sai lo sai parlare il
 11 dialetto — Danie —
 → 12 Dn.: °io l so parl[a:re°
 13 m: [a:!
 → 14 Er.: io: so parla:re — il [bare:ze
 15 m: [bra:vo
 → 16 Vt.: io so parla:re l dialetto: napoletano — l sicilia:no
 01 — bare:ze — tutto: —
 02 m: fai sentire un po

- 03 Ln: pa:rlə na:poletano:
 04 Er.: ma va: ffangu:loə :

-
- 10 m: you know how to speak it — eh you don't know it
 11 you know how to speak the dialect — Daniele —
 → 12 Dn.: I know how to sp[ea:k it
 13 m: [ah!
 → 14 Er.: I know how to speak — the dialect of B [ari
 15 m: [well done
 → 16 Vt.: I know how to speak the dialect of Naples —
 01 of Sicily — of Bari — all —
 02 m: let me hear a bit
 03 Ln.: speak Neapolitan
 04 Er.: ((tries to imitate:)) kiss my ass

All three boys may orient to the fact that non-formulating self-ascriptions of competence can initiate a proof sequence (which is indeed the case, cf. line 02). Their different ways of ascribing dialect competence to themselves may therefore indicate their readiness to use dialect in the presence of an Italian adult, m. Whereas the first two boys are eager to ascribe competence to themselves and whereas at least Ernesto does not hesitate to give specimens of what he considers to be Neapolitan, Daniele tries to avoid the subject and refuses to speak *Barese* (cf. his non-participation in lines 16-04). It is justified to infer from such contrasting self-ascriptions that Ernesto and Vittorio on one hand, and Daniele on the other, have a different attitude towards their dialects. Volunteered self-praise as produced by Vittorio and Ernesto may not contain very useful information, then, if we want to find out about these children's 'actual' linguistic repertoires; however, they are an important source for reconstructing participants' evaluation of the languages and dialects involved.

Aspects of the organization of *self-deprecations* are relevant for *formulating (in-)competence ascriptions to present third parties*. Take, for instance, the sequential organization of extract (2):

- (i) A: verbal activity projecting next other-party activity (line 01)
 (ii) B: non-response (lines 01/02 — note the pause and Veronica's refusal to take the floor)
 (iii) C: ascription of incompetence to B = explanation of B's non-response in (ii) (line 04)
 (iv) A: repair initiation (line 05)

- (v) C: repetition of/insistence on ascription of incompetence (iii) (line 06)
- (vi) A/D: disagreement (or pre to disagreement) with (v) (line 07 by m.)

The interesting part is the final disagreement of A (or in his place, of D) with the intervening party's (C) explanation of B's inadequate response to A's first activity. A (D) refutes an offered pattern that plausibly integrates the linguistic features observed in the prior interaction. In order to account for this sequential development, the conversational organization of (self-) deprecations (cf. Pomerantz 1975, Ch. 4) has to be taken into account. Self-deprecations are preferentially followed by disagreements: since criticizing a co-present member is a dispreferred activity, and since agreeing with another co-participant's self-deprecation would amount to such criticism, this self-criticism is refuted. The same principle that governs the sequential organization of self-deprecations is likely to be relevant in our case. Here, it is not the other participant who self-deprecates by ascribing incompetence to himself or herself, but rather a third party who does so in his/her place (i.e., in the place of somebody who may be lacking the ability to express his/her incompetence in the language of interaction). This other-deprecation (in the place of a self-deprecation) is oriented to by m.'s refusal to accept the intervening participant's ascription.

Finally, *non-formulating ascriptions to non-present members* may be organized as *assessments*, provided both ascribers have a knowledge of the evaluated person. There is then a preference for agreement which is taken into account by next speaker in the organization of the turn.

4. Conclusion

Members ascribe (in-)competence to selves and others and thereby evaluate others' and display their own bilingual competence. In this paper, I have attempted to outline some features of such ascriptions of bilingual competence in a group of bilingual Italian migrant children living in Germany.

How (candidate) employers, (candidate) acquaintances, relatives, or parents in Italy and Germany assess these migrant children's linguistic abilities can obviously be decisive for their lives. In the face of the serious consequences of such lay ascriptions, it seems insufficient to test and measure bilingualism from the detached and allegedly objective point of view of the professional onlooker (linguist, etc.) alone. In addition to applying such a professional (more 'consistent,' more 'rational,' more 'operationalized,' etc.) concept of bilingual competence, I propose to investigate the (ethno-)methods used by members as a topic of their own in order to find out *how* bilinguals come to be looked upon as competent or incompetent speakers of one of the languages involved, or both of them.

The re-orientation from professional testing to lay members' methods of assessing and ascribing bilingual competence echoes Werner Enninger's conviction that "the problems connected with the employment of the traditional norm-oriented and quantitative instruments force[d] us to change to a perspective that approximates that of ethnomethodology" (Enninger/Wandt 1979: 67).

Note

1. While the focus of these remarks will be on explicit self- or other-ascriptions, more implicit displays of competence assessments are discussed in Auer 1983: Ch. 3 and Auer 1984: 55-61.

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