

## Negotiation for Meaning and Second Language Acquisition in a Family Conversation

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### Abstract

This study examines the meaning negotiation devices used by three bilingual family members of different proficiency levels of English and Japanese as they had breakfast. The participants utilized a range of negotiation devices, including reformulations, clarification requests, confirmation checks, and lexical substitutions. It was also discovered that gestures and onomatopoeic sounds were crucial devices for meaning negotiation, a finding that extends research on negotiation for meaning. The study shows that each participant seemed to have learned new language knowledge that resulted from the negotiation for meaning. The focal learner in particular is shown to retain one of the two alternative forms used in the negotiation for meaning, perhaps due to social factors. This study suggests that further research incorporating a wider variety of sociolinguistic contexts and parameters could prove beneficial to the field of Second Language Acquisition.

### Introduction

The significance of interaction in second language acquisition has been documented in many studies. Gass and Selinker (2008) explained in their Input-Interaction-Output Model that once input is given, processing and interaction will take place and the learner will move toward the production of output. The discussion of the complete model is beyond the scope of this paper; however, the focus of this paper will be placed upon the interaction part of discourse as negotiation for meaning. According to Block (2003), the Input-Interaction-Output model posited that learners need to know how to negotiate for meaning because of its relevance and importance to the acquisition process. According to this model, negotiation for meaning is the construct central to communication as information transaction in which interlocutors exchange information while conducting communicative tasks. Long (1996) defined a number of negotiation devices that interlocutors might employ as

they negotiate for meaning during social interaction, such as recasts, repetitions, seeking agreement, reformulations, paraphrasing, comprehension and confirmation checks, clarification requests, and lexical substitutions. The following examples of some of the negotiation devices were provided by Gass and Selinker (2008):

1. Comprehension check  
NNS: I was born in Nagasaki. Do you know Nagasaki?
2. Confirmation check  
NSS1: When can you go to visit me?  
NSS2: Visit?
3. Recast  
NNS: What doctor say?  
NS: What is the doctor saying?
4. Clarification requests<sup>1</sup>  
Student: Et le coccinelle . . .  
          “And the (masculine noun)  
          ladybug . . .”  
Teacher: Pardon?  
          “Sorry?”

Student: La coccinelle . . .  
“The (feminine noun)  
ladybug . . .”

5. Repetitions

Student: La chocolat.  
“(Feminine noun)  
Chocolate.”

Teacher: La chocolat?  
“(Feminine noun)  
Chocolate.”

Student: Le chocolat.  
“(Masculine noun)  
Chocolate.”

(p. 319, 335-336)

Negotiation devices are used to propel the interaction forward as the participants receive, process, and request information by demonstrating what they understand and what they need more information about from their counterpart. For example, an interlocutor might employ a repetition as a negotiation device in order to communicate to the speaker that what was said was unclear or not understood. The manner and tone in which the repetition is presented during the interaction will help the negotiation for meaning. Additionally, a hearer may recast what the speaker has just said as a way to reformulate an incorrect utterance while keeping the original meaning. In other words, an interlocutor could use a recast as a negotiation device to humbly correct and check (i.e., negotiate for) meaning with the speaker about his/her original intent during the communicative event. Similarly, reformulations, paraphrasing or clarification requests could be implemented as a negotiation device to signal to the speaker the hearer's level of understanding and whether communication is on the brink of breakdown or is on track to continue forward successfully.

The concept of negotiation for meaning as defined in the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) is not without criticism. Block (2003) argued that IIO researchers have not fully reached compliance with Hymes' (1974) socially constituted linguistics because they narrowly and selectively limit their analyses to the transactional aspect of talk and focus only on task and negotiate for meaning. In so doing, they have turned to a sociolinguistic model that excluded contextual and interpersonal meanings, which are as important in communication. Block was also in agreement with Aston's (1986, 1993) sociologically-oriented constructs in SLA such as negotiation for solidarity, support and face, and suggested that SLA also pay attention to negotiation for *identity* and not just for meaning. This paper is an attempt to respond to Block's call for a socially oriented SLA.

In this paper, I am interested in investigating the negotiation for meaning, not in a classroom or laboratory settings as in most SLA studies (e.g., Gass, Mackey, & Ross-Feldman, 2005), but in the natural setting of a family breakfast among a father, a mother, and their son. I first ask (a) What are the negotiation-for-meaning devices that were used by the participants? Informed by Block's (2003) criticism of the notion of negotiation for meaning, the research questions I ask are: (b) What sociolinguistic factors affect the negotiation for meaning that takes place in a natural multilingual environment in the confines of the home? (c) Is there any evidence of learning from the interaction?

## Methodology

### *Participants*

The participants in the interaction were Eric (myself), Asuka (my wife), and Nobu

(my son).<sup>2</sup> At the time of this study, I had intermediate colloquial proficiency in Japanese and native speaker competence in English. Asuka had intermediate to advanced colloquial proficiency in English and native speaker competence in Japanese. Nobu was 10 years old and, by Gass and Selinker's (2008) traditional SLA definition, he has Japanese as his first language and English as his second language. Nobu learned his Japanese by extensively interacting with his mother and others within his mother's Japanese circle of friends during his first five years of life. During this time, he concurrently learned English from interacting with his father in the home and through everyday interactions in an English speaking environment. At age 5, he began his education in kindergarten in an English speaking elementary school. He was placed in supplemental ESL classes for the first two years of his education. During that time and thereafter, he has been receiving informal Japanese language tutoring from his mother and continues to converse with her predominantly in Japanese regardless of the environment. He has vacationed in Japan with extended family members for two months during the summer each of the last 10 years. He has attended Japanese elementary school for one-week durations on each of the last three visits to Japan. Some of his Japanese friends can speak English.

### *Data Collection*

A video camcorder was used to record naturally occurring conversations among Eric, Asuka, and Nobu, the focal learner who was the central participant in this study. Allowance was made for regular and natural environmental factors familiar to Nobu to exist during the taping. For example, if Nobu wanted the television

on in the background during the conversation, then this was allowed. If he was comfortable with conversing while he dined, then this was permissible. He had been previously informed that he would be videotaped during our conversations. The camera was focused only on him and not on the other participants. The topics of the conversations were completely random and facilitated as they developed. By the end of the two-week data collection period, I had 3 hours of videotaped conversation, and a segment of that data was extracted for analysis in this paper.

In an effort to see whether the subject's learning was retained after the interaction, I also conducted a short follow-up activity about three weeks after the recorded conversation. I presented the focal learner with three Japanese sentences using the target word, and asked him to translate all three sentences verbally. These sentences were created by the Japanese native speaker participant in this study, Asuka.

### *Analytical Procedure*

I decided to transcribe this conversation after I viewed multiple, segmented playbacks of the longer recording which involved other conversations at different days and times over a two-week period. During the playback, I searched for instances in which the participants were seemingly negotiating for meaning when the communication had faltered because of the content, vocabulary, or other aspects of the language spoken. Consequently, this sample provided the data which enabled me to find negotiation devices employed by the participants while they negotiated for meaning in the interaction. The transcription was a multilayered process. First, I watched the

video in segments in order to write down all the words spoken. After I watched the segmented video again enabling me to insert the time stamps, I viewed it once more to capture and document gestures and body language that occurred.

### *Conversation Data*

In the following segment selected for analysis (see Transcript next page), Nobu is in a good, relaxed mood as can be witnessed by his body language and behaviors during the conversation. He is aware that he is being videotaped; however, he did not seem to mind the camera. The tone throughout this exchange is warm and casual. In this particular part of the conversation, Nobu is eating plain oatmeal with soymilk and Eric is eating yogurt and gelatin for breakfast. Eric has placed his bowl of oatmeal to the side because it is hot.

### *Data Analysis*

In line 03, Nobu makes a statement about the kimbap-like taste of his oatmeal (kimbap is a Korean style sushi roll consisting of rice, beef and a variety of vegetables wrapped in seaweed). In line 04, Eric uses a confirmation check as a negotiation device to bring attention to Nobu's incorrect grammatical use of "taste" in addition to expressing his surprise at the peculiar claim that the oatmeal tasted like kimbap. Nobu perceives confirmation check as a clarification request for meaning instead. After Nobu provides the negotiated meaning to Eric in line 05, he seems to shift toward Asuka (as Nobu's body language and tapping indicate) before Eric can respond. Perhaps Nobu's body language indicates that he was seeking agreement or approval of correctness from Asuka. Coincidentally, Nobu code

switches into speaking Japanese. Gass (2008) outlined that the possible reasons for code switching can be due to humor, context, or to insufficient linguistic understanding of an L2's vocabulary. In this case, I believe that Nobu's code-switching is due to his linguistic inability to say what he wants to say in English, as there is no laughter involved. Another possibility is that Nobu code-switches in order to involve his mother, Asuka, a native speaker of Japanese, into the conversation. Either way, Nobu uses the code switch as a communication strategy to direct his turn at Asuka, but at the same time, this turn was for Eric as well. In response to this code switch, Eric poses a clarification request in line 10 and receives negotiated meaning from Asuka in line 12. However, this does not seem to help Eric, as Eric then, in line 13, reformulates his question back in line 10 to negotiate further for meaning. This negotiation device aims to clarify what "that" stands for in Eric's original question.

While Asuka, the native Japanese speaker in the conversation, is in the process of providing the negotiated meaning, Nobu cuts in with his lexical translation of *isshun* in line 15 while providing a gesture to illustrate its meaning (the use of gesture in word searches in conversations is common, as noted by Goodwin and Goodwin (1986) for example). However, this word is different from what Asuka then provides in line 17 as she completes her turn. Nobu continues and provides another slightly different meaning in line 18 than what Asuka has provided in line 17 but quickly appropriates Asuka's language and adds "or like one moment" in the same turn. In this part of the interaction, Nobu puts himself in the middle between Eric and

	TRANSCRIPT	COMMENTS
01	A: Even I don't taste it, I cannot smell but taste bad. I don't (.5) feel good.	
02	E: (4.0) yeah.	
03	N: (4.6) I just taste kimbap. (1.4) I just taste kimbap. huh. uh ( <i>giggle</i> )	
04	E: (2.4) You just taste kimbap? ----->	Confirmation check/ surprise
05	N: (2.3) ( <i>As N slurps</i> ) I taste kimbap right now. ----->	Provision of negotiated meaning
06	(1.6) ( <i>N finishes swallowing and glances over to E</i> )	
07	N: <b>Anno isshun no</b> (.20) kimbap. (.1) ----->	Codeswitch
08	( <i>N says this while he looks toward A and taps/fidgets his spoon handle lightly</i>	
09	<i>against the bowl</i> )	
10	E: [What is that? ----->	Clarification request
11	N: [ <b>isshun no</b> kimbap.	
12	A: Kimbap. ----->	Provision of negotiated meaning
13	E: (.7) No, what is <b>isshun</b> ? ----->	Reformulation
14	A: <b>Isshun</b> is like ----->	Provision of negotiated meaning
15	N: a flash ( <i>N simultaneously simulates a flash by signaling with his right hand</i>	
16	<i>opening and closing quickly and looks over from A to E</i> ) ----->	Provision of negotiated meaning
17	A: one moment. ----->	Provision of negotiated meaning
18	N: like one second flash	
19	( <i>N "flashes" hand</i> ) or like one moment. ----->	Provision of negotiated meaning/ Reformulation
20	E: Oh? ----->	Clarification request (implicit)
21	N: like one second flash would be like ( <i>lifts right hand upward while</i>	
22	<i>"flashes" hand</i> ) that. ----->	Provision of negotiated meaning
23	A: (1.7) like whoo ( <i>rising tone</i> ) pshht. ( <i>E giggles</i> ) ----->	Provision of negotiated meaning/ Reformulation
24	( <i>N covers his face with two hands and slightly bends over and then straightens up,</i>	
25	<i>removing his hands to reveal a smile and glances over toward E</i> )	
26	E: So how would you tell me that in English then? ----->	Clarification request
27	N: ( <i>N sighs playfully with a smile</i> ) Thought it was supposed to be in	
28	Japanese, [too. ( <i>N leans back and looks at E</i> )	
29	E: [No but how would you tell me that in English? ----->	Clarification request (repeated)
30	N: ( <i>N focuses toward bowl as he speaks</i> ) Like one second (.6) flash	
	( <i>N looks back to E</i> ) ----->	Provision of negotiated meaning
31	E: (1.3) That's all you would say to me? (.) One second flash. ( <i>E</i>	
32	<i>chuckles</i> ) ----->	Clarification request (repeated)
33	( <i>N makes a flash gesture as he looks first to A, then back to E</i> ) ----->	Provision of negotiated meaning
34	E: But then I would be like, what are you talking about? What are	
35	you talking about one second flash? ----->	Clarification Request

36	N: ahhh...hahuh... <i>(Smiles, looks down at his two index fingers, one from each hand on the edge of the table)</i> that's hard to translate. .	
37		
38	umm.. Well it's like one moment <i>(rise tone on -ment)</i> (1.9) once a moment. ->	Provision of negotiated meaning
39	E: (1.2) 'kay, so tell me that in English like how would you tell me that whole sentence? ----->	Clarification request
40	N: <i>(While looking down at table)</i> So if I was...ahh...When I drank the soymi:	
41	soymilk (1.6) one moment it taste like kimbap. ----->	Provision of negotiated meaning
42	<i>(Nobu looks over at E as he's leaning back with his head tilted toward E and N is smiling)</i>	
43		
44	E: Oh ok. <i>(N giggles while looks over toward A, grabs spoon handle and looks over at E)</i> <i>(E chuckles)</i>	
45		
46	N: You already know the meaning. <i>(N puts a spoonful into his mouth)</i>	
47	E: Well yeah...I know what you're trying to say...you're probably trying to	
48	say "when I drank the soymilk (2.0) it tasted like kimbap for a second." ---->	Lexical substitution
49	<i>(N smiles affirmatively)</i> Right?	
50	<i>(E laughs)</i> <i>(N makes a funny face and puts each thumb on the sides of his head just above each ear and waves his open hands while keeping his thumbs in contact with his head.)</i>	
51		
52	E: (1.3) Yeah, sometimes I get mixed up in the words I use, too.	
53	<i>(A can be heard clearing her throat as N continues to eat)</i>	
54	E: (1.7) 'kay.	
55	N: (.2) wanna taste this? <i>(As N looks over to E and passes his bowl to E)</i>	
56	E: Yeah I do since I can't eat mine.	
57	N: Use your spoon. (.4) Use your spoon <i>(said in a slightly higher pitch)</i> and then	
58	scoop some up. (1.2) You can eat all my stuff. <i>(said while smiling at E)</i>	
59	A: (.3) Don't say hungry, Nobu. <i>(said sternly)</i>	
60	N: How does it taste like? <i>(directed at E)</i>	
61	A: (1.0) So he want you to eat [it.	
62	E: [oh <i>(E chuckles)</i>	
63	A: 'cause he don't wanna eat it all. <i>(N takes bowl back and slurps a spoonful)</i>	
64	N: Don't you have like kimbap or	
65	E: (.8) I don't know if it tastes like kimbap. ----->	Recast
66	N: One moment it really taste like kimbap one (0.1) one second like. ----->	Re-use of negotiated meaning
67	E: Yeah	
68	N: to me like (.1) once I taste like spaghetti it taste like seafood sometimes. ->	Re-use of negotiated meaning
69	E: <i>(laughs)</i> it tasted like seafood? ----->	Recast
70	N: Sometimes when I umm lick my spoon like this <i>(N demonstrates by lifting empty spoon to mouth)</i> it sometimes taste like metal or iron. ----->	Re-use of negotiated meaning
71		
72	E: (1.2) I can see that happening. <i>(The topic ends and the conversation shifts to a different topic.)</i>	

#### Transcript conventions

*(text)*: action being done or transcriber's note

**bold text**: Japanese

[ : beginning of overlapped speech

(number): time in seconds

Asuka, as indicated by his body language as he looks back and forth between Asuka and Eric.

The negotiated meaning provided by Nobu and Asuka does not seem to satisfy Eric, however. He makes a clarification request in line 20. This request prompts Nobu to provide a further explanation of the meaning of *issbum*; this time he seems to abandon the appropriation of Asuka's language and returns to his own translation of the word, accompanied by his hand gesture to illustrate the meaning.

Asuka re-enters the conversation in line 23 and provides a reformulation of her previous explanation by making an onomatopoeic sound, "who" and "pshht," in the hope to provide the meaning of *issbum* for Eric. At this point, perhaps because of the prolonged nature of this negotiation for meaning, Nobu's body language indicates a little frustration and playfulness (lines 24-25).

In line 29, Eric issues another clarification request to stimulate a response from Nobu, perhaps because Eric is attempting to bring Nobu back into the conversation and to reinforce the new English expression for Nobu. Here, Nobu reverts back to his original lexis of "one second flash" in line 30. His provision of meaning does not seem to fit what Eric is looking for, and in lines 31 and 34-35, Eric repeats his clarification request to negotiate for meaning further with Nobu. In lines 34-35 in particular, Eric points out that the meaning Nobu provides, "one second flash" may lead to confusion, thus indicating indirectly that he is looking for a more accurate expression from Nobu. Lines 36-38 show Nobu returning to "one moment" which was originally provided by Asuka in line 17. At this point, Nobu may have truly

appropriated the lexis for *issbum* from Asuka. The next repeated clarification request from Eric elicits a repetition of the negotiated meaning of *issbum* from Nobu, which is consistent with Asuka's explanation, and after that point, Eric ceases to make clarification requests toward Nobu about this word's meaning.

A few moments later, in lines 47-49, Eric provides a paraphrase of what Nobu was trying to say. This lexical substitution functions to confirm the negotiated meaning that Eric, Nobu, and Asuka have collaboratively achieved up to this point. It is interesting to note that in line 48, Eric uses "a second" instead of "one moment," which incorporates Nobu's contribution ("one second flash") but also conforms to the form provided by Asuka ("one moment," plus the sound effect of something that happens quickly and briefly).

As the conversation continues a few lines later, we see evidence of Nobu retaining the language that emerged earlier in the negotiation for meaning. In line 66, Nobu uses both the phrase provided by the Japanese native speaker, "one moment," and the phrase provided by the English native speaker (which is also a form he came up with himself), "one second." Although this is a very short span of time, I would like to argue that Nobu demonstrates and confirms that his acquisition of the negotiated meaning of *issbum* has occurred. He negotiated for meaning with Eric and Asuka during the conversation and was able to apply what he appropriated within the same conversation.

Of course this short-term "acquisition" begs the question as to how long Nobu retained what he learned. I addressed this third research question in a

follow-up session with Nobu. My goal was to check how Nobu would translate *isshun* into English and whether this translation would reflect what he had picked up in the recorded conversation above. Below are the three sentences presented to him for oral translation about three weeks after the above conversation (see section on Data Collection above):

- (1) *Isshun nanika mieta.*  
Moment/instant something saw
- (2) *Isshun shinzo ga tomatta.*  
Moment/instant heart  
SUBJ stopped
- (3) *Kyuni kuruma ga tobidasbite*  
Suddenly car SUBJ jumping out  
*jiko ga okotta*  
accident SUBJ occur  
*Sore wa isshun no deki goto datta.*  
That SUBJ moment/instant  
PART occurrence/event was.

*Note.* SUBJ: subject marker; PART: Particle.

Nobu translated the above sentences as:

- (1) For one moment I saw something.
- (2) For one moment my heart stopped.
- (3) All of a sudden the car jumped out and an accident happened. That was a one moment thing.

It is intriguing that although Nobu demonstrated acquisition by appropriation of both forms (“for one moment” and “for a second”) from Asuka and Eric in the same conversation where the negotiation for meaning took place, he retained the meaning “one moment” (used by Asuka, his mother) and not the other form (used by Eric, his father). In light of this finding, I inquired of Nobu which language he was more comfortable with speaking. He affirmed that it was

Japanese, his L1, even though he has been performing in English throughout his academic career. He stated that Japanese was easier and quicker for him. In addition, as previously noted, Asuka has assumed the predominant role of facilitating educational learning in the home, although Eric provides guidance as challenges arise. Asuka’s role included consistently tutoring Nobu in Japanese language and holds Nobu accountable for the completion of his English academic assignments. Eric’s role includes being the family’s bread winner, being the primary source of English speaking in the home, coaching Nobu’s sports team and playing games with Nobu. I suggest that Nobu’s preference for “one moment” three weeks later may be related to the fact that this form was provided by Asuka, who has the same L1 as Nobu. Nobu may also have selected Asuka’s meaning for *isshun* because of his close personal, educational and social affiliation with her. One may argue that Nobu’s affiliation with Asuka may be an exhibition of a type of in-group L1 motivational characteristic supporting Giles’ Accommodation Theory (cited in Richard-Amato, 2003).

## Discussion

In this paper, I have attempted to analyze how three family members in a casual conversation negotiated for the meaning and English translation of a Japanese word, and I have also examined whether the learner retained what he had learned from this conversation. This Japanese word was new to Eric, and its English translation was new to Nobu, and to some extent, also to Asuka. The analysis shows that they used a range of negotiation devices, including reformulations, clarification requests, confirmation checks, and lexical substitutions. Notably, I also



found that gestures and onomatopoeic sounds were a crucial device for meaning negotiation, something that is not found in many studies on negotiation for meaning (e.g., Ellis, 2007; Gass & Varonis, 1989; Pica, Holliday, Lewis, & Morgenthaler, 1989; Lyster, 2004; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; McDonough, 2007; Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993). The reason for this might be because I am looking at naturally occurring data in a family setting while the other studies tend to look at classroom data. Perhaps in a family setting, it is more likely to encounter words that can be illustrated easily by gestures and sounds. It could also be that when people are interacting among intimates and in a relaxed setting (e.g., their homes), they are more likely to resort to these devices to negotiate for meaning.

My analysis also differs from most other studies on meaning negotiation in SLA (e.g., Ellis, 2007; Gass & Varonis, 1989; Pica, Holliday, Lewis, & Morgenthaler, 1989; Lyster, 2004; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; McDonough, 2007; Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993) in that I examine the negotiation for meaning in a multiparty context rather than in the typical dyad structure. This shift in participation framework (Goffman, 1981; M. H. Goodwin, 2001) enabled me to observe how the provision of negotiated meaning may come from more than one participant (in this case, Nobu and Asuka). I have also shown how the negotiated meaning that emerged in the conversation and that was later re-used by the learner (Nobu) is the collaborative achievement of everybody involved.

That the participants in the interaction had multiple levels of bilingualism also leads to the fact that everyone in this conversation learned something new. My study is in contrast to many SLA studies on meaning negotiation, where the lower-level learner typically acquires new knowledge but the higher-level learner simply provides meaning without adding new knowledge to his/her own second language repertoire. I have shown that although it was Eric who requested for meaning clarification, he was not the only one who gained new knowledge (Eric indeed had no prior lexical knowledge of *isshun*). Nobu, the provider of the requested meaning also learned how to translate the Japanese lexical item into English. Even Asuka, the Japanese native speaker, arguably also learned another way to express *isshun* in English (she provided the translation “one moment” and learned the other expression, “for a second” in Eric’s sentences), an observation also confirmed in my follow-up interview with her.

Finally, the results about Nobu’s retention of the new lexical knowledge demonstrate concretely that social factors can play an important role in language acquisition. This finding thus supports a social approach to the investigation of how and why language is learned.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The original language in this example is French. English translation is provided in quotation marks.

<sup>2</sup> Except for my name, all personal names are pseudonyms.

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