Managing Discussion Sessions (Q&A)

17

Abstract

The Q&A or discussion session (hereafter 'DS') is considered to be a quintessential feature of not only the CP itself but one of the key events of the academic conference in general. The DS is where research hypotheses are truly tested—by the judgment of one's peers. As a result, given the combination of the open-ended, unpredictable nature of these sessions along with the heightened possibility of facing criticism, DSs can be the most stressful part of the entire conference experience, particularly for NNES and novice presenters. In this chapter, we will discuss the academic foundations underlying DS discourse, some of the common DS coping strategies used by effective presenters, the expected role of discussants in DSs, and some of the vagaries associated with this distinctive conference speech event.

17.1   The Academic Dimension

It is interesting to note that applied linguists do not refer to what are popularly known as 'Q&A sessions' as such but rather as 'discussion sessions' (hereafter abbreviated to DSs), with the participating audience member(s)—or, on occasion, the chairperson—referred to as the 'discussant(s).' I will use these terms for two good reasons.

The first is that calling this event, or sub-genre, a 'discussion' is in fact a much more accurate description. In my observations of DSs, comments were as common as questions, and in fact expository comments typically precede questions in the discussant's turn. The number of cases in which the discussant asked only a question, without additional commentary, backgrounding, or other parenthetical device, accounted for less than 5% of all discussant talk. Often, the question element was appended to the comment more as a means of indicating that the discussant's turn was coming to a conclusion than as any self-contained query.

Secondly, referring to the event as a '*Q&A*' session imbues the interaction with the qualities of a test, an interview, or even an inquisition, which does not do justice to the actual nature of the event, which typically involves much negotiation and a focus on turn-taking and politeness strategies that go well beyond the type of simple adjacency pair relationship that 'Q&A' implies. So, although DSs *could* be described or analyzed as a series of synoptic adjacency pair sequences, the reality is often much more dynamic, unpredictable, and open-ended. Approaching the DS primarily as a 'Q&A session' might thereby serve to heighten the dread and anxiety that many presenters, particularly NNES, claim to experience.

The ability to manage textual organization and social relations is particularly heightened in DSs, as the speaker holds 'speaking time' rights, and both the presenter and the discussant must keep in mind that the main purpose of the discussion session is to gain feedback from the audience for research work still in progress or in its preliminary stages.

According to Webber (2002), presentation DSs constitute a distinct sub-genre of the CP, partly governed by unwritten rules and maintained as an accepted code by members of the discourse community. Academic DSs differ from similar discourse found in legal or political debates in that they generally involve more linguistic realizations of politeness and solidarity as opposed to competition and disputes. In discussion sessions, participants tend to use more informal language, politeness devices, and pay close attention to address forms, all of which help to decrease interpersonal distance. DSs involve mediated negotiation; they are jointly constructed ventures between the presenter and the discussant.

DSs can be particularly difficult and stressful for NNESs to manage because the interaction is unpredictable and also as disputes may become open, where face-saving and face-threatening acts might be both perceived and managed in different ways by participants coming from different cultures. Often, too, the DS focus is on as yet unclear or unknown phenomena. All of these factors can lead to a greater degree of tentativeness and duly affect the linguistic behavior of participants. For example, evaluative discourse markers more typical of casual conversation, such as '*I just can't understand why…,*' become more pronounced within discussion discourse (Webber, p. 244).

Despite their open-ended and unpredictable nature, DSs are nonetheless goal-oriented discourses and thus warrant taking a discourse analysis approach. Based on the analysis of medical conference DSs, Webber argued that one of the DSs main purposes is to probe—to compare the presenter's work to the discussant's own. This involved two categories of questions: information-eliciting and action-eliciting (such as asking for repetition of a point or to view a slide or presented data again), with the former type predominating. Question types identified by Webber (p. 231) included the following:

Information about facts = 32%
Information about opinions = 17%

Criticism or attack = 30%
Suggestions = 9%
Comments = 3%
Mixed comment and information question = 9%

Among the discourse features that Webber analyzed in DSs were exchange structures, choice of discourse markers, and politeness devices/interpersonal distance—with the choice of response being realized by the interactants' pragmatic intentions.

The chair or moderator-led turn-taking procedure marks most DSs as distinct from casual spontaneous discussions and thus inhibits what we might call true conversation. Sometimes, DSs are unresolvable given constraining factors such as the time allotted or the need to fairly distribute discussion time among different audience members. Thus, DSs are often fragmentary interactions, largely due to the constant change of discussants. As a result, DSs often skip over topics, do not really cover specific areas in-depth, and most often do not lead to conclusions (Webber, 2002, p. 247)

Hedges and approximators are commonly used as face-saving devices in DSs. Subjective modalism and higher incidences of personal reference are also widely utilized in conference DSs (Webber, 1997), and thus more modalization and hedging are required in DSs in order to disassociate the writer/speaker from too strong a commitment (Skelton, 2007). This includes the use of increased vague language, such as the ubiquitous (in my observations) 'sort of.'

Adjacency pairs, in which comments precede questions, are very common in DSs, and often there is no explicit question asked per se. Webber (2002) notes that suggestions were particularly common among discussants. But while adjacency pair discourse often compels the speaker to address the comment, in reality DS discourse analysis indicates that comments and suggestions do not always require an 'answer' as such—a simple 'Thank you for your comment' is often sufficient as an acknowledgment of the speaker's contribution and can produce the desired sense of solidarity.

17.2 The Discussion Session as Negotiated Dialogue

In late 2012, I conducted a survey among doctors at my home institution regarding their English presentation anxieties (Guest, 2013). One question asked them to rate which aspect of CPs (in both English and Japanese) created the greatest amount of anxiety.

I eventually received 52 responses, and in 49 out of the 52, 'Q&A sessions' were selected as the most anxiety-inducing, with over forty respondents claiming that it made them feel 'extremely anxious.' In further interviews and discussions, it became apparent that, for most, the general anxiety associated with CPs was almost wholly focused upon facing the dreaded DS element. This reality is underscored

whenever I am asked to assist healthcare professionals with their conference presentations—often what they really want help with is managing DSs.

What I really wanted to know in these interviews, however, was *why*? Since anxiety appears to be a common factor in DSs, it is important to understand the environmental and/or attitudinal factors behind it. Of course, to some degree, the answer is rather obvious—set or static monologic speech, particularly when performed in a foreign language, has a built-in comfort zone since it can be prepared and manipulated, but in cases of dynamic interaction content has to be conveyed unpredictably and in real time. Yet, while most people would naturally feel less at ease being under fire in a foreign tongue, I was rather struck by the extreme degree to which it inflicted many of my Japanese colleagues. Are there helpful linguistic treatments to remove or stabilize this anxiety?

According to the responses from the survey of the medical faculty at my own university, it appeared that the likelihood of being doubted or criticized in Q&A is *not* a worry for most. The doctors I interviewed post-survey all expressed confidence in the veracity of their research. Instead, what they feared most was looking foolish. To be more precise, they feared looking unprofessional and non-academic by not being able to understand the question posed or by being unable to think on their feet quickly enough to respond adequately in English. Causes of breakdown, however, need not be due to only linguistic misunderstandings, other DS problems, as noted by Webber (2002), include apparent differences in agendas, points of view, as well as negotiating from differing schools of thought, and these can occur between native speakers of the same language.

However, many of my interviewees also worried that negotiating meaning with the discussant might not be considered polite, or that the discussant and/or the audience in general would get fed up with time-wasting meaning negotiation tactics, and that the gulf between the high-quality English in the prepared portion of the CP and the inability to improvise a response during DSs might somehow expose them as academic or linguistic 'frauds.' Yet, regardless of the underlying English proficiency (here speaking in terms of grammatical and/or lexical accuracy), several NNES academics I observed appeared to manage dynamic and open-ended interactions more efficiently than more English-proficient peers.

Interviewees also admitted that, on occasion, their anxiety was also due to the 'English complex' that I discussed in Chap. 5, of this book. After conducting post-Q&A interviews with NNES presenters, it became apparent that this perception led some NNES academic presenters to blame DS breakdowns upon themselves, even when there was no good reason for them to do so. A noted recurring pattern went as follows:

1. *A question/comment is asked in English after a presentation.*
2. *The NNES presenter cannot fully understand the question/comment.*
3. *The NNES presenter feels as if they've somehow failed or fallen short.*
4. *The NNES speaker says nothing or starts talking aimlessly, deflecting the discourse to avoid losing face.*

It is in the third step above where the problem is occurring. Presenters can break this unfortunate cycle by reformulating the third step as follows:

3. *NNES presenter thinks, 'OK, breakdowns happen. Let's negotiate this breakdown together.'*
4. *NNES presenter utilizes some type of coping or repair strategy.*

Many of these DS coping and repair strategies observed in conference DSs will be outlined in the next section.

Questions and Exercises for Sections 17.1 and 17.2

1. What two features of DSs make them more anxiety-inducing for many speakers than the actual body of the CP?
2. What type of DS questions/comments did Webber find were most common?
3. Explain how DSs work as a negotiated dialogue and how this might affect the management of communicative breakdown in the DS.

17.3 Coping Strategies for Discussion Sessions

The key item in the heading above is '*strategies,*' a term which most accurately reflects the linguistic choices we make regarding spoken discourse, particularly when under pressure. In applied linguistics, this skill is known as 'strategic competence' and developing skills in this often neglected area can go a long way toward removing DS anxiety. Since the samples presented in this section are *strategies*, they should be treated as distinct from the type of set stock phrases that might be memorized as sentential formulas. Strategies involve real-time cognitive and interactive shifts. Let us look at some authentic, recurring, conference DS-based examples.

17.3.1 Clarification

Even the most proficient of English speakers can experience trouble understanding what the discussant in a DS actually wishes to say or ask. One reason may be that the speaker's accent is rather thick. Another may be that some discussants speak very quickly and, on occasion, rather incoherently. This can occur regardless of the discussant's mother tongue.

At larger conferences, audiences will typically be very diverse, meaning that a greater variety of knowledge/experience levels and question or comment types are likely to arise, making predictions regarding the type or focus of a comment or question more difficult.

And, as is well known to both moderators and DS chairs, some discussants do not actually have a question to ask at all. They simply want the microphone and the floor because they enjoy either the attention and/or the opportunity to give a testimony regarding their opinion or their own research. Some discussants can also be frustratingly unclear and unfocused in their comments and, in some cases, may be speaking merely because they feel compelled to say something, anything.

In such cases, I noted that effective presenters successfully respond by asking:

So what exactly is your question?
So your question is…?
Could you summarize your point/question, please?

These clarification requests are not rude. After all, it is the discussant who has the responsibility to make himself/herself understood, since it is they who are opening the particular turn in this dialogue—it is not *only* the presenter's responsibility to maintain a productive dialogue asking for clarification can put pressure on the discussant to carry out their role in a felicitous way. This is a central feature of what we mean by 'negotiating meaning'.

This point deserves emphasis. As I mentioned earlier, some NNS presenters are prone to thinking that any communicative breakdown must be entirely their fault. It is not. I've often seen NES discussants fail to modify their English in the slightest even though it was obvious that English was not the speaker's L1 and given that the conference was taking place in a region where the majority of attendees were NNESs.

The onus to make oneself understood, therefore, is upon the discussant. One widely noted phenomenon was the frequent use of colloquialisms or idioms in NES discussant speech, both inside and outside of set speech events, when engaging with NNES interlocutors. Most notable were those idiomatic phrases that have become default terms in NES speech which are, as a result, used without hesitation by NESs but are often outside the comprehension fields of many or most NNESs.

In one case at an education conference, I noticed an NES discussant uses the idiomatic phrases, 'jump through hoops,' 'get the ball rolling,' and 'pull it off' all within a 15-s utterance made to a largely NNES audience. Such phrases have become such a normal feature of daily NES parlance that speakers often do not realize that these terms might not be part of their interlocutors' lexicons and, as a result, fail to modify their speech accordingly to accommodate their audiences.

However, it must also be stated that modifying one's speech does not mean speaking to an NNES in broken or childlike English, which may be interpreted as insulting or belittling, but *does* mean adjusting one's speech to accommodate the other, given that modification is a part of the negotiation of meaning. However, suffice to say that some discussants, especially English native speakers who have little experience outside English settings, may be oblivious to linguistic accomodation (see the section on the expectations and roles of discussants later in this chapter).

Many presenters, however, seemed to be particularly adept at dealing with such situations. Although some NNES presenters struggled with comprehending the

English question/comment on several occasions, I noted them taking control by responding with directness regarding their lack of comprehension:

> *Sorry. I don't understand what you said.*
> *Sorry. You spoke too fast for me to understand.*

In some settings, these bold responses may come off as rather blunt, but there is no denying that on several occasions they were effective. First, they forced the discussant to adjust their speed, lexis, or phrasing, allowing the dialogue to advance and ultimately benefiting everyone in attendance—many of whom had also probably failed to understand the question/comment.

If the presenter is an NNES, there should also be no shame in admitting that one is not a native speaker of English. Among such responses noted were:

> *Sorry. I'm not a native speaker of English. I didn't quite understand.*
> *Sorry. English isn't my first language so…*

I have used this strategy myself occasionally when speaking Japanese in Japan (a language of which I am an NNS) after which Japanese discussants invariably responded *not* with impatience or frustration but rather by making helpful adjustments and modifications to their own speech in order to achieve the goal of mutual understanding.

Clarification strategies like those mentioned above are also commonly used to buy the speaker time, to allow the speaker another chance to catch a difficult or obtuse phrase, or simply to allow for an appropriate response. The worst thing a speaker can do in such a case, in any DS scenario in fact, is to remain silent (although they might look to the chairman with a confused expression). The old escape standby, '*I agree with you*,' will often not work either, since the perplexed speaker might not be sure what exactly he or she is 'agreeing' with.

17.3.2 The Uncertain Keyword

Many of the doctors who took part in my interviews made mention of DS cases where the discussant used a word that they had not heard clearly or could not quite remember the meaning or usage of. Naturally, the presenter does not want to engage in a mini-English lesson during the discussion, so asking '*What does X mean*?' would not be effective. Rather, the standard response in such cases was: '*What exactly do you mean by X?*'

This implies that the speaker knows the canonical meaning of the word (even if they cannot actually retrieve it at the time), but they are not sure of the nuanced usage as it appears in the question/comment. This strategy, used widely by English speakers of all levels of proficiency, will usually require the discussant to explain or rephrase the key term in a way that is more understandable to the speaker. This too can benefit others in attendance.

Sometimes, it might be just one word or phrase that is confusing the speaker, a phenomenon that occurs widely even in NES-NES contexts. I observed one case in which the discussant said, *'Have you considered the possibility of sbtmwprfk?'* The presenter clearly had no idea what that last item was (nor did I, and I might assume, neither did many other members of the audience). It may be due to the presenter's miscomprehension, and it may be that the speaker slurred or enunciated their question in an unusual manner, but there is a simple and obvious strategy for such cases:

Sorry, have I considered the possibility of WHAT?

Or, similarly:

Q: *Why did nmsszvt occur*?—Response: *Sorry, why did WHAT occur?*
Q: *Did you place the tubes in the vtrllmk?*—Response: *Sorry, did we place them WHERE?*

I also observed cases in which an entire phrase was not quite grasped by the speaker. In several such cases, the speakers, NNESs in particular, responded by simply saying: '*What?*' Unfortunately, this often has the unintended uptake of having the discussant repeat the entire comment again, wrongly assuming that the speaker has almost no English comprehension. The bold directness of '*What* might even be taken as a face-threatening challenge.

The most common response used by competent and effective CP speakers in these situations was simply *'Sorry?'* However, it must be emphasized that this should not be used employing an apologetic but rather a questioning tone. This was often accompanied by other paralinguistic features: a turn of the head and, frequently, the furrowed brow that typically denotes confusion or incomprehension. Without exception, discussants, regardless of cultural background, recognized this as a cue to clarify, slow down, or otherwise reformulate their comment.

17.3.3 Convoluted and/or Vague Comments

One salient feature of DSs that I observed was that both highly proficient non-native *and* native English discussants regularly engaged in self-repair. This typically involves repetition, reformulations, and false starts which lead to the construction of lengthy, unfocused, convoluted questions or comments. Presenters can safely ignore much of the spoken text if it is suspected that this is happening. For example, one discussant I observed began his comment as follows:

You mentioned X in your presentation, umm, so I was wondering, well not wondering, but what should I say, I felt myself criticizing, or at least questioning… well, I suppose my experience is different. What I mean is…

In such cases, if the presenter remains passive in posture the discussant may extend their comment infinitely, believing that the presenter has not yet grasped the discussant's point and that even more verbiage is required. Once a certain point was reached, however, experienced presenters tended to raise their hands and nodded slightly, a gesture with the (polite) uptake of, '*Ok. Enough. I get it.*' Although this might appear to violate standards of politeness within some cultures, it did serve as a clear signal to the discussant to allow for the speaker's response turn.

Similarly, the degree to which very complex cleft structures were asked in DSs was notable. These indirect forms can be particularly problematic for NNES to process and decode. Below is a verbatim example noted at an obstetrics and gynecology conference:

> Discussant: *Ok, the thing I'd like to ask first, and the item that I really think we should focus upon because it is the most relevant to our field, is whether or not procedure X should be our first choice of treatment. I mean, I'm not saying that there is anything wrong with the procedure itself but what I think I'm trying to say is that there are better options, so I guess my question is, have you considered other procedural options?*

This is quite a cognitive load for any listener, let alone an NNES, to process. And yet this type of multiclausal, meandering, heavily clefted question appeared quite frequently (I have been on the receiving end of many such comments as a speaker myself). The grammatical subjects tend to be extremely long, interspersed with stance-establishing interpersonal metadiscourse (*What I want to say, I think, I guess*), with much of the text unfocused and lacking coherence, and in some cases amounting to little more than discursive window-dressing. It can be hard for NNESs to recognize what can safely be ignored.

I suggest that while developing sensitivity to decoding typical cleft structure constructions (e.g., *The reason I'm asking this is…, What I would mainly like to clarify is…*), as well as learning to recognize false starts and self-repair, are both important (and often overlooked) listening comprehension skills, it is perfectly within your right here to ask for specific clarification. Among such examples noted were:

> *So could you state your main point or question in one short sentence, please?*
> *So, in short…* (this phrase might be used *if* the speaker believes they have grasped the gist of the comment).

Finally, a speaker may also want to check whether or not the discussant has understood or accepts the response. On occasion, I noted colloquialisms such as, *'Yeah? Is it OK?'* used as a checking response, but readers might want to consider whether this meets the standards of academic conference tenor, as it can sound somewhat rough and unprofessional. Instead, *'Have I answered your question?'* can serve as a near-default phrase to address such situations.

17.3.4 Avoidance/Evasion

Sometimes, the discussant appears to be arguing with or challenging the speaker—putting the speaker on the spot. In fact, even neutrality can be perceived as criticism in such face-threatening scenarios.

In such cases, the speaker might be experiencing a combination of both a personal challenge *and* a lack of aural comprehension. Often, attempts to clarify and then justify certain aspects of the research presented will take longer than the standard DS allows. In such cases, I observed speakers occasionally successfully utilize evasion or avoidance strategies.

Evasiveness should not be thought of as a cop-out or as being devious, but rather as a legitimate strategy. However, speakers must construct the response in such a way that it is still seen as a response. Although the lack of a direct response is a rare DS strategy, it *will* be seen as significant in terms of maintaining or threatening face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Not *directly* acknowledging the question or comment is, however, an option (Webber, 2002, p. 231), particularly if the speaker is not in a position to give an adequate response.

Webber notes that evasion strategies were frequently used when discussants addressed issues outside the scope of the paper presented. Normally, it is the chair's responsibility to guide the discussion, but in many cases this duty may fall upon the presenter. After all, the presenter may be in a more appropriate position to judge the relevance of a question.

Further, if the discussion appears to be unproductive, going round in circles, the speaker may also choose to move on to the next question, particularly if an aimless or drawn-out discussion is not addressed adequately by the chair. Among the forms I noted to achieve this, were:

> *So, can we move on to the next question?*
> *Let's/can we return to the main point/topic of discussion?*

Other avoidance strategies noted were:

> *If you contact me after I can give you more information.*
> *If you'd like more detail I'd be happy to talk with you later.*

These types of responses serve two purposes. One is that does not allow one discussant to dominate the proceedings, particularly if the presenter judges that other issues may be more pertinent and thereby wishes to reopen the floor. Such responses also put the onus on the discussant to initiate follow-up. Are they *really* interested in discussing the issue? If so, one might expect to receive their email or approach sometime after the DS. If not, perhaps the discussant was just being aggressive or opinionated for the sake of argument, which is not the speaker's concern.

Another occasionally noted avoidance strategy was to refer the question to a more experienced, senior colleague in the audience:

Perhaps Professor Mouret can say something more about this.

Many senior professors, who are generally more knowledgeable about the research content (and, among NNESs, also often more proficient in English), are happy to help out and/or defend an underling in such cases. It also gives the senior member a chance to add their stamp on the proceedings, while the junior presenter effectively gets off the hook. However, the speaker's relationship to the senior researcher as well as that researcher's personality, his or her willingness to be actively engaged in this discussion, will be paramount in choosing whether to use this strategy or not.

Planted questions, in which the speaker and a member in the audience have pre-arranged the latter to ask a 'friendly' question, are another form of evasion. This may help relieve anxieties for a speaker but also does nothing to hone one's DS management skills. Further, if the DS is being managed by the chairperson, it is very possible that other raised hands may be selected first, scuttling the speaker's planned attempt at evasion.

Yet another strategy is to *return* the question to the discussant, a tactic that was rare but noted on several occasions.

Well, what do you think?

Do you have any ideas about that?

Webber notes a case in which the speaker responded to a discussant by saying, '*What do you think*?' followed by the first name of the discussant—a highly marked interpersonal response (Webber, 2002, p. 241, p. 241). This can be an effective response because many discussants are simply looking for an opportunity to offer their own opinions and will be delighted to have the chance to sum up their views. They may well feel very magnanimous toward the speaker for having given them the chance.

17.3.5 Thanking and Appeasement

When the speaker faces a critique or challenges occur, there is one crucial strategy that must always be considered, that of *thanking* the discussant for their contribution.

Once, when I was performing a presentation for language educators on alternative methods of language testing, an audience member came to the microphone during the DS and told me in no uncertain terms that he 'objected to' my presentation. I admit that I was rather taken aback by his aggressive comments. However, rather than challenging his statements—which, incidentally, I thought ridiculous as well as discourteous for a conference setting—I thanked him for his criticism and asked him what he would have done regarding the issues he raised, which he proceeded to do with great enthusiasm. Thankfully, this defused the

situation and helped avoid escalating into becoming an unpleasant confrontation. This, then, might be categorized as a type of appeasement strategy.

Since that time, I have seen competent presenters often use thanking as a tactic to defuse potential criticism or to avoid unnecessary conflict. Webber (2002) estimates that about one-third of all discussion questions and comments are critical. But even if or when the speaker has not fully accepted the criticism, thanking strategies are regularly used. Recurring forms that I noted included:

> *Thank you for your comment. We'll certainly take that into consideration.*
> *Thank you for your suggestion. I really appreciate it.*
> *That's a very interesting point. Thank you.*
> *As you suggest…*

In short, even if the speaker thinks the comment or suggestion to be utterly daft, such responses should be more than enough to mollify most discussants. For the purpose of both appeasing the aggressor and allowing oneself time to think of a substantial answer, common responses were:

> *'That's a good question.'* Or *'I'm glad you asked that question.'*

Arguments from authority, such as references to other speakers or authorities on the topic, were also often used as a means to diffuse criticism. Suffice to say that speakers should have key references and authoritative quotes to back up potentially contentious aspects of their CP readily retrievable.

A discussant simply asking the presenter to 'comment a little more' about something is also a common occurrence. This may serve to clarify, or it may serve as a prelude to criticism—as more insidious questions can be disguised as information-eliciting questions. Generally, however, when criticism in DSs does occur, it usually follows a pattern of going from confrontation to convergence or some type of submission on behalf of one party.

Finally, if the speaker believes their initial explanation to have been insufficient, one might employ an elaboration or reformulation strategy. The examples noted below were all uttered frequently by competent presenters in DS sessions:

> *I mean* (used as an elaborator).
> *What I am saying is x.*
> *Let me explain this another way…*
> *Let me rephrase that…*
> *Perhaps I didn't express myself clearly…*

17.3.6 Admission

Another very effective way of deflecting potential DS criticism was for speakers to directly acknowledge that they were not aware of, or did not consider in their research, some factor pointed out by a discussant. And, after all, if the discussant has a valid point, why try to deny it? On several such occasions, presenters also responded with frankness: '*I don't know*' or '*The question is still open.*'

Other successful responses that I observed being used on several occasions were:

> *Sorry, we didn't research that.*
> *That wasn't included in the scope of our study.*
> *That's interesting. We haven't thought of that.*

Webber ([2002](#)) also noted several examples of admission (p. 240). Among these, '*I don't know*,' constituted 18% of the total responses. Other responses included outright rejections or denials of the line of inquiry ('*It was not one of the aims of the study*,' '*We did not test brain cells*,' p. 240).

There should be no shame in admitting possible research shortcomings, and in fact, '*More research needs to be carried out*' is something of a paradigmatic phrase, widely used in both written and spoken academic discourses. If anything, admission of a weakness or shortcoming often pleases the discussant because it makes him or her feel justified or validated that their comment has been accepted as beneficial to the speaker or audience. Admission can save face for the presenter in the eyes of the audience as well. Novice presenters should remember once again that the event is just a discussion, and it is not the defense of a Ph.D. thesis.

Often, gratitude for the discussant's insights was indicated explicitly:

> *True. We didn't consider that. Thank you.*

Such admission strategies can benefit the research presenter in another way: If the presenter had truly overlooked an essential point, the discussant has now provided an opportunity to revise and/or solidify the research—which is one of the central purposes for attending conferences and presenting one's research in the first place.

Another common question from discussants often involved describing their own research or outcomes and then asking, '*Have you had any such experience*?' If the discussant's case does not match the speaker's experience, or if the speaker has never tried to use such a method or procedure, they should readily admit so: '*No. We've never tried/noticed/done that.*' Note, however, that effective presenters avoided responding to such questions with, '*No. I have no (such) experience,*' as this might be misinterpreted as meaning that the speaker is admitting to a general lack of experience.

Another admission phrase, often employed by NNES presenters, that should be avoided as a strategy is '*We have to think about X more and more.*' This set phrase might be interpreted as having the connotation of fobbing off the discussant by

appearing willfully vague and uncommitted. Readers may remember that when we discussed evasion earlier we noted that avoidance strategies are often legitimate. The above phrase on the other hand, while serving an evasion function, is both semantically and pragmatically empty.

17.4 Improving Listening Comprehension for Discussion Sessions

Up to this point, most of the suggestions made have been about how to manage interactions with the discussant, as opposed to dealing directly with the question itself. However, the biggest glitch in managing DSs for many NNES presenters is in fact, simply put, listening comprehension. Certainly, NNES readers do not need to be told that in order to remove a lot of anxiety from DSs they should try to improve their listening comprehension skills. But there were a few salient points gleaned from observations that might help reduce NNES presenter anxieties.

Let me explain this first by taking a bit of a digression. One unfortunate English teaching habit prevalent in many secondary schools in regions in which English is not an official (or formerly colonial) language is the teaching of the pronunciation and intonation of individual English words as discrete units. This may be fine for dense, concrete terms, such as specialist terminology, but it can cause particular difficulties for NNES listeners if this habit equally applied to prepositions, pro- nouns, modal and 'be' verbs, interjections, connectors, determiners, and other so-called grammar or function words. Unlike some languages, which tend to have fairly consistent word intonation and stress, or those for which tone is the key determiner of semantic value (e.g., Chinese, Vietnamese, and Thai), spoken English phrases will regularly de-stress certain items.

For example, in an utterance such as '*Did you catch the one that I put on the top of the slide?*' (uttered by a workshop presenter at an education conference in Singapore) *'Did,' 'you,' 'that,'* and *'of'* were de-stressed (almost to the point of inaudibility for many NNESs). So, for many, that utterance will sound something like an acoustic blur: '*Didja catch the one thadai pudon toppa the slide*?'

Many NNES listeners, however, having studied the canonical pronunciation of individual English lexical items, will likely be wondering about the meaning of the apparent subject or head of the utterance—'*Didja*?' Is this a personal pronoun of sorts or is it a new lexical item that they were not taught in school? As they are working this conundrum out, the remainder of the comment has faded beyond comprehension.

This is the blending habit found in English supra-segmental forms. Above, you will note how 'Did you' in common or casual speech may often be reduced to 'Didja.' If the listener has no expectation as to where or when supra-segmental tends to occur in English, the utterance might remain undecoded and unprocessed, received, and retained merely as an acoustic blur.

For example, a blend used in the utterance, '*Is there any reason why…*' (as noted during a medical keynote speech in Thailand), might be perceived by many NNESs as '*Zereny reason why…*' in which '*Is*,' '*there*,' and '*any*' have been conjoined into a blurred single item. Unfortunately, some NNESs will get flummoxed upon hearing '*Zereny*,' perhaps again believing that this is a word they do not have in their English lexicon. The listener, however, may not realize that this supra-segmental blend actually represents the default phonetic form when used as the subject/head of this type of utterance. Likewise, many proficient English speakers believe that this supra-segmental utterance will be processed by NNES listeners precisely the same as the written text would: '*Is there any*?' and fail to adjust their speech accordingly.

In all languages, items that are deemed to be semantically superfluous are regularly dropped from informal speech. For example, following a CP by a Japanese presenter, a British commenter responded in the DS by saying, '*Sounds like it was effective.*' It was immediately apparent that the Japanese interlocutor was thrown off for a moment upon hearing this construction, almost certainly because the implicit subject '*It/this*' had been elided.

This tends to happen more frequently in high-intensity, low-formality conversational interactions than it does in more formalized settings—such as presentation DSs. Therefore, it is important for NNESs to realize that many such speech items will tend to be de-stressed or elided, just as it is equally important for more proficient English speakers to be cognizant of how problematic such utterances might be for NNESs to receive or decode.

So, what to do? Telling NNES presenters that they need to improve their English listening skills is rather facile and obvious. What I suggest for both NNESs and their teachers/trainers, however, is this: While watching English movies, videos, and/or TV, take note of in what situations which types of English words/phrases are regularly reduced, contracted, blended, or dropped. After an extended study of this type, one can usually better anticipate them.

Another point to be made here is that the gist of what the other interactant is conveying can usually be deduced by context—listeners do not really have to process every word. However, if a significant portion of the utterance becomes a blur to the presenter, one should simply ask for clarification, as suggested earlier:

> *Sorry, what was that first part?*
> *Sorry. I didn't quite catch the last part.*

There should be absolutely no shame in asking this whether proficient in English or not. Confirmation strategies can also be used to clarify:

> *If I understand your question correctly…*

Finally, the novice presenter might wish to practice an English DS with colleagues. Have colleagues and peers initially come up with typical or standardized (in short, predictable) questions so that presenters can grow accustomed to giving

formalized answers. After that, have them also construct a few 'left-field' questions to keep you on your toes and to help you get used to employing some of the strategies we've mentioned.

17.5   Roles and Expectations of Discussants

Given the pressures that presenters are under during DSs it is crucial for discussants to adhere to the following protocols, all of which are mandated by the academic discourse community in general and the conference genre in particular:

- *Never* put a speaker on the spot or use the occasion to try and show off superior knowledge. This is not in keeping with the expected conduct of academics nor is it an accepted form of behavior within most discourse communities.
- Modify your English to make it comprehensible to speakers who do not speak English as a first language. However, this does *not* imply deliberately using broken English or avoiding academic or specialist terminology. It does, however, mean framing your comment in a way that it can readily be processed and easily be decoded by others. Keep nonessential verbiage to a minimum.
- Make your question felicitous. That is, it should be succinct and concise, have a clear rhetorical purpose, and be within the scope of the CP.
- Many conference chairs require that you state your name and affiliation before commenting in the DS. Be prepared to do so.
- Do not feel the need to comment after every presentation, and if/when you do comment, do not act as a CP evaluator!
- Unless the presenter explicitly states otherwise, do not interrupt the body of the CP in order to raise a point or ask a question. Wait until the floor is opened by the chairperson or the presenter.

Finally, keep in mind that if a NES discussant appears to have trouble coping with the fact that many others in the world do not work within English-speaking cultures, and are using English at this conference as a lingua franca, that the onus is upon the NES, not the NNES, to adapt, adjust, or improve their intercultural and/or interpersonal communication skills.

17.6   A Confession

In closing this section, I should confess that I am not a big fan of post-presentation DSs, both as a presenter and as a member of the audience. This has nothing to do with personal anxieties, and in fact as a presenter in English, I feel almost no

anxiety during DSs (although I will admit a slight degree of apprehension when managing DSs in Japanese).

While it is often claimed that DSs may offer up fruitful discourse that has not been addressed in the CP itself (which is often cited as a justification for making the DS include up to 50% of the allotted length of the entire CP), both as an active participant and as an observer conducting research, I have felt that the vast majority of DSs tend to be little more than formalized time fillers, cluttered with either indulgent or mundane commentary. This observation is underscored by the frequency with which non-participating audience members check cell phones, programs or start to pack papers and bags—hoping to depart as soon as possible— during DSs.

Often, this problem occurs because the discussants' comments are connected only to their own specific research interests or concerns—they are unshared by other audience members. In other cases, questions or comments can come across as forced or artificial, particularly when habitual discussants feel obligated to maintain or initiate discourse even when there is in fact little to drive it. In many such cases, the chair might intervene with a manufactured question, asked largely in order to fulfill the obligation of carrying out the DS, rather than due to any pressing issues connected to the contents of the CP (it should be noted that the chair tends to give 'friendly' questions).

As a presenter myself, I have rarely noted questions or comments from the audience that I felt served to illuminate some point of import for the majority of the participants. And while some beneficial or uplifting discussion may, and does, occasionally occur, the DS, it seems to me, fulfills more of a post-CP ceremonial function than a deeper exploration of academic value. Even occasional strands of potentially stirring debates tend to be truncated by considerations of time, and face-saving politeness strategies and are often more robust and interesting when held outside the presentation room or during breaks.

Having said that, however, DSs still remain a quintessential sub-genre of academic conferences, and for that reason alone both presenters and audience participants should develop an understanding as to how to maintain and carry out such interactions.

Questions and Exercises for Sections 17.3–17.6

1. Give one example of each of the following DS response strategies: a. Appeasement, b. avoidance, c. admission, d. returning the question, e. clarifying a vague comment, f. clarifying a misheard word/phrase
2. What are two politeness protocols that discussants should be aware of when giving a question or comment?
3. How can you indicate to a discussant that a) you have understood the question and no more need be said, and b) you do not understand the question/comment?

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