



Gambits in a New Light

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Received: 25-04-2013

Accepted: 04-06-2013

Published: 01-07-2013

doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.2n.4p.228

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.2n.4p.228>

Abstract

This paper examines the substance of a term, often heard but rarely explained, in the discussion of language teaching, namely gambits. More specially, the focus of this paper is to explore the inadequacies in the literature regarding gambits, in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the term. To this end, this paper argues that there may be more to gambits than merely strategies for communication. Gambits may serve a didactic function by shifting the learners' attention to form, or as self-regulation devices mediating the process of learning which is a central concept in sociocultural theory. Not all the criteria mentioned in literature are efficient in distinguishing gambits. This paper concludes by introducing a new classification based on the specificity of gambit use to aid its perception. It is hoped that in this light, a deeper understanding of gambits can be achieved, one which can ease the process of learning, leading to more independent and effective learners.

Key words: gambits, communication strategies, focus on form, self-regulation

1. An overview on the definition of gambits

What is a gambit?

Let's consider the definition provided by 'Oxford English dictionary' (OED)

(1) A thing that somebody does or something somebody says at the beginning of a situation or conversation, that is intended to give them some advantage.

An opening gambit (= the first thing you say)

His idea of a brilliant conversational gambit is '*what's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?*'

(2) A move or moves made at the beginning of a game of chess in order to gain an advantage later.

Taking a closer look at the definition provided by OED, the word 'advantage' seems rather conspicuous. The question is what is exactly meant by 'advantage'. In chess the issue is rather straightforward, sacrificing a pawn in order to eventually end up winning the game. However, in discourse analysis 'advantage' is not so clear-cut and can pertain to a variety of functions. Whatever the function is, as the term 'advantage' suggests, it's surely to benefit the participant involved in the conversation, or in a broader sense 'a situation'. According to Keller (1979),

The polished conversationalist is a familiar figure. He breaks smoothly into conversations, picks up the thread effortlessly, holds the listeners enthralled as he develops his point, and then elegantly bows out of conversation. How does he do it? No doubt the answer is complex, involving personality factors, group dynamics, and the degree of familiarity between the speaker and the other conversation participants. But from a purely linguistic point of view, it is also possible to identify a further factor for facilitating conversational discourse, the presence or absence of a certain set of signals in the conversationalist's speech, used to introduce level shifts within the conversation, or to prepare the listener for the next turn in the logical argument. This set of signals will here be called 'gambits' (p.219-220).

So unlike the definition by OED, in conversational discourse gambits can be used not only in the beginning of a conversation, but can also maintain and end a conversation. Keller (1979) believes that strategies which have an overt and verbal representation in the form of semi-fixed expressions and are used by speakers to structure their content and their conversational procedure from a psycholinguistic point of view are called 'gambits'. He also indicates that gambits can serve one of the following 4 main functions or a combination of them, that is,

(1) Semantic introducers

Gambits can indicate the general frame of the topic which is about to be broached in the conversation. A topic can be framed for example as an opinion or a piece of unpleasant realism by saying “*The way I look at it*” or “*whether we like it or not*”.

(2) Signaling the participants’ social context in the conversation

Gambits can indicate for example a wish to take a turn in conversation, to end it or to get another participant to answer. E.g., “*that’s pretty much it*” when wishing to end a turn.

(3) State of Consciousness

Gambits may signal a person’s readiness to receive information, for instance by saying “*Yes, I’m listening*” or even simply “*Yes?*” They can also signal the opposite by saying “*I’m not really interested in that*”.

(4) Communication Control

Gambits sometimes share the purpose of gaining time to look for a word or a syntactic structure, hesitations such as “*you know*” or “*you see*” can serve this purpose. In addition some gambits are used for assuring that the communication channel is open, such as “*Are you with me?*” or “*Is that clear?*”

Another well-known model has been provided by Edmunson and House (1981) which involves a more detailed and precise classification of gambit categories based on both the function they serve and the positions in a sentence which they can occupy. This model constitutes 3 main categories, namely, ‘Uptakers’, ‘Clarifiers’ and ‘Appealers’ (see Appendix 1 for more information).

So, as can be seen, there is much more to gambits than initially assumed. It is hoped that the following sections can burn a torch on the concept of gambits.

2. Are Gambits merely strategies for communication?

Let’s have a clear vision on what communication strategies (CSs) mean.

CSs have been defined in a variety of ways which in turn has led to somewhat different taxonomies.

Different approaches towards conceptualizing CSs:

The traditional view: CSs were originally seen as verbal or non-verbal first aid devices used to compensate for gaps in the speakers’ L2 proficiency as reflected in Tarone (1977) and Faerch & Kasper’s (1983a) definitions:

Conscious CSs are used by an individual to overcome the crisis which occurs when language structures are inadequate to convey the individual’s thought. (Tarone, 1977, p.195)

CSs are potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communication goal. (Faerch & Kasper, 1983a, p.36)

Due to this definition, it’s clear-cut that CSs constitute only a subtype of L2 problem-management effort, dealing with language production problems that occur at the planning stage, which is entirely different from those problem-solving devices involved in handling problems that have already surfaced during the course of communication, such as, meaning-negotiation and repair mechanisms (e.g., requesting & providing clarification).

To my mind, this definition seems rather contradictory in itself. According to Swain (1995, 1998) we have 2 types of noticing, noticing the gap and noticing the hole. Although they appear to be related, they differ in crucial ways. Noticing the gap occurs when learners notice that their interlanguage (IL) differs from the target language (TL). So, as the definition suggests it involves noticing both the IL and TL forms, a process sometimes referred to as cognitive comparison (Doughty, 2001). On the other hand, when learners notice a hole they in fact realize that they don’t have the means of saying something they intend. So it seems that what the traditional view wants to say is that CSs are devices aiding learners when confronted with holes. Although there is no guarantee that the hole will be filled by a TL form (This would well be a pedagogical goal, which teachers should pursue i.e., when learners’ realize the need, input should be available to provide them with positive evidence about the IL). It is here which gambits can be of utmost value in filling these holes. Whether functioning as semantic introducers, signaling the social context, an indication to receive information or communication control, they seem to have a say in the matter. The thing is that, although gambits at first seem to be conscious plans (as consciousness is one of the criteria of CSs), but when used time and again, seem to escape the learners’ consciousness as Daly (1994) states ‘some strategies are overlearned and seem to drop from consciousness’ (p.6).

Now considering gaps, again gambits can provide a colorful role Consider the following example¹:

Teacher: *well* [starter], would you care for an apple?

Student: *Oh, oh, eh* [appealer] ...

It’s clear that the student hasn’t fully understood the teacher’s utterance, so the teacher uses a gambit and rephrases the question:

T: *let me put it another way* [revival], do you want an apple?

S: *oh* [appealer], *well* [rheme-free], thanks, but I don’t want an apple.

The student experience no holes in his IL in responding to the teacher’s question, but his answer is far from perfect and somewhat a non-native like utterance, so the teacher recasts the student’s utterance by first marking it with a gambit, in order to ensure that he will notice the form (these recast marking gambits will be discussed at length, in the following section).

T: *In other words* [recast marking], *you mean to say* [clarifier (underscorer)] ‘thanks, but no thanks’

Thus the student notices that there’s a difference between his IL and the TL form, thereby leading him to an IL restructuring. Later on, the teacher can ask a similar question to see whether this processing instruction was effective in destabilizing non TL forms or in other words, observe whether any uptake has occurred on the student’s part.

As can be seen, this type of interaction will not only impact control, by speeding up the access to IL forms resulting in an increased fluency (as Van Patten (1996) claims that output will only impact control), but will also develop the IL system because the teacher’s output will be considered input for the student. So gambits will have an impact on both noticing the hole and noticing the gap and thus an extended version of the traditional view on CSs.

Dorneyi’s extended view: Dorneyi (1995) suggested an extension of CSs’ definition arguing that because a primary source of L2 speakers’ communication problems is insufficient processing time, stalling strategies (e.g., the use of lexicalized pause-fillers and hesitation gambits) that help speakers gain time to think and keep the communication channel open are also problem solving strategies. In Tarone’s (1980) framework, pause fillers would fall under production rather than CSs, the difference being that production strategies “are not used for the primary purpose of negotiating meaning” (p.420).

Faerch and Kasper (1983b) considered pause fillers temporal variables rather than strategic devices. Now, the thing is that surely a function of gambits is to give the speaker time in order to organize his thoughts, but to my mind reducing the notion of gambits to time stalling devices is underestimating their true value. As Keller (1979) stated, one of the most pervasive functions that gambits may have is that they can introduce the general frame within which meaning can be conveyed. So most commonly and most overtly gambits refer to semantic information. They serve to signal that the stretch of utterance to follow is to be taken in a particular manner, for instance, as an opinion or as a piece of unpleasant realism. Now let’s consider a type of gambit which Edmundson (1976) calls “the Downtoner”. The Downtoner is a classic case of Lakoff’s (1973) first maxim of politeness. It’s used in order to attenuate the force of the speech act it happens to accompany to make it more acceptable to the hearer. The Downtoner may both precede and follow the central speech act but normally proceeds. For example:

Correct me if I’m wrong but ...

So, as can be seen the statement following this gambit can be a disagreement on the hearer’s part towards what the speaker has previously mentioned. Thus, not only do they give the hearer time to execute what he wants to say, but also imply the semantic frame of the discourse, therefore they should be considered as strategic devices rather than merely temporal variables.

Let’s take this a step forward. There are also gambits which can also anticipate the semantic frame of an entire discourse which has not even been uttered yet. Reflexive pronouns are one example of these gambits. For example:

A: Hi

B: Hi, *yourself* [felicity].

What is the function of the reflexive pronoun attached to Hi, in B’s response?

In native English conversation, plenty of these instances can be found, all leading to an intimate conversation. I call them ‘Felicity gambits’. (See Appendix 2)

Canale’s extended concept: Canale (1983) offered the broadest extension of the concept “communication strategy”. He proposed that CSs involve any attempt to “enhance the effectiveness of communication”. Considering what has been given up to now about gambits. It seems perfectly clear that gambits can take on such a role. They can lubricate discourse, aid in negotiating meaning and also form (this will be discussed at length in the following section), indicate readiness to receive information, claim the floor, abandon a turn and so on, so forth, thus leading to an effective communication. At the end of the day, one feels bewildered whether to consider gambits as a subdivision of CSs or the other way around!

3. Gambits as a means of focusing on form (the didactic function of gambits)

One of the most popular functions of gambits is that they serve as discourse lubricants or in Edmundson’s (1976) words, gambits are “used to lubricate discourse already initiated”. Due to this function, they will lead to fewer breakdowns in communication. But it seems that these discourse lubricants can also act as didactic devices, aiding both teachers and students in a brief diversion to form that is while maintaining the primary focus on meaning. In the context of tasks, they can aid in allowing some focus on form run through the backdoor thereby, abiding to what Ellis (2001) has defined an incidental FonF.

Gambits can be used to mark recasts. According to Farrokhi (2005),

To make recasts less ambiguous and to ensure that learners attend to form, we might conclude that it may be necessary to combine recasts with additional explicit signals to make them less implicit. (p. 69)

He indicates that “recasts are often provided in 2 phases. The first phase (that is, repetition of the learner’s error with stress and rising intonation) serves as an additional attention getting device to promote noticing of the erroneous forms and the second phase (that is, recast) is used to highlight the gap between the learner’s erroneous form and the teacher’s corrective reformulation”. (p. 68)

It seems that gambits can have a say in the first phase (that is, marking). This can be achieved in 3 ways:

3.1 Pick-ups

We can use what Edmundson (1976) calls 'pick-up' or 'theme-rheme' gambits which occur when the hearer repeats part of what has been said to him. Although this gambit serves a number of functions (that is, as time-gaining devices, used by someone short of a ready answer, saving one's own face and showing respect to the speaker), to my mind, it can be used for corrective purposes, as well.

Pick-up gambits can be used as a means of learner initiated focus on form which Ellis (2001) states that "is a good learner strategy". On the other hand, it is for this reason which I'll call these gambits 'recast marking gambits' which although similar to 'pick-ups', have an extended function of marking recasts. (See Appendix 2)

3.2 Underscorers

These pertain to a category of gambits, based Edmundson and House's model called 'Clarifiers' (1981). Underscorers are message-oriented which serve to direct the hearer's attention to a particular point the speaker is making and are often used in Argumentative discourse. Consider the following excerpt which I've taken from one of my classes:

T: *Now* [starter] how was the birthday party last night?

S: *Well* [rheme-free], *eh* [appealer], it was nice. I have a very good time.

T: *You mean* [clarifier (underscorer)] you had a very good time.

S; *Oh, sorry* [appealer], I had a very good time.

Note that 'well' can be considered both as a starter or a rheme-free gambit depending on the role it takes. If it is an indication to claim the floor in the sense that somebody is about to say something, based on Edmundson and House's model, it is a 'starter', on the other hand, if it is used merely as a means of buying time it will be considered as a 'rheme-free' gambit. (See Appendix 2)

3.3 Tag-questions

A category of gambits in Edmundson and House's (1981) model are called 'Appealers'. Appealers are quite similar to a request for confirmation and are commonly realized by tag-questions, which can be used both with a rising and falling intonation. Tag-questions unlike 'recast marking' gambits serve to mark the recast after the recasting has been done. In this light, they can be called 'post recast marking' gambits. (See Appendix 2)

Consider the following excerpt from my class:

T: *So* [starter] where did you go last week?

S: *Oh well* [rheme-free], *you know* [clarifier (cajoler)], I go to New York.

T: *Go to New York* [pick-up]! It should be 'went to New York', *shouldn't it* [appealer (tag-question)]?

S: *Oh, yes* [appealer], I went to New York.

As can be seen 'post recast marking' gambits not only serve to recast the student's utterance, but can also illustrate whether uptake has taken place on the student's part or not. It seems that combining both gambits (that is recast marking and post recast marking) will lead to the most disambiguating results on recasts. However, more empirical studies are needed to confirm this. (Note that the student has taken advantage of the gambits 'oh', 'well', 'you know' to buy time in order to come up with the response)

Now let's consider Negotiation as a means of implicitly encouraging learner noticing. Negotiation isn't a dependable pedagogical technique (Pica, 1997; Foster, 1998), because it mostly revolves around meaning and due to the built in redundancies in language, learners can often effectively communicate without the need to focus on the TL form. However, gambits can be used during negotiation by the teacher to focus the learner's attention on form and by the learner to restructure their utterance in an effort to understand or to be understood. Consider another excerpt from my class, which involves discussing the movie 'Sweet November'. In addition to negotiating meaning, the teacher also wishes to allocate the student's attention to the simple past tense form.

T: Who was Nelson and how did he meet Sarah?

S: *Well* [rheme-free], Nelson is a businessman.

T: *Really* [uptaker (go-ons)]? *You mean that* [clarifier (cajoler)] he is a business man in real life?!

S: No, *you see* [clarifier (cajoler)] he was a businessman in the movie.

T: So, *correct me if I'm wrong* [downtoner] but *what you mean to say* [clarifier (underscorer)] is that Nelson was a businessman.

S: *Oh, yeah* [uptaker(receipt)], Nelson was a businessman and he met Sarah on a test.

T: I didn't get the last part [uptaker(checks)], *what do you mean* [clarifier(cajoler)] by 'on a test'?

S: A driving test.

T: *I still don't get it* [uptaker(checks)]!

S: *Eh, oh, uh, it's called um* [aside]...

T: *Could you put it in another way* [revival]?

S: *Yes* [uptaker(receipt)], there was a place where they take test.

T: *All right* [uptaker(receipt)], so *they met at a place where they* [recast marking] took a test.

S: *Oh, yes, took a test* [uptaker(agree)].

T: *What kind of test* [clarifier (underscorer)]?

S: A test to drive.

T: So, *in other words* [appealer], *you mean* [clarifier (underscorer)] a driving license test.

S: *Yes, Yes exactly* [uptaker(agree)]. *They met during a driving license test* [pick-up].

T: *Fantabulous* [uptaker(exclaim)]

S: *Can I say it again* [appealer]?

T: *Sure, go ahead* [uptaker(receipt)].

S: *Correct me if I'm wrong* [downtoner], I believe, *Nelson and Sarah met during a driving license test* [pick-up].

T: *Now that's the spirit* [uptaker (exclaim)].

So, as can be seen from the excerpt above, the use of gambits not only aided in the negotiation of meaning but also drew the student's attention simultaneously to form. At the end the student was able to use the previously mentioned 'Downtoner' gambit used by the teacher, on his own, which was very promising. To wrap up this section, I believe gambits are well deserved to be thought of as serving the didactic function.

4. Gambits as a means of mediation

Sociocultural theorists prefer to talk of 'participation' rather than 'acquisition' (Sfard, 1998). Development is a matter of taking part in social activity. The theory seeks to explain how mediated minds (Lantolf, 1996) are developed out of social activity. As Lantolf (2000) points out 'the central & distinguishing concept of SCT is that higher forms of mental activity are mediated'. He suggests 3 types of mediation in second language learning: (1) mediation by artifacts like tasks; (2) mediation by others in social interaction and (3) mediation by self through private speech. So it's obvious that mediation can be either external or internal. Based on SCT, external mediation serves as the means by which internal mediation is achieved. Instruction as a form of external mediation may lead to development, but not any kind of instruction, as Vygotsky (1986) believes "the only good instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it" (p.188) and thus instruction that occurs in the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development). Putting it short, ZPD is a projection of a person's developmental future in the sense that what one can do in cooperation with others today one can do alone tomorrow (Vygotsky 1986, p.188). In Vygotskian sense, learning is assisted performance, whereas, development is the ability to regulate mental and social activity as a consequence of having internalized that assistance. Thus development is moving from materialization to verbalization and then internalization, which moving from materialization to verbalization "is the crucial point in the passage from external to internal" (Leon, 2001, p.274). When internalization occurs, the knowledge can serve the functional needs of the individuals independently of the particular circumstances in which it was appropriated. In other words, independent strategic functioning which will then construct a further ZPD, results from the process of object regulation to other regulation and finally to self-regulation, that is, moving from the intermental to the intramental plane.

It seems that gambits can play a role in this process (especially in self-regulation). Due to Edmundson & House's (1981) model, one type of gambits called 'Aside' can often stimulate the hearer to provide the prompt in order to assist the fumbling speaker. Thus these gambits look like self-prompts and indicate the need to be scaffolded. For example, consider tokens like:

"Erm oh let me see"

"Yes whats it called erm"

"Oh its erm it's on the tip of my tongue"

By using such gambits, learners can indicate the need for other regulation. Gambits as discourse lubricants can predict the nature of a context or in Keller's (1979) words "signal the semantic framework of discourse". Therefore it seems obvious that having a wider repertoire of gambits will lead to higher contingency, thereby increasing coherence in discourse. In a dialogic task, participants seek to establish 'intersubjectivity' (that is, agree on the nature of the activity). Gambit use on the participants' part can let the dialogic task run smoothly, thereby facilitating contingency and easing the process of establishing intersubjectivity. Gambits can also help construct an immediate ZPD, thereby facilitating learning and when these gambits are repeated within this fundamental ZPD, they will be acquired.

Strategic use of gambits can take on the form of object regulation, which can then be used to form questions directed at the teacher or to indicate the need to be scaffolded, in the form of other regulation, and finally to indicate having understood the problem in the sense of self-regulation. Self-regulation is a form of dialogic activity which "I" is talking to "me"; thereby gambits when internalized can lubricate self-regulation and decrease the cognitive stress which seems lethal for L2 learners. In other words, when we have a wide repertoire of gambits to start, maintain and end our conversation, we'll feel less need to resort to the use of L1 in our private speech. Having sufficient gambit knowledge, will give us time, therefore increasing our self-confidence to interact with others or ourselves.

Based on the 'activity theory' the way learners approach and carry out a task, that is the activity they construct out of the task, can be simplified by means of gambits.

Tasks themselves don't create the context for learning; it is the learners which create opportunities for themselves to extend their knowledge by ways they approach a task using gambits. Gambits can allow learners to self-scaffold themselves. For example imagine you're being interviewed in an IELTS speaking test. You're given a prompt and asked to talk about it for 3 minutes. Gambits will allow you to structure your talk, moreover when you feel what you're saying is reaching a dead-end and that you need to create another opportunity for yourself, you can use the gambit "*let me put it another way*" and open a whole new gate in front of yourself.²

Let's assume the participant is asked to talk about his favorite TV commercial. He can begin with rheme-free gambits, like "*well*", "*as a matter of fact*", "*you know*". Then he begins his talk "I love chocolate commercials, because I adore chocolate and that these commercials are very colorful & *uh...*", suddenly he notices a hole in his knowledge, that is he wants to say "honest", but is unable to do so. On the other hand, he doesn't want to the interviewer to scaffold him, because that will lead to the consequence of lowering his score. So either he gives up, by keeping silent, thereby putting the interviewer in a demanding position, or he can create a second chance for himself by using the gambit "*let me put it another way*" and by saying "these commercials usually tell the truth about their products' quality".³ Thus by using a gambit he was able to pretty much save the day. Now when ending the talk, he can use gambits such as "*that's pretty much it*" or "*that's all*", thereby indicating to the interviewer, he has finished. This is extremely important, because most L2 learners are unable to end their utterance with a falling intonation, thereby lacking the proper means of indicating that they're finished. (See appendix 2)

5. Revisiting the criteria for distinguishing Gambits⁴

5.1 No moves

Gambits, unlike utterances, are no moves in an interactional structure because they do not carry the conversation forward to an outcome. Mostly they are ritualized, idiomatic expressions which are used to establish, maintain and end a conversation (Keller 1979).

But reality seems somewhat different. In fact, some gambits prove the opposite. For example:

A: were you satisfied with the food?

B: *mmmmm*

As can be seen, B's response which is in the form of an interjection, not only ends the conversation, but also implies that the food was very delicious in his opinion. Note that these are not to be confused with 'Uptakers'. If B for instance had said "*uhum*" then it would have been considered only an acknowledgement to A's question, thereby an 'Uptaker receipt'. So unlike Keller (1979) that believes "gambits don't signal any specific meanings", to my mind, some of them out there, do.

5.2 Falling intonation

Keller (1979) believes Gambits have a falling intonation. But a quick glance at Edmundson and House's (1981) model, will lead us to a category called 'Appealers' which in the form of tag-questions accompanied with a rising intonation, precisely runs against the falling intonation criterion.

5.3 Problem-orientedness and consciousness⁵

A review of the CS literature reveals that 2 defining criteria are consistently mentioned, that is, problem-orientedness & consciousness. However these criteria seem somewhat problematic. Considering the problem-orientedness, one has no choice but to ask exactly what type of problem? Since problem-orientedness in general isn't specific enough as Dornyei and Scott (1995a, 1995b) argued.

Originally CSs were thought to handle only one type of language problems, resource deficits-gaps in the speakers' knowledge preventing them from verbalizing messages. This runs counter to the broadness of the term "communication strategies". The same mismatch carries over to gambits, as well. Gambits can be used as signals for turn-taking, to indicate readiness to receive information, claim the floor and so on. So it's clear that gambits serve a variety of functions beyond merely filling gaps. Thus the first criterion (that is, problem-orientedness) can't do justice, neither for CSs, nor gambits.

Now turning to the second criterion, I believe that due to many different connotations "consciousness" has, it would be best to avoid it altogether. Schmidt (1994) recommended that the term be deconstructed into several aspects & suggested 4 basic senses of consciousness, namely intentionality, attention, awareness and control. Bialystok (1990) also separated consciousness from intentionality, which she defined as the "learner's control over a repertoire of strategies so that particular ones may be selected from the range of options and deliberately applied to achieve certain effects" (p.5). Faerch and Kasper (1983b) argue that "consciousness is perhaps more a matter of degree than either-or" (p.35) reflecting that in most cases a speaker consciously selects only certain elements in a plan. Gass and Selinker (1994) also indicated a central feature of language use is a tendency to automatize high-frequency elements; therefore, the small set of strategies people use in the numerous problem situations they encounter can become routinized and then in Wiemann and Daly's (1994) words "drop from consciousness". Keller (1979) states that "no matter what form gambits take, they do exist somewhere in the speaker's consciousness as he formulates his utterance, because they do serve very definite communicative functions". It seems to my mind that Keller only considered a subset of gambits when making this claim. There are a lot of gambits out there which people use for a variety of purposes but not in a

conscious fashion because they are routinized. Moreover, some gambits are part of a person's personality and used habitually to whatever purpose there is.

People often have 'catch phrases' which they use time and again to gain time in order to structure their message. In other words we have a repertoire of gambits that are part of our personality which we use unconsciously for both strategic (offline) and online planning in order to smoothly run the 3 stages that Levelt (1989) identifies in his speech production model, namely conceptualization, formulation and articulation. So considering consciousness as a criterion for defining gambits seems well out of place.

5.4 The 3 main criteria for defining gambits

Keller (1979) believes that expressions, consisting of a single or several habitually co-occurring lexemes, were classified as gambits if they met the following criteria:

- (1) They should be used to introduce one of the 4 main functions (that is, semantic introducers; signaling social context; state of consciousness and communication control) or a combination of them.
- (2) They could be used under usual circumstances in the initial position within a sentence (due to the linguistic difficulty surrounding the initial phase of any turn in conversation, gambits seem to be of primary didactic interest).
- (3) They should be pervasive and stable in language use or in other words, they should be in common use by the speakers of that language, thus gambits exclusively used in slang language were excluded.

Thus Keller believes that by applying these criteria, standard formulas of conversational initiation and leave-taking such as: "Hello", "thank you" or "good luck" is not to be considered gambits, since they don't signal any of the 4 main functions. I dare to say that in some contexts, we all have used "hello" not merely for the sake of greeting, but to indicate readiness to take on a turn. So in this light, even these standard formulas can refer to the second function (that is 'signaling social context'). Furthermore, some may even use "hi" or "hey" in order to break away from formality and be more casual, thus fulfilling the first function (that is, 'semantic framing').

Keller (1979) also believes that by means of these criteria, gambits are distinguished from idioms. But the fact is that, there are a lot of gambits which are idioms. The interesting thing is that even Keller (1979) himself has admitted to this by pointing out some idioms such as, "*time and again*" which he subsumed under the label "Argumentation" as one of the 7 categories pointing to "Semantic framing" or "*every now and then*" which is used for low-frequency generalization, again under "Argumentation".

So considering the first criterion, it's not that we should do all together with it, but that dismissing whatever seems not pertaining to it at first sight, isn't logical. Gambits are in fact context-dependent (at least most of them) and there are a lot of idioms out there which are gambits.

So, at the end of the day, we'll keep this criterion in mind, but bearing in mind not to jump to conclusions when faced with certain expressions.

Now, let's move on to the second criterion. If we consider Edmundson and House's (1981) model, it's clear that this criterion won't do any justice towards marking gambits, since it's clear that gambits can occupy all three positions in a sentence. 'Cajolers' as the most frequently used gambits in English (at least in Edmundson's opinion) can occur in pre-, mid-, or post positions. Cajolers also have a "fumbling function" for the speaker because he suspects that what he is about to say might not be welcome to the hearer, he can "downplay" the impact of what is saying (1981:75). "*I mean*" and "*you know*" are the most common tokens (1981:75); the high frequency of these gambits clearly demonstrates their function to fill conversational gaps. Consider the following example:

A: What did you think of my lecture?

B: Well erm it was *you know* very interesting of course but to *tell the truth* I thought erm *you know really* you might have paid more attention to the audience.

So, it's quite obvious that gambits can occupy all 3 positions, rendering the second criterion insufficient. (Note that tag-questions as a form of 'Appealers', which were discussed previously, only occupy the final position in a sentence)

As with the second criterion, the third one also falls short. Since gambits often consist of verbal or nominal elements that allow morphological and syntactic manipulation, it becomes evident that there is no limit to the number of gambits we can have. This what Keller himself also partially agreed on by saying, "criteria 1 & 2 (purpose & placement of gambit) maybe more incisive criteria for defining gambits in the absolute sense than criterion 3 (fixedness of use)" (1979:223). For example "*I think so*" can be easily permuted into "*I thought so*". So gambits can be created by picking up a set of words which may or may not be used commonly in that language.

6. Conclusion & implications

All this confusion towards defining gambits, has led me to come up with a new classification according to the specificity of gambit use. I hope that this taxonomy will clear up at least some of the smoke regarding the issue.

Gambits can be classified in 4 main groups, with respect to their specificity of use:

(1) Universal Gambits

Those shared among all languages, conveying more or less the same intent. Non-linguistic signals, such as "*eh*", "*oh*", "*mmm*", "*mhm*", "*uhuhm*", belong to this group, which can serve any of the 4 main functions. Consider "*Uuhuhm*" which can serve both 'consciousness' (I'm sharing your opinion) and communication (I understand you) functions, or "*oh*", "*ah*", "*uh*" which are time gaining devices, are pretty much used in all languages. Some can even move a

conversation forward by eliciting a specific meaning, such as “*mmmm*”. These non-linguistic signals have been considered as one type of ‘Appealers’ due to Edmundson and House’s (1981) model but clearly they can function beyond ‘Appealers’. ‘Pick ups’ (previously discussed) also seem to be universal, although more empirical studies need to be carried out to prove such a claim. I want to take ‘Universal Gambits’ a step forward and even say that gestures can also do the gambit trick and pretty much convey the same meaning in all languages. Thus instead of responding with a “yes”, one can nod. Nodding seems to imply the same meaning everywhere. ‘Universal Gambits’ can aid in international communication, especially for those who are less proficient in the host language. Moreover, these gambits not need to be learnt.

Gambits are a language system in their own right and hence biological. According to Lenneberg (1967), a system is biological if,

- Its cognitive function is species specific
- The specific properties of its cognitive function are replicated in every member of the species
- The cognitive processes associated with this system are differentiated spontaneously with maturation
- Certain aspects of behavior and cognitive function for this system emerge only during infancy
- Certain social phenomena come about by spontaneous adaptation of the behavior of the growing individual to the behavior around him (p.371-4)

So, due to these prerequisites, gambits are in fact biologically based, i.e., they are species specific; they’re universal; their use develops with maturation (no need for teaching); some gambits, especially of the interjection kind, emerge only during infancy; and social interaction will lead to more and more gambit use.

(2) *Macro Gambits*

Gambits unique to a specific language community. These gambits are commonly used among the speakers of that community. E.g., “*that’s pretty much it*” in order to end a turn, thus serving the ‘social context’ function. Most of these gambits aren’t culturally specific (that is, functional equivalents and in some cases conventional equivalents can be found). On the other hand, since they correspond to the standard form, they may also serve a prestigious function.

(3) *Micro Gambits*

These pertain to gambits used across different dialects, gender and ethnic groups. Although conventional equivalents maybe somewhat difficult to find, functional equivalents may exist. Consider “*come on, bro*” which its functional equivalent in the standard form may be “*Take it easy, my friend*”. Note that slang gambits will also be included in this group. These gambits which are related to the discipline of ‘Sociolinguistics’, may prove a fruitful area for future research which in turn can expand sociolinguistic knowledge which L2 teachers depend on when making decisions regarding which grammatical, pragmatic and discourse standards to promote. As a specimen, it would be very interesting to see that whether gambit use differs in males and females.

(4) *Idiosyncratic Gambits*

Gambits which each person creates on his/her own. These gambits can particularly enhance fluency. They can also serve a heuristic function. Thus L2 teachers can motivate learners to come up with their own gambits, thereby extending their ZPDs. A 30 minute movie task, which learners first analyze a movie(subtitle included) according to both its content and form, and then narrate it in 30 minutes, can be one way to extend their repertoire of gambits and thus make them more independent and effective learners, which is the sole aim of the ‘post method’ era.

So, at the end of the day, it seems that providing a clear-cut definition for gambits is somewhat impossible. Keller (1979) defines gambits as “strategies which have an overt and verbal representation in the form of semi- fixed expressions”.

Considering this definition, 3 points come to mind. First, the term “strategy” implies a conscious attempt while clearly ‘consciousness’ as previously stated can’t account for a criterion defining gambits. Second, some gambits, especially of the universal type don’t have a verbal representation and third, some gambits are indeed fixed while others can be permuted. So, the term ‘semi-fixed’ can’t apply to all of them. On the other hand, considering gambits as no moves in an interactional discourse, because they don’t carry the conversation forward to an outcome, also seems far removed from reality. Some gambits as previously shown or even a combination of them may move the conversation forward, although not explicitly, they may implicitly lead to an outcome. Consider the following excerpt from the book ‘Functions of American English’,

Sue: *You mean* [clarifier (underscorer)] you’re not interested in politics?

Bob: *Uh, well no, I’m, I’m, you know, well, I’m really, uh* [rheme-free]... (p.27)

Although nothing comes out of Bob’s response explicitly, the combination of ‘Rheme-Free’ (see Appendix 2) gambits used implies that Bob is a conservative person and doesn’t want to answer the question or in other words, prefers not to be asked questions involving politics. Thus by the combination of the gambits used by Bob, the conversation in fact moves forward towards a desired outcome. (At least on Bob’s behalf)

The main aim of the post method era is to encourage and develop learner autonomy. It seems that gambits will have quite a say in this matter, one that cannot be simply overlooked. Teachers are more than welcome to try to encourage students in learning these pre-patterned expressions but of course this is not the whole story. Not all gambits are pre-patterned, as a matter of fact, there is no limit whatsoever to the quantity of gambits and their functions. So in this light not all gambits should be handed out on a silver platter to the learners and even attempting to do so, is quite pointless because of the infinite nature of gambits. So the best a teacher can do is present some well-known gambits and leave the rest up to the learners to discover. Last but not least, it seems that for the present, the 4 functions Keller presented, in addition to the didactic function I've introduced, seem the best criteria in defining gambits. It seems that any attempt to restrict gambits by providing an absolute definition, runs against the nature of gambits. After reading this paper, if you've come up with the idea that language is entirely a huge gambit, I can't blame you. After all, an applied linguist should only point out to the possibilities, and provide food for thought for language users.

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Appendix 1

Edmondson and House (1981) model

Uptakers

An Uptaker serves as an acknowledgement of the preceding utterance made by the interlocutor and prefaces a speaker's move.

Receipt: most often realized by tokens "yes" and "yeah" with a falling intonation. Other tokens are: "hmm", "uhum", "aha", "uh" or "I see", "right", "okay". There are also tokens that re-represent the original message. To House they constitute their own category of gambits: the Re-Represent (House 1980: 101). Edmondson (1976) calls them: The Pick-Up.

Emotive Exclaim: Using an Exclaim, a speaker shows his emotional state about what has been said before (1981: 72). Edmondson & House distinguish between four sets of tokens used as Exclaims:

- Subset A: includes tokens like "oh", "ah", "really" or "indeed" that express interest, surprise or disbelief.
- Subset B: includes tokens that are used when the previous utterance contains information that is unwelcome to the speaker. Such as: "oh dear", "oh lord", "god help us", "what a nuisance".
- Subset C: includes tokens that are used when the previous utterance contains information that is welcome to the speaker. Such as: "super", "great", "terrific", and "good".
- Subset D: Tokens reflecting resignation or anger, for example "damn", "Jesus Christ", "not again".

Go-ons: They are realized by the same tokens as Receipts and Exclaims but differ from them in their placing. They occur alone during an extended turn-at-talk by the interlocutor, but do not constitute an interruption. (1981: 73) With a Go-on, a speaker does not claim "the floor". Go-ons usually have a rising intonation. (1980: 102) For example:

A: So I went up to him and simply introduced myself

B: *Really*

Go-ons are part of the "art of good listening". According to Edmondson/House, they support the conversation. When they are totally absent, it might be that the speaker stops his talk altogether. The use of a Go-on can be interpreted by the preceding speaker as a request for Confirmation or Repetition.

Checks: House introduces another category of Uptakers: "Checks", which are precisely requests for confirmation, repetition or clarification. Typical tokens are "Do you really think so?", "Could you repeat that, please?", "I didn't get that"

Agree: Another category introduced by House is the "Agree". It shows that the speaker accepts the preceding communicative act as right. The token is: "yes, you're right"

Clarifiers

Unlike the Uptakers, they do not refer to the previous utterance, but to the utterance that is uttered now. They have 2 subcategories:

Cajolers: Cajoler serves to establish or even restore harmony between the conversation partners. Its function is to make a communicative act more palatable to the hearer, it appeals for agreement or cooperation. Cajolers also have a "fumbling function" for the speaker because he suspects that what he/she is about to say might not be welcome to the hearer, he can "downplay" the impact of what he is saying (1981: 75). Edmondson and House have shown that Cajolers are the most frequently used gambit type in English. "I mean" and "you know" are the most common tokens (1981: 75); the high frequency of these gambits clearly demonstrates their function to fill conversational gaps. "The Downtoner" can also be considered a special case of Cajolers.

Underscorer: In contrast to the hearer-oriented "Cajoler" it is more message-oriented. It serves to direct the hearer's attention to a particular point the speaker is making. For that reason, Underscorers are often used in Argumentative

discourse. Tokens like: “Look I’ll tell you what...”, “Well the thing is...” are used in pre-position to the sentence underscored, and tokens like: “this is the point”, “that’s the problem” are used in post-positions.

Appealers

An Appealer is used to elicit a reaction to what has just been said by the speaker. The hearer is expected to react with an Uptaker. Usually the speaker seeks to elicit agreement to what has been said; therefore Appealers are quite similar to a request for confirmation. (1981: 77)

Appealers are commonly realized by tag-questions, such as “isn’t it”, tags on imperatives like “will you” and also by tokens like “okay”, “(all)right”, “remember”, “don’t you agree”, or “does he/she/they”. Non-linguistic signals like “eh”, “uh”, “mhm” also serve as Appealers.

Other types

There are also gambits that do not fit into the three main categories, as they are mostly used to fill gaps and don’t refer backwards or forward or modify a move internally, the Starter and the Aside. The Starter usually appears at the beginning of a speaker’s turn-at-talk, but it is not to be confused with an Uptaker. It basically just constitutes a claim to the “floor”, indicates that somebody is about to say something. The only tokens are “well” and “now”. There is also the Aside, which occurs rarely but is quite useful to fill conversational gaps. They can occur anywhere in a turn-at-talk and they appear, as if the speaker was talking to himself. But they also have the function to show that the speaker is conversationally still present, although he is “engaged” with something else at the moment. (1981: 82) They look like self-prompts and often stimulate the hearer to provide the prompt in order to assist the fumbling speaker. Tokens include: “Erm oh let me see now”, “Yes what it is called erm”, “Oh it’s erm it’s on the tip of my tongue”.

Appendix 2

Coined Gambits

- **Dodgy Gambits:** Unlike gambits used as a time-gaining device, when someone is short of a ready answer, these gambits are used when a person realizes that even if given all time in the world, he wouldn’t be able to come up with an answer. E.g., “*I should take a rain check*”; “*I rest my case*”.
- **Felicity Gambits:** These gambits are used in order to pave the way for an intimate conversation, pronouns attached to standard formulas of greeting & leave-taking, are such gambits. E.g., “*Hi you*”, “*take care you*”, “*hi yourself*”.
- **Recast marking Gambits:** They have a didactic function of briefly diverting the learner’s attention to form. Pick-Up gambits can serve such a purpose as well as underscorers. Gambits such as: “*in other words*” can also do the trick.
- **Post Recast marking Gambits:** Appealers in the form of tag-questions can serve this function.
- **Sheer Gambits:** These gambits signal that an event or action will take place, no matter what. E.g., “*mark my words*”, “*there’s no way out*”.
- **Comforting Gambits:** As the name suggests, they are used when one wants to comfort another. E.g., “*now now, everything is going to be ok*”, “*no no, don’t be sad*”. Repetitions of this kind can also indicate hope.
- **Irreversible Gambit:** These signal events which can’t be altered, thus putting emphasis on accepting the fact. E.g., “*what’s done is done*”, “*that’s that*”, “*there’s no turning back*”.
- **Whenever Gambits:** these gambits convey the meaning: “we will cross that bridge when we come to it”, Thus implying patience. E.g., “we have enough stock, *for now*”, “*hang in there*; we still have plenty of time”.
- **Revival Gambits:** These are especially used under testing circumstances, when the participant realizes that he is reaching a dead-end & therefore in need of creating a second chance for himself. E.g., “*let me put it another way*”. Another function of these gambits is that they signal to the hearer that the speaker will try his best to make the hearer understand his speech & clear up the vagueness, in an ordinary conversation.
- **Rheme- Free Gambits:** These gambits are merely time gaining devices, and don’t move the conversation forward to an outcome. All-purpose words can be considered as a subset of these gambits. E.g., “*The thing is*”, “*Well*”, “*you know*”, “*Actually*”. A very interesting point is that a combination of these Rheme-free gambits may imply some sort of meaning.
- **Wrap-up Gambits:** gambits such as “*that’s pretty much it*”, “*that’s all*”, “*at the end of the day*” are used to either to indicate the end of one’s speech or signal that their speech is about to end. This is extremely important, because most L2 learners are unable to end their utterance with a falling intonation, thereby lacking the proper means of indicating that they’re finished.
- **Self-recast Gambits:** whenever a learner notices that he/she has made an error, either grammatical or phonological, and pauses for more than 3 seconds thereby indicating hesitation, but attempts to rectify his/her own utterance before giving the teacher a chance to recast him/her, the recast done by the learner will be considered a ‘self-recast’ gambit as it functions as a means of self-structuring.

Notes

¹ Throughout this paper, gambits are illustrated in italics, its type in square brackets and subtype in single brackets. Gambits have been labeled based on both Edmundson & House's (1981) model, and the coined gambits introduced in this paper, which can be found in Appendix 2.

² I have named these gambits, Revival gambits, which can be found in Appendix 2.

³ Using these Revival gambits can open up the possibility for circumlocution.

⁴ The criteria mentioned in the following section have been mostly taken from Edmundson (1976), Keller (1979) and Edmundson and House (1981).

⁵ If we consider gambits as a subdivision of CSs as it has been considered up to now, then whatever criteria is considered for CSs, has to apply to gambits, as well.