

To Whom Are We Talking?

The Need for a Primer on "Conversational" Rasch

Rita Bode

Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago



Have you ever walked in on a conversation where people were speaking another language? This happened to me when I attended an AERA session sponsored by a nonquantitative division that sounded interesting. As I sat there I realized that, although they were speaking English, I didn't have the foggiest idea what they were saying. That's what a novice must feel like when tuning into some Rasch "conversations," be they oral or written, and that is one reason why a publication such as *Popular Measurement* is needed. While I'm hardly an expert (I consider myself an advanced novice), I have noticed the glazed look on the faces of some audience members at Rasch presentations and thought about the need to improve our ability to communicate.

What is jargon and why do people use it? Jargon isn't just the use of specialized terminology; it also refers to the use of ordinary words that are given special meaning in certain contexts. Experts may use certain terminology to describe a complex set of phenomena or train-of-thought. When other experts use that same terminology to refer to these phenomena, jargon is created. As these descriptions become more widely known, the jargon becomes more familiar. For novices, however, the use of the jargon alone will not lead to understanding without reference to the original description of the phenomena.

Thus, within a group of experts, jargon is useful in making communication more efficient. But why do experts use jargon in other situations? There are probably many reasons why they do so. They may become so accustomed to using the jargon that they forget that they acquired an understanding of it through some learning process. They assume that others have gone through the same process in understanding of the underlying phenomena. In this process, we typically acquire specific bits of information until we've collected a critical mass which enables us to understand the concept as a whole. Once we've assimilated this critical mass, we take mental shortcuts that skip over the intermediate steps. We forget that we progressed from step A to step B to step C, etc., in our acquisition and automatically leap from step A to step Z. While other experts can follow these leaps, it confuses novices who need to be lead step-by-step (as did the experts when they first acquired their knowledge) to understand new concepts.

Another reason jargon is used might be that it masks a lack of true understanding of some of the concepts involved. In the process of acquiring knowledge, certain connections may not have been made which resulted in these gaps in knowledge. If the concepts involved are truly understood, they can be explained in other terms; however, where there are gaps in understanding, one may resort to the use of jargon.

Whatever the reason for using jargon, we need to do a better job in communicating what Rasch is all about to those who don't already know about it. If conversing with Rasch experts, we can still use jargon to expand our collective understanding of new applications, but if we want to converse with novices, we need to develop bilingual skills. Conversing with novices requires the use of language which novices can understand, and contexts and examples that are relevant to them. Since there is no readily available "Rasch-to-English" dictionary, we need to develop one based on what would make sense to novices, not other experts. With the multiplicity of contexts in which Rasch is used—in education, medical rehabilitation and health sciences in general, business, etc.—multiple versions would be needed. We need to pool our resources and over time compile a list of ways of describing objective measurement to introduce new audiences.

Rita Karwacki Bode, Ph.D., has a long involvement with the development of academic achievement tests using traditional measurement theory and moving on to the development of outcome measures using Rasch measurement. She is a post-doctoral research fellow at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago after completion of a doctorate in Educational Psychology from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

