

INTERACTIONAL PRACTICES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING: UNDERSTANDINGS AND APPLICATIONS GAINED THROUGH CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Conversation analysis (CA) provides researchers with a set of microanalytic tools and a solid set of research findings about human interaction as it naturally occurs in both ordinary, everyday interactions and in interactions that occur in institutional settings. It has its roots in a sociological, and specifically, ethnomethodological research tradition (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984) that is focused on uncovering the orderliness of everyday practices of members of society. Since the pioneering work of Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson in the 60's and early 70's (Sacks, 1992), there is now an impressive set of findings about the organization of talk. Three important corner stones uncovered by this research are turn-taking (the rules that govern how the next speaker is selected), sequential organisation (how turns are organised into sequences such as questions and answers) and epistemics (how speakers work on establishing common knowledge states). This paper is concerned with explicating new findings that conversation analysis has brought to our attention on language teaching and learning, and how these findings can impact pedagogy. By examining transcripts of early childhood interactions, classroom and test-taker talk in foreign languages, through the Question and Answer and third turn sequence, the paper will focus on the language alternation (also referred to as code-switching) practices, on the "performance" of students in speaking, both in the classroom and in high stakes tests such as IELTS, on examiner talk and on a child's development of interactional competence. The paper will end with practical considerations for improving speaking.

Keywords: Conversation, Interactional Practice, Language Teaching and Learning

Introduction

My aim in this paper is threefold. First, I want to explore the perspectives that the microanalytic lens of conversation analysis (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974; ten Have, 2007) can contribute to revealing and understanding the interactional properties of learning as it unfolds turn-by-turn in a range of contexts where learning or the assessment of learning is at centre stage. I want to show how learning and understanding is pursued (or not) by analyzing a three-part sequence, the Initiation Response Evaluation (IRE, Mehan, 1979) or Feedback (IRF, Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) sequence (commonly found in instructional sequences) in four different learning contexts: 1) parent child interaction at three moments in time, 2) the second language classroom where the teachers subscribe to a target language only policy, 3) samples of talk from part 1 of the IELTS speaking test, and 4) a sample from a TESOL classroom where students are "practising" speaking. In analyzing these sequences, I wish to show the work of questions, how answers are pursued and what action is being carried out in the third turn position; ie whether it is acknowledging, whether it is evaluating or whether it is absent. Finally, I wish to show how such features are tied to the specific interactional context.

The second aim is to demonstrate why CA is useful and what it can uncover that other approaches cannot, while the third aim is to suggest how these findings can have practical applications.

I will start by providing an overview of conversation analysis and how it is applied in investigating interaction. I next describe the structure and significance of the IRE sequence in learning contexts. Finally, I will show how the rich analyses can inform our understanding of interactional competence.

Conversation Analysis

Conversation analysis provides both a body of findings and a set of pedagogical tools to microanalyse

naturally occurring interaction. As a body of findings three major systems in interaction have been described: turn-taking, sequential organization and epistemics.

Turn-taking

Research on turn-taking has found that interactions are highly ordered and rule-governed; if it were not there would be little understanding and a chaotic mess of interactions where people would talk over each other all the time. In fact, speakers orient to order by monitoring turns and attending to turn beginnings and to possible turn endings, indicated both verbally, through words or a grammar of speaking, through falling, rising or continuing intonation, and non-verbally through gaze and bodily orientation. Rules governing speaker selection ensure that speakers do not talk over each other, and that if they do, one speaker will drop out; they also ensure that gaps between one speaker and the next are kept to a minimum one beat measured in one tenth of a second; and they ensure that if there is trouble in understanding, speakers will initiate repair so that mutual understanding is restored.

Sequential organisation

Turns are organised into pre-sequences, base, post and insert sequences. The most basic and pervasive unit is the is the Question and Answer (Q/A) pair, referred to as an adjacency pair and base sequence. These paired utterances are fitted together such that a question makes a particular answer relevant as a response. As the name suggests, pre-sequences such as a summons to elicit a speaker's attention, go before a base sequence, while post sequences follow the base sequence. Insert sequences are usually repair sequences that temporarily suspend a base sequence to deal with a problem of misunderstanding or mishearing.

Epistemics

When speakers interact with each they work hard to establish mutual understanding. They have distinct territories of knowledge which they draw on as they interact with one another. In doing so, they design their talk based on what they expect their recipients will know (Sacks & Schegloff, 1979). This is referred to as epistemics (Heritage, 2012). Evidence for these assumptions or expectations are reflected in the particular design of a speaker's turn, in the episode of talk beyond the single turn, as well as speakers' use of specific conversational resources such as "do you remember" (You, 2015).

Displays of the ways in which speakers create these epistemic expectations as they monitor each other's turns in order to produce a fitting next action, emerge turn-by-turn and result in a turn-taking system that works efficiently and in an orderly manner. Such monitoring reveals epistemic imbalances which are constantly adjusted and as participants work to establish mutual understanding and shared knowledge states (Heritage, 2012).

The process of analysis

Conversation Analysis provides an inductive approach to the analysis of interaction. It is focused on uncovering the organisation of interaction at a micro-level and the recurring features in sequences of talk both in everyday conversation and in institutional contexts. It uses naturally occurring data that is usually both audio- and video-recorded, and in transcribing the data, the analyst seeks to capture as many details as possible because nothing can be dismissed as being of no value. Analysts thus capture not just what is said but also how something is said. This will include the timing of the gaps between speakers, prosody and nonverbal features. Below are some of the established notations that will be used in the transcripts in this paper:

- [— overlapped talk (when speakers speak at the same time)
- { — gesture co-occurring with words
- — talk that is softer than the surrounding talk
- CAPS — talk that is louder than the surrounding talk
- : — sound stretching
- (0.0) — pauses and gaps measured in tenths of a second
- — gaze
- ,,, — gaze disengagement
- P--- — pointing
- = — a latched turn (i.e. no gap between one speaker and the next)

The IRE or IR(?) sequence

In teacher fronted classrooms, the Question and Answer along with a third turn closing Evaluation, forms a three-part IRE sequence. From the perspectives of different research traditions other than Conversation Analysis (see for example, Chin, 2006; Mercer & Dawes, 2014; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975), this

sequence has been shown to be a pervasive feature in the classroom. Research has shown that it is the teacher who normally produces the Initiation principally through a Question, the quality of which can vary. For example, it can be a closed question, known-answer, test or display question (Kaur & Toh, 2012), or it can be a genuine information seeking, open question. The student's turn is then to produce a response through a fitted answer. If the answer is correct, the teacher provides feedback (F) or an evaluation (E) which closes the sequence (Chin, 2006; Fisher, 2011; Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). A typical sequence from a science lesson is illustrated below:

1. (I) Teacher: why is it an example of inertia?
2. (R) Student: because the car stops but you keep going.
3. (E) Teacher: excellent...

Research has indicated that closed-questions do not facilitate genuine engagement because they tend to encourage minimal student participation (Fisher, 2011). They also potentially stymie thinking because they invite brief student responses (Chin, 2006). As a consequence, the IRE has been misaligned and considered to be a feature of classroom interaction that should be avoided (Mercer & Dawes, 2014). However, over time and through careful micro-analytic and multimodal approaches that capture non-verbal features of interaction, investigations indicate that important pedagogic work actually occurs through the actions in this sequence type. Studies with young children (see for example my papers: Filipi, 2017a, b), have shown the work of follow-up actions such as yes/no questions subsequent to an initiating wh question that does not receive a response. These questions actually facilitate the participation of children in the interactions because they provide the necessary support for them to successfully respond. Similar follow-up accommodating questions have been reported in high stakes tests by Filipi (1997) and Seedhouse and Egbert (2006) who suggest that the action of asking a yes/no question after a failed wh question is produced as an accommodation strategy in the context of repair or lack of student understanding. Teacher actions of holding the IRE sequence open by withholding the acknowledging or evaluating third turn that would otherwise close the sequence down, have also been shown to serve a number of pedagogical purposes including inviting learners to elaborate or to self-correct (Zemel & Koschmann, 2011). These variations before or within the third turn of the IRE sequence in teacher's talk have been described in a number of studies (e.g., Cohrssen & Church, 2017; Filipi, 2018; Hellermann, 2003; Ko, 2014; Zemel & Koschmann, 2011), and offer evidence of the complexity of the sequence. Furthermore, the types of questions used in subsequent initiation turns in an episode of interaction, in addition to assessing student understanding, can serve to model how to use content-specific language and to encourage students to make their thoughts explicit (Mercer & Dawson, 2014).

In analyzing the data in the presentation of this paper, I will show how the third turn of the IRE, normally found in instructional sequences, is missing in high stakes tests such as the IELTS or produced as an acknowledgement in interactions with young children.

Analysis of Data

Having provided the research landscape, in this section, given the limitations on space, I analyse one transcript of a young child interacting with her mother to illustrate the ways in which conversation analytic methods can provide a rich analysis of learning. Note that in the presentation of this paper, as stated, I will present a range of others.

Extract 2 (From Filipi, 2009, p. 221) (The child, R is 18 months old. She is trying to shell a pea pod but is having difficulty. She seeks her mother's assistance through a series of non-verbal actions.)

- 1M: would {you like mummy to HELP you?
 2R: {((---->M))
 3 ((at 0.2 , , , nods))
 4M: °hey?°
 5 (1.0)
 6R: {mm?
 {((---->M))
 {(hands M the peas)
 7 (0.3)
 8M: {want mummy to help you?
 {((nods))
 9R: (0.5) ((at 0.2 ---->at peas and moves closer to M))

10M: {say YES please mummy.
 {{{(nods)}}}
 11R: (0.5) ((P→ nods ----→M))
 12M: yes please mummy.
 13R: (0.8) ((,, stops nodding and pointing))
 14M: °come this way.°
 15 (0.8)
 16 yes please mu{mmy?
 17R: (0.3) {{{(nods)}}}
 18M: °ye{ah.°
 19M&R: {{{(,, R. stops nodding)}}}
 20 (0.7)
 21 oh:::....

This sequence very clearly presents a teaching moment, and as I have reported elsewhere (see Filipi, 2009), any moment in the interactions with young children can become an occasion for language learning. The actions of the parent are very focused on getting the child to produce a verbal response. We see the ways in which she pursues the response. This is done through one principal question “would you like mummy to help you?” which is repeated but with modification to simplify the syntax, rendering “want mummy to help you?” in line 8. In between these two questions she produces a repair initiating “hey?” which brings attention to the missing response. When these questions “fail” to elicit a *yes*, she launches a modelled answer, repeated three times, for the child to repeat. Finally, the mother gives up and produces an acknowledging but whispered *yeah* in line 18 in response to the child’s head nod which closes the sequence. Also to be noted is that her turns co-occur with non-verbal resources such as nods, the action of moving closer to the child as well as prosodic features including loudness and emphasis of the key word *yes*. So there is no doubt that the parent is providing a great deal of support for the child to complete an expected verbal response. The mother’s action of pursuing a verbal response can be seen as constituting a teaching moment. To use Bruner’s (1983) words, she is upping the ante and teaching her child that a non-verbal response is not quite enough even though she concedes at the end in order to bring the activity to a close.

If we turn to the actions of the child, we can see that the child is actually responding to each of her mother’s questions but through her embodied actions which include nodding, pointing and moving closer to her. She is also able to produce a request through her *mm?*, accompanied by the gesture of handing her mother the peas. So we can conclude that the child is displaying her understanding of her mother’s questions which she does with a minimum of gap, and that she is also able to confirm that she wants her mother’s help. In other words, there is evidence of substantial linguistic and interactional competence.

If we were to take the pauses, non-verbal and prosodic features out of this transcript which are so crucial in Conversation Analysis, we have a very different picture of both the mother’s and the child’s actions.

1M: would you like mummy to help you?
 4M: hey?
 6R: mm?
 8M: want mummy to help you?
 10M: say yes please mummy.
 12M: yes please mummy.
 14M: come this way.
 16M: yes please mummy?
 18M: yeah.
 21M: oh

What is striking here is that there is very little evidence of what the child can do and how she is contributing to the interaction turn-by-turn. It appears in other words that the child has very little linguistic and interactional competence, and that the mother is doing all the “talking”. Indeed, she appears to be hounding the child, and we have no sense of the ways in which the mother is in fact designing her turns in particular ways in response to her child’s actions. For example, how she gives the child space to respond, how she emphasises the key word, and how she uses embodiment in pursuing a verbal response. Conversation analytic methods can thus be used to great effect to uncover a range of competencies in the act of interacting that would otherwise be missed.

Conclusion

In closing, what I have tried to do in this segment of my paper, is to provide a flavour of the ways in

which the microanalytic methods of Conversation Analysis can uncover much about interactional competence, about a speaker's expectations about what the other can do or knows, and about the resources that speakers draw onto do this work. With respect to the IR(?), unlike the third turn where an evaluation or feedback is produced in teacher fronted classroom teaching, in interactions with the very young, the third turn is more likely to be an acknowledgement (IRA), usually achieved through a yes, or it can be missing entirely as will be shown in other extracts.

In the presentation of my paper, I will provide further examples of the ways in which interaction is built in the contexts mentioned in the introduction, and show how these findings have been applied to parenting, to inform speech pathology, to inform training of assessors and to teaching about interaction through staged pedagogical approaches in TESOL as described by Barraja-Rohan (1997) and Filipi and Barraja-Rohan (2015).

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