Pragmatic Structure in Naturally Occurring Conversations for Making Appointments

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Conversational structure was examined by applying pragmatic and sequential analyses to two-party, single-purpose, spontaneous conversations between acquaintances. A subgoal achievement label was given to each talking turn of 60 automatically tape-recorded telephone conversations between beauty salon receptionists and clients phoning to make appointments. Lag sequential analyses showed that these conversations have subgoal structures that resemble the ones found in quasinaturalistic appointment-making conversations between strangers. The results are discussed in terms of what was predicted about the degree of generalizability from quasinaturalistic appointment-making conversations between strangers to natural appointment-making conversations between acquaintances.

Recently, rigorous quantitative techniques have been applied to conversational data in an attempt to discover sequential regularities within them. Regularities describable most generally as "pragmatic" have begun to be discovered (Goldthwaite & Roberts, 1993; José, 1988).

These preliminary successful searches for pragmatic conversational structure have been carried out in quasinaturalistic settings. José (1988) generated conversational data by setting children and adults the task of talking about stories the children had just been told. Goldthwaite and Roberts (1993) had a confederate caller phone to make a series of appointments with beauty salons. All of them were between strangers.

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Researcher-imposed constraints serve to limit variability in the data. This has the beneficial effect of allowing regularities to be displayed, should any exist. However, there is always the danger that the displayed regularities are the effect of the constraints. There is the possibility that the unconstrained, noisy, real world is not regular when descriptive categories derived from the constrained world are applied to it. The present research attempted to extend the generality of the Goldthwaite and Roberts (1993) results by showing that spontaneous, natural conversations held for the purpose of making appointments at a beauty salon have pragmatic structure.

Goldthwaite and Roberts (1993) found that the accomplishment of appointment-making resides in the commitment of a *time* to a *person* for the provision of a *service* by a *server*. The determination of *what*, *when*, *for whom*, and *by whom* did not happen in random order. The prediction in the current research was that spontaneous appointment-making conversations between acquaintances would show some of the same structural pragmatic regularities as confederate-generated appointment-making conversations between strangers. In particular, it was predicted that the subgoal categories labeled Time, Name, Services, and Operator determination would occur significantly often and they would enter conversations in a nonrandom fashion.

Some of the results in the current research are expected to be different from the results in the Goldthwaite and Roberts (1993) study. In that earlier research the caller was trained not to lead the conversation. In the spontaneous conversations collected here, both the caller and the callee had an opportunity to lead. Because the conversationalists knew each other it was expected that the caller may identify herself or himself. Thus, the “*for whom*” category (Name) may not be inhibited from occurring in an initial position the way it was in the Goldthwaite and Roberts data.

In addition, acquaintances might be expected to engage in exchanges that “*get personal*” some of the time, but strangers in the Goldthwaite and Roberts (1993) study never did. Put another way, strangers engaged exclusively in transactional business; acquaintances might be expected to engage in both transactional and phatic (or interpersonal) business (Jakobson, 1960). For that reason the acquaintance data were expected to require extra coding categories to supplement those used in the Goldthwaite and Roberts study.

**METHOD**

*Subjects*

Four staff members at a single beauty salon in Vancouver, British Columbia, served as callees. One female was completely bilingual in Finnish