Handling Sequentially Inapposite Responses

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Introduction

As a critical interactional resource to establish or re-establish shared understanding in talk-in-interaction, participants deploy various practices of repair organization. Repair can address any sort of problem in speaking, hearing and understanding, anywhere in the interaction, in any type of activity (Schegloff 1992b; Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977). It is precisely the availability of a robust mechanism for dealing with trouble in interaction that permits oral non-scripted language use to be as ambiguous, indirect, allusive, elliptic, incoherent and otherwise ‘fundamentally flawed’ (Coupland, Wiemann and Giles 1991) as it is and yet enable participants to manage their language-mediated activities largely successfully (House, Kasper and Ross 2003; Schegloff 1991). Following Schegloff and colleagues’ (1977) seminal paper, a large volume of research attests to the ubiquity of repair in talk among linguistically expert speakers. Second language researchers working in the tradition of conversation analysis (CA) have been particularly interested in examining the formats and functions of repair in talk including second or foreign language speakers. The impetus for this focus comes first and foremost from the empirically sustained assumption that when shared linguistic resources are limited, mutual understanding may be at an increased risk, requiring more repair work from participants in order to manage their joint activities. A second line of inquiry into repair in L2 interaction takes its cue from second language acquisition research in the interactionist tradition, which accords repair initiated or completed by the trouble source recipient a critical role in L2 learning (Gass 2003). However, outside of classrooms (Seedhouse 2004) and other educational arrangements, other-completed repair, and especially other-repair of linguistic form, appears to be infrequent, while self-initiated repair in the same turn is most prevalent (Wagner and Gardner 2004). Speakers with less extensive L2 resources thus order their repair practices in the same way as expert speakers. Moreover, outside of language
classrooms, repair targets the same types of trouble source regardless of participants' language expertise, that is, discursive events that threaten mutual understanding rather than linguistic errors. To the extent that linguistic form becomes the object of repair, it is typically initiated by the less expert speaker (Kasper 2004; Kurhila 2005; Wong 2005) or done as embedded correction (Brouwer, Rasmussen and Wagner 2004; Kurhila 2001).

While much of the CA literature on L2 interactions examines repair sequences (e.g., Egbert 2004; Egbert, Niebecker and Rezzara 2004; Brouwer, Rasmussen and Wagner 2004; Hosoda 2000, 2006; Kidwell 2000; Kurhila 2001; Mori 2004; Wagner 1996; Wagner and Firth 1997; Wong 2000), less attention has been paid to sequences that hearably (or visibly) display trouble in the interaction, yet where the participants pass up the opportunity for repair. Firth (1996) notes that in business interactions conducted in a lingua franca, participants may disattend to apparent misunderstandings and thereby maintain a sense of orderliness and normality of the interaction. Similarly, Wong (2005) observes that native speakers in informal conversation may other-initiate repair to clarify topical matters pertinent to the local interactional goal, but disregard grammatical, phonological and lexical errors in the trouble source turn. In quite different activities, participants thus prioritize the business at hand over dealing overtly with problems that do not pose a serious threat to intersubjectivity at the particular moment they occur (although a disattended trouble source may turn out to require repair further into the interaction, as Firth (1996) shows). For Firth, such practices instantiate the phenomenological concept of 'letting-it-pass', an interpretive procedure (Cicourel 1973) or method of practical reasoning (Garfinkel 1967) by virtue of which a hearer 'lets the unknown or unclear action, word or utterance “pass” on the (commonsense) assumption that it will either become clear or redundant as talk progresses' (Firth 1996: 243). As such, letting-it-pass is part of the interactional competencies that L2 users and their interlocutors bring to any interaction. The question at interest in this study is how the passing up of repair is deployed in conversations designed for language practice. In a large corpus of such interactions, we noticed that the learners' response turns were sometimes sequentially inapposite and could thereby be taken as 'misunderstandings' of the previous speaker's turn. Yet overwhelmingly such misunderstandings did not seem to be taken as such by the expert speaker or the other participating L2 learner. Conventionalized indicators deployed by misunderstood parties such as I don't mean X and I mean Y are very rare occurrences in our material. This observation propelled the general question we want to pursue in our chapter: how does an expert speaker handle sequentially misfitting response turns when she does not (overtly) treat them as misunderstandings?