PART I

Introduction

1

Comparative perspectives in conversation analysis

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Introduction

Comparison of the various ways in which people talk in different sociocultural and linguistic communities can easily lead to two, apparently contradictory, conclusions. On the one hand, the *diversity* of conduct is striking. People speak different languages, they are oriented to markedly different sociocultural norms of posture and tone, they inhabit very different social (as well as economic, political, etc.) worlds and thus find occasion to talk in vastly different "contexts." One need only compare, for instance, the Mayan villagers of Tenejapa with Yélî Dnye speaking Rossel Islanders to see this diversity (as Rossano, Brown and Levinson do in this volume). On the other hand, the *commonalities* are what are remarkable. Everywhere turns-at-talk are constructed and opportunities to speak distributed, courses of action are launched and co-ordinatively managed, troubles of speaking, hearing and understanding are located and their repair attempted. These commonalities suggest that, for all the diversity we see, people everywhere encounter the same sorts of organizational problems and make use of the same basic abilities in their solutions to them – a capacity for reading other's intentions, anticipating and projecting actions, calculating inferences and processing information available to them (see Levinson 2006, Schegloff 2006).

If these abilities and problems appear universal and generic, the particular ways in which they are implemented or solved is anything but. After all, whatever happens in interaction happens through the medium of some *specific* set of locally available semiotic resources. Over the past forty years, conversation analysts have shown that actions in talk-in-interaction are formed through the use of distinctive prosodic patterns, lexical collocations, word-order patterns as well as language-specific objects such as English "oh" (Heritage 1984), Mandarin "*a*" (Wu 2004), Finnish "*nii*" (Sorjonen 2001) and so on (see Stivers and Sidnell 2005 for an overview). Of course, these semiotic resources vary significantly and systematically across different languages and communities. Some languages such as Vietnamese and Mandarin use a set of distinct tonal contours to signal differences of lexical meaning; others do not. Some languages are, like English, left-headed, whereas others, such as Korean and Japanese, are right-headed. In some languages, such as Vietnamese again, words are typically made up of one morpheme having a single meaning whereas in others words often consist of several morphemes some of which may embody multiple meanings (e.g., -*ó* in Spanish "*habló*" expresses indicative mode, third person, singular, past tense, and perfective aspect).

Because every turn-at-talk is fashioned out of the linguistic resources of some particular language, the rich and enduring semiotic structures of language must be consequential in a basic way for social interaction. So, although the problems are generic and the abilities apparently universal, the actual forms that interaction takes are shaped by and adapted to the particular resources that are locally available for their expression. The chapters in this book contain detailed analyses of talk in English, Finnish, German, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin, Tzeltal (Mayan), Russian, Swedish and Yélî Dnye and provide the beginnings of an answer to the question of how the local resources of these particular languages and other semiotic systems shape, constrain, torque or inflect the otherwise generic and universal underlying organization of talk-in-interaction. In recent work, both Schegloff (1996c) and Fox (2007) have argued that *over time* the organizational contingencies of interaction significantly shape (though do not determine) grammar. This book offers a complementary view in which, *at some given point in time,* the semiotic resources of any particular language – especially grammar – essentially define the possibilities for social action accomplished through talk.

Notice, that this way of putting things largely obviates the theoretical syntactician's appeal to a "deep" level of linguistic structure or "logical form" at which such "surface" differences between languages more or less completely evaporate. For social interaction does not work with such "underlying" mental representations; it works with the actual, observable surfaces of grammar and prosody as well as the particular words and phrases that constitute possibly complete turn units and recognizable actions. As we will see in this chapter, it is this surface patterning of language that has consequences for turn-taking, repair and other aspects of the organization of talk-in-interaction. The linguistics that forms a natural companion to conversation analytic studies is thus the descriptive and empirical tradition that investigates not mental models but rather actual living languages in all their peculiarity and nuance often from a comparative perspective.[1] In fact, recent work in interactional linguistics has emphasized and shown the value of just this connection (see Ford *et al.* 2002 for an overview).

Some of the complexity of the relationship between (1) the specific semiotic resources of a particular language, (2) language and culture-independent principles, and (3) the contexted courses of action within which language is actually embedded can be seen through a consideration of repetition. Turns designed to show that they are repeats of something that someone has just said are apparently found in all communities and in all languages.

But now consider that, strictly speaking, "unmarked" repetition of what someone has just said is interactionally impossible. That is to say, one cannot simply and solely repeat what someone has just said without adding something to it. While it's possible for a second speaker to do a repeat in such as way as to make it hearable as saying "exactly" what another just said (for example, by preserving not only the words another speaker has used but also the original deictic forms as well the intonation and other aspects of prosody), to do so is to do something in addition to repetition. Repetition of this kind is hearable as a verbatim repeat and thus possibly as "mimicry." This points to the fact then that even in repeating what another has said, the speaker necessarily draws on the semiotic resources of some particular language to mark, and thus to frame, the repeat in some way.[2]

Typically then, a repeat involves the use of some intonational or periphrastic marking which shows to what end this bit of talk is being repeated. One very common thing is for the repeat speaker to produce his or her talk with what is typically known as "question intonation" as in the following case from an English telephone call in which Ben has called for someone he refers to first as "Mary" and subsequently, after Ann indicates that she does not recognize anyone by that name, as "the tax lady" (Jefferson 1972, Schegloff *et al.* 1977).

(1) XTR1

```
01               ((click))
02  Ann:         Hello:¿
03  Ben:         hHello, Ma:ry?
04               (0.2)
05  Ann:         No:
06               (0.3)
07  Ben:         No, not Ma:ry?=
08  Ann:         =No, it's not Ma:ry. There's no Mary he:re
09               (.)
10               I don' think:hh
11               (3.0)
12  Ben:         The tax lady:
13               (0.2)
14  Ann:  →      The tax lad(h)y::?
15  Ben:         Ya hhh=
16  Ann:         =Nah. (.) Wha number were you callin'.
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Another common intonation-marking for repeats in English involves stressing the first syllable of a multi-syllabic word. In (2) below Ann and Bev are discussing the diet and regime of a woman who is pregnant.

(2) YYZ_T1A_A&D 2.03

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01  Bev:         anyway [.hhhh
02  Ann:                [I know.
03               (0.2)
04  Ann:         an' i- (.) gra:vol an all these (s[          )
05  Bev:  →                                        [gr↑a:vo:l
06  Ann:         She takes gravol al- everyda:y.
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Notice that whereas in Extract 1 the repeat elicits from Ben a confirmation ("Ya" at line 15) in Extract 2 it does not: instead, Bev continues with the telling. This suggests that in Extract 2 Bev uses the repeat to do something other than check her hearing of "gravol." While these forms of marking appear to be quite common across a wide range of languages, more obviously language-specific resources are used in repeats too. Stivers (2005) for instance has described one kind of repetition in English that involves, among other things, expanding the pronoun + verb contraction of the original utterance (It's → It is). Consider the following case from a conversation between co-workers.

(3) YYZ

27 Clare: Just we've got- Michael and I did the resourcing for next
28 → week and it's just- it's=just ughu(h)h(hh) .hh and it's a
29 short wee:k so
30 (.)
31 Alice: → Yeah:- Oh:yeah it is a short week=
32 Clare: Ye[ah
33 Alice: [.hh[hh
34 Clare: [so (.) I'm rilly rilly sorry,

Indeed, for English, next-turn repeats take a great variety of forms and are deployed in a wide range of actions such as confirmation (Schegloff 1996b), other-initiation of repair (Schegloff *et al.* 1977), correction (Schegloff *et al.* 1977; Goodwin 1984), displays of appreciation (Jefferson 1972) and agreement (Pomerantz 1984). Coupled with the particular semiotic resources of English grammar, prosody and lexis, the apparently universal practice of repetition is employed to effect a range of interactional outcomes.

A number of the chapters in this book consider practices that involve repetition including Hayashi and Yoon on Japanese and Korean, Sorjonen and Hakulinen on Finnish, Wu on Mandarin, Heinemann on Danish, Bolden on Russian. These studies provide further evidence of the ways in which an apparently universal aspect of interactional organization is shaped and, in some ways, constrained by the semiotic resources of a given language thus providing unique possibilities for social action.[3]

A comparative perspective in conversation analysis

The chapters collected in this book examine the organization of social interaction and, more specifically, talk-in-interaction, from a comparative, cross-linguistic perspective. Although some of them draw at points on a number of other traditions (particularly functional/interactional linguistics), the analyses they present are largely developed within the framework of conversation analysis (hereafter CA) – an approach to talk and social interaction which emerged in the writings and lectures of Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson.[4] CA takes not language per se as its focus but rather the practical activities in which language (along with gesture, gaze and other aspects of bodily comportment) is deployed, that is, talk-in-interaction. However, comparison of such practical activities across different languages brings the relevance of grammatical (and other) structures into view as the chapters in this book demonstrate. In this chapter, I sketch some of the conceptual background of comparative studies in CA. I begin with a consideration of previous studies distinguishing the approach taken within CA from that known as cross-cultural pragmatics. I then move to consider the CA methodology. Here I note a similarity between structuralist or distributionalist methods in linguistics and the CA approach of using collections. I argue that the former, but not the latter, essentially undermine the very possibility of comparison. Structuralism, taken to its logical conclusion, reveals the particularity of any system (e.g., of pronouns, or verbal tenses) and the elements of which it is composed. Since each element is defined by its relation to all the others, each element is a unique outcome of the particular system in which it is embedded. The result, as is well known, are accounts which are wholly hermetic and incapable of being compared to one another. In contrast, CA focuses on generic interactional problems which find solutions in the local resources of particular languages and social systems. For example, turn-taking and repair address interactional problems which must be solved in any community if its members are to coordinate their actions through talk-in-interaction. This approach actually encourages comparison: by looking across different languages/communities we can see the way in which the same interactional problem is solved through the mobilization of different resources (Schegloff 2006).

Conversation analysts are keenly aware of the methodological and theoretical issues raised by a comparative perspective. In an early co-authored paper, Schegloff and Sacks (1974: 234–235) wrote:

> The materials with which we have worked are audiotapes and transcripts of naturally occurring interactions [...] with differing numbers of participants and different combinations of participant attributes. There is a

> danger attending this way of characterizing our materials, namely, that we be heard as proposing the assured relevance of numbers, attributes of participants, etc., to the way the data are produced, interpreted, or analyzed by investigators or by the participants themselves. Such a view carries considerable plausibility, but for precisely that reason it should be treated with extreme caution, and be introduced only where warrant can be offered for the relevance of such characterizations of the data from the data themselves. [...] The considerations just adduced [...] restrain us from further characterizing it here.

And the authors go on:

> For example, they restrain us from characterizing our findings as relating to "some general features of conversation rules in American English" – a suggestion offered by Dell Hymes (personal communication), for that suggests implicitly an ethnic or national or language identification as a relevant putative boundary for both our materials and findings. We cannot offer a warrant for asserting such a boundary and we suspect others cannot either.

The passage sums up quite succinctly the distinctive position which conversation analysts have adopted toward what are referred to in this passage as "participant attributes." Whereas other approaches such as linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics typically treat participant attributes as self-evident features of "context" or, alternatively, as "external variables" to be correlated with aspects of speech behavior, CA shifts the burden of evidence by requiring researchers to show that putative "characteristics" of the participants (such as race, ethnicity, gender) have some "procedural consequentiality" or demonstrable relevance for the participants themselves in terms of the specific ways in which the interaction is organized.[5] In the passage quoted above, Schegloff and Sacks characterized this as a reluctance to invoke a boundary where none seemed to be warranted by the data being examined. Importantly, Schegloff and Sacks were not denying the existence of differences either between groups within a society or between societies. Instead, what they were pointing to were the methodological and theoretical issues involved in making claims about the relevance of such differences for the organization of interaction. Within CA then, researchers have emphasized the various ways in which "participant attributes" are picked out and made relevant to the talk of the moment (see for instance Goodwin 1987; Schegloff 1991, 1992b; Sacks 1995).

There were deep underlying issues at stake here – ones that Sacks had initially addressed in his work on membership categorization devices and that Moerman (1974, for instance) had applied to problems of ethnic categorization in anthropology. As Goodwin puts it, "showing that a category can be accurately applied to a participant does not demonstrate either that the participants themselves are dealing with each other in terms of such a category, or that it is in fact a relevant feature of the activity being studied" (1987: 120). A speaker (or recipient) may be Catholic, six feet tall, male, a dentist, a vegetarian or whatever else without this being in any way relevant to the way he talks on some particular occasion. Sacks noted in his lectures that all societies appear to divide people into groups based on at least two axes of difference: gender and age (Schegloff 2002c). It was not an interest in universals of social organization that prompted Sacks' noticing of this. Rather, the existence of at least two axes of difference meant that any given individual could be described or categorized in more than one way. As such, any description of a participant (as a male, a child, etc.) required some "warrant" or motivation, some evidence that *this* and not some alternative was the relevant descriptive category. It is not difficult to see how these considerations bear on the problems of comparison to which the chapters in this book are addressed. How can we, for instance, warrant a description of the data as "requests in Polish," "French compliments" or whatever where, typically, the participants do not display any overt orientation to the relevance of the language being used or their ethnicity?[6] This is a particularly difficult problem and this book does not offer a single, conclusive solution to it. Rather, different authors take somewhat different approaches. One possible solution is discussed in this introduction: this involves linking the practices of talk-in-interaction to particular, distinctive aspects of the language being spoken thus warranting a characterization of those practices in terms of the language employed. The idea then is that particular languages provide specific resources and also establish unique constraints for the organization of interaction.

Grammar, culture, and the organization of repair

A few years after the Schegloff and Sacks paper cited above was published, Moerman (1977) addressed the issue of comparison in a study of repair in Thai-Lue materials. If differences could be located between the Thai-Lue and English materials, these might be related to differences in language structure, social arrangement or, perhaps, culture. However, in the main, the study did not reveal significant differences in the organization of repair and Moerman (1977: 875) was led to conclude: "the detailed, systemic, and massive parallels between" Thai and American English corpora "support the claim that the domain described by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson is conversation – without respect to the language, nation, class, or culture in which it occurs."

In contrast to work in both cross-cultural pragmatics and linguistic anthropology, early comparative research in CA provided evidence of massive, underlying structural similarities in interaction from very different communities. Whereas both cross-cultural pragmatics and linguistic anthropology tended to work from the assumption of significant differences between communities/cultures, conversation analysts began with a focus on generic interactional problems which had to be, in some way, solved in any community. For instance, the phenomena to which a conversational repair mechanism is addressed – misunderstandings, misspeakings and the like – are universal and ubiquitous. If participants are to engage in coordinated action they will necessarily require some mechanism for dealing with these issues. At a finer level of detail, misunderstandings and misspeakings seem to take similar forms in every community. Misunderstandings arise because the recipient does not know a word the speaker has used or did not hear it adequately. Misspeakings arise when a speaker uses the wrong word or cannot find the one they need and so on. Given that everywhere the issues are more or less the same, it is hardly surprising to find that the solutions developed for dealing with them are also strikingly similar. This is not, however, to say that there are no differences. Here, I will briefly note a few of these staying with the problem of repair; below (see "Mobilization of Local Resources to Solve Generic Problems of Interaction") I discuss some claims for profound differences in turn-organization and turn-taking between Japanese and English.

In a comparison of repair in English and German, Egbert (1996: 587) argued that "repair is sensitive to the linguistic inventory of a given language" in several different ways. First, Egbert showed that grammatical markings present in German but not English (such