



Conversation Strategies in Institutional Dialogue

Xiaomei Yang

English Department, Qingdao University of Science & Technology

Middle Section of Songling Road, Qingdao 266061, China

Tel: 86-532-8895-8959 E-mail: lindateacher@tom.com

Abstract

We live and work in different institutional contexts and manage our institutional goals, tasks and activities through our use of language. We should realize that a given linguistic practice is specifically and specially characteristic of talk in a given setting, and that we can actively employ certain conversation strategies to orient to our institutional identities and activities. This paper investigates different levels of language use and particular strategies, aiming to help people achieve smooth and efficient communication.

Keywords: Institutional dialogue, Conversation strategy, Identity

1. Introduction

When people visit the doctor, hold meetings at their workplaces, negotiate business deals, call railway stations for information, they are talking, communicating and interacting in institutional “contexts”. Language employed in these situations, in the form of talk-in-interaction, is the means by which the participants perform and pursue their respective institutional tasks and goals. In order to achieve effective and efficient communication in these contexts, people concerned should be aware of some conversation strategies of which they often unaware in common daily conversation.

2. Institutional Dialogue and Conversation

2.1 *The institutionality of Conversation*

The study of institutional dialogue has emerged as a distinctive field of research during the past 30 years from developments in a number of cognate disciplines, notably in socio-linguistics, discourse analysis, ethnography of speaking and conversation analysis. The study of institutional dialogue is the study of how people use language to manage practical tasks, and to perform the particular activities associated with their participation in institutional context. There is no clear definition which would precisely delimit the scope of the field of institutional dialogue (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992), and the boundaries between institutional talk and conversation are not fixed. But still we can distinguish by saying that the institutionality of dialogue is constituted by participants through their orientation to relevant institutional rules and identities, and through their production and management of institutionally relevant tasks and activities. The study focuses on the ways in which conduct is shaped or constrained by the participants’ orientation to social institutions, either as their representatives or in various senses as their clients.

2.2 *Conversation Strategies*

Communication is a social activity requiring the coordinated efforts of two or more individuals. Mere talk to produce sentence, no matter how well-formed or elegant the outcome, does not by itself constitute communication. Only when a move has elicited a response can we say communication is taking place. In order to create and sustain conversational involvement, we require knowledge and ability that go considerably beyond the grammatical competence we need to decode short isolated message.

A basic assumption is that this channeling of interpretation is affected by conversation implicatures based on conventionalized co-occurrence expectations between content and surface style. That is, constellations of surface features of message form are the means by which speakers signal and listeners interpret what the activity is, how semantic content is to be understood and how each sentence relates to what precedes or follows. These features are referred to as contextualization cues (Gumperz, 1982), which was called conversation strategy by other linguists later (Wanjin Zhu, 1992).

3. Conversation Strategies in Orientation to Participants' Institutional Identities

Participants' institutional identities can be viewed, not as exogenous and determining variables, but as accomplished in interaction. Hence a key focus of research into institutional dialogue is to show how participants' orientation to their institutional identities is manifested in the details of the verbal conduct through which they manage their institutional tasks. Here we review some of the conversation strategies which participants use in orienting to their institutional identities, namely person reference, lexical choice, grammatical construction, turn-taking, and institutionally specific inferences.

3.1 Person Reference

In their selection of the particular way of referring to each other and to third parties, participants may display their orientation to their acting as incumbents of an institutional role, or as somehow representing an institution. They do so by using a personal pronoun which indexes their institutional rather than their personal identity. Here is an example taken from a call to the emergency services in the U.S:

Desk: Mid-city Emergency

Desk: Hello? What's the problem?

Caller: We have an unconscious, uh: diabetic

Desk: Are they inside of a building?

Caller: Yes they are:

Desk: What building is it?

Caller: it's the adult bookstore?

Desk: We'll get somebody there right away...

In this fragment, the caller refers to himself through the first person plural pronoun *we*, thereby that he is speaking not in a personal capacity (for example, as a relative of the victim) but on behalf of the shop in which the victim happened to fall ill. Similarly, the desk uses a third person plural pronoun *they* as well as first person pronoun *we* in inquiring about the victim, announcing he is acting on behalf of the emergency service.

This example does not only illustrate aspects of how participants exhibit and orient to their institutional identities through person reference forms, but also shows the inseparable constitutive relationship between the linguistic devices of person reference and managing institutional activities.

3.2 Lexical Choice

The issue raised above concerning the selection of person reference forms shade into a more general issue of lexical choice—that is, the selection of descriptive terms and other lexical items treated by participants as appropriate to, and hence indicative of, their understanding of the situation they are in. Plainly, this connects with linguistic notions of setting specific, situationally appropriate registers, codes or styles. The point to be made here is that speaker orient to the institutionality of the context, in part through their selection of terms from the variety of alternative ways for describing people, objects or events. This can involve the “descriptive adequacy” of lexical choice with respect to the type of institutional context concerned.

The following is an extract from a call by the attendance clerk in a high school. (AC = attendance clerk; M = mother. F =father)

AC: Hello this is Miss Medeiros from Fedondo High School calling.

M: Uh Hu:h

AC: Was Charlie home from school ill today?

M: .hhhhh

M: (off phone) Charlie wasn't home ill today, was he?

F: (off phone) Not at all.

M: No he wasn't.

AC: Well he was reported absent from his third and his fifth period class today.

M: Ah, ha:h

AC: We need him to come in the office in the morning to clear this up.

(Drew & Sorjonen, 1997)

Having first inquired whether their child was ill at home that day, the attendance clerk then informs the mother that the

child has been *reported absent* that day. Here the attendance clerk says that the child was *reported absent*, not simply that he *was absent*. Her use of the verb *reported* here in collocation with *absent* is cautious or equivocal—at least it avoids direct accusing the child of truancy. The word “reported” is a part of proper management of the attendance clerk’s task. Furthermore, the selection of the complement “absent” to describe the child’s non-presence at school activates a specifically institutional form of non-presence (For instance, one is “absent” from school or workplace, but not from a party).

The institutional relevance of lexical choice is more obvious in cases where participants use a terminology more clearly restricted to their situation-specific distribution. Many studies have documented the way in which the use of technical vocabularies can embody definite claims to specialized technical knowledge. The asymmetry of knowledge between professional and lay participants may result in the professional’s control of the information available to the clients, thereby possibly influencing what emerges as the outcome of the interaction.

Finally, we should emphasize that issues of lexical choice go beyond technical vocabularies. Potentially, any lexical selection in institutional dialogue is investigable for its constitutive and situated relevance for the kind of discourse in which participants are engaged, and for the task which they are performing through their lexical choices. In this sense, any lexical selection is informative about participants’ orientation to institutional contexts and their role within them.

3.3 Grammatical Forms

Various grammatical forms are the resources available to participants in managing their institutional tasks. In so far those tasks are part of the interaction routine for a given settings. Particular grammatical forms are likely to have distinctive distribution in given settings, that is to say, certain grammatical forms may be prevalent in certain settings, or they may show characteristic pattern of use which are associated with the characteristic activities in which participants engage in a setting, for example, the use of directives and suggestions in medical settings.

There have been many studies about characteristic use of particular grammatical forms in settings such as courts, classroom, new interview, medical consultations, service encounters and formal meeting. These studies revealed the interactional functions or dimensions and interactional consequences associated with the use of certain forms. For example, a number of studies have documented the way in which different forms used by attorney for asking questions in courtroom examinations, such as between *wh*-question and *yes/no* question, can have variable constraining power over witness’ answer.

Another example is Kim’s (1992) finding that *wh*-cleft contraction in English is much more common in formal settings (such as university lecture) than it is in ordinary conversation. Also, there are differences in their usage in the two types of setting. In formal lectures, the contraction is often used to resume formality and thereby to shift the default register of the interaction after an informal and often humorous stretch of talk. While in daily conversation, this contraction is used to depart from the default register of conversation in order to formulate one’s utterance as authoritative when asserting a point in response to a co-participant’s prompt or challenge in “problematic” context. In summery, the examination of grammatical form is the interface between linguistic work on syntax and the analysis of the pragmatic and interactional function of utterance.

3.4 Turn-taking

One of the most significant themes to have emerged in this field is that, in various ways, participants’ conduct is shaped by reference to constraints on their contributions in institutional dialogues. Perhaps the most evident constraint lies in turn-taking systems which depart substantially from the way in which turn-taking managed in conversation (Sacks et al, 1974). Interactions in courtrooms, classrooms, and news interviews exhibit systematically distinct forms which constrains turn-taking system. These turn-taking systems involve the differential allocation of turn types among the participants; notably, the interactions are organized in terms of question-answer sequences, in which questions are allocated to the professional and answers to the client. Even if the turn-taking system is predetermined by an external prescriptive organization, the participants nevertheless need to manage the dialogue in order to achieve his institutional role or to accomplish his task. For example, it is quite familiar that news interviews exhibit a question-answer structure. However, the following example begins to show that this structure is achieved through the practices for managing the talk as asking and answering questions.

(IE: interviewee; IR: interviewer)

IE: The difference is that it’s the press that constantly call me a Marxist when I do not, and never have er er given that description of myself. .hhh I—

IR: But I’ve heard you- I’ve heard you’d be very happy to : to: er, describe yourself as a Marxist. Could it be that with an election in the offing you’re anxious to play down that you’re a Marxist.

IE: Not at all Mister Day...and I’m sorry to say I must disagree with you, you have never heard me describe myself ...er ...as a Marxist.

In this extract, the interviewer constructs his turn so that, whatever else he does, he produces a question as the last element in his turn, through an interrogative—thereby constituting his local task as one of “asking questions”. Second, although it is clear that the interviewee disagrees with the interviewer’s standing, he withholds his answer (disagreement) until a question has explicitly been asked. Thus the ways in which the interviewer constructs his turn, and the interviewee only speaks after a question has been asked, thereby producing an answer, display both participants’ orientations to their respective tasks in their interview. It is in this sense that we mean that the turn-taking organization is an emergent product of participants’ locally managed interactional practices.

3.5 Institutionally Specific Inferences

Participants orient to institutional setting through their recognition of and responses to the particular meanings that they attribute to each other’s turns at talk. Hence some studies in this area focus on analyzing the inferences participants make about what the other is saying or doing, and the specific institutional salience of those inferences. “Inference” refers to participants’ understanding of the activities that each is performing and the situationally relevant meanings of their utterance; those understandings are based on normative expectations concerning the nature of the occasion and each other’s roles within it.

In some respects what participants take one another to mean, that is, the inferences they make from what is said, is rooted in their orientations to the constraints about what will count as allowable contributions to given institutional activities (Levinson, 1992). For example, the kind of answer that one might give at the beginning of a medical consultation to the doctor’s question “how are you” might be very different from one’s answer to the same question asked by a friend at the beginning of a telephone call. These differences reveal speakers’ inferences concerning what the doctor wants to find out in asking that question, and hence what would be an “allowable contribution” as an answer to the inquiry.

The above strategies are commonly found in smooth talks without any conflict between people, which greatly facilitate the development of conversation and help to manifest participants’ institutional identities. Still in some cases, because of the unequal status of the speakers, the choice of strategies is asymmetric.

4. Conversation strategies and Institutional Superiority

One of the most pervasive of all socio-cultural universals is social stratification—the unequal social distribution of prestige, power, wealth, and privilege. It is patent that in all societies there are persons who are more powerful than others. The social scientist is interested in how such social inequalities come into being, are maintained, changed, and how they affect and be affected by other social variables.

“The ideal of linguistic democracy, in which the speech of every citizen is regarded with equal respect by all others, is perhaps the most unrealistic of all social ideals” (Christian, 1972). Speech is one of the most effective instruments in existence for maintaining a given social order involving social relationships. It is also true that certain strategies are reserved to the superior part in an institutional talk, such as topic-dominance. In conversation, subordinates more pursue topics raised by those with superior status than the other way around.

4.1 Interruption

In conversation, superiors interrupt and touch more frequently. Superiors have the privilege to interrupt the subordinate, not for information or identification, but to stop what he doesn’t want to listen. This phenomenon is part in concordance with the topic-dominance of the superiors. For example:

(Li: Li Shiqing ; Pan : Pan Yueting)

Li: (in a low voice) I’ve got some information from a very secret source. It’s quite profitable for us to buy the public debt this time.

Pan: yeah .. yeah...yeah...(but interrupts suddenly) aha, Fushen said your wife...

Li: I know, I know—I tell you, perhaps we can make a profit of 30,000...

Pan: Yes, yes, didn’t your wife want you to go home?

Li: Don’t care about her. I propose...

Pan: Shiqing, do you know your son is ill?

Li: It doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter, tomorrow, we’d better still buy in...

Pan: Shiqing! You’d better go home now! Do you know your son is badly ill?

(*The Sunrise* by Cao Yu)

In this conversation, Pan, the manager, interrupted Li four times to stop him from talking about buying the public debt. Although Li, the assistant, ignored the interruption for three times, he was eventually stopped and gave up his

persistence. This kind of interruption is usually use by a superior to the subordinate, for it's very forceful and has a sense of "command".

4.2 Directives

Anthropologists and socio-linguists have observed that variations of directive forms are systematically related to social features. They have shown that variation does major work in interaction, conveying concurrent information about social features of the speaker and the situation, communicative intent and effect.

[head of office to subordinate]

I want you to check the requirement for stairs.

[Doctor to nurse in a hospital]

I need a 19 gauge needle.

[nurse to orderlies]

Cindy, ran to CSR for a box of ABDs.

[Drill sergeant to new recruits]

Get your eyes off me!

From these examples, we can see that in certain institutional contexts where there are clear rank differences, the superior can employ "need statement" and "direct imperatives" in their talking, which is seldom used vice versa. When the inferior wants to express the same idea, they are likely to use some less direct forms:

[young housecleaner to older employer]

I could use some furniture polish.

5. Conclusion

Researchers working in institutional talk have a common objective—to explore the ways in which participants in institutional interactions manage their institutional goals , tasks and activities through their use of language. Here, the investigation of language use in lexical selection, grammatical forms, sequence (including turn-taking), pragmatic inference, and the unequal employment of some strategies can reveal aspects of how participants themselves orient to their institutional identities and activities. In our daily life and work, we should realize that a given linguistic practice is specifically and specially characteristic of talk in a given setting, and that a certain linguistic feature or practice has a characteristic use when deployed in a given setting, thus more smooth communication is expected to be achieved.

References

- Drew, P. and M.L.Sorjonen. (1997). Institutional Dialogue. In *Discourse as Social Interaction*, Vol. 2, ed. Van Dijk, SAGE Publication Ltd, 92-115.
- Goodwin, C and Duranti, A. (1992). Rethinking context: an introduction, in A. Duranti and C. Goodwin (eds), *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon*. Cambridge University Press, 1-42.
- Gumperz, J.J. (1982). *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levinson, S. (1992). *Activity Type and Language*, in P. Drew and J. Heritage (eds.), *Talk at Work: Interaction in Institutional Settings*. Cambridge: CUP, 66-100.
- Sacks et al. (1974). A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-taking for Conversation. *Language*, 50: 696-735.
- Zhu, Wanjin. (1992). *A Survey on Socio-linguistics*. Changsha: Hunan Education Publishing House.