

ASPECTS OF NS/NNS TELEPHONE CONVERSATIONS

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The article discusses how linguistic and pragmatic features of telephone conversations influence crosscultural communication. On the basis of the analysis of the empirical data the author focuses on turn-taking, supplying feed-back, inadequate speaker strategies as well as turnshift and framing both on the part of the native and non-native speaker.

The analysis of telephone conversation is one of the more illuminating areas of crosscultural communication, providing important insights into the nature of language as well as culture. In my study of conversational discourse I have been permitted by Stromberg ABB Vaasa to make the following transcripts which comprise 30 telephone conversations between engineers in offices in Vaasa, Finland and Basingstoke, England. On the basis of these transcripts, I have selected specific features of telephone conversations which reveal important aspects of crosscultural communication. These features show and explain moments of successful and non-successful communication between British and Finnish speakers. As a result this paper can shed light on problems of communication between native and non-native speakers in general.

1. TURN TAKING AND COMMUNICATION FAILURE

Occurrences of more than one speaker at a time are common but brief, and typically transitions from one turn to the next occur with no gap and no overlap. Furthermore, turn order and size are not fixed, but vary. The interesting points here are how well non-native speakers manage to employ turn-taking strategies successfully, and how well they can hold the turn. Furthermore, we will consider the way non-native speakers employ back-channel items and the way floor-returners are employed. By looking into communi-

cation failures we will try to discover what occurs when communication is smooth and successful.

The question then arises as to how the listener knows when it is his turn to speak and how the participants go about regulating their talk to promote smooth alternation of speaker and listener roles and well synchronised exchanges. Schegloff and Sacks (1973) found that turn transfer is coordinated around what they call a 'transition-relevance place'. A transition-relevance place is definable in grammatical terms as the possible completion of a sentential, clausal, phrasal or lexical construction. In the following extract, the point has already been put across by the Finnish speaker and the British listener is determined to take over the floor, probably regarding it a transition-relevance place. The speaker, however, is determined to complete the sentence as a grammatical unit before he yields the floor, with the following results:

TC 20

CF It's a, we call it single phase instaneous harmonic measuring alternant harmonic relay, BBSJIH5J3.

RB Right, //and...

CF And then* obviously we must find a way how to block the differential relay, if you have 5th harmonic...

RB //Yes.

CF present* and because we don't have any blocking input in our differential relay

RB I //see.

CF it would * mean that we must do something with output contacts.

RB Yes.

CF Put them in series or.

RB I see, yeah. So you've got to arrange it then. When there isn't a 5th harmonic, everything works OK.

CF //Yeah.

RB But* when there is, a, there is a 5th harmonic, you don't want the differential relay to operate.

CF Yes.

1.1. Difficulties with supplying feed-back

The empirical corpus analysed suggests that the Finns employ few short back channel items which may lead to breaks in communication. There would seem to be a general culturally bound shortcoming related to the Finnish tendency to reticence in communication situations. There is negative interference from the source culture, expressed in the form of restricted use of feedback items or even the lack of them. This feature of native culture interference is a general characteristic in the conversational contributions in the data analysed.

Back channel items, which in the normal flow of conversation overlap the other interactant's contribution, have a minimal occurrence in the following conversation. The Finns tend to have a preference for one speaker at a time in conversations. British speakers, according to the data analysed, misinterpret the Finnish lack of verbal feedback. The lack of back channel items may be interpreted as an indication of low involvement and interest. As in the extract (TC 4) below the British caller is not sure whether the Finnish recipient is following the conversation as only an absolute minimum of feedback is supplied. Finnish communication reticence (Sallinen-Kuparinen 1986) is perceived by the English cointeractant as a style indicating coolness and lack of empathy. In the following conversation the British caller starts in a playfully energetic, friendly tone of voice, but ends up somewhat frustrated in a commanding tone of voice:

- TC 4
 CB Eila, we're in trouble.
 » RF Oh.
 CB I'm afraid. You know you said to me you hadn't got any 165C3s.
 RF No.
 CB Have you got any 165A3s?
 RF A3s.
 CB So that you could do for us a 40 er a 4 15.
 RF Yes, I think and let's see, A3. We have 8.
 CB Could we have them all?
 RF Yes, we have 8 in stock.
 CB Can we have them all in next week's shipment?

-
- RF Yes.
 CB Right. I'm gonna order 20.
 » RF Uhum.
 CB OK?
 RF OK.
 CB And it's on order No 040.
 RF Mm.
 CB And it's item 3.
 RF Mm. OK. So 8 next week and then the rest.
 CB Do that as fast as you can do them.
 RF Yes, OK.
 CB Oh, great.
 RF OK.
 CB That'll help us a bit.
 » RF Mmh. Laughter.
 » OK.
-
- CB Alright?
 RF OK

1.2. Failure due to inadequate non-native speaker strategies

It is normally the caller who controls the nomination of the topic, but in the following telephone conversation the receiving person dominates in this respect. If the Finnish caller had really wanted to express 'Just a one more question' then she should not have employed back-channel items to such an extent because they function as floor-returners; rather she should have tried to claim the turn, indicating that she wanted to switch from listener mode to speaker mode. In other words, instead of using phrases like 'Mm', 'Yes', 'Oh yes, mmh', 'Mm yes, yes', 'Hmhm, hmm, yes. OK', 'Yes, yes, Y's', 'Mm, laughter. Yes', 'Hmhm, laughter', 'Yes, of course', she ought to have employed a framing element such as use of a first name or 'Oh, I see, yeah. I see, yeah' and perhaps a metalinguistic statement, such as 'The other part of my question er was going to be...' after having employed a focusing element such as 'Yes. OK. Well' and possibly a retrospective summary element, as below, where the native speaker makes an elegant topic-change in addition to a turn-yielding manoeuvre.

TC 9

CB Oh, I see, yeah. I see, yeah. Very good. Very good.

- RF So it's just to tell about the alternatives.
 CB Yes. OK. Well, I've got this in the, me catalogue anyway, so, then I believe he has used them before. The other part of my question er was going to be.
 RF Yes.
 CB Considering all the essential parts, what in actual

The back-channel items are listener reactions which chiefly signal attention and agreement; functioning as floor-returners. Efficient use of these items is essential for successful communication. Their use is interpreted by the speaker as a 'go on' or 'tell me more' signal. These feed-back utterances do not convey an acceptance element such as is required in response to directive speech acts. In the following extract the communicative difficulty could have been avoided if a slightly more committed utterance had been employed, implying at least minimal understanding of the British recipient's utterance, e.g., 'OK' or 'Oh, I see'.

TC 15

- RB You could perhaps get er [clears his throat] we certainly need all two, at least 200 of them. Well, perhaps, maybe er actually, I think this is important enough to do an airfreight shipment on.
 CF Uhuh.
 RB I, I honestly think it is er, so could I confirm now.
 CF Yeah.
 RB That you could airfreight that one item.
 CF Alright.
 RF Yes.

The native speaker has to make repeated references to his initial request and explicitly ask for confirmation before the conversation can go further. In the next extract from the same telephone conversation the non-native speaker responds to a request for a favour with an over vague 'Mmh.', simply acknowledging that something has been heard and accepted into the stream of conversation. That is why the native speaker very effectively goes on using the recipient's first name as a form of summons, employing an adjacency pair technique; in other words, a summons has to be answered by a response. The summons in essence functions here as an alarm clock, providing a wakeup signal. After the native speaker has made sure that the channel is open, he repeats his previous request for a favour, whereupon he obtains an answer to it

in the form of 'Yes.' The communication failure has been rectified and conversation can continue.

TC 14

CF One.

RB Er, well, I think, could you do me a favour?

CF Mmh.

RB Hellevi?

CF Yes.

RB Do me a favour. Send him a telex and ask him what he's done with them.

CF Yes.

Let us take one more example to illustrate this point. Here the native speaker wants an explicit confirmation of the fact that the listener is following, employing 'Yeah?' as an elicitation item for more explicit feed-back:

TC 13

CB That is* could you do me a quick favour?

RF Uhum?

CB Umm we, er we got the new er, 4 pole 40 amps low-phased switches, OETL 40D4.

RF Uhum.

CB Yeah?

RF Yeah.

Floor-holders are used when the present speaker wants to continue with his turn. The participants have to process information while they are engaged in the interaction. (This may be time-consuming even for native speakers, not to mention non-native speakers, who in addition may be at a loss for words.) Native speakers would seem to show a greater variety in their choice of exponents for floor-holders. In the data analysed the following utterances were made:

well
to give you some idea
you know
you see
as I say
in actual fact
actually
basically

by the way
with all right, but at the same time
that's a good question
I think, just recollecting er ...
I think in retrospect
that is a very good question
hold on a moment
I would think

the problem is that
the problem that I've got is

I should say, I would think
I dare say

The list above is not intended to be exhaustive. In different speech situations these routines may have different functions, but one of their primary functions would seem to be to withstand attempts to interrupt the speaker until he has concluded his turn. In addition, they will grant the speaker some time to formulate his thoughts because the use of these conversational gambits will not consume intellectual energy once they have been learned, but will provide the speaker with valuable time to think. Among the most frequently employed devices for turn maintenance/interruption suppression by non-native speakers is the use of one or more instances of 'er' as well as the use of repetition together with an excessive use of 'and' or 'anyway' as in the extract below.

TC 10

RB Yeah.

CF And he has quoted er, er, some er queries to South Africa again er also er and their terms of payment has been just something like er er for example 20% when ordered and the rest against irrevocable letter of credit. That's the way and anyway, the' have had er, they have used er anyway some system like that some, some percents when ordered, and the rest against irrev' er irrevocable letter of credit anyway

RB OK

2. TURNSHIFT AND FRAMING

In the following extract the British recipient poses a direct question, but does not receive a straightforward answer. The Finnish caller then starts talking vaguely round the subject, obviously collecting her thoughts, and has not yet reached her point when the native speaker recipient of the call claims the turn with 'Well, I'll see how er it it er we can do it.' and goes on to expand the topic, whereupon the non-native caller interrupts him with simultaneous talking '//Yes, yes, yes, yes', resulting in the British recipient claiming his turn by speaking louder than the non-native speaker and finishing his turn with '...send it up to you * from there to mark for your attention for // information?'. At the end of that turn the non-native speaker expresses her

frustration by reverting to simultaneous talking. The turnshift is anything but smooth. The non-native speaker is not sensitive to what is called the transition relevance place.

TC 5

CF Laughter, OK. If I am successful in getting it from Helsinki shall I send a copy over to you or get them to send a copy over to you for information?

CF Mm. Well, that's er by telefax, if we get it from Helsinki or from you is

RB Well, I'll see how er it er we can do it. Uhum. Er, I think I'll have a word with Arto Rautelin er there.

CF Yes.

RB So we can get to his, er see what he says about it, and if he's going to send me a copy he might just as easily take a copy and

CF //Yes, yes, yes, yes.

RB send it up to you* from there to mark for your attention for information.

CF Yes.

RB Then if the question comes up in the future we will have something to refer to.

CF Mm, yes, that's right.

RB That's assuming they've got this in Helsinki. I don't know, they may well be having the same problem as you are.

CF Yes.

RB They have got an inside back cover.

CF Laughter. Yes, that might be.

RB Er, anyway, I shall be speaking to him very shortly, so I'll, I'll ask the question.

CF Mm, OK.

RB Yeah, thank you for your checking anyway.

CF Laughter. Not at all.

Secondly, in a telephone conversation there is a boundary between the opening sequence and the main sequence on the one hand, and between the main sequence and the closing sequence on the other, which is realised by means of framing items, such as 'well', 'now', 'OK', 'alright', etc. As a result, language learners should be sensitised to this feature of communication, even if linguists might consider it a matter of common sense to realise that utterances are bound together in sequences.

The command of these strategies lies at the centre of our ability to communicate and to be able to locate our utterances in the appropriate position in the discourse, so that we establish the shared knowledge between ourselves and

our hearers which alone can prevent communication problems and lead to understanding.

Sometimes it may be difficult to say what we mean. We want to be given another chance in the conversation, so we say 'Let me put it another way.' We can link our own idea to what someone has just said with 'But the problem with that is ...' or 'Not to mention the fact that ...'. Or we may want to disagree, but in a way that will not offend, such as 'That's a good idea but ...'.

In the following extract from the main sequence of TC 22 the non-native speaker successfully employs framing and focusing elements when there is a topic-shift, even if the wording is not always idiomatic: firstly 'And then. What else I had here', secondly 'OK, And I think that's about it', and thirdly 'OK. And I think that's it', all of them resulting in efficient communication:

TC 22

RB I see.

CF And after that we'll have to change the artwork slightly.

RB Yes, OK.

CF And then. What else I had here. About these er, production models.

RB Yes.

CF I think we can make three in January.

RB Well, I think you agree it'd be better if er, particularly if I go to South Africa, where I've got to go, to show them an actual unit.

CF Oh yes.

RB You know, rather than the ones we've got here.

CF Yes, because I think the, the er, also the covers which are hand-made, they look very nice.

RB Yes. I bet they do.

CF Yeah.

RB Yeah.

CF OK. And I think that's about it.

RB Oh, good.

CF And Peter will ring er, Henrik will ring tomorrow to Peter, and...

RB OK.

CF and discuss more accurately about these changes.

RB Yeah. Now, I got your telex or Peter did, about the trouble we've got with these AC/DC converters.

CF OK. He can discuss with Henrik tomorrow // also this.

RB OK* Lovely.

CF OK. And I think that's it. What about this South Wales Coal Board? Have you heard something?

RB Uhm, I'm waiting for some new orders coming in any time.
CF OK.

Framing and focusing elements pave the way for expression of ideas, shifts in the flow of the train of thought, etc. By analogy they may be compared to traffic signs in terms of their function. One reason for using linking gambits is that our listeners will be more prepared for our arguments and views. They can anticipate whether we are going to agree or disagree. Those who use link words will find that they are more easily understood. We may conceive of misunderstanding as a product of 'how' things are said rather than as a product of 'what' is said. It is here that the successful management of different conversational strategies comes to the fore.

CONCLUSION

It is common knowledge that in order to be able to communicate we must be familiar with the linguistic code system and that a mastery of the system is just one factor when it comes to communicative competence. In other words, knowledge of the code is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the achievement of successful communication. Therefore, in addition to knowledge of the phonology, morphology and syntax of the target language, the non-native speaker also has to be sensitive to the situation and context of the speech event. To put it another way, the speaker has to be able to produce utterances which conform to the situational constraints which are appropriate in a given situation. These constraints are socio-cultural, intercultural and psycholinguistic by nature. It is these variables which in part determine the form of successful utterances. If speakers do not observe this interactional aspect of language, communication problems may occur. By examining communication difficulties we hope to understand better what makes communication successful. In this sense, success and failure are only different facets of the same phenomenon.

Crosscultural communication then not only presupposes a formal grasp of linguistic and cultural givens, but demands an exploration of those deeper

areas of language and culture that remain inaccessible in the ordinary reception of discourse.

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