

**A REQUEST IN SWAHILI**  
**On Conversation Analysis and non-western societies**

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**INTRODUCTION**

A few exceptions notwithstanding, empirical research in the ways how talk is socially (and systematically) organized has usually been carried out by researchers who study interaction in their own society'. What I would like to do here is to apply some of the methods conversation analysts have developed, to an analysis of recorded data of naturally occurring interaction from an African society. With the exception of Parkin (1974), Scotton (1988 and elsewhere) and a few others, analyses of face to face interaction in Africa have been rather rare, and in the literature on intercultural communication as well, data from subsahara Africa are remarkably absent. Thus, there is a definite need for more research in this area. In this paper I want to explore to what extent Conversation Analysis (from now on CA) is suited for the job. Most researchers working within the CA paradigm not only analyze the procedures ordinary speakers use when they participate in socially organized interaction, they also themselves rely on these very same procedures in most of their everyday activities. And this, I expect, is not completely unproblematic.

The data I am working with come from the vast area in East Africa where Swahili is spoken. Swahili is essentially a Bantu language, although it has absorbed a lot of borrowings from Arabic. Historically it is associated with the Waswahili, the inhabitants of a series of relatively small but very influential trading communities shattered along the coast of the Indian Ocean, from Moqadishu in Somalia as far as Sofala in present-day Mozambique. They traded with Persians, Arabs and with the peoples of the interior, and in this process they gradually adopted Islam. Nowadays Swahili is one of Africa's most widely spoken

lingua francas. It is the national language of Tanzania, it is one of Kenya's official languages and it is also widespread in Uganda and in the eastern and southeastern parts of Zaire.

The conversation I will base my analysis on is taken from Blommaert (1989:101/2), and was recorded at the Campus of the University of Dar es Salaam, the former capital of Tanzania. The conversation is partly in Swahili, partly in English. Due to Tanzania's heavily Swahili-oriented language and educational policy, English has been historically inaccessible -- and to a large extent unintelligible -- for the overwhelming majority of the population. As Blommaert and Gysels (1990) and Blommaert (1992) point out, using this mixed variant therefore activates a set of meanings having to do with academic in-group solidarity and the creation of symbolic boundaries between academicians and the rest of society.<sup>1</sup>

- 1 A **naenda benki .**  
I go+ bank  
*I go to the bank .*
- 2 **kuna hii form kwa =kubadilisha .**  
there is+ this+ form+ for+ to exchange  
*there they have this exchange form .*
- 3 B **=ndiyo**  
yes
- 4 A **napata on that date .**  
I get+  
*I get it on that date .*
- 5 **that i can do .**
- 6 B **= =ndiyo**  
yes
- 7 A **kingine nikaweza nikafanya ?**  
something else+ (then) I can+ (then) I do  
*what else can I do ?*

- 8     **ni mimi bwana .**  
 (it) is+ me+ mister  
*it is me mister .*
- 9     **hela zangu =’ve gone .**  
 money+ my+  
*my money has gone .*
- 10 B                    **=sawa**  
                           **sure**
- 11 A   **nikaenda . nikamp=eleka**  
 (then) I go+ (then) I send him  
*I go . and I send it to him*
- 12 B                    **=sawa**  
                           **sure**
- 13 A   ... wakati pa hizi kumi na mbili zitafanya **currency** ... **traveller’s cheques.**  
 moment+ when+ these+ ten+ and+ two+ they will make+  
*... as soon as these twelve thousands are converted in currency ...  
 traveller’s cheques .*
- 14     **nikaenda zangu nikifika .**  
 (then) I go+ my place+ (I am) arriving  
*I go home and I arrive .*
- 15     **lakini sijalipa hii government outfit .**  
 but+ I haven’t paid yet+ this+  
*but I haven’t paid this government outfit yet .*
- 16 B   **=sawa i see .**  
           **sure**
- 17 A   **nikifika huko . naweza nipate outfit .**  
 (I am) arriving+ (over) there+ I can+ I get (subj)+  
*when I arrive there . I can get the outfit .*

- 18 **ninatoka daressalaam .**  
I come from+  
*I am from Dar es Salaam .*
- 19 **lakini kule watalipa kwenye: ... foreign curr=ency**  
but+ there+ they will pay+ in+  
*but there they pay i:n ... foreign currency*
- 20 **B** **=foreign currency**
- 21 **A kutokana na kibaya hiki nimeweza nikakitry .**  
according+ with+ bad thing+ this+ I could have+ (then) I try  
it  
*even with this bad luck I could try .*
- 22 **lakini you pay actually twice =as much . unaona ?**  
but you see  
you see ?
- 23 **B** **=twice as much**
- 24 **A that's what i want to do .**
- 25 **lakini . i don't have that twelve thousand shillings .**  
but
- 26 **B ==yes i see bwana (laughs)**  
mister
- 27 **A i own five thousand shillings .**
- 28 **sasa . i have to raise some seven thousand shillings**  
now
- 29 <1>
- 30 **B yeah ... mimi ... at most**  
me

31 A ndiyo  
yes

32 B ...i can give you two thous=and shillings

33 A =thank you very much

Both participants are members of the academic staff of the University of Dar es Salaam, which is why they frequently switch to English. The one who does most of the talking, (A), is clearly in need of money: he wants to buy a 'government outfit' (what this includes is not specified), and therefore he needs to convert Tanzanian shillings into foreign currency. In Tanzania, a country with heavy currency restrictions, this can be both a time-consuming and an expensive experience. Although we may assume that he expects financial help from B -- the readiness with which he accepts B's offer points in this direction -- he does not *ask* B for money. Instead, he engineers an offer for help from B by reporting about his (=A's) financial situation.

In the opening paragraph of this paper, I said I wanted to adopt a type of analysis developed within the tradition of CA, and therefore a few preliminary remarks need to be made here. According to Blommaert (1989:100), the 'hinting' in the fragment above is part of a politeness-strategy which he has formulated as follows: "don't expose your interlocutor to the risk of losing 'face' by obliging him to answer an explicit question". In this paper, however, I deliberately neglect issues related to 'face' or 'politeness', and deal exclusively with the organizational features of the interaction. Secondly, I will, also deliberately, not bring codeswitching into the discussion. I assume it would be possible to assign certain functions to particular switches -- especially for the discourse particles in lines 22, 25 and 28 -- and thereby identify 'discourse functions' in the same way as Blommaert and Gysels (1990) did. Such an analysis, however, would imply an explanation of codeswitching in terms of speaker's intentions which are encoded in the switch. To a large extent inspired by Duranti (1988), Stroud (1992) lucidly points out that this view on the meaning(s) of codeswitching (which underlies many current work) is not unproblematic, because it reflects a western, 'personalist' theory of meaning and interaction which is not necessarily shared by non-western,

non-middle class speakers. In addition I would say that the emphasis on 'intention' which one can trace in most of the sociopragmatic approaches to codeswitching<sup>2</sup> is contradictory to some of the basic methodological assumptions of CA. In Bilmes' (1988:161) words, "CA provides a method of analysis that is neither statistical neither intentional-motivational.[...] It looks for mechanisms that produce and explain behavior, but for social rather than psychic mechanisms." Therefore, bringing codeswitching into the discussion poses theoretical problems I cannot address in the limits of this paper.

## ANALYSIS

Drew (1984) has shown in great detail how in invitation sequences speakers can make an invitation without explicitly inviting somebody. In his analyses he shows how, by simply *reporting* about what might be a possibility for a meeting without making any overt suggestion about the implications of this report for the recipient, a speaker can provide his recipient with an opportunity to address his involvement or participation without constraining him to do so. If the recipient prefers to do so, he can turn down the implied proposal by neglecting the implication and treating it as just another newsworthy event instead, without overtly having to reject it, since 'officially' no such proposal has been made. A similar logic seems to apply to the fragment above, except that the activity which is performed here is not an invitation but a request for money. In what follows I will pay special attention to the ways in which B, the recipient, participates in the accomplishment of the request, since from a theoretical perspective, this aspect deserves some special attention, as will become clear later on. I will refer to B's participations as 'listening behavior', keeping in mind however that 'listening' is as much an active participation in the interaction as 'talking'.

One of the first things that might catch the analyst's attention when looking at this fragment is the shift in pattern of B's listening behavior. In B3, B6, B10, and B12, he sticks to *sawa* and *ndiyo*. *Sawa* "sure" and *ndiyo* "(it is) indeed" can perform an emphatic expression of agreement, as well as 'showing agreement'. As such they are used as a means of signalling to your interlocutor that you are actively listening.

Usually *sawa* and *ndiyo* are produced at a rather high rate -- certainly if you compare them with 'Average Western European' listening behavior -- and they often overlap with other speakers' utterances<sup>3</sup>. From line 15 onwards, A's report takes the form of a narrative with a dyadic structure, consisting of (a) an assertion in which a new aspect of the problem is raised and (b) an assertion in which a partial solution is presented. One can schematize this as follows:

A15 raising a problem  
 B16 *sawa* I see  
 A17/18 downgrading the problem

A19 raising a problem  
 B20 foreign currency  
 A21 downgrading the problem

A22 raising a problem  
 B23 twice as much  
 A24 downgrading the problem

A25 raising a problem  
 B26 yes I see *bwana* (laughs)  
 A27 downgrading the problem

The tokens which constitute B's participation (B16, B20, B23, B26) are now situated right in between the 'problem-raising' and 'problem-downgrading' assertions. The frequency of B's tokens has decreased, and when we compare them to *ndiyo* (B3, B6) and *sawa* (B10, B12), we notice that at the same time their character has changed. All of them consist of more than one lexical item, and in line B20 and B23 they are composed of a partial repetition of the last part of the preceding turn.

One can characterize the adjacency relationship between A's problem-raising assertion, B's participations, and A's problem-downgrading assertion as follows. By producing something that amounts to an agreement token or a partial repetition at the 'right' place, B shows recognition of the problem his interlocutor raised in the previous turn. Then A, by producing an assertion in which the problem is downgraded, simultaneously shows his appreciation of B's recognition

and paves the way for a new problem to come. For B, the slot following an assertion in which a new part of the problem is raised is the most obvious place to show his participation, because the introduction of a new aspect of the problem carries the most relevance for the progressive development of A's report. On the level of lexical choice, this is illustrated by the fact that every problem-raising assertion is initiated by the discourse particle *lakini* "but", which functions here as a kind of 'more trouble is to come' indicator. Note also that in A22 the problem-raising assertion is followed by the agreement elicitor *unaona* "you see?". Contrary to what one might expect, the partial repetitions of the previous turn in B20 and B23 are not requests for confirmation or "redo invitations" (Schegloff 1984: 40), but rather they seem to perform a kind of agreement similar to *sawa i see* (B16) and *yes i see bwana* (B26). One can safely say so because these repetitions occupy the same sequential slot as *sawa i see* and *yes i see bwana*, and because A responds and reacts to them in the same way as he did with regard to these 'regular' agreement tokens, by downgrading the problem and presenting a possible solution.

A finishes his report by producing a two part turn (A27/28) which is stylistically similar to the preceding sequence(s), with only one important modification. The turn in question is composed of two syntactic units entirely in English but separated by a particle in Swahili. Only, instead of the trouble-initiator *lakini*, speaker A here uses *sasa* "now". Focussing on "here and now" is an evaluative device (in the sense of Labov 1972), in that it provides for the relevance, the point of A's story. By doing so, A simultaneously provides a possible story completion point.

Throughout the event -- and certainly from line 16 onwards -- B implicitly recognizes that something else than reporting is being sought by A: he does so by withdrawing from participation, except at those places (discussed above) where a minimal agreement is relevant (cf. Drew 1984:141). One element that doesn't fit in this picture is B's laughter in line 26. Both from what precedes and from what follows, we can conclude that B's laughing seems not out of place here. B's laughter is not followed by a repair of some kind and neither does A, the troubles-teller, join in the laughter. One-sided laughs (like this one) typically accompany troubles-telling sequences; but usually it is the troubles-teller who produces the laughter, while the troubles-recipient



usually does not join, but replies with a serious question about the troubles-teller's problem, as demonstrated by Jefferson (1984). In B26 the opposite seems to be the case, since it is the troubles-recipient and not the troubles-teller who starts laughing. Moreover, B's laughter takes place just before A rounds off his implicit request, and this in turn suggests that in this sequence, B's laughter is relevant and not out of place. How then can we make this laughter fit into the picture?

## DISCUSSION

One explanation for the relevance of the laughter in this sequence might be that it is relevant for A because he interprets it as a showing of recognition by B of what is the implication of his report. Once B has done so, A 'knows' that the implication of his report has been understood and that he can safely round off the request. Although this suggests that there is a strong link between the relevance of B's laughter and B's reception of A's report, this leaves open the question whether B's laughter is actually a 'recognition' or just a 'showing recognition'. On the one hand B might already have been aware of the implication of A's report *before* line 26 (in this case he is only showing recognition, maybe because he is realizing that the request is approaching a possible completion), on the other hand it is possible that he was not yet aware of the implication and only recognized it the moment he started laughing. Interpreting the fragment this way could lead us quite far. One could argue that if B would be 'showing recognition' instead of 'recognizing', this would imply that A's elicitations of agreement/problem-raising assertions --remember that these (A15, A20, A23, and A26) form the backbone of A's report -- were as much possibilities for B to turn down the implicit request *before* it was actually completed. If B 'knew' before or had realized already that the report is actually a request, he could have raised a question or introduced a topic-shift every time A offered him the possibility to do so.

The problem with the interpretation of B26 as a showing of recognition is that it is to a large extent speculative, since we cannot assess unambiguously that this is indeed the participants' interpretation, by reference to the sequence in which it occurs or other organizational features only. First of all, in addition to the fundamental ambiguity of

laughing -- it does not show much recipient design -- it is extremely difficult to decide whether B actually did recognize the implication. Above I mentioned the paper in which Drew shows how detailed reportings of a possibility for a meeting can implicate the involvement of the recipient, or conversely, how detailed reportings of their agenda by recipients of an invitation can implicate the impossibility of a meeting. In a footnote he comments on this:

*"We have analytically and empirically the puzzle [...] of how reportings come to be treated as just telling some news. And of course on occasions it can be a matter of practical conjecture whether, in reporting something, a speaker means no more than to report/inform, or intends the recipient to act on something being sought/done through the vehicle of reporting." (1984:148/9)*

Later on, he suggests -- again in a footnote -- that

*"[...] the way in which an event is portrayed in a reporting [trouble reports as well as reportings about the possibility for a meeting] establishes the relevance of a particular kind of involvement/coparticipation by the recipient through some conventional tying between the kind of occasion/activity and a relevant action by the recipient." (1984:149, my emphasis)*

There might indeed be a form of 'conventional tying' at work here, but the question as to how and *at what point* reportings about an event are recognized and come to be treated as more than simply reporting remains unanswered.

Of course it would be wrong to assume that the 'meaning' of an utterance is fixed at the moment of its production, as the paragraph above might suggest. But here too, when we look at A's next turn (27/28), we can see that A does not take a 'recognition' into account in the design of the next turn, unless one would consider A's proposal for story completion by means of the evaluative particle *sasa* as an instance of such design. The last possibility, however, should not be ruled out altogether, because it does make sense if we assume that A -- and possibly also B -- acts on behalf of a kind of hidden agenda, and that therefore the presence of any utterance from B which goes beyond minimal agreement is relevant as a basis for inferencing (what Bilmes [1988] calls U-type preference, in which the unusual is 'preferred' and should therefore be mentioned). What is problematic here is the notion of hidden agenda, because this reduces 'preference' to a common

sense/psychological rather than a CA/technical concept (cf. the discussion in Bilmes 1988).

The impossibility to assign an unambiguous interpretation to B26 implies that we are dealing here with an empirical ambiguity (Schegloff 1984), i.e. an ambiguity which -- ideally -- poses a problem for those who participate in the interaction. The fact that this *empirical* ambiguity does *not* pose problems for the participants, poses a problem for the analyst. In CA, participants' utterances are the analyst's tool, because they allow a structural analysis of the ways in which conversationalists deal with each other's utterances. Much work in CA is based upon the principle that participants mutually display understanding of each other's actions (cf. Schegloff 1984:37/8), and therefore, analysis of this publicly available material is considered equal to interpretations by the participants (cf. Schegloff 1988:109). In this it is assumed that both participant and analyst rely on the same tools for interpretation. The ambiguity in the fragment analyzed here, which is clearly empirical but seems to be not problematic for those who participate, suggests that A and B rely on something that is not displayed nor publicly available: that what is implicit in the interaction. Implicitness manifests itself here as ambiguity on the level of what is publicly displayed, the level of the 'syntax' of utterances which CA takes as its level of analysis.

In order to understand how A and B handle this structural ambiguity, I think we cannot rely only on the syntax of utterances which are publicly available, but we also need to pay attention to the ways in which participants negotiate and categorize *context*, because this serves as the background for the process in which they make sense of each other's utterances by relating them to the context in which they occur (Gumperz's [1982] notion of 'contextualization'). Seen from this perspective, it becomes possible to view the whole process of mutual accommodation as a way of participants' negotiating and establishing agreement about how their utterances are to be interpreted. With 'mutual accommodation' I mean the gradual escalation in B's listener's tokens, from tokens which are a neutral way of 'receiving information' (*sawa* and *ndiyo*), to tokens which are obviously designed to fit into the dyadic structure of A's report and finally B's one-sided laughter in 26, simultaneously with A 'giving off' more and more information (note that I use Goffman's words 'giving off' information deliberately in the 'wrong' way in order to stress the implicit character of the request).

When it becomes clear that an agreement is reached, A rounds off his request.

## CONCLUSION

Of course much more, detailed ethnographic information is needed in order to support this hypothesis about B's laughter. Still, I think I have shown that in analyzing this fragment, one cannot rely only on 'participants' mutual display of understanding', but that one should also take into account the ways in which participants negotiate context and contextualize each other's utterances.

In the beginning of this paper I mentioned that most conversation analysts not only analyze the procedures conversationalists use when they participate in conversation, they also rely themselves on these very same procedures in most of their everyday activities. The fragment analyzed here illustrates that one should keep in mind that there exist differences in the way conversationalists with a different background perceive communication, because often these go beyond what is publicly displayed and what can be revealed by a sequential analysis. I assume that this problem of contextualization -- or rather *recontextualization* -- will pose itself more sharply, the greater the difference in background between analyst and the people he observes.

## NOTES

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(1) Following transcription symbols are used: a single dot (".") indicates a micro-pause, three dots ("...") indicate a longer pause, brackets (" $<...>$ ") indicate a timed pause, equation marks ("=") indicate overlaps and double equation marks ("==") indicate latching of subsequent utterances. Codeswitched parts are underlined.

(2) Except maybe Auer's (1984, 1988) theoretical framework for analyzing bilingual conversation, which starts from participants' interpretive procedures rather than speaker's intentions.

(3) Other backchannel signals include *ee* "yes" and *haya* "all right". Some Swahili

speakers tend to adopt the same listening behavior when speaking English, using *OK, yes* and *ee* as listener's tokens -- which can be quite a strange experience for a European interlocutor (on problems and misunderstandings in intercultural communication related to differences in listening behavior, see a.o. Miller [1991]).

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