Conversation Analysis of Online Chat

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Abstract

This paper examined some dominant discourse features of online chat. Using the methods of Conversation Analysis (CA), it examined the discourse strategies chatters used to maintain conversation and manage turn-taking, repair and adjacency pairs. These principles were quietly effective in the situation of online chat while sometimes problematic especially due to absence of extra linguistic features. So, interactions in this context needed specific discourse skills different from that of written or spoken discourse.

Key terms: Conversation analysis, Online chat, Turn taking, Repair, Adjacency pair, Emoticons

1. Introduction

Conversation analysis which is a ‘naturalistic observational discipline dealing with the details of social action rigorously, empirically and formally’ (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p.289) aims to ‘describe, analyze, and understand talk as a basic and constitutive feature of human social life’ (Sidnell, 2010, p.1). As an approach to the study of features of discourse in interactions, there has been quite a lot of work on conversation analysis interaction; however, the studies that relate the principles of conversation analysis to a specific kind of interaction such as online chat are rare. It is obvious that internet chat is a form of social interaction and as such follows the rules that govern social interaction. Internet chat is a kind of conversation, since in which there is exchange of thoughts and words while not necessarily in talk. Also, although in written form, it is not well-organized and based on completely correct grammatical rules.

1.1. Concepts of conversation analysis

There are some basic concepts in conversation analysis. Basic principles of CA, according to Seedhouse (2005) are as follows:

1) There is order in interaction, and it is systematically organized and deeply ordered. 2) Contributions to interaction are context-shaped and context-renewing. 3) No order of detail can be dismissed a priori as disorderly, accidental or irrelevant (Heritage 1984, p.241). 4) Analysis is bottom-up and data driven. The data should not be approached with any prior theoretical assumptions, regarding, for example, power, gender, or race (p.166–67). One of the aims of conversational analysis is to avoid starting with the assumptions about analytical categories in the analysis of conversational data. Conversation analysts, rather, look for phenomena which regularly occur in the data and then make that the point of further investigation (Partlidge, 2006, p.108).
Also, a key issue in conversation analysis is the view of ordinary conversation as the most basic form of talk. For conversation analysts, conversation is the main way in which people come together, exchange information, negotiate and maintain social relations (Partlidge, 2006, p.107).

In addition to these principles, there are some important issues in conversation analysis in relation to sequence and structure in conversation. According to Partlidge(2006), aspects of conversation analysis that have been examined from this perspective include conversational opening and closing, turn taking, adjacency pairs, preference organization, feedback, and conversational repair. Some of these features considered in this study would be discussed at the following.

1.1.1. Turn taking

According to Streeck (1983, pp.80-81) interaction and exchange between speaker and hearer is crucial in conversation. This interaction consists of turns. Each turn is made up of turn-constructional units. These units can consist of anything from one word to a complete sentence, and are not to be mistaken for well-formulated written sentences. Each turn has a possible completion point which is recognized as a good point for speakers to switch. This is also referred to as the transition relevance place. The next speaker in the turn-taking can either be self-selected or selected by the previous speaker.

Cameron (2001) believes that there is an ordered set of rules for the allocation of the next turn. These rules are:

1. The current speaker selects the next speaker. If this mechanism does not operate, then
2. The next speaker self-selects. If this mechanism does not operate, then
3. The current speaker may continue.

There are a number of ways in which people can show that they have come to the end of a turn. This may be through the completion of syntactic unit, or it may be through the use of falling intonation, then pausing. They may also end a unit with a signal such as “mmm” or “anyway” which signals the end of a turn. By contrast, people may hold on to a turn by not pausing too long at the end of an utterance and starting straight away with saying something else (Partlidge, 2006, p.113).

There are some works dealing with turn taking in conversation analysis of chat (Rintel et al., 2001; Herring, 2001; Cherny, 1999; Parrish, 2000; Greenfield et al., 2003; McKinlay et al., 1994). McKinlay et al. (1994) in their experiments found that the transfer of turn-taking skills from the face-to-face setting to the computer based online chat condition is problematic.

In another study, Panyametheekul and Herring (2003) analyzed turn-taking and response patterns in chat and face-to-face conversation, and found that the most used strategy in online chat is the current-speaker-selects-the-next-speaker strategy. Turn allocation in the chat room is generally similar to that in face-to-face interaction in which participants preferred to address one another rather than self-selecting to speak.

1.1.2. Adjacency pair

Adjacency pairs are fundamental units of conversation organization and a key way in which meanings are communicated and interested in conversation. Adjacency pairs are utterances produced by two successive speakers in a way that the second utterance is identified as related to the first one as an expected follow-up to that utterance (Partlidge, 2006,p.115). Adjacency pairs refer to where one utterance demands a certain type of utterance from the next speaker as for instance question – answer and greetings.

Psathas (1997) summarizes the major dimensions of the adjacency pair structure:
1. There are at least two turns in length.
2. They have at least two parts.
3. The first part is produced by one speaker.
4. The second part is produced by another speaker.
5. The sequences are in immediate next turns.
6. The two parts are relatively ordered so that the first belongs to the class of first pair parts, and the second to the class of second pair parts.
7. The two are discriminately related in that the pair type, the first of which is member, is relevant to the selection among second pair parts.
8. The two parts are in relation of conditional relevance; the first sets up what may occur as second, and the second depends on what occurred as first.

1.1.3. Repair

Conversation is full of errors and mistakes because of synchronous qualities of this type of interaction; and since there is not enough time to plan each utterance in advance, and instead people make repairs and corrections. Streeck (1983, p.83) defines four different types of repairs: self-initiated self-repair, other-initiated self-repair, self-initiated other-repair and other-initiated other-repair. He showed that self-initiated self-repair is the most common one, and that most of the repairs occur in the same sentence as the mistakes were produced (p.86).

1.2. Online chat interaction

Computer-mediated communication technologies come in a wide variety of forms, and they are generally divided into synchronous vs. asynchronous and one-to-one vs. one-to-many or group communication (Wetherell et al. 2001). Synchronous communication takes place in real time. A user enters a chat room and participates in an ongoing "conversation" (Crystal 2001). In asynchronous communication such as Email message, conversation takes place in "postponed time" (Crystal 2001), and does not require both parties to be present. Collot & Belmore (1996, p.14) claim that online communication is neither purely written language, since there is no time for editing strategies, nor as spoken since participants cannot see or hear each other. Crystal believes that, synchronous interactions cause the most radical linguistic innovations that affect basic conventions of both spoken and written discourse. He concludes that online interaction is neither speech nor writing since for example in a chat you can communicate with up to 20 people simultaneously, something not even the most adroit person could accomplish at a cocktail party.

Condon & Cech (1996, p.65) compared the structure of decision-making interactions by dividing utterances into functional categories. They assert that in online interactions, there are features such as turn-taking and repair, which are both crucial in conversation analysis. Hale (1996) observes that computer based communication is incoherent in many ways. Coherence refers to the ways in which parts of written or spoken discourse are linked together to form a whole.

According to Halliday and Hasan (1987), a text is coherent if it "hangs together." Coherence is brought about by the use of linguistic resources for linking one part of a text to another. In this regard, Herring (1999), believes that computer based communication is incoherent, and the processes of turn-taking and topic maintenance are disrupted in such contexts.

In this paper some of the ideas behind conversation analysis are applied to analyze text chat. Some of these basic issue considered in this paper are turn-taking, repair, and adjacency pairs.
2. The Data

The corpus in this study was 34 sets of interactions in a Yahoo chat room. Although the names of most chatters were not real names and they used nicknames, ethical concerns were considered.

3. Analysis of data

An examination of data yielded the following observations:

3.1. Turn-taking

The results of examination of the data indicated that turn-taking in on line chat is in a kind of disorganized way. There are problems in turn-constructional unit, completion points, transition relevance places and turn entry- and turn exit techniques. In on line chat, there are often many different conversations going on simultaneously, and therefore you cannot see each new utterance as a new turn following the previous utterance. In such a context, delay plays an important role since firstly, it takes longer to write an utterance than it would to speak it out loud; secondly, the message you write will not be shown until it has been sent, and this leads to overlaps in chat. Many number of speakers chatting all at one time lead to rapid exchanges of turns, and limitation related to computer devices, typing … cause delays and overlaps in exchanges. In CA, an overlap refers to talk by more than one speaker at a single time. In chat, the overlap is associated with exchange sequences interrupted by other exchanges. Delay and overlaps seem to be very crucial factors to the turn-taking in on line chat context. In this setting, people may write short incomplete sentences in order to show that they have more to say or they may complete their turn within one utterance, which results in very long utterances.

As an example, it can be seen that “star2” has used some short utterances so that after three turns, he completes his words eventually.

Example 1:
“Good teacher”: any person to know sth about uni interview?
“star2”: it depends
“star2”: u should know for which part
“star2”: u should focus on & practice some factors

The point is that in on line chat turn-constitutional units are defined in terms of content, and we cannot define them based on the form of utterances, since delays among utterances make them disorganized and difficult to recognize. In addition, there are many cases in which new turns appear among the other turns, therefore, no obvious turn entry or turn exist technique can be identified. People may interrupt others and introduce a new topic; they may indicate that their turn is not over by typing several short messages after another or by typing “…“ at the end of an utterance. In the collected sample, several cases of this kind of typing were observed.

Example 2:
“Smsk”: any ideas about the preparation exam?
“net 2007”: there are some books…..
“net 2007”: I can give u the names of authors …..
“net 2007”: Not the titles of the books.

The observations in this study revealed an interesting turn-taking feature in on line chat. This feature is the opportunity of being able to participate in several conversational threads simultaneously. In the example below, it is observed that “net 2007” discusses the
sources for uni interview with “smsk”, and way of teaching of a specific teacher with “Yan23” simultaneously.

Example 3:
“Smsk”: any ideas about the preparation exam?
“net 2007”: there are some books…..
“Yan23”: Do u know him?
“net 2007”: I can give u the names of authors …..
“net 2007”: Not the titles of the books.
net 2007”: ya, teaches law and ethics. Seems a good guy!!!
“Yan23”: kidding? Unbelievable!!

3.2. Repair

Next area of investigation in this study is related to repairs and clarifications as common features in oral interaction with the purpose of making an utterance more understandable. In the analyzed data, there were some self-initiated self-repairs. An example is when “bad boy” types an utterance and then he repairs in his next message.

Example 4:
“bad boy”: they don’t have any class, now
“bad boy”: they must not have any class now

Also, some cases of other-initiated other-repairs were found in data:

Example 5:
“Star2”: I think he has hold MA in the field
“Mrno”: MS
“star2”: yes, MS

Moreover, some forms of clarifications which are closely related to repair were observed, for example:

Example 6:
“Mrno”: his major was IT, I mean Information Technology

This utterance can be an example of clarification that has a self-initiated self-repair form.

In the data, some cases of self-repair related to misspelling and mistyping were also found. Although rapid change of topics and fast typing, make misspelling very common in on line chat, it is sometimes corrected by people in the same turn or immediately in the next turn. In the examples below, the first one can be both misspelling and mistyping but the second one is mistyping case since in keyboard “y” and “u” are next to each other and rapid typing has led to such mistakes.

Example 7:
“Teresa”: you d be happier there
“Teresa”: happier*

Example 8:
“Maria”: duslexic
“Maria”: dyslexic*

Generally, it was observed that some mistakes were tolerated by other chatters; however, for some mistakes chatters gave the person a little time to see whether he/she self-corrected, then if they observed no correction, they began to correct the mistake. Sometimes, other chatters preferred to ask some questions about what they thought to be wrong.

Example 9:
“star2”: he s psychiatrist and expert in language
“Teresa:” mean in both fields of psychology and language?
“star2”: exactly
“Teresa”: should say psycholinguist

However, it is observed that in these cases that other chatters ask for clarification to assure whether the person typing is wrong, the best and frequently used kind of asking is repetition of written utterance. This technique is very common since chatters just copy and paste the written utterance with a question mark and the end.

Example 10:
“mrno”: He s professional in electronics and electrical engineering
“star2”: in electronics and electrical engineering?

3.3. Adjacency pair

In the analysis of the data, it was observed that like turn-taking principle which seemed to be violated most of the times, there was often irregularities and disorganization in the principle of adjacency pair since there were cases in which one question had several responses so that the questioner became confused, and finally was able to continue interaction with one of them.

Example 11:
“CHAT_2”: is there a book on how to essay for IT students?
“star2”: I v seen one but very general
“moyo123”: there s a book on essay writing in technology fields…
“TIMES_27”: one by Robert ….., I think
“CHAT_2”: What do u mean by GENERAL? Not for IT students?

It can be seen that after “CHAT_2” asked the question, received different responses and had to continue with one of them that was “star2”.

In addition, there were cases in which the questions were ignored that nobody answered the question. Such situations happened especially when the question was not addressed to a specific person. In on line chat lack of extra linguistic features such as eye contact can lead to such problems. This principle of adjacency pair is complicated in on line chat since it has different processes for different persons from the point of being regular, known chatter. Some cases were found in which the question of some chatters were not answered or they were completely ignored just since they were not regular chatters. In face to face interactions such a behavior is rude but in on line chat everybody is free to answer the questions of a specific chatter or not. For example as you see in the below extract of data, when “spiderman_2011” asks a question, he/she received no response. The content of all data indicate that this chatter is not a regular chatter of this room so he/she is ignored. This ignorance can even be seen in adjacency pairs related to good-by. Generally, when someone
wants to leave say a general good by not addressed to a specific person but rarely he/she receives an answer since not only providing no answer to good-by is common in on line chat but also others may be involved in typing an utterance and so cannot reply the others’ good by. If the chatter is irregular chatter of that chat room the chance of receiving a response is not much.

3.4. Extra linguistic features

As mentioned before, the problems in different principles of conversation analysis in on line chat is to some extant related to lack of extra linguistic features such as gestures, hand movements, eye contact, pitch and intonation, …. Absence of these features cause confusion, overlaps, ignorance, ambiguity, irrelevant responses …. A remedy to such problems is using devices and signs that imitate the facial expressions or indicate some feelings. Such cases have been found frequently in the data. For example repeating the letters of some words can be used to show excitement or emphasis, or using !!!!can indicate surprise and excitement. Some of most frequently used signs and emoticons in the data are displayed at the following. The description of the codes and smiley have been found from internet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SMILEY</th>
<th>CODE(S)</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>:) :)</td>
<td>:D :D</td>
<td>Happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:) :)</td>
<td>:D :D</td>
<td>Winking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-/-</td>
<td>:-/-</td>
<td>Confused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-\ )))</td>
<td>:-\ )))</td>
<td>Love Struck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-X :x</td>
<td>:-X :x</td>
<td>Surprised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-O :-O</td>
<td>:-O :-O</td>
<td>Crying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-( (:((</td>
<td>:-( (:((</td>
<td>Don't Tell Anyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-?</td>
<td>:-?</td>
<td>Thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=D&gt;</td>
<td>=D&gt;</td>
<td>Applause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>Sad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>Big Grin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>wave</td>
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<tr>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>Blushing</td>
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<tr>
<td>X( X(</td>
<td>X( X(</td>
<td>Angry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>Laughing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>No Talking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>Call me</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These emoticons and signs not only are useful devices as a remedy for absence of body gestures, but also are very helpful to the rapid nature of on line chat interactions. In addition to these signs and emoticons, some contractions, acronyms and abbreviations also are used and they increase the speed of typing and interactions. Some of these abbreviations are:

cya: see you
ltnc: long time no chat
omg: oh my god
t/y: thank you
y/w: your welcome
lol: laughing out loud
4. Discussion

The analysis of data related to interactions in on line chat in this study revealed that on line chat exhibits features of turn-taking, repair and adjacency pairs as important concepts in CA. These principles are quietly effective in the situation of online chat while sometimes differ significantly from what we would expect to find in face-to-face conversation. This finding is in agreement Condon & Cech (1996, p.65) who compared the structure of decision-making interactions by dividing utterances into functional categories. They assert that in online interactions, there are features such as turn-taking and repair, which are both crucial in conversation analysis.

However, it was found that there are some disorganizations or problems in these principles in on line chat. These findings are in line with Herring (1999)’s study who believes that computer based communication is incoherent, and the processes of turn-taking and topic maintenance are disrupted in such contexts. Also, these findings are in accord with Cherny (1999), Parrish (2000), Greenfield et al. (2003), McKinlay et al. (1994). McKinlay et al. (1994) in their experiments found that the transfer of turn-taking skills from the face-to-face setting to the computer setting is problematic.

In addition, in this analysis it was observed that one of the most important sources of these problems is lack of extra linguistic features. Therefore, in some cases when chatters have specific discourse skills in chat and are able to use some signals or emoticons can improve the interactions.

References