Retro-Sequence in Human Interaction

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Human beings cannot not communicate with each other. In the course of any communicative activity, even if one does not intend to communicate, every aspect of behavior inevitably conveys a great deal of information, and the receiver inevitably interprets it, correctly or not. Based on the impossibility of not communicating, it is possible to describe the human being as a communication-oriented animal. When it comes to our communication, however, it is obviously impossible to directly understand what others think. The central question here is this: What enables us human beings to communicate successfully? With a background like that, this study will place language in the center of discussion and shed some light on the basic mechanism of human communication, to express more precisely, human interaction. In particular, this study attempts to reconsider the theoretical framework of the *inference model*, which is the refined communication model in the realm of cognitive pragmatics, and to propose that *retro-sequence*[1] proposed by Schegloff (2007) is important to elaborate the pragmatic theory on linguistic performance.

Intuitively speaking, what we call communication is a social activity of a combined effort of at least two participants, but if there is no partner to receive the information, then the activity remains private. In such a sense, human communication requires joint-activities. On this point, it is worth rethinking the necessity of preceded intention, and therefore this paper focuses on the theoretical framework by Goffman (1963). He introduces the term *interaction*, dividing it into two subcategories: *focused interaction* and *unfocused interaction*. The former is typically face-to-face communication, in which at least two participants share the same goal and coordinate their activities to achieve it. Contrastively, in the case of unfocused interaction, two or more participants never share the center of attention. This sort of interaction, for example, can be observed in a train. It often happens that the people co-present in the same place and time, even though they are aware of one another, rarely interact with each other. In such a situation, however, it is certain that the participants perceive a great deal of information from the external environment and adjust their own activities accordingly. In this respect, what is of great importance is that we human beings are agents who continuously search for possible information and adjust the behavior on the basis of perceived resources, even if there is no preceding communicative goal.

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[1] According to Schegloff's 2007 volume, there is a sequential structure that is overtly different from the adjacency pair. This thesis places emphasis on a construction referred to as a retro-sequence, which encourages us to rethink the inference model and the essence of human interaction. The general property of a retro-sequence can be described in the following way:

> These are sequences *activated from their second position*, which invoke what can be called a source/outcome relationship…..Their "firstness" follows their outcome, though their occurrence preceded it. These are sequences *launched* from their *second* position.

(Schegloff 2007: 217)

The same holds true for language: In the interpersonal situation, such possible resources without participants' intention can trigger the formation of mutual communication. For instance, the following is the extracted interactional activities which are worthy of our careful attention:

STEV: The <u>Doctor Dreadful drink lab</u>. ⟵
SHER: The <u>who what?</u>
STEV: The <u>Doctor Dreadful drink lab</u>.
SHER: (slightly laughing) The Doctor Dreadful drink lab.

(SBC058 *Swingin' Kid*: *1*.290-3)

In the process of this verbal interaction, Sheri perceives the difficulty in interpreting or hearing 'Doctor Dreadful drink lab', whose difficulty Steven never intends to convey. Through producing the second sentence, Sheri introduces a new *joint attentional frame* with a goal of facilitating the interactional field. It is clear that the participant frames the preceding utterance as a shared object, and at this point, the preceding utterance is first regarded by the sender as a problem which may lead to the communicative inexpediency. Without the retrospective assessment, human interaction is definitely not fruitful. Following this perspective, the utterance which triggers the retrospective interaction can be expressed as an 'interactional device'.

This study thus attempts to analyze our communication from the viewpoint of unfocused interaction, using the computerized corpora such as Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBCSAE), with the view to enhancing the validity of theoretical framework. At the same time, the generalized system of retro-sequence is discussed on the basis of joint attentional frame by Tomasello (2003). It is clear that the sender's intention is not indispensable to human interaction if we are to take the retro-sequential structure into account. The theoretical framework of the inference model is definitely plausible; however, there also exist the interactional sequences constructed retrospectively – that is to say, unrelated to the sender's preceding intention. Through this study, what emerges is a new map of a still underexplored terrain: the retrospective mechanism of human interaction.

References

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