

A Case Study on Self-repair in Casual Talk of ESL Speakers

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Abstract: This paper aims to address a qualitative study of conversation analysis on self-repair in authentic casual talk between two intermediate level ESL adult speakers A and B (A is a Chinese female undergraduate; B is a Brazilian male undergraduate). The data consists of a three-minute audio recording and its transcript, and adopts the conversation analysis transcription system of Richards' (2003:173-4). This study focuses on exploring how self-repair is conducted through detailed analysis and how the ESL participants solve the trouble sources and spontaneously use various construction types of self-repair to sustain an adequate daily conversation.

Key Words: self-initiated; other-initiated; self-repair; casual talk; ESL

Introduction

Self-repair is quite an interesting phenomenon often occurring in conversations, especially in daily casual talks. Speakers use self-repair to perfect their utterance constantly: they not only correct their real mistakes, but also amend some inappropriateness of word-selection, morphology and syntax they have made during the speech process, in order to solve the problems of (mis)hearing or understanding. Since self-repair provides participants with a chance to communicate with fewer or even no misunderstandings, the analysis of self-repair organization is a necessity. And how intermediate level ESL speakers' self-repair is initiated and processed in casual talk for mutual understanding is to be specified.

Conversation Analysis on Self-repair

Schegloff et al (1977:362) identify 'Even casual inspection of talk in interaction finds self-correction vastly more common than other-correction'. So is self-repair, which is to be elaborated and analyzed as follows.

Extract A:

03 A: =Maybe, (1.5)when you-your(.)wife will give birth to the kids.

In Extract A: 03, the repair here is obviously before the transition-relevance place (TRP) within speaker A's turn, and only A is available to do the repair. So self-initiated self-repair is operating in the case of 'you-your', where A is trying to correct her mistake in morphology or maybe A is not sure whether it is a correct way to say 'a man, like B (the hearer), will give birth to kids' in English. Mostly, when the idea 'asking about the kids' takes lexical shape it requires the shift from you to your, for the initial formulation made the 'man' the actor but in fact speaker A realizes that it is easier to frame the propositional content with the woman as the 'actor'. Additionally, the cut-off here as a regular initiator technique can also indicate self-initiated self-repair type in this utterance. Just as Schegloff et al (1977: 367) mention, 'Self-initiations within the same turn (which contains the trouble source) use a variety of non-lexical speech perturbation, e.g. cut-offs, sound stretches, 'uh's etc., to signal the possibility of repair-initiation immediately following'.

Another self-repair type is other-initiated self-repair, inferring the recipient initiates the repair while the speaker carries it out, and 'this is quite often done with a short item like 'huh?', 'what?', etc.' (Have 2007:134) Extract B illustrates this:

Extract B:

08 B: and the girls are cost too(.)^ohehehe^o [too (dake)].(...)[hehe]

09 A: [(xxx)] [what?]

10 B: (...)They are expensive [heh(...)to] take care(2.0)[hehe](2.0)

11 A: [oh::yeah] [yeah(h)]

In Extract B: 08, at the initial TRP, speaker B refers to a feature that most girls have, 'too dake', and this word 'dake' turns out to be the source of trouble. As Drew claims:

There was a failure in the design of those initial turns insofar as their design failed to enable them to be understood in the way the first speaker wished them to be understood – a breakdown in mutual understanding or inter-subjectivity or in the accountability of conduct. (Drew 2005: 97-8)

The trouble source word 'dake' speaker B says may be a wrong word or may be some word in his mother tongue – Portuguese, which the recipient A has no knowledge of, so A picks up the opportunity to initiate repair by using a turn-constructive device 'what' (line 09), and this response gives the original speaker B an opportunity to self-repair the trouble source 'dake'. It is worth noting that the one-second pause in line 08 may represent B is waiting for A's response, and soon B hears A's inquiry, notices her confusion, and captures the trouble, after the first one-second pause of thinking in line 10, B uses a different word (maybe a synonym) 'expensive' to make it clear. Until now, participant A and B finish an other-initiated self-repair trajectory. What's more, B is assumed to pay immediate attention to A's response after his repair as he pauses for another one second in line 10, and finally he obtains A's understood response 'oh yeah' in line 11 overlapped with his own laughter, which may indicate that his utterance resumes.

'Alternatively, another speaker may also offer a candidate understanding of a target utterance, possibly in a format like 'you mean X?', which the original speaker can then accept, reject, or rephrase.' Have (2007: 134) claims. This can be elaborated in Extract C.

Extract C:

16 A: So: er(...)ma-um-maybe-you mean the(x)the boys are(.)maybe

17 money-saving or what?

18 B: No:, the(.)>boys don't need<so many clothes,>don't need<so many

19 treatments(...)for hair and for(.)the body.

20 A: Oh:[yeah]hhh .hhh, [[oh, your-

According to what B mentions in Extract B line 10 'they (girls) are expensive to take care' leading to another trouble source for A, A intends to confirm what B really means and provides B with an optional understanding 'you mean the boys are maybe money-saving or what' in Extract C line 16 and line 17.

As Schegloff et al (1977: 368) state other-initiated repair may involve 'you mean plus a possible understanding of prior turn', A initiates repair once more by using the alternative format of 'you mean X?' to encourage B's repair. In addition, 'you mean' together with the phrases 'or what' at the end of the question tends to elicit B's confirmation or further illustration in an urgent manner. B thereupon begins to construct his turn with a sound-stretching 'No' in line 18 to disagree with A, trying to repair and convey his view, which is that boys are not money-saving, but compared with girls, boys generally spend less on their appearance. Meanwhile, B's turn of repair in line 18 shows his strong eagerness to repair and clarify his view by using two fast utterances 'boys don't need' and 'don't need', and accordingly A's short turn 'Oh yeah' in line 20 acknowledges his opinion received. This typical other-initiated self-repair starting with 'you mean' usually occurs in our daily casual talk. Besides, it is noticeable that in line 16 A constructs her turn through speech perturbation with the sound stretches of 'so' and 'er', and the abrupt cut-off 'maybe', which indicates a typical self-initiated self-repair.

However, Schegloff et al (1977: 363) still demonstrate 'hearable error does not necessarily yield the occurrence of repair/correction', which can be specified in Extract D.

Extract D:

20 A: Oh:[yeah]hhh .hhh, [[oh, your-

21 B: [en] [[>I don't know how is in China, but the girls<(x)girls

22 in Brazil has to(x)to make her(x)her nails, I don't know, every

23 [um(...)]ev]ery=>two weeks three weeks<,they (took that) and=

24 A: [yea-yea]

In Extract D line 21-23, speaker B starts constructing his turn at the same time as speaker A, while B keeps talking without paying attention to what A is going to say. Although here appears several stutters like 'girls', 'to', 'her', short hesitation like 'um', lexical problem 'girls has' and syntactic problem 'how's in China', with his rather fast utterances 'I don't know how is in China, but the girls' and 'two weeks three weeks', B has no intention to stop or repair, which proves reasonable as self-repair rarely occurs when the speaker only focuses on delivering the message of his or her perspectives. Simultaneously, even though there's a one-second pause occurring in line 23, in order to guarantee the flow of B's talk, A responds with 'yea-yea' to support B and implies that B could continue his talk without hesitation. Apparently, in specific ESL context, a successful conversation can also be built up without correcting or repairing some hearable errors, so self-repair should be taken full advantage of and properly applied when necessary.

Conclusion

Above is some self-repair (both self-initiated self-repair and other-initiated self-repair) analysis detected in my transcript between two ESL speakers' casual talk. From this self-repair analysis, it is realized that self-repair in conversation is of great use to communicate, despite some inevitable hesitation and disfluency, it contributes tremendously to mutual understanding among non-native speakers. Just as Have (2007: 136) proposes, self-repair 'offers participants an important secondary device for achieving inter-subjective understanding.'

Appendix: Transcript on authentic casual talk between ESL speaker A and B

Extract:

01 A: Do you li[ke gir]ls or boys?=
 02 B: [yea]

03 A: =Maybe, (1.5)when you-your(.)wife will give birth to the kids.

04 B: I: like both. [(...)Ea]ch one has(.)[uh(h)i]ts good things and bad thing.

05 A: [hahhh.hhh] [yeah]

06 Yea, but eh I think maybe the(x)the boys are hard to: maybe to manage

07 or what

08 B: and the girls are cost too(.)°hehehe° [too (dake)].(...)[hehe]

09 A: [(xxx)] [what?]

10 B: (...)They are expensive [heh(...)to] take care(2.0)[hehe](2.0)

11 A: [oh::yeah] [yeah(h)]

12 B: ((giggle))(.) So: hehe,>it's a kind of difficult to, but<girls a(x)are lovely

13 and boys(...)are playable(2.0), >you know<

- 14 A: Ye-[h-do]u, oh↓,(...) To raise girls is expensive(h)..hhh e[r:],
 15 B: [yea] [yea]
 16 A: So: er(...)ma-um-maybe-you mean the(x)the boys are(.)maybe
 17 money-saving or what?
 18 B: No:, the(.) > boys don' t need < so many clothes, > don' t need < so many
 19 treatments(···)for hair and for(.)the body.
 20 A: Oh:[yeah]hhh .hhh, [[oh, your-
 21 B: [en] [[> I don' t know how is in China, but the girls < (x)girls
 22 in Brazil has to(x)to make her(x)her nails, I don' t know, every
 23 [um(···)ev]ery= > two weeks three weeks < ,they (took that) and=
 24 A: [yea-yea]
 25 B: =they have to(.)pick out her(···)her(···) > I don' t know how to say < ,
 26 her hair in the legs, you know(h), [(···)]the[(xxx)], aha,[yes]
 27 A: [Ye:ah] [yea] [yea].hhh and don' t you think the boys (x)the boys
 28 needs(x)need too much money also? > Since the < maybe the(···)um:the
 29 what, maybe the(1.0)football shoes or the maybe the(···)um:the what,
 30 maybe the(1.0)football shoes or the basketball [shoes] is expensive.
 31 B: [uh huh] No,
 32 > because < that you buy once a year or > maybe < once two years, >
 33 yeh, the usual one < is once a year, but the girls they(x)
 34 they(x)they use money every(x)every wee(h)k(h), [th]ey buy new=
 35 A: [oh:]
 36 B: =clothes to the:(x)to the to go to the night club to go out, and boy
 36 goes always the same clothes many [times].
 37 A: [yeah], that's true.

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