Coherence in Chinese Conversation

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Abstract: Conversational analysis, as a branch of spoken discourse analysis, is to investigate the way that conversation works in practice. Relevant studies on the adjacency pairs in conversational analysis aim to explore the discourse coherence. To probe into the coherence in Chinese conversation in a further way, this paper investigates how a chain of adjacency pairs functions in Chinese conversation.
Keywords: Illocutionary acts; Conversational analysis; Adjacency pairs

1. Introduction

In daily communication, people not only use the language to say things as making statements, but also to do things while performing actions. Thus, a theory called *illocutionary acts*[1], is utilized to examine what kinds of things people do when they speak, how people perform the action and how do acts fail or succeed in achieving a illocutionary goal. This goal achieving in any interaction relies on the negotiation between the speaker and hearer, which is also a meaning-making process engaged three steps: "a hypothesis, formation and testing"(Thomas, 1995)[10]. A hypothesis, or preposition is raised by the speaker at first, then the meaning is formed or negotiated between interlocuters and is finally tested during conversation. In this meaning-making process, the conversation goes from probability to certainty(Leech, 1983)[5].

For demands of exploring the conversational process, a conversational discourse is created based on the combination of conversational study and discourse analysis. And hence, conversational analysis(short for CA), as a branch of spoken discourse analysis, is to investigate the way that conversation works in practice, and is also considered as an approach to the study of social interaction (Hyland, 1998; Schiffrin,1994)[4,9].. Previous discussion on CA concerns more on issues like the general structure of CA and inner links of conversation from the perspective of thematic progression(topic progression) but study on CA still displays its lacks within discourse analysis.

To inquire into CA, pragmatists suggest a framework"activities type"(Levinson 1979)[6], in which, turn-taking and topic control are emphasized, that is, to what degree the interlocutor can utilize turn-taking norms or principles to fit for or establish his or her own agenda in interaction is discussed. Actions during conversations are implemented through the demonstration of turns, and hence, turn-taking is a fundamental feature in conversational organization. Analysis on turn-taking is mainly exploited on what the primary units of turns are and how these units are allocated among interlocutors. As an example of conversational turn-taking, an adjacency pair divides utterance types into "first pair parts" and "second pair parts", forms a "pair type"(Tsui, 1994)[11]. Moreover, in the conversational discourse, all adjacency pairs form a meaning unit around certain topics, and even contribute to the topic progression. In view of this, a chain of adjacency pairs presents the coherence of conversation. In this paper, with the purpose of exploring the coherence of conversation, issues like how two parts in a pair are connected, and whether all pairs in the conversation are consistent are discussed. Based on this, two research questions are addressed: firstly, how do the first and second parts work together to make an adjacency pair contribute to the flow of conversation? Secondly, how does the sequence of adjacency pairs contribute to the coherence of the Chinese conversational discourse?

2. Literature review

In 1952, Z.S. Harris proposed a hierarchy method for the analysis of connected speech (or writing) in his paper *Discourse Analysis*[3]. His view that a discourse analysis should go beyond the boundaries of sentence level is appreciated and is regarded as the starting point of discourse analysis. After 1960s, discourse analysis began to develop, Barthes, Greimas and Metz had done discourse analysis from the perspective of semiotics. Later, Halliday published a paper *Notes on Transitivity and Theme in English* in 1960s, raising three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. And in 1976, four main types of cohesion are stated in his book *Cohesion in English,* they are coreference, substitution/ ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion(Halliday& Hasan, 1985)[2]. They can "create relations of identity or comparison, logical semantic relations or similarity"(Menzel, 2017)[8].

CA, as an approach to the study on social interaction that was developed by the collaborative research conducted by Harvey

Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff and their followers in the 1960s and early 1970s. In 1975, Birmingham School developed the Initiation-Response-Follow-up Structure (IRF) at the level of exchange in teaching context. Later, in 1994, Amy Tsui suggests that a three-part exchanges is the basic unit of organization of classroom discourse, while in causal conversations, in fact, two-part, four-part and even five-part exchanges may happen, displaying the complexity of exchange structures.

3. Data analysis and discussion

According to Schegloff and Sacks, utterances is referred to form pair types so that a particular "first pair part" sets up the expectation of a particular "second pair part" (Tsui, 1994)[11]. The "Adjacency pair", termed by Schegloff and Sack, could be utilized to describe such a pair type, and some examples of adjacency pairs like 'Question-answer', 'greeting-greeting', and 'offer-acceptance/refusal' etc. are discussed. This adjacency pair could be utilized to analyze the organizational pattern recurrent in conversation.

This study aims to explore the issue on Chinese discourse coherence through the analysis of the adjacency pairs in one selected text. The part analyzed is selected from a mini- drama show in the textbook for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign language in Taiwan. In this text, there are seven adjacency pairs and eight turns in total. There are three adjacency pair patterns identified, they are, request-rejection, question- answer, and complain- remedy, and the structural complexity emerges. In addition, the persuasion- refusal-acceptance presents the topic progression, causing the interlocutor finally to yield, and responses to the request.

As the findings show above, answers to two research questions are discussed here. For the first question: how do the first and second part work together to make an adjacency pair contribute to the flow of conversation? As McCarthy(1991)[7] mentions, "pairs of utterances in talk are often mutually dependent"(p119), and an adjacency pair is thought as the smallest unit in speech acts, consisting of a first, a second and even more parts. These parts are produced by different interlocutors in a conversation. While analyzing the texts above, each act, as shown in the conversation, in fact, is not of equal structural complexity. To be more specific, after the speaker poses the question, the hearer doesn't give the pure answer to previous question directly, while some further statements or assertions are elaborated after or before the answer, as a trigger to the following adjacency pair. To sum up, all adjacency pairs are considered to be one important factor contributing to the flow of a conversation.

For the second research question: how does the sequence of adjacency pairs contribute to the coherence of the Chinese conversational discourses? The concern of it is to explore the use and linguistic features of language in communication, discussing the sequencing of adjacency pairs on constructing the coherence of discoursal meaning in the conversation. In the conversation, it starts from the two-part pair: request- refusal, and linguistic strategies are frequently used by interlocuters to persuade one of them to speak more and then get the final agreement The discoursal coherence is presented in a clear way through the topic progression[11].

Analysis on these two conversations displays the descriptive power of *adjacency pairs*. And in this study, both a sequencing rule within the adjacency pair, and a sequencing of all adjacency pairs in a conversation contribute to the discoursal coherence are explored.

4. Conclusion

From the above discussion, the sequencing of adjacency pairs is described as a demonstration of discoursal coherence in the Chinese conversation.The sequencing of adjacency pairs plays an important role in the structuring of conversations, and utterance follow utterance with a certain amount of regularity and cohesion in itself demonstrates the coherence of the Chinese discourse.

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