A study of floor management of English and Japanese conversation

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THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

JUNE 1987

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS BY

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ENTITLED A STUDY OF FLOOR MANAGEMENT OF

ENGLISH AND JAPANESE CONVERSATION

BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR

THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

Conversation is a social activity in which at least two participants interact with each other and play their roles as members of a society to accord rights and fulfill obligations while creating a mutually desirable atmosphere. If the interactants fail to achieve reciprocity, communication becomes less smooth and sometimes disputes or arguments arise. Interactants know how to participate appropriately in a situation on analogy from past experience, just as spontaneous musical performers know how to play as an ensemble, improvising as they go along in a certain musical context and developing an ideal performance situation within that context. In successful communication, participants are able to anticipate how to take turns, when to change topics, when to make supportive comments, how to make objections, and even how to interrupt without being rude. This is because they know the rules and conventions of social interaction which make communication a coherent whole, just as ensemble playing in music is codified in scores and performance conventions.

While musicians use musical instruments as tools, conversants use speech and body movements to express themselves and interact. For linguistic analysis, human communication is divided into three components: language, body movement, and
prosodic features such as intonation, accent, and rhythm. These areas have to be jointly analyzed as they provide equally important information for the study of human communication. My focus here is speech, but the discussion will involve nonverbal behavior because speech acts cannot be accounted for without referring to non-linguistic cues.

Face-to-face interaction, like any other linguistic behavior, is rule governed and has emic or underlying structures. The knowledge of rules of interaction, as well as grammatical rules, is an essential component of the interactive competence speakers must have in order to interact and cooperate with others successfully. Speakers who understand each other must share common rules even though the surface forms they employ may differ. Modern sociolinguists' efforts demonstrate that the investigation of emic structures of conversation must be carried out within a general study of socio-cultural values. The applications of sociolinguists' works to actual social problems have revealed systematic connections between etic and emic variables, and reconstructions of underlying structures in terms of socio-cultural knowledge have been made successfully by applied sociolinguists. These findings show how variables of socio-cultural significance actually work to give social meaning in face-to-face conversation. What sociolinguists pay attention to is the aesthetics of speaking and the social strategy and social attitude of the interactants.

This study does not focus primarily on the analysis of
quantitative data. This is, rather, observational and
descriptive micro-ethnographic analysis which derives on other
fields or disciplines such as pragmatics, social psychology,
anthropology and cognitive science. In the present thesis, I
will focus on one aspect of conversation, "floor" which can be
explained as attention orientation strategy for interactants to
achieve communicative goals. My immediate purpose is to
investigate the structural mechanism of "floor" among
interactants and its management strategies in the sequence of
conversational interaction. The ultimate goal is to investigate
what the communication is, and how its goal is achieved in
various social encounters -- how the concept of "floor" is
integrated and managed by the interactants in order to achieve
the communicative goal, how the social meanings of politeness is
intertwined in the process of "floor" managing, and how the
2 polarity of politeness factors, deference and solidarity and
the polarity of positive and negative aspects of "floor" are
related in face-to-face verbal interaction. Deference and
solidarity appear interchangeably from moment to moment in an
on-going conversation, and they produce a sort of tension in
"flooring". It seems that these two factors hold conversational
partners together in a mutually attentive "floor" and lead them
3 from one speech event to the next, while impolite behavior
creates uncomfortable moments and negative aspects of flooring.
Basic Concepts and Framework

Empathy and Rapport

In the past two or three decades, Chomsky and neo-Chomskian linguists claimed their linguistic theories have made a new epoch in the study of language. They claimed that linguistic analysis is a natural science. The word "scientific" means for them the formalization of completely decontextualized language and leads their language analysis to the abstract and idealized world. These theories, however, do not last long and need constant modifications. Some linguists (Yngve, 1970; Lakoff, 1974, 1980) have realized the necessity of modifying this trend to study "human linguistics" in which the goal would be to deal with "communication", to explore what speakers have in mind when they use language, and to achieve an understanding of how they use language to communicate. As Yngve has put it (1970):

One might be tempted to ask why are we broadening our scope from the scientific study of language to the scientific study of how people use language to communicate? ... The answers to this in part are that through state of mind we are able to account for the variability of behavior; a means is provided whereby the situational context can be taken into account; we can handle in a unified way, and allow for the interrelation of, all of the various communication modalities, ... (p. 576).

We live by language, since it is a part of the knowledge of socio-cultural conventions we need in order to live social lives. However, we also live with language as social beings who are also individuals who struggle to sublimate emotional needs in social life. Emotional needs, such as empathy and rapport, are the fundamental sources of the human desire to converse with others.
The primitive emotions that we have at birth are refined by experience and come to be expressed in a more sophisticated manner in conversational interaction appropriate to a social context. Emotion is a subjective state which varies with each individual, but affective factors are expressed in socially restricted ways when they are displayed in social contexts. The investigation of "floor" is, thus, done from a broader point of view as Yngve suggests. It deals with the sensitive area of how knowledge of social conventions and expression of affective factors of empathy and rapport intertwine and co-occur on the surface in a logical way and how they are rationally negotiated in a certain social context.

Empathy and rapport are types of communicative behavior that are closely linked to both cognitive process (Sarbin, 1954 [cited in Sexton, 1980]) and emotional response (Stewart, 1956 [cited in Sexton, 1980]). According to Mead (1934), communication is a form of negotiation that cannot take place without empathy, because interactants are required to understand how the others perceive the situation and what their emotional states are in order to proceed in a mutually satisfying social interaction. By developing their empathic skills, interactants can accurately assess the empathic involvement of themselves with the others, therefore they can manipulate the on-going conversational interaction with an appropriate interactional strategy. Empathy and rapport are on the same continuum of emotional need. If a person is highly empathic, s/he will create rapport. Skillful