4-1-1997

What Does Nonreciprocal Term Exchange Index? Examining Chinese Business Telephone Conversation Closings

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This article reports part of the findings of a current research project which is still in progress on comparisons between Chinese and English telephone conversations. The study shows that the nonreciprocal terminal exchanges in Chinese business telephone conversation closings reveal the social reality and index the unequal relationship between the two parties involved in the interaction: the customers as the callers and the sales/service people as the recipients.

This investigation is inspired by (1) studies in cross-cultural conversational interaction, (2) the theoretical construct of interactional versus transactional talk, and (3) studies in second language acquisition, particularly the interplay between first language and second language.

Studies in anthropology and sociolinguistics have continued to provide evidence in the past several decades that what is assumed to be the norm of interaction or the appropriate way of communication may not be shared by different speech communities. On the other hand, scholars working in the tradition of Conversation analysis contend that there are universal principles at work in human interaction across cultures and languages, as has been illustrated in some studies of telephone conversations. How people talk in different cultures and languages and to what extent different languages and cultures share similarities in communication has been of increasing interest and significance for both communication theory building and intercultural communication.

Studies in Sino-American encounter often report that the Chinese are perceived as “inscrutable” due to differences between the Chinese communication style and that of Americans. But the Western perception of the Chinese communication style results from a Eurocentric perspective. Furthermore, researchers studying conversational behavior of native speakers of Chinese have mostly focused on their discourse in English as a second language. In order to provide a valid and objective account of the features of Chinese ways of talking, we need to conduct studies of natural Chinese conversation by native speakers of Chinese, natural English conversation by native speakers of Chinese, and natural English conversation by native speakers of English. As is pointed out by Saville-Troike and Johnson (1994), an ethnographic approach to comparative studies will greatly enhance the validity of the analysis and interpretation.

A second dimension of contrast which is of interest to me is the functional axis of “interactional” vs. “transactional” talk proposed by Brown and Yule (1983). While interactional talk focuses on social interaction as the main goal, transactional talk is for business transactions. However, there has been little empirical investigation so far, into natural discourse in any particular language to examine whether such distinction between these two types of talk is valid and if so, how they differ within and across languages. This is one of the parameters in my study for exploration.
In addition, I am very interested in the interplay between first language and second language in conversational interaction. Studies have suggested that transfer from one’s native language occurs not only in areas such as syntax and lexicon, but also at the pragmatic level. Takahashi and Beebe (1987) advance the hypothesis that L2 proficiency is positively correlated with pragmatic transfer because more developed proficiency will allow advanced learners to draw on the pragmatic knowledge of their L1. (Although their own study did not support the hypothesis, some other research findings have provided evidence supporting the hypothesis) (e.g., Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986). If there are differences between telephone conversations in Chinese and in English, are they manifested in the calls in English made by Chinese bilinguals? And if so, how? What aspects of calls made by Chinese “bilinguals” show similarities with or differences from those made by monolingual speakers of Chinese and by native speakers of English respectively? This is the third aspect of my research goal—to examine the interplay of first and second language in natural telephone conversation interaction.

The data for the research project is based on natural telephone conversations recorded by eighteen collaborators, twelve of them Chinese, and six of them Americans. All of them are women, aged between thirty and fifty. For this article, I will only focus on the closing of the transactional telephone calls recorded in China. This set of data is based on fifteen recorded telephone calls made to businesses or services from individual households in China. I am aware that the corpus upon which my analysis is based is not a substantial amount but there are some salient patterns that I have observed which deserve our attention. (Here I should mention that in China the use of telephone for business purposes by individuals is still limited. It is mostly to request information.)

Telephone conversation closings, as we all know from our experience, is accomplished usually with terminal exchange such as “Good-bye,” This has been observed by Schegloff and Sacks (1973). Discussing how people accomplish closings in phone calls, Schegloff and Sacks propose that the exchange of “good-bye” as an “adjacency pair” works to solve the problem of coordination. There are five features of adjacency pair, they assert: (1) two utterance length, (2) adjacent positioning of component utterances, (3) different speakers producing each utterance, (4) relative ordering of parts, and (5) discriminative relations. The rule of the operation is that on hearing the first part of pair produced by the first speaker, the next speaker, the authors argue, should start and produce a second pair part from the pair type of which the first is recognizably a member. In the case of phone calls, the second pair part of the terminal exchange represents the agreement by the second speaker to the closing of the talk. It is probably safe to assume that most people will readily accept and agree with the observation about the adjacency pair phenomenon in terminal exchanges as everyone participates in such an activity on a daily basis. However, what I will share with you next will show a different picture.

Summary of Patterns for Terminal Exchanges in Chinese Transactional Telephone Calls

C stands for callers (customers); A stands for recipients of calls (sales person/receptionist/operator)

(I) C: Thank you. (8 calls)
   A: ____.  

(II) C: Thank you. (4 calls)
   A: No problem.
   C: Bye.
   A: ____.  

(III) C: Thank you. (1 call)
   C: Bye.

(IV) C: Thank you. (2 calls)
   A: Uh hum.

Total (15 calls)

There are several observations that can be made based on the summary of the closing exchange. As we can see, first, ten out of fifteen calls ended with “thank you” instead of “good-bye” (type I & IV in the summary). It is very different from calls in Chinese made by the same people to friends or acquaintances. For calls between acquaintances, “good-bye” is always present. Secondly, for those ten calls terminated with “thank you,” eight of them (type I in the summary) ended with “thank you” without a reciprocal expression in return. In other words, the second pair part of the
“adjacency pair” is missing. Thirdly, there are five calls with terminal exchange (type II & III in the summary) and four of them (type II) are initiated by the callers. For those four calls, the “Goodbye” exchanges were all initiated by the callers but the recipients did not respond to the terminal exchange, thus again the second part of the “adjacency pair” is missing. The fourth point is that there is one case wherein the recipient initiated the “goodbye” (type III in the summary). In this case, the caller clearly responded to the terminal exchange.

The last observation I would like to make concerns type IV of the exchange in the summary for closings. Here, it seems that there is no adjacency pair problem; in both cases, the recipients responded to callers’ “thank you” appropriately and the exchanges seemed balanced. Further examination, however, renders’ questions about the relations as reflected in the exchange. The response form from the recipients here is not the prototype for response to expressions such as “Thank you.” I would argue. In other words, it seems to be a less enthusiastic response compared with “It doesn’t matter” or other expressions. It should be mentioned that the actual word in Chinese is an “en,” which is very similar to “uh hum” in English. In Chinese context, this “en” is often a response form used by parents in their talks to their sons or daughters, or by superiors or seniors to subordinates or juniors, but is not used the other way around usually. (I have observed this in other parts of my data for this study.) Therefore, I would argue that the use of “uh hum” in reply to the callers’ “thank you” in these two calls still shares similarity with my previous analyses about the other twelve calls in that different social status is indexed through the response form although the adjacency pair principle seems to be operative in these two closings.

To summarize the observations, we can see a clear pattern: In twelve calls (type I & II in the summary) out of the fifteen (80%), the second pair part of the adjacency pair is absent. Moreover, it is missing only from the slots which belong to the recipients. To put it another way, in all those cases, it is the recipients who did not provide responses to the “Good-bye” exchange. None of the callers, on the other hand, failed to provide such a response.

Let us now go back to Schegloff’s definition of adjacency pair briefly before we resume our analysis. According to Schegloff’s definition, we now encounter some problems if we attempt to account for the Chinese data, that is, (1) The adjacency pair for the terminal exchange is not two utterance length. (2) It is not adjacent positioning: the second pair part is simply absent. (3) There is only one speaker, not two. Now, what is the problem? Is it because adjacency pair is not applicable to Chinese terminal exchange for conversation in general or is it because these closings are “marked” cases which call for the absence of the second pair part of the adjacency pair for terminal exchange?

The answer to these questions is negative. First, it needs to be established that in Chinese, people do say “goodbye” to each other when they close telephone conversations. Actually, very often, Chinese people say goodbye more than once when they do leave-taking, but this is not the topic for discussion here. Secondly, not responding to one’s conversation partner when being thanked or when leave-taking is uncommon and rude. Then how do we account for this non-reciprocal terminal exchange in the transactional calls? Is this idiosyncratic phenomenon or are there some underlying causes for such patterned behavior?

It will be helpful, at this point, to draw on other data in the corpus for comparison so as to provide us with some basis for analysis. First, in the forty or more calls made by my Chinese participants to acquaintances, friends or relatives, terminal exchange “good-bye” is never absent and there is not even one case of nonreciprocal closing exchange. Therefore, we know that reciprocal terminal exchange is still the prototypical behavior, or the norm, for closings in Chinese telephone conversations. Similarly, if we look at the recorded phone calls made by native speakers of American English in my data, reciprocal terminal exchange is the norm. Examining business telephone calls in English made by native speakers, whether the terminal exchange is initiated by the caller or the recipient, I found that 60%-70% of the calls ended with reciprocal terminal exchanges while only 30%-40% ended with one party’s terminal exchange. Furthermore, it is often the callers in my English data, as opposed to the recipients in the Chinese cases, who failed to respond to the terminal exchange.

My interpretation and argument for the absence of the second pair part of the adjacency pair in Chinese transactional calls is that the almost across-the-board nonreciprocal terminal exchange reflects the unequal relationship between the customers and the sales persons (or operators/receptionists). The absence of the second pair part of the adjacency pair, be it in the case of “thank
you” or in the case of “Bye,” is not incidental, neither is it idiosyncrasy due to personal preference of the recipients. It mirrors the social status of the participants vis-à-vis each other in the given context: the callers are the less powerful party whereas the recipients are the ones with relative power. The recipients have more power over the callers because it is the callers who are making requests for information. The recipients are the ones, as has been reflected by their language use, who have control over the response or help they provide for the callers.

Here, I would like to mention an ethnographic comparative study by Tsuda (1984) which is of significance to my study. Tsuda describes and analyzes sales and salespersons’ talk in the American and Japanese communities. Her research shows certain overall patterns of sales transactions are typical of both speech communities. However, there are differences between the two. One of the major differences is that sales transactions within the American speech community are typically egalitarian. On the other hand, the Japanese transaction reflects a relationship of relative power as manifested in sales persons’ frequent use of honorifics, humble forms and polite expressions as well as in the nonreciprocal address terms.

It seems that the findings in my study share some similarity with Tsuda’s study in that there is also some difference between the Chinese data and English data for closing. However, while Tsuda reports that the Japanese customers feature a more powerful social status vis-à-vis the sales person, in my Chinese data, it is the opposite. It is the sales persons who seem to possess more power in the given context, and their use of language in the interaction reflects the lack of courtesy, warmth, and enthusiasm for their customers; it reflects a relative power relationship with the sales persons being the more powerful over the customers.

Why is this the case then? To find an answer, we need to examine the larger social context in which the interaction is embedded. In China, especially in the past several decades, the relationship between the customer and business/service people was the opposite of that in the U.S. or other Western countries. Until quite recently, with regard to the relation between sales person and the customers, it was always the sales persons or service people who were more powerful as they could exercise some power, no matter how much that might be, vis-à-vis the customers. This perceived power derived from a combination of factors such as public ownership of the business/service, the nonexistence of competition among service/businesses, the limited supply of commodities, and the lack of incentive for sales persons to do more business. Although the whole situation has changed quite significantly in the last two decades or so since the reform, in the case of transactional telephone calls, it is still the sales persons who consider themselves more powerful and appear to be so.

To conclude, the absence of the second pair part of the adjacency pair in the terminal exchange for Chinese transactional telephone calls points to a sociolinguistic phenomenon in the Chinese society, namely, an unequal relationship between the customers and the sales person which is the opposite of that in the U.S., at least, for now. Laver (1981) maintains that “linguistic routines of greeting and parting, far from being relatively meaningless and mechanical social behavior, can thus be understood as extremely important strategies for the negotiation and control of social identity and social relationship between participants in conversation” (304). As has been illustrated by research in sociolinguistics repeatedly, language use reflects, and consolidates in turn, the social status of the participants in interaction, and this is just another case in point.

References