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Strategies of Topic Termination: A Contrastive Study of English and Persian

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Abstract

An interesting area within conversation analysis on which few studies have been done is strategies employed by interlocutors for topic termination. Not only non-native speakers, but also native speakers have difficulty in order to develop the tact required for topic termination. This study aimed to examine strategies which Persian speakers employ for terminating a conversation. The participants were two groups of 30 graduate native speakers of Persian and English and the natural data collected via various means in English. The data incorporated male and female speakers with an age range of 20-33. Spontaneous interviews were used to gather data, then an open-ended DCT was formed based upon the results of the interviews. According to the results of data analysis, native Persians were observed to use a greater variety of pre-closing and closing devices in comparison with native English speakers as there are radical cross-cultural differences between Persian and English accepted norms of politeness. Using fewer and more limited pre-closing sequences by native English speakers is explained by relating it to their tendency to be direct and individualistic, while Persians made use of more such sequences due to their culture which tend to be highly publically oriented.

Keywords: topic termination; conversation analysis; contrastive investigation; closing devices; pre-closing devices; cross-cultural clashes

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1. Introduction

According to J. Liddicoat (2007) closing a topic signals that the participants want to withdraw from a talk; the parties need to do it in a way which does not make their relationships vulnerable and all have had the opportunity to talk about all things which need to be discussed in the conversation. Thus ending it should be sensitive to its present situation and what is going to occur and speakers need to apply some practices which indicate the end of a talk; distinctive from silence. This aim will be reached through disengaging from turn-taking system and also creating a closing implicative environment, some sets of actions after which closing is a common activity, though it might not happen. The style of closing a conversation is a predictable set of activities which include: pre-closing and terminal sequences which form a 'closing section' that are both required to achieve closing properly (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). In other words terminal sequences constitute expressions and adjacency pairs which accepting their latter component in the pair shows the end of the conversation.

For Schegloff and Sacks (1973, p. 295) terminal adjacency pairs have the following features:

1) Two utterance length
2) Adjacent positioning of component utterances
3) Different speakers producing each utterance

Nevertheless, these may not be enough to allow the parties to make sure whether there are further things to talk about. Consequently, pre closing sequences taking the form of "we-ell", "O.K", "so" are sometimes provided which do not lead necessarily to closure, that is why Schegloff and Sacks(1973) call them possible pre-closings as a means of passing the turn due to having nothing to say or giving a free turn to a next.

Terminating a topic is not just limited to saying "good bye"; rather it constitutes a variety of expressions, whether explicit or implicit. As Liddicoat (2007) argues conversational closing is not a set routine that all conversations must pass, but it is achieved by participants. However, various interactional styles due to different cultures make these sequences contrasted.

1.1. Face

"The positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line, a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants especially himself, others assume he has taken during a particular contact"(Goffman, 1967, p. 5). For Watts (2003, p. 107), the key to Goffman's notion of face is that it is "not something that the individual somehow builds for him/herself, which then needs to be supported and respected in the course of interaction, but is rather 'public property', something which is only realised in social interaction and is dependent on others".

2. Present study

In Schegloff and Sacks' view "Topic talk is an ambiguous notion, being understandable both as the organization of the unit 'a topic', and as the organization of a set of such units within the larger units 'a single conversation'" (1973, p.300). In the present study this is the latter that we intend. Aiming at exploring the similarities and the differences between native Persian and English verbal strategies to terminate a conversation, non-verbal mechanisms, prosodic features and uncompleted sentences or unilateral terminations which are arisen because of pique, anger, and brusqueness were not taken into account. To date, some topic termination strategies have been put