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Journal of Pragmatics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

“Sorry?”/“Como?”/“Was?” – Open class and embodied repair initiators in international workplace interactions



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 23 November 2017

Keywords:

International work settings
 Conversation analysis
 Video data
 Repair sequences
 Open class repair initiators
 Embodied other-initiation of repair

ABSTRACT

As open class repair initiators (OCRIs, e.g., “what” or “huh”) do not specify the type of repairable, choosing an adequate repair format in the next turn becomes a practical problem for the participants. Whereas in monolingual/L1 speaker conversations participants typically orient towards troubles caused by reduced acoustic intelligibility or by topical/sequential disjunction, in multilingual/L2 interactions possible problems regarding asymmetric language choices and skills can be added – and might be responded to accordingly. Based on videotaped international business meetings and interactions at a customs post, this paper investigates various open class and embodied other-initiations of repair. By means of a conversation analytical and multimodal approach to social interaction, this contribution focuses first on instances of audible OCRIs and illustrates that they are accompanied by embodied conduct. Second, two types of embodied other-initiation of repair are scrutinized: a lifted eyebrows/head display and a freeze display in which movements are suspended. The analysis shows that participants treat these as referring either to troubles in hearing (display 1) or to troubles in understanding the linguistic format (display 2). This leads to the formulation of further desiderata and analytical challenges regarding the multimodal other-initiation of repair in general and in professional international settings in particular.

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1. Introduction

In international professional settings, participants are constantly faced with heterogeneous linguistic skills and preferences. This means that the participants in these settings encounter bigger challenges in maintaining both the intersubjectivity and the progressivity of the interaction than in linguistically and culturally homogeneous settings (Markaki et al., 2013; Varonis and Gass, 1985). Conversation analysis has described repair as a universal practice for re-establishing mutual understanding (Dingemans et al., 2014; Hayashi et al., 2013; Schegloff et al., 1977), as it aims to repair problems in speaking, hearing or understanding. In this exploratory study, I wish to focus on practices of “open class” repair initiation (Drew, 1997), that is, interjections or lexical items that do not specify the nature of the trouble source, as well as on embodied other-initiations of repair, meaning repair carried out through gesture, facial expression or bodily posture. As the inherent multi-functionality of open class repair initiators (OCRIs) and embodied repair display leads to practical problems in identifying the precise repairable, their occurrence in international professional encounters might represent an even

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greater challenge for the participants. In foreign-language learning settings, trouble can also be related to linguistic forms produced by second-language speakers (Seo and Koshik, 2010). In international professional encounters, one can add possible trouble in language choice. This contribution will investigate the use of audible OCRIs and visible other-initiations of repair as well as the ensuing repair sequences in two professional settings (international business meetings and service encounters at a customs post) to analyze whether and how participants make a distinction between different types of trouble. Such other-initiations of repair in these settings address problems in hearing, understanding and linguistic format or language choice.

In the following I will first review the literature regarding the other-initiation of repair in general and OCRIs in particular (section 1.1) then focus on research on embodied repair initiation (section 1.2) and outline the data sets and the method (section 1.3). The analysis will then focus on instances of audible OCRIs in international professional settings, showing that they are mostly treated as referring to problems in hearing (section 2.1). As these audible other-initiations of repair are systematically accompanied by repair-related embodied conduct, two types of embodied other-initiation displays are then investigated (section 2.2): first, a lifted eyebrows/head combination and, second, a freeze display in which the bodily posture, gesture and facial expression are kept unchanged in a response-relevant slot. As participants treat these as either referring to trouble in hearing (display 1) or referring to trouble in understanding the linguistic or general action format (display 2), my contribution finally mentions ensuing analytical desiderata and challenges regarding the multimodal other-initiation of repair in general and in professional international settings in particular (3).

1.1. Repair sequences, other-initiated repair and open class repair initiation

Repair sequences are organized according to basic structural features with regard to the speaking turn containing the trouble source, such as who initiates (self-initiated vs. other-initiated) and who carries out the repair (self-repair vs. other-repair). While, especially in interactional linguistics, there has been a strong interest in (self-initiated) self-repair in various languages, mostly in mundane settings (e.g., Birkner et al., 2010; Drew et al., 2013; Fox et al., 2009, 2010), other-initiated repair has been studied in a large variety of settings (mundane, medical, workplace and classroom). To adapt the overview precisely to the scope of this contribution, I will only consider studies referring more specifically to other-initiated repair, that is, a repair initiated in the next-speaker turn adjacent to the trouble source turn.

The other-initiation of repair can be carried out through various practices: using open class items (such as “huh” or “what,” Drew, 1997), interrogative pronouns or adverbs (such as “who,” “where,” Egbert et al., 2009), full repeats of the trouble source turn (Robinson and Kevoe-Feldman, 2010), partial repeats (Lilja, 2014; Robinson, 2013), partial repeats combined with a question word, formulations (such as “you mean” accompanying a candidate understanding, Antaki, 2012) or explicitly referring to an error (especially in educational settings, Kurhila, 2006). The central differences between these practices lie in the precision with which they specify or refer to the repairable and in what they consequentially implicate as being a relevant next repair procedure. Whereas partial repeats or question words point at a precise part or element of the trouble source turn, open class items do not specify the exact scope of the repairable (Drew, 1997). It has been shown that these referentially “weak” repair initiations (Schegloff et al., 1977) can hint at topical discontinuities of the trouble source turn (i.e., a sudden shift in topic) or at a sequentially problematic prior turn (Drew, 1997). Though the same author underlined “[...] that there can be no general account for the selection of ‘open’ class N[ext]T[urn]R[epair]I[nitiator]’s” (Drew, 1997:96), it can be said that these items refer to trouble in the sequential positioning or activity format of the trouble source turn. However, the format of the following repair can indicate both trouble in sequential positioning and audibility of the trouble source turn (“disjunct” vs. “fitted” trouble source turns, Curl, 2005). It has been suggested that repairs most frequently address problems in hearing first and only subsequently address problems regarding understanding or preference/disagreement (Mazeland and Zaman-Zadeh, 2004; Svennevig, 2008).

It can be argued that “[...] the canonical use of open class repair initiators is with problems of hearing” (Svennevig, 2008:346), as most repairs carried out afterwards take the format of a verbatim repeat of the trouble source turn (Blythe, 2015:303–304; Levinson, 2015:392; see however Curl (2005) regarding variations in the acoustic format of repeats). It has been pointed out that open class repair initiation is a universally adopted practice (Enfield et al., 2013) in that all languages under investigation use “interjections” (monosyllabic items containing an open vowel and uttered with rising intonation) and most languages also use question words (i.e., with a semantic value, typically “what”). Though this distinction might not be a clear-cut one (e.g., “what” being used differently in repair initiation, cf. Egbert et al., 2009; Hayashi and Kim, 2015; Robinson, 2014), it has been maintained in later cross-linguistic studies on other-initiated repair (Dingemanse and Enfield, 2015) and expanded to the group of formulaic items (“pardon,” “sorry”). Interjections seem to be the most frequent OCRIs (e.g., Baranova, 2015; Enfield, 2015; Floyd, 2015; Gisladdottir, 2015; Levinson, 2015; Rossi, 2015), whereas formulaic OCRIs seem to be quite rare or even absent (the latter probably being more frequently used in institutional settings; see Robinson, 2006).

According to the literature, the most frequent repair practice following an open class repair initiation is, cross-linguistically, a verbatim repeat. However, there are also a considerable number of modified repeats (suppressed “dispensable” elements (Schegloff, 2004), modified word order, modified or added lexical material) or even completely

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