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‘‘What's it called in Norwegian?’’ Acquiring L2 vocabulary items in the workplace

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Abstract

The article describes a conversational practice used by L2 speakers in acquiring new technical terms in the course of everyday workplace interaction on a construction site. In the process of searching for a word, the speaker identifies a referent by embodied means and asks the L1 interlocutor what it is called in Norwegian. When the term is provided, it is repeated, often with emphatic prosody, displaying the L2 speaker's identification of the word and ability to pronounce it. This repeat is treated as a request for confirmation by the L1 speaker, who often also provides further repeats of the word in question. By expanding the word search sequence beyond the identification of the word searched for, the participants show an orientation to the word as a learnable, that is, as something to be memorized and rehearsed in the conversation. The activity of teaching and learning technical vocabulary is thus treated as a relevant activity in and of itself, at the expense of the progression of the workplace task at hand.

Keywords: Workplace interaction; Second language acquisition; Second language interaction; Repetition; Word search sequences; Learnables

1. Introduction

Extensive work migration in present-day Europe has led to a situation where many workplaces involve employees with different first languages. Communication will thus frequently be conducted in a language that is a second or foreign language to one or several speakers. In white-collar workplaces English is often chosen as the lingua franca, but in blue-collar workplaces this is not always the case. This article is a study of how a Polish construction worker uses Norwegian in communication with his leaders and co-workers. He has only had very rudimentary formal training in Norwegian, and thus has mainly learnt to speak Norwegian merely by interacting with colleagues at work. He is thus a good candidate for studying processes of language learning ‘in the wild’, that is, outside of organized pedagogical activities (Wagner, 2015).

Since Firth and Wagner's (1997) call for more research on the characteristics of L2 interaction as a topic in its own right, there has been a growing interest in how second language speakers orient to language learning in everyday conversations outside the classroom (*e.g.* Brouwer, 2003, 2004; Kurhila, 2006; Hosoda, 2006; Theodórsdóttir, 2011; Kim, 2012; Lilja, 2014; Wagner, 2015). This study contributes to this line of research and expands it by investigating a new type of data from a multilingual workplace. Most studies referred to above describe practices of language students in their extracurricular activities. The current study focusses on a migrant worker who does not attend language classes and thus has workplace interaction as his main source of language learning.

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Observing how language learning happens in the wild is challenging since most lingua franca speakers in the workplace tend to avoid 'flagging' problems and instead let mistakes pass without correcting them (Firth, 1996; Wagner and Firth, 1997). Thus, language issues seldom surface in such conversations. However, in some cases, interlocutors do orient to missing words as 'learnables', that is, as words to be acquired for future reference rather than just being identified and used for the communicative purpose at hand. According to Majlesi and Broth (2012), the orientation to a lexical item as a learnable emerges interactionally when one party enquires about the meaning of a word used or the name a referent in the physical surround and thereby displays his or her lack of linguistic knowledge. If the knowing interlocutors respond with a metalinguistic explanation, they enter into a side sequence where the pedagogical activity of learning a new word becomes temporarily the focus of attention.

This article focuses on one practice used in orienting to a new lexical item as a learnable. The practice involves cases where the speaker, due to a lack of words in Norwegian, identifies a referent by embodied means (gestures, object manipulation) and asks his interlocutor what it is called in Norwegian. This practice is based on the format of word search sequences (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1986), but it also differs from it in certain respects. The main difference is that the sequence is systematically expanded by repeat sequences. The article argues that these repeat sequences manifest an orientation to the pedagogical activity of teaching and learning a new word.

The article first presents the features of word search sequences in general and how such sequences have been studied in L2 interaction. Then I present the data used in the study, before I turn to the analysis of extracts that illustrate the orientation to teaching and learning new words in word search sequences.

2. Word search sequences

Word search sequences start by a speaker displaying problems in continuing or completing an ongoing turn at talk. This may be indexed by intra-turn pauses and by speech perturbations such as hesitation markers (*uh*) and sound stretches (Schegloff et al., 1977). There may also be embodied displays of trouble, such as putting up a 'thinking face' (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1986) or grasping in the air (McNeill, 1992). Even explicit verbal indications of trouble may be produced, such as ''what's it called'' or ''how do you say it''.

These verbal or gestural prompts are sometimes recognizably self-directed, such as when speakers are searching for a name or a word that they do not expect their interlocutors to have access to. The solitary nature of the search may be displayed by keeping the gaze away from the interlocutor or by speaking in low volume. On other occasions, speakers may on the contrary direct their gaze at their interlocutor, and thereby seek to recruit them to participate in the search activity (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1986).

In the course of appealing for assistance, speakers may provide clues as to what they are searching for, such as giving examples, paraphrasing, explaining, code-switching etc. (Kurhila, 2006; Greer, 2013). Speakers may also give clues by means of gestures, such as *illustrating* the referent by means of iconic gestures or *indicating* it by means of deictic gestures such as pointing (Hayashi, 2003; Park, 2007; Greer, 2013). Finally, the type of lexical item being searched for may be indexed by various verbal elements produced prior to the search activity, such as articles, demonstratives and other function words that project a word of a certain grammatical category (Hayashi, 2003).

Word searches may be resolved in two ways, either by the speakers themselves finding the word searched for (or some equivalent) or by the interlocutor proposing a candidate solution. Candidate words may be produced with falling or rising intonation, signaling varying degrees of epistemic commitment to the solution proposed (Park, 2007). The candidate solution will then be either accepted or rejected by the speaker. Acceptance is often signaled by repeating the suggested word and adding a confirmation token (Kim, 2012). Sometimes the word is also integrated in the completion of the original utterance-in-progress (Lerner, 1996).

A collaborative word search sequence thus consists of three parts. First, the trouble source turn, where the speaker displays problems finding a word and possibly also appeals to the interlocutor for assistance. Second, the proposal of a candidate solution by the interlocutor, and third, the acceptance or rejection of the proposed candidate by the speaker.

Collaborative word search sequences interrupt the business-at-hand in order to deal with a 'problem of speaking'. As such, they constitute a specific type of repair sequence, namely self-initiated other-repair (Schegloff et al., 1977). Such repair sequences may be considered *parenthetical sequences*, interrupting and suspending the main communicative activity in course (Mazeland, 2007). The preference for progressivity implies that the interactants will display an orientation to minimizing the interruption and resuming the main activity (Stivers and Robinson, 2006). And this is surely the case in most word search sequences. Once the word is found, the speaker immediately resumes the main activity. However, in the cases under investigation here, the speakers do not display such an orientation, but instead expand the parenthetical sequence beyond the identification of the missing word. The expansions consist of (sequences of) repeats of the word proposed. The analysis argues that these expansions display an orientation to the lexical item as a learnable and to pursuing the pedagogical activity of teaching and learning the word as a relevant activity in and of itself. As such, the participants orient to different concerns than just repairing the problem of speaking.

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