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Invitations in French: A complex and apparently sensitive action

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Abstract

In this paper, we focus on the way in which invitations – first actions that project the relevance of successive actions – are constructed. In our data of phone calls in French, far from being straight to the point, invitations appear to be complex activities, produced step-by-step, in a progressive way, both temporally and sequentially, as if they were, regardless of the context in which they occur, delicate actions. After a short overview of previous studies on invitations, we turn to analysing invitations to pre-planned events, with a special focus on the different features that make them appear as delicate actions. In the final section of the paper, we explore how the delicacy of the action of inviting is negotiated over several turns before the activity is completed and responded to. We then put this in relation to the progressive construction of the participants' identities as inviter and invitee.

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1. Background of the study

1.1. Sequential organisation of actions in invitation sequences

A major objective in Conversation Analysis has been to consider actions in turns-at-talk within the framework of interaction, i.e. in the context of previous and following turns, of broader activities and situations (in contrast with the speech acts approach, cf. Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; see Drew and Couper-Kuhlen, 2014; Levinson, 2013, for a historical perspective). One of the consequences of this renewed analytical framework has been to focus on pairs of actions, and to concentrate on the link between the first and the second actions in an adjacency pair by examining how 'sequential implication' and 'preference organisation' work (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; Pomerantz, 1984; Pomerantz and Heritage, 2013).

Regarding invitations, Davidson (1984, 1990) examines the link between the two parts of the pair. She explores how the invitees' reactions in the immediate next turn after an invitation can lead the inviter to modify the invitation. She shows, for instance, how silence in second position is interpreted as a clue to the possible recipient's rejection of the invitation, and how this leads to a revised version of the invitation or to the addition of new elements related to the invitation. The same occurs after 'weak-agreements' (such as 'mhm') as well as after 'first refusals' of the invitation. In this last case, Davidson shows

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that the sequence as a whole does not come to an end until the inviter utters a 'rejection finaliser' (like 'oh', 'I see', 'okay', 'alright', 1990:160), which generally occurs after several turns displaying the inviter's insistence. She notes that:

[...] the revision or modification of an invitation or offer may be a display by inviter or offerer that the rejection came from some inadequacy with the original invitation or offer, such that if this inadequacy is corrected or remedied through a modified or revised invitation or offer, then perhaps the invitation or offer will now be accepted. (1990:165)

Likewise, [Drew \(1984\)](#) focuses on 'reportings' of a project or of circumstances occurring in next position after an invitation, which, without officially or explicitly declining it, let the inviter infer and formulate a rejection. The author also examines how a speaker's reporting of a future social activity can prompt recipients' self-invitations. In these cases, the focus is on the link between the two turns, the invitation and either the following or the preceding turn. A related issue is explored by [Barraja-Rohan \(1994\)](#), who, in line with [Schegloff \(1990\)](#) on expanded sequences, analyses a single case in which 113 turns-at-talk are inserted between the first pair part (the invitation) and the second pair part (the response).

In the interactional literature, the two classical ways of describing this sequential construction of invitation sequences have been in terms of 'pre-sequence' and 'preference organisation' (see for instance [Schegloff, 2007](#); [Levinson, 1983](#)). For the former, Schegloff argues that 'pre-invitations' are among the most readily recognisable pre-sequences. As he stated:

When a caller follows the opening of a telephone call with the query 'Are you doing anything?' or 'What are you doing?', the recipient does not ordinarily understand that as asking for a factual description. Rather it is ordinarily understood as a preliminary, and very commonly as a preliminary to a possible invitation. (2007:29)

A main aspect of invitation sequences in this respect is that the responder tends to let the pre-sequence develop completely, with its two successive pairs, thus orienting towards the sequential progressivity of the activity. Indeed, it rarely seems to be the case that the responder explicitly anticipates what is going to be asked next (by saying for instance 'Why? What are you going to do?'), i.e., s/he does not skip over the response to the preliminary question (cf. [Levinson, 2013](#)).

With respect to preference organisation, invitations are considered clear cases in which the two alternative responses are not equivalent, acceptance being preferred over refusal ([Levinson, 1983](#); [Schegloff, 2007](#)). Preference organisation is the basis of [Davidson's studies \(1984, 1990\)](#), according to which the sequence is expanded in order to pursue a preferred response. [Pomerantz and Heritage \(2013\)](#) show another way of dealing with the onset of a disagreement after an invitation, with cases in which the inviter offers a reason for a possible upcoming rejection. This puts the invitee "in position to confirm the reason for rejecting the invitation rather than explicitly reject the invitation" (2013:216).

More recently, studies on action formation investigate a set of initiating social actions (offers, requests, suggestions, proposals), and the way in which they are implemented and understood by the co-participants in interaction ('action ascription', [Levinson, 2013](#)). [Couper-Kuhlen \(2014\)](#) distinguishes over these actions, showing that participants use different formats in their turn constructions. Her investigation is based on the questions "who will carry out the future action?" and "who will benefit from it?". They lead her to identify specific linguistic forms for these different actions, and to show the distinctive cues that enable participants to distinguish between them and thereby limit the risks of misunderstandings in their interpretation. Of specific interest for us are two actions, *offer* and *proposal*, which she distinguishes according to the agent of the future action and its beneficiary. On this basis, proposals show shared costs and benefits, whereas offers "are undertaken unilaterally with costs accruing to the action initiator and benefits accruing to the recipient" ([Couper-Kuhlen, 2014:628](#)). Starting from this analysis, and elaborating on the very notion of 'benefits', [Clayman and Heritage \(2014\)](#) propose to distinguish between the 'benefactive stance' (the future action as it is displayed through linguistic cues in the speaker's talk, cf. [Couper-Kuhlen, 2014](#)) and the 'benefactive status' defined as:

a complex of underlying conditions for the action, including such matters as whether a service will be rendered that is of actual benefit to its recipient, whether the performer of the service is able and willing to perform it, whether the cost to the performer is high or low, and whether the service is to be performed immediately (a 'proximal' service) or at some later time (a 'distal' service) (2014:58).

1.2. Studies on invitations in French

Very few papers have studied invitations in French. With the exception of [Barraja-Rohan \(1994\)](#), which strictly focuses on this social action (cf. section 1.1), other studies do not make a clear distinction between offers and invitations. [Conein's paper \(1986\)](#) deals with the construction of adjacency pairs and types of responses to a first action, focusing on invitations

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