



Turn formats for other-initiated repair and their relation to trouble sources: Some observations from Japanese and Korean conversations

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Abstract

Intended as a contribution to our understanding of the principles underlying the selection of turn formats used for other-initiated repair (OIR), this study explores the relationship between OIR turn formats involving the “what” token in Japanese and Korean and the types of trouble addressed by them. We focus in particular on the differentiation between “open class repair initiators” (Drew, 1997) and OIR that targets a specific referential element in the trouble-source turn. We show that, while prosody plays an important role in distinguishing the two in Korean, it does not in Japanese. Instead, Japanese speakers rely on grammatical resources, in particular postpositional particles, to accomplish the differentiation. We also discuss one type of OIR turn format in Japanese, *nani ga* (‘what’ followed by the nominative particle *ga*), whose workings deviate from those of all the other OIR turn formats consisting of “what” followed by a postpositional particle. We suggest that *nani ga* has undergone a process of pragmatic specialization and that, as a result, it is treated by speakers as an unanalyzed chunk used for specific pragmatic purposes.

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1. Introduction

When speakers encounter trouble in hearing or understanding an utterance produced by a prior speaker, they have recourse to practices of other-initiated repair (OIR), an organized set of techniques that can be used to address and potentially resolve such problems (Schegloff et al., 1977). Languages provide speakers with resources to design their utterances for OIR in a range of different ways so as to indicate what aspect of the prior talk has caused them a problem. The complex relationship between turn design used for OIR and the type of trouble being addressed with it has received sustained interest in conversation-analytic research on other-initiated repair across languages (Schegloff et al., 1977; Selting, 1988, 1996; Egbert, 1996, 2007; Drew, 1997; Schegloff, 1997; Kim, 1993, 1999; Robinson, 2006, 2013; Wu, 2006, 2009; Svennevig, 2008; Sidnell, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010; Egbert et al., 2009; Robinson and Kevoe-Feldman, 2010; Suzuki, 2010; Benjamin, 2012; Hayashi and Hayano, 2013). This body of research has demonstrated that turn design for OIR “harnesses the available grammatical resources of a particular language” (Sidnell, 2008:498) and can thus vary across different languages. It has also shown that, in addition to grammar, prosodic resources play a significant role in designing OIR turns across languages.

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The present study pursues this line of inquiry into the relationship between OIR turn design and the type of trouble addressed with it. As Schegloff et al. (1977:377) noted, OIR turns are primarily formatted as “techniques for locating the trouble source” in a prior speaker’s talk. One important question to investigate, then, is how, within a given language as well as across languages, speakers utilize grammatical, prosodic, and other resources to format OIR turns so that they are recognizable by recipients as locating particular trouble sources. In this study, we focus on OIR turns involving words for “what” in Japanese (*nani*) and Korean (*mwe*) and explore what turn-formatting practices are employed by speakers of these languages so as to distinguish different types of trouble sources they target. More specifically, we examine OIR turns that consist of (i) a stand-alone token of *nani/mwe* (e.g., *nani?* and *mwe?*) and (ii) *nani/mwe* followed by a postpositional particle (e.g., *nani ga?* and *mwe-ka?*, where *ga* and *ka* are postpositional nominative particles in Japanese and Korean, respectively).

A point of departure for our exploration is a study by Egbert et al. (2009), who examined OIR turns consisting of *what* in English and *was* and *was denn* (‘what’) in German. Of particular relevance to our study is their discussion of different prosodic manifestations of stand-alone *what* in English and stand-alone *was* (and *was denn*) in German used as repair initiators. According to their study, when a stand-alone *what* or *was* is produced with rising intonation, it is regularly treated by its recipient as an “open-class repair initiator” (Drew, 1997), which only indicates that the speaker has had some kind of trouble with the prior turn, without specifying the nature of the trouble. The recipient of a rising-intoned *what/was* commonly treats it as targeting the whole of the prior turn as the trouble source. Since the repair initiator itself does not specify the nature of the trouble, it is left to the speaker of the trouble-source turn to decide how to modify his/her previous utterance so that it would be more understandable or more acceptable for the recipient. This is exemplified in (1) and (2). (Note: Due to space constraints we provide only examples in English here.)

(1) [Egbert et al., 2009:107]¹

1 M: He’s just impo:ssible.
 2 a-> J: Did juh tell ‘im that?
 3 (0.4)
 4 b-> M: **Wha:t?**
 5 c-> J: D’=juh tell ‘im that?
 6 (1.4)
 7 M: No:

(2) [Schegloff, 2004:97]

1 a-> A: Do you have some church affiliation, now?
 2 b-> B: **What?**
 3 c-> A: Do you belong to a church now?
 4 B: No I went to church I haven’t been to church for a long
 5 time...

In (1), J responds to M’s rising-intoned *Wha:t?* with a verbatim repeat of the trouble-source turn (line 5), thereby treating M’s repair initiation as an indication of a hearing problem. In (2), A responds to B’s rising-intoned *What?* with a replacement of a potentially “specialized” formulation (line 1) with one designed to be more accessible (line 3). A thus treats B’s repair initiation as an indication of some kind of understanding problem. What is crucial in these two cases is that the repair initiators are “unfocused.” They only indicate that the prior turn was somehow problematic and it is up to the recipient to decide where the problem lies and how to address it. Typically, the recipients rework (e.g., repeat, reformulate, etc.) the *whole* of the prior turn, as seen in (1) and (2).

On the other hand, when *what* or *was* is produced with falling intonation, it is regularly understood as “focused.” That is, such a repair initiation is regarded as targeting a particular component of the preceding turn, a referential expression, specifically, as the trouble source. Thus, the recipient of a falling-intoned *what* or *was* responds to it with a clarification or elaboration of the targeted referential expression, thereby treating the trouble source as having been “underspecified” for the repair-initiating party. This is exemplified in (3). Prior to this excerpt, Shane had mentioned the need for contact lens cleanser, but the focus of the talk had shifted to something else.

¹ In the fragments cited in this article, arrows marked with “a,” “b,” and “c” are used to indicate the trouble-source turn, the repair initiator in question, and the repair done by the trouble-source speaker, respectively.

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