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Computer Mediated Conversation for Mutual Learning: Acknowledgement and Agreement/Assessment Signals in Italian as L2

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Abstract. The current study aims to investigate form, composition, distribution of acknowledgement and agreement/assessment signals in upper intermediate/advanced Italian as L2 speakers. Data are video-transcribed computer mediated conversations for mutual language learning (Teletandem) during which two female volunteer university students (L1: English and German) talk with a native speaker (NS) female interlocutor (L1: Italian) for developing L2 language proficiency. For each pair, data have been collected during two different meetings: meeting 1 comprises free discussion for mutual introductions; meeting 2 is a discussion on a topic chosen by the Italian non-native speaker. The analysis shows that L2 subjects employ a great variety of (1) acknowledgement and agreement listener responses, (2) both lexical and non-lexical units whose functions, positions and frequency are affected by the level of involvement in the discourse, and (3) acquaintance of the two speakers and by the type of task. Particularly in the second meeting, when a topic is discussed, non-native speakers (NNSs) use more lexical units than in the first meeting, thus highlighting the relevance of situational variables over the discourse structure.

Keywords: teletandem, discourse markers, agreement signals, acknowledgment signals, listener responses.

1. Introduction

The current study focuses on the use of two types of listener responses (LR) in L2: acknowledgement particles, which are used to show either attention or discourse

perception (e.g., Eng: *hm, huh*; in Italian: *sì, mhm*; Yngve, 1970) and reactive expressions (Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki, & Tao, 1996), named as well agreement/ assessment signals (e.g., Eng.: *oh really/really*, It.: *bene, ok*) by which the listener wants to align to what has been previously said, also showing surprise (e.g., Eng.: *yeah, wow, gosh*). Listener responses are discourse markers (DM) produced by the listener in order to mark transition points, link two discourse units, and give relevance to different discourse levels (e.g., interpersonal, cognitive; Bazzanella et al., 2007a, 2007b; Bazzanella & Borreguero Zuloaga, 2011; Louwerse & Mitchell, 2003). DM, hence LR, are characterized by:

- Syntactic independence, i.e., if they are erased the sentence structure does not change;
- Multifunctionality both at paradigmatic (i.e., the same token can have different functions in different contexts, in relation to the linguistic co-text in which it occurs) and at syntagmatic levels (i.e., it is not always easy to assign to a unit just one function among the following: metatextual, interactional and cognitive);
- Possibility to combine in different ways (e.g., It: *ah sì bene allora*).

Teletandem conversations are a form of computer mediated "conversation for learning" (Kasper, 2004), during which speakers talk via chat and videocalls having a "dual-focus" in mind (Apfelbaum, 1993; Bange, 1992): the language used for communication (e.g., the discourse includes turns for recast, for meaning negotiation) and the topics under discussion (e.g., there are appraisal/agreement sequences). During Teletandem conversations a communication strategy is code-switching which is employed for facilitating content exchange and for being more effective in communication (Anderson & Banelli, 2005; Leone, 2009).

2. Acknowledgement/reception and agreement/assessment signals in L2

Studies on different L1 speakers' discourse have shed light on how syntactic, prosodic and pragmatic resources are used to negotiate social practices (Couper-Kuhlen & Ford, 2004; Schegloff, 2007) and speech acts. Less extensive and systematic work has been dedicated to how L2 speakers employ DM to organize and expand their turn.

Concerning listener responses, several studies (Xudong, 2008) have investigated criteria for identifying and classifying DM: for instance, the possibility of "claiming or not claiming the floor", their acoustic, lexical and non-lexical form and the sequential context of occurrence (Cerrato, 2007).

Research shows that across languages these conversational strategies are used differently: Japanese NSs use backchannels (BC), for example, more frequently than English NSs, whereas the latter use them more frequently than Mandarin NSs. Chinese speakers rarely use minimal responses during conversation with German NSs (Xudong, 2008). Conversely, German speakers use BC frequently during conversation with Chinese interlocutors.

Differences among speakers have been related to where listener responses are located. Researchers refer to the 'Transitional Relevance Places' (TRP, Sacks, Schlegoff, & Jefferson, 1974) and distinguish among points of transition from one speaker to another or during another's speaker turn (Xudong, 2008).

The analysis of functions, type and position of different DM in Swedish learners of Italian as a foreign language (Bardel, 2004) have shown that most frequent non-lexical DM (e.g., *eh, hm, mhm*) are produced either at the beginning of the turn or for keeping the turn, thus showing difficulties in discourse planning. Furthermore, non-lexical units are employed to request clarification and to show attention. Form, frequency and function of DM have been investigated in Croatian L1 Italian learners (Nigoević & Sučić, 2011). The research, based on data collected during interviews, shows that advanced learners of Italian as L2 use different DM such as fillers, mitigating devices, agreement/assessment and turn taking signals. Non-lexical DM are more frequent in less advanced interlanguage, whereas lexical forms appear in advanced L2 speakers.

3. Research questions

The study aims to highlight the use of acknowledgement and agreement/assessment signals (e.g., Xu, 2009), in upper intermediate/advanced Italian as L2 speakers, particularly:

- Form and composition of the short utterance, i.e., is it a lexical or a non-lexical unit? Does the unit appear in discourse together with other turn components? (Schegloff, 2007);
- Distribution and function in the conversational sequence, e.g., are signals employed for acknowledgement or for assessment? Do they overlap primary speakers' turns? Do they occur at or near transition space and determine movements to new positions?

4. Data

Subjects were 2 female volunteer university students forming 2 Teletandem pairs who talked via computers using instant messaging and VoIP software (i.e., Skype). Each pair was composed of one Italian NS (ITL1) and one English NS (ENGL1) (PAIR1) and one German NS (GERL1) (PAIR2). Their language proficiency in L2 ranged from upper intermediate to advanced.

Data are based on 3 hours conversation (1 hour and 30 minutes for each pair). The first 30 minutes are part of a 1 hour session during which participants talked fifty-fifty in their L1 and L2 for knowing each other (M1). The subsequent 1 hour conversation was recorded after a few days; ENGL1 and GERL1 chose the conversation topic (M2).

5. Data analysis and discussion

Data analysis highlighted forms that satisfied the functions of acknowledgment and assessment.

PAIR1M1, ENGL1 (Table 1) employs a variety of LR for acknowledgement/ reception and agreement/assessment signals that are often more than one single unit. Most of the agreement signals are lexical forms like *sì, bene, esatto*, which are also used as a acknowledgement/reception function. For this latter function the mentioned lexical forms combine with *bene, benissimo* and non-lexical forms such as *ah*.

In PAIR1M2, the level of involvement in topic discussion and task characteristics such as topic choice seem to affect the frequency and the overlapping position of listener responses. A greater variation of lexical (*sì ho capito, ah sì eh allora, sì bene, sicuro sì, vero*) and non-lexical forms (e.g., *ahh, oooh, wow, a:h, ah ah*) is also an interesting interactional strategy. *Sì* seems to carry a greater variety of pragmatic meaning than other forms, i.e., it also signals that the speaker wants to go on talking or that she has nothing more to add to the topic.

Table 1. Acknowledgement and agreement/assessment signals in Italian as L2 (B2; C1) in a corpus of Teletandem conversations.

	Acknowledgement signals	Agreement/Assessment signals
PAIR1ENGL1- M1	*sì, molto bene, sì è chiaro, benissimo, ah bene, ah bene sì + laugh*	*mm, sì, mm bene, sì esatto, sì sì sì, sì sì no, no sì no,*
PAIR1ENGL1- M2	*sì allora e:hm yeah, sì ma, sì allora, ah ok, sì esatto, [sì ho capito], [sì chiaro], ah sì eh allora, ah ah sì, ah sì ahh bene*	*sì, sì sì, esatto esatto, ah è molto bene sì, sì chiaro, [sì] ah sì + laugh, ah sì sì molto be[ne], sì a:h, ahh vero wow, oooh, sicuro sì a:h*
PAIR2GER1- M1	*ahah, ah, ehm, sì, ah ok, sì ah ja, ok*	*sì + laugh* *ah ok sì* + repetition *ah sì ah ja sarebbe bello* +laugh *uhm uhm bello,*
PAIRGERL1- M2	*ah, sì, uhuh sì, ok sì, sì sì, sì* + concept/form repetition, form repetition + *ja, (ah) ja*+ form repetition	*è vero, sì certo, uh sì, sì ok,* (eeeh) *sì* + repetition, *ah ok sì* +repetition

In PAIR2M1 (Table 1) between the two types of LR under discussion the majority are acknowledgement signals in the form of non-lexical units.

In PAIR2M2 the number of acknowledgements and assessments is more balanced. As for PAIR1ENGL1M1 *sì* is a largely used lexical signal for acknowledgement and assessment. When it occurs in sequences of focus on form (e.g., a recast by the NS), it seems to have the function of reception signal (not always followed by a repetition), conversely in sequences of focus on meaning, it has the function of agreement. But formally in both contexts, it combines with other discourse parts in the same way (i.e., *sì* + content/repetition).

Both L2 speakers switch code also when they use DM, combining lexical units in L1 and in L2 during their L2 talk (e.g., *ah sì ah ja*).

In some sequences the functions of acknowledgement and assessment overlap. Listener responses rarely overlap primary speakers' turn; particularly, they occur at transition space and in some sequences they open a new turn, thus determining movements in the position from listener to speaker.

6. Concluding remarks

The analysis shows that even learners with intermediate competence in L2 employ a great variety of acknowledgement and agreement LR, both lexical and non-lexical whose functions, position and frequency are affected by the level of involvement/ acquaintance of the two speakers and by the type of task. Therefore:

- It is advisable to plan Teletandem sessions including different typology of tasks since each of them presents various discourse structures at interactional and transactional levels (see also Leone, forthcoming);
- Research on interlanguage pragmatics and on the use of DM cannot be based on one typology of discourse (e.g., interview);
- Pragmatic competence (particularly the use of DM) should be evaluated considering more than one typology of conversation.

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