Starting Skype conversations: Pragmatic features and strategies in an English as a Lingua Franca context

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1. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

- Seidlhofer (2003): Preferred option for cross-cultural communication
- “Non-standard” (or “non-native-like”) features, e.g. in pragmatics, grammar or code-switching (cf. Seidlhofer 2003; Crystal 2003)
- ELF and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) interconnected
  - Accommodation to international context
  - Influence of native language, occurrence of mistakes and errors
Communication setting

- Lack of spoken academic corpora in an informal setting
- CASE: Informal, oral, synchronous, dialogic CMC setting
- Similarities to telephone conversations (Schegloff 1986, 2004, Couper-Kuhlen 2001)
Corpus of Academic Spoken English
compiled at Saarland University (2013/14, Diemer et al. forthcoming)

- 200 informal Skype conversations (150+ hours) between German, Bulgarian, Italian and Spanish EFL speakers; >50% video
- 141 participants, 104 female, 37 male
- 7-12 topics, academic context, 30-60 min.
- Subcorpus for pragmatic analysis from CASE Sofia-Saarbrücken
  - 28 conversations (18 audio, 10 video)
  - Total word count: 261,072
  - 56 speakers
  - Total length: 30:48h
  - Average length of conversations: 66min.
3. Pragmatic features and strategies

3.1. Conversation starts

- Opening sequence
- Ensuing introduction of first topic

{Skype dialling sound}

SF03: hello?
SB04: hello;
SF03: hi Lisa,
SB04: hi;
SF03: I'm Marina,
       nice to meet you,
SB04: I'm Lisa,
       nice to meet you too,
       how are you doing,
SF03: well good,
       a bit late but good,
       [a]nd uh you?
SB04: [(((laugh)))]
       yeah I'm pretty good,
       thanks.
SF03: good so that wasn't that scary, [((laugh))]
SB04: no no it's alright.
SF03: oh uhm,
       I haven't started recording yet,

(01SB03SF03)
Conversation starts: Openings

- Openings in CASE mostly conform to Schegloff’s (1968) classification of opening sequences for telephone conversations
- Deviations specific to particular setting of CASE conversations and international CMC environment: Less strictly structured, not all sequences occur in every opening (cf. Brunner, forthcoming)
- Identified sequences
  - Contact initiation (dialling tone)
  - Greetings (Hi – Hi + optional: nice-to-meet-you)
  - Identification
  - Reassurance of understanding (sometimes more than once)
  - Exchange of ‘how-are-you’
  - Discussion of technical issues (sometimes several times)
Conversation starts: Greeting + nice-to-meet you

Indicative of particular set-up

- Greetings mostly follow telephone conversation conventions
- Nice-to-meet-you turns
  - Often occur in video (and audio) conversations
  - Possibly specific to Skype conversations in CASE
  - Potential implications
    - Unusual set-up: prearranged conversation with a stranger
    - Participants might transfer learnt, internalized face-to-face protocol to this context
Conversation starts: Identification sequence

Indicative of particular set-up

- First contact via e-mail
- Identification sequence seems unnecessary during talks
- Some conversations still include identification sequence
- Participants seem to be aware of redundancy
  - One-sided identifications
  - Direct initial addresses by name
  - Explicit comments

{Skype dialing sound}
SF03: hello?
SB04: hello:
SF03: hi Lisa,
SB04: hi;
SF03: I'm Marina, nice to meet you,
SB04: I'm Lisa, nice to meet you too,
Conversation starts: Reassurance and technical issues

Indicative of particular medium

- Reassurance of mutual availability and understanding
- Discussion of technical issues: Skype, internet connection, video component, recording program, recording process (cf. Brunner, forthcoming)
Analysis of first topics after openings
Mostly follow Geluykens’ (1993) three steps of topic introduction:
- Introduction
- Acknowledgement
- Establishment

SF01: mhm,
SB01: ["yeah of course"]["<okay so u:h>", maybe we should start with this topic.]
SF01: [<why> do we:] .. study English,
SB01: yeah uhm,
SF01: .. I'm studying English because of .. uhm,
First topic introductions: Signaling a new topic

- Pauses (.., ...)
- Hesitation markers (uh, uhm, ...)
- Discourse markers (well, so, ...)
- Sometimes laughter ((laughs))
- Frequently combinations of the above

SF01:  

mhm,  
.. <okay so u:h>,  
maybe we should start  
with this topic,
Three topic types can be identified, sometimes as hybrid forms:

- Assigned topic
- Random (‘small talk’) topic
- Task-oriented topic


Random/task-oriented topics frequently occur in first position.

Assigned topic later referred to as “the topic”.

Due to predeterminedness of topics an introduction of reason for the call becomes unnecessary in first position — focus on task and getting to know each other.
3.2. Rapport management

- Key issue in first contact situations between non-native speakers of English (various ways of creating rapport in different language environments)
  - Rapport management
    - “Harmony between people” (Spencer-Oatey 2000: 16)
    - Positive effect of interaction; bonding (Provine 2000)
    - Secondary effect: Tension release and signalling relief (Gregory 1924, Grotjahn 1957)
  - General features (Spencer-Oatey 2002, 2005)
    - Politeness
    - Laughter
  - In a CMC situation
    - Increased situational delicacy
    - Novelty
Rapport management: Laughter in delicate situations

Laughter as a method for successful rapport management

- Situational incongruity not worthy of further serious consideration (cf. Morreall 1983, Chafe 2007) → defusing potentially delicate situations, which can be abnormal or undesirable (Chafe 2007)
- Created through circumstance or by a speaker’s utterance
- Feeling of non-seriousness (non-serious ≠ humorous)

SB01: I can hear you,

SF01: o:h great,

... at last._((thh))

SB01: yeah ((laughing)) that's true, (01SB01SF01)
3.3. CMC features in Skype conversations

Lags and interferences

SF13: uh, .. so where are you located in a dorm or something or,
SB14: .. in a what i-?
SF13: i- in a DORM?
SB14: no [no I actually live]-
SF13: [like a student dorm]?
SB14: I- I've got my own flat.

... uhm,
[so uhm],
SF13: [oh:],

(02SB14SF13)
3.4. ELF features: Deviations from the standard

- Pragmatic issues: e.g. ‘How-are-you’ sequence
  - Lack of reciprocity
  - Misinterpretation of how-are-you as topic introduction
- Code-switching
- Grammatical errors, e.g.
  - Plural constructions
  - Articles
  - Prepositions
  - Tag questions

SF03: okay I had a week to do this and now is the time-okay there are some stuff lying around here, but I think this is good °okay°.
4. Conclusion

- Medium and setup influence conversation organisation and topic choice, and interfere with the conversational flow.
- Reason-for-the-call turn is often postponed due to predeterminedness of topic.
- Laughter is a central strategy to create rapport in increasingly delicate and novel CMC situations.
- ELF context prompts code-switching, pragmatic and grammatical errors.
5. Outlook

- Extension of pragmatic annotation
- Talks between native and non-native speakers
- English as a Lingua Franca between language learners
- Lexical innovation
- Non-verbal behaviour
Thank you!
Diemer, Stefan; Marie-Louise Brunner; and Selina Schmidt. forthcoming. Ja, also, can you see me now?: Designing and compiling a corpus of computer-mediated international academic English. English corpus linguistics on the move: Applications and implications. Proceedings of the 34th ICAME conference 2013, Santiago de Compostela.


References

Conversation starts: How-are-you sequence

Indicative of EFL background

- Often native-like
- Occasional pragmatic errors
  - Lack of reciprocity
  - Misinterpretation of how-are-you as topic introduction

SB07: ((thh)) it’s all right.. great,

.. how are you.

SF15: well uh.. good considering it’s  uh nine o’clock in the evening,
... well .. not nine o’clock,
.. about .. ten o’clock actually,
... and I’ve actually done half of my work,
.. for tonight so,
.. I’m pretty pleased with myself (°I think°),

SB07: oh okay.. so you’re,
... do you have to do a lot of work in this evening,
Topic introductions: Topic types

**Assigned topic**

SF01: mhm, .. <okay so u:h>, maybe we should start with this topic, [why do we], study English,

SB01: ["yeah of course"],

SB01: yeah uhm.. I'm studying English because of.. uh.

(01SB01SF01)

**Random topic**

SF13: uh, .. so where are you located in a dorm or something or,

SB14: .. in a what i-? €€€

SF13: i- in a DORM?

SB14: no [no I actually live]-

SF13: [like a student dorm]?

SB14: I- I've got my own flat.

(02SB14SF13)

**Task-oriented topic**

SB24: ((laughs))

SF02: ... uhm: .. have you had any conversations, .. [until now,]

SB24: [uhm,] yeah I've actually had two. uhm .. one .. with .. uh Hristina,

<and one with> uh, .. Dana?

(08SB24SF02)
Hybrid topic: task-oriented and random

SF06:  oh .. uhm, 
... I'm just fine, 
... I'm ready .. to talk to you and, 
... uh .. then uh, 
... I have to start 
studying, 
... uh I have a lot to do, 
((laughs)) [for].. the week. 

(05SB18SF06)