Explicitation sequences in conversation: some considerations on formulations, candidate inferences and grounding

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This conversation analysis study focuses on sequences where speakers make a piece of information explicit (explicitation sequences). Among others, formulations (Heritage & Watson 1979) and candidate inferences (turns submitting an inference and requiring a confirmation in a second position) can initiate an explicitation. Based on a short analysis of conversational data in French this study shows that, despite their similarities, formulations and candidate inferences have different impacts on the grounding processes in conversation (Clark & Brennan 1991). More generally, this paper is concerned with the questions of inference and information in the co-construction of meaning in interaction.

1.   Introduction

As Garfinkel (1967) pointed out, when we talk, we inevitably convey an infinite quantity of information and background knowledge that we supposedly share with our interlocutor. As a result of this process, most of what we refer to and communicate to others is left unsaid. That is, we inevitably infer information as the conversation goes on.

This study raises precisely the question of inferential processes in ordinary conversation. More specifically, it deals with explicitation sequences where participants articulate a content, which has been left unsaid or indirectly conveyed in a prior turn. By providing an analysis of a corpus of spoken French data of conversations among friends, this paper aims to show how an account of information processing contributes to describing the emergence of meaning in ordinary conversation. Two particular conversational practices are at stake here: formulations and *candidate inferences* (see section 3).

2.   Making a content explicit in conversation

As participants talk, they sometimes encounter moments in their interaction when a particular bit of information needs to be articulated in an explicit way. Participants are able to infer that bit of information based on what has already been conveyed in prior talk. In some cases, they formulate that inference. The conversational sequence initiated by such a proposal of inference is what I call an explicitation sequence (Chernyshova 2017, ongoing).

In order to illustrate this kind of phenomenon, let us first consider excerpt (1). Here, JUD and PAT meet for a drink. PAT talks about a Halloween party:

(1) Glasgow [00:01:52-00:02:01][1]

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    01      PAT    et euh voilà bon on a pas tenu longtemps en fait
                   and uh that's it well we didn't last for long really
    02             parce qu'on a commencé assez tôt
                   because we started quite early
    03             (0.5)
    04      PAT    [et euh:  ]
                    and uh
    05      JUD    [ah ouais/]
                    oh yeah
    06      PAT    ouais\ (0.4) du coup dimanche c'était
                   yeah             so Sunday   it was
    07             un peu dur en plus de tout nettoyer mais .h
                   a bit hard and we had to clean everything up but
    08   →  JUD    [ah dans ton appart] vous avez fait ça/
                   oh in your apartment you did that
    09      PAT    [(inaud.)          ]
    10   →  PAT    non chez nina/
                   no at Nina's
```

In line 8 JUD produces a question containing a candidate answer (Pomerantz 1988). The candidate answer ("in your apartment") displays an inference JUD made concerning the location of the Halloween party, information that has been left unmentioned up to this point. This turn is followed by a negative response bringing new elements about the issue (line 10).

This sequence is a repair-like sequence: JUD displays that some information is 'missing' in order to interpret correctly what PAT is telling her about the party. JUD's turn submits a particular understanding and projects, in a subsequent position, a confirmation that the inferred information is correct (*if* PAT had to clean after the party, *then* the party must have taken place at PAT's apartment).

In conversation analysis literature, similar configurations have been described by Bolden (2010), who defines the action of 'articulating the unsaid'. Bolden gives four main features of this particular action:

> first, by 'articulating the unsaid', the speaker performs a repair operation in the form of a *request for confirmation* ; second, what is being offered for confirmation is a 'missing' or *unarticulated* element of the addressee's preceding talk, which is typically an *extended informing* of some sort (i.e. a turn consisting of more than one turn constructional unit that informs the addressee of something, […]); third, the offered formulation is (claimably) *inferable* from the addressee's talk; fourth, the formulation is (claimably) *done on the addressee's behalf*, extending the addressee's course of action.
> Bolden (2010: 7).

Explicitation sequences fall into this particular action category and can be sequentially defined as follows: such sequences are initiated by a turn displaying an inference performed by the speaker, which is followed by a

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[1]   This excerpt, like others presented here, is extracted from the spoken French database CLAPI (http://clapi.ish-lyon.cnrs.fr).

(dis)confirmation of the inference (Chernyshova, ongoing). The present study focuses on the information processing aspect of explicitation sequences and on the cues of the inferences made by the participants.

3.   Processing information in conversation

Inference is traditionally defined as the process (or the result of the process) of reaching a conclusion starting from a premise. Hence, understanding how inference works in conversation implies understanding how participants select information from what is available in the conversation, or beyond it, in order to build a particular interpretation of what has been said. More largely, this issue relates to the issue of the co-construction of mutual understanding in interaction.

The model we call on here is that of Clark and Brennan (1991), according to which, in order to reach mutual understanding in conversation, speakers rely on a *common ground* : "that is, mutual knowledge, mutual beliefs, and mutual assumptions" (1991: 222). The constant 'updating' of the common ground is accomplished through the process of *grounding* in conversation (Clark and Brennan 1991). In other words, grounding is the process through which participants progressively establish what has been understood from prior talk and make those elements part of their shared knowledge.

Grounding implies for participants to 'operate' on information. Participants can in fact not only 'deliver' and 'receive' information while talking, but also 'select' information from previous talk. As a matter of fact, since each turn in conversation is linked to what has previously occurred, participants 'update' their common ground by selecting and activating informational elements already mentioned in previous talk. Furthermore, they can mobilize informational elements that are part of their common ground beyond the conversation. In the process of 'putting all the pieces together', participants sometimes need to infer information: thus, as they respond to previous talk, they somehow display the conducted inference. In this perspective, inference appears as a process of *transforming* given information (*i.e.* available in the common ground).[2]

4.   Informational aspects of formulations and candidate inferences

In this section I propose to consider formulations and candidate inferences, which are two particular practices involved in explicitation sequences, and show their impact on the grounding processes in conversation.

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[2]   The model presented here is part of an ongoing research and aims to describe 'information management' in conversation (Chernyshova, ongoing).

4.1   Some definitions

When initiating an explicitation sequence, participants submit a particular inference they were able to make based on previous talk. Two conversational practices seem to be implied in the articulation of an inference: formulations and candidate inferences.

First described by Garfinkel and Sacks, formulation is a conversational practice where participants "describe [the] conversation, [...] explain it, or characterize, or explicate, or translate, or summarize, or furnish the gist of it" (1970: 350). Further studies on formulations have restricted this practice to responsive actions that require a confirmation (Heritage and Watson 1979) and consider formulations as semantic transformations of what has been said (Deppermann 2011). In a nutshell, formulations are produced by the recipient and 'transform' previous talk by displaying a particular understanding of it.

Similarly, practices like candidate understadings (Heritage 1984; Antaki 2012) and candidate answers (Pomerantz 1988) can also be involved in displaying an inference. We can define a category grouping these cases of candidate understandings and candidate answers: *candidate inferences*. Candidate inferences are turns submitting an inference made by the speaker and calling for a (dis)confirmation of the inferred information (Chernyshova 2016, ongoing).

Formulations and candidate inferences seem quite alike. Indeed, just like formulations, candidate inferences are produced by the recipient as a responsive action to what has previously occurred in conversation. They both call for confirmation and display a particular inference conducted by the speaker. In what follows, I will show how formulations and candidate inferences differ from the point of view of their impact on the informational aspect of conversation. I present the analysis of two cases extracted from a collection of explicitation sequences in a corpus of conversations among friends in French.

4.2   Formulation: 'recycling' information

To begin, let us consider two examples of formulations. In the following excerpt, ELI, BEA and MAR are gathered at ELI's apartment for a drink. In this excerpt, ELI mentions some issues she has with the heating system.

(2) Kiwi [00:01:52-00:02:01]

```
    01     ELI    du coup/ euh\ j` suis obligée de l` mettre à fond
                  and so   uh   I  have to      turn it all the way up
    02            autrement elle marche pas donc/ euh\
                  otherwise it doesn't work so     uh
    03            c'est [un peu  ] la loose/ quoi\
                  it's   a bit of a bummer
    04     BEA        [ah mince]
                       oh man
    05  →  BEA    c'est soit à fond soit zéro\
```

```
                  it's either all the way up or completely off
    06      MAR   moi [c'est] pareil chez moi
                  it's the same at my place
    07   →  ELI      [ouais]
                       yeah
    08            (0.4)
    09   →  BEA   ((à MAR)) du coup tu dois l` mett` [à fond ]
                  ((to MAR)) so you have to turn it up all the way
    10      ELI                                     [ah mais]
                                                     well yeah
    11            du [coup ] c'est trop chiant quoi
                  so it really sucks
    12   →  MAR      [ouais]
                       yeah
```

In her first turn, ELI delivers new information concerning the heating system at her apartment (line 1), that she expands as the turn continues (lines 2 and 3). BEA responds by a change-of-state token (Heritage 1984) showing her affiliation with ELI (line 4): this turn 'registers' the information delivered by ELI. In her subsequent turn, BEA continues by producing a formulation (line 5): she re-states what ELI has just said, thus displaying her understanding of it. In fact, BEA's turn shows that she made the following inference: *if* ELI has to put the heater all the way up *and if* otherwise it doesn't work, *then* there is no intermediary position for the heater, and *so* "it's either all the way up or completely off". Even if this inference may appear quite trivial, BEA's formulation is followed by a confirmation (line 7), which shows that her turn in line 5 has been treated as projecting a responsive action. ELI's confirmation overlaps a turn produced by MAR stating that her heater works the same way (line 6). After a short silence (line 8), BEA produces a new formulation (line 9) initiated by *du coup*, indicating a relation of consequence with previous talk (Bruxelles *et al*. 2014). In this turn, BEA delivers, once again, inferred information: *if* MAR's heater works the same way as ELI's, *then* in order to make it work correctly MAR also has to turn it all the way up. This new formulation is also followed by a confirmation (line 11).

The two explicitation sequences are here initiated by formulations which are followed by a confirmation. Hence, they are treated as requesting a confirmation of a particular understanding and a validation of a particular inference. Like other formulations in the corpus, they display an inference without delivering new informational elements but rather 'recycle' information that is already in the common ground. Furthermore, these formulations fall within sequences of small talk (Coupland 2003), which makes their informational contribution to the co-construction of shared knowledge less crucial than that of candidate inferences, as we are about to see.

4.3   Candidate inferences: introducing new informational elements

In the following excerpt, the configuration is different. Here, JUL receives a couple ANN and ROM at her place for a drink. The three friends are talking about grocery stores and ANN says that there are none in the countryside where she lives.

(3) Pois [00:12:33-00:12:47]

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    01      ANN    mais même euh la premiè:-  le premier supermarché
                   and even uh the first the first supermarket
    02             j` pense il est à:: (0.8) dix minutes en voiture/
                   I think   is at            a ten minute drive
    03      ROM    [hm]
    04      JUL    [ah] °ouais::°
                   oh yeah
    05      ANN    ouais
                   yeah
    06             (0.4)
    07   →  JUL    en fait tu peux rien faire sans (.) sans caisse/
                   actually you can't do a thing without without a ride
    08             quoi `fin
                   then I mean
    09   →  ANN    ben ouais\  [ah c'est clair  ouais .H:          ]
                   well yeah    oh that's for sure yeah
    10      ROM                [ouais ouais ah ouais °c'est clair°]
                                yeah yeah   oh yeah that's for sure
    11      ANN    moi si j'ai pas ma voiture mais j` peux pas aller
                   if I don't have my car      well I can't go
    12             travailler j` peux rien faire\
                   to work   I can't do anything
```

After ANN mentions that the first supermarket is quite far away (lines 1-2), JUL first 'registers' this information by acknowledging it (line 4) and then offers a candidate inference (line 7) initiated by the marker *en fait* that expresses here a connection with previous talk (just like *du coup* in the previous excerpt). By doing so, JUL displays the following inference: *if* there are no grocery stores where ANN lives *and if* the closest supermarket is at a ten minute drive, *then* ANN has to take her car every time she needs to go somewhere. JUL's turn brings new elements into the conversation: the issue is now not only the lack of accessibility to supermarkets, but also to other places near ANN's. Finally, ANN marks this understanding as being adequate to what she just said and thus confirms the candidate inference (line 9). She then expands the topic in her following turn (line 11-12).

Similarly to the previous excerpt, in this second excerpt the participants are making a piece of information explicit, they 'articulate the unsaid'. However, a new element is here added to the shared knowledge. This is indeed the case for all instances of candidate inferences in the corpus. Moreover, candidate inferences also have a specific effect on the expansion of conversational topics: as a matter of fact, the new informational elements brought by candidate

inferences are frequently exploited by the participants as a basis for developing a conversational topic.

6.   Concluding remarks

This study addressed the issues of inference and information in conversation by considering a particular conversational sequence: the explicitation sequence. It offered the description of two practices initiating explicitation sequences, namely formulations and candidate inferences. It shows that these two configurations operate differently on the grounding processes in conversation. In fact, whereas formulations seem to 'recycle' already available information without introducing new elements to the shared knowledge, candidate inferences do bring new information. The study also gives a brief insight on the topical role of these two practices: whereas formulations tend to 'state the obvious' based on previous talk, candidate inferences have a stronger impact on the topic development in conversation.

The presented analyses are part of an ongoing research, but they nevertheless show that an account for information processing in conversation is relevant when describing the 'inferential work' of the participants. By closely considering the ways in which speakers build their turns in talk based on what has been previously said, it appears that the process of inference becomes accountable (Garfinkel 1967). This perspective on conversational data contributes to the study of the co-construction of meaning and mutual understanding in conversation.

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