Leadership in multimodal computer-mediated "conversation for learning"
Paola Leone, Università del Salento

Introduction

The study analyses interactional behaviour of native and non-native speakers who are partners in a dyadic computer-mediated "conversation for learning", named Telatandem (www.teletandembrazil.org), during which each speaker talks in L2 which is the interlocutor's L1. Particularly, the study aims to investigate whether one of the participant is alone responsible for controlling the conversation and if his/her behaviour is the same when conversation is in his/her L1 or L2, and whether during conversation in L2 the chance to choose content for discussion might represent for him/her an opportunity to act as the "leader" of the communication process, by establishing conditions for ensuing dialogue, for instance by asking the interlocutor various questions.

As face-to-face tandem, Teletandem communicative exchange is characterized by pedagogical turns in which participants correct/repair interlocutors' language misuse, explain a rule related to their first language, etc. For this reason, Teletandem dialogue can be considered a variety of "conversation for learning" (Kasper 2004). On the other hand, the presence of appraisal/agreement sequences make Teletandem conversation close to natural peer communication (Anderson & Banelli 2005; Leone 2009a, 2009b). For its "blended nature", it develops together with language interaction abilities also preliminary language teaching skills.

The idea of leadership as a form of control calls for the concepts of "reciprocity", "autonomy" and "collaboration", three principles on which tandem and Teletandem (see above and Brammerts 2003; Telles 2009) are based. In fact, joining a Tandem or a Teletandem program implies that:
- there must be mutual recognition by each partner of the same rights and privileges in relation to the participation to the activity (reciprocity);
- activity planning must be free of external control (autonomy). The instructor is a consultant and collaborates to find solutions when requested (Telles & Vassallo 2006);
- partners must work in conjunction in order to achieve results (collaboration).

Investigating leadership during interaction means analysing whether in terms of discourse structure one of the partners more actively controls the conversation flow thus actually affecting the degree of reciprocity in using conversational patterns. In relation to the interaction development this would also contribute to defining the type of collaboration and the role assumed by each partner, apart from the language used for communication. Therefore we aim at giving a situationally achieved definition of "reciprocity", of "autonomy" and of "collaboration" in the Teletandem context.

The current study is further development of Leone (submitted paper).

Interactional leadership, dominance and asymmetry

The leader of a conversation is the person who has an influence on structuring the dialogue, for example asking more questions, introducing new topics. In the literature of applied linguistics, this kind of acting is defined as "dominance" which is an overall term used also in other fields of studies. Particularly in psychology and sociology, it is used to explain the position of authority of one group or individual over others in both human and animal behaviour and it is intended as the opposite of submission. In common use, "dominance" has a negative connotation, evoking power of
one person (or one group) over another. In my personal experience, the use of expressions "dominant interactional behaviour" or "dominance in Teletandem conversations" prompts adverse reactions from people who are involved in the program either as language learners or as instructors. Considering the closeness with which I work with "Teletandem actors", I preferred the word "leadership" which underlines also the positive effects that controlling conversation might have in native/non-native communicative exchanges since the leader is also an active collaborator; that is, (s)he is the one who feels the responsibility, for instance, for accomplishing a task (i.e. talking with the partner), for defining ways of finding solutions to communicative problems (i.e. clarification requests).

My definition of leadership in conversation is the same as that of dominance in interaction studies which is a "temporary lack of reciprocity" in conversation (Hakulinen 2009: 61). An interactional dominant behaviour is verified when one of the speakers takes a number of initiatives during conversation, e.g. bringing in topics, to which one or more interlocutors reply. Therefore I will use leadership as synonym of dominance in the literature of applied linguistics.

In applied linguistic studies, the concept of dominance goes together with that of asymmetry. The distinction between interactional dominance and asymmetry can be explained by referring to speakers' behaviour in ordinary and institutional conversation. In ordinary conversations, equality in participation can be easily brought about. In fact, if one speaker controls the conversation flow more for any reason (i.e. speaker's familiarity with topic at hand, a temporal lapse of one interlocutor’s attention), his/her interlocutor can modify "participant structure" (Philips 1972, 1983) and "establish the conversational order" (Orletti 2000: 13-14). Conversely, in institutional conversations (e.g. doctor-patient) the "global management" of the interaction cannot be changed (Linell and Luckmann, 1991; cfr. Orletti 2000).

Whereas research in applied linguistics has analysed the relationship between macro-social variables (e.g. gender differences, status differences) and the way dialogues are structured, aiming to highlight the relation between social power and speakers' linguistic and communicative choices” (Orletti 2000: 9) and "to look for generalizations about asymmetries in situ in dialogues and discourse” (Linell and Luckman 1991: 1), this study focuses on the effects of individual factors (e.g. language competence, topic familiarity) over interaction structure. As a premise, it must be said that the features of discourse practices captured by the analysis will not be considered as signs of social and psychological power of one interlocutor over the other. In other words, an individual communicative choice cannot be a predicting behaviour of either authoritarianism or submission.

Other studies on dominance

In previous studies, dominance in ordinary conversation has been investigated in different contexts of use and it has been measured by the distribution of various communicative behaviours (e.g. fillers, turn length). Several of them are empirical investigations of communicative actions on the basis of gender factors. To quote just a few, Zimmerman and West (1975) and West and Zimmerman (1983), analysed the relationship between gender and language variation by looking at interruptions and overlaps. Fishman (1983: 405) explored "concrete conversational activity of couples in their homes from the perspective of the socially structured power relationship between males and females", by investigating distribution of questions, statements, minimum responses, topic initiation. Gass and Varonis (1986), aiming as well to highlight genre dominance in conversation in Japanese society, analysed distribution of amount of talk, number of turns, questions and overlaps produced by male and female speakers when talking in ESL.

As regards native - non-native conversation, on which the current study focuses, Zuengler and Bent (1991) investigated the influence of content knowledge when participants had different expertise, by looking at the distribution of fillers, amount of talk, back-channels, interruptions, resisting interruptions and topic moves.
A fairly well-known attempt for defining the analytical framework of different social situations (e.g. everyday conversations, radio call-in chat programmes, etc.) is the work by Linell and his associates (Linell and Gustavsson 1987; Linell 1990; Linell and Luckman 1991; see also Linell 2009) who propose a scheme of analysis based on four dimensions of dominance: quantitative dominance, intended as the measure of words said in a turn by each speaker and by the average turn length; topic (or semantic) dominance which manifests in the control of topics in the discussion, measurable for instance by the introduction of new content words; strategic dominance, which are "strategically really important things", defined qualitatively (ibidem) and interactional dominance. Particularly this latter dimension deals with "patterns of asymmetry in terms of initiative-response (IR) structure" (Linell 1990: 158). Linell and his associates' model distinguishes 18 categories of turns, comprehending either an initiative (I) or a response (R; Sinclair and Coulthard 1975), ordered on a six-point ordinal scale in relation to the strength each of them shows in structuring conversation. A strong move is an initiative such as a question which brings about new topics (Linell et al. 1988); conversely, a response is a weak move which shows no tendency in developing the dialogue. The original peculiarity of Linell's model (1990: 158) and Linell (2009) is the perspective of analysis which is not limited to local IR but tries to capture interrelations among turns and macro-structure, i.e. topics and episodes in order to highlight the co-construction dynamics of what he calls "communicative project". This dialogical dimension of discourse overcomes the traditional Searlian 'speech act' theory (Searl 1969), considered as "monologist pragmatics". Linell's interaction analysis is also a valuable attempt to employ a quantitative analysis to capture differences among different social situations, ranging from symmetrical (e.g. everyday conversations) to highly asymmetrical (e.g. court interviews) and to define differences among phases of the same social event.

Whereas the model proposed by Linell et al. aimed mostly at characterizing social situations, showing different interactional behaviours in symmetrical and asymmetrical contexts, for the purposes of the current study, it seems more appropriate to follow the analytical framework of Itakura (2001) which focuses on the description of a non-institutional context such as L1 and L2 conversations between Japanese male and female speakers. As in Itakura (2001) and in Leone (submitted paper), the focus of the current study is just one social situation, which does not fall under the category of "asymmetrical", and particularly the role assumed by each actor in relation to the conversation flow, including the role he/she plays in solving communication problems, which are relevant in native / non-native conversations.

Data collection and research questions

Video-recorded and transcribed Teletandem conversations are the basis for the current research. Subjects are 4 female volunteer university students forming 2 Teletandem pairs. Participants were strangers to one another: they were in contact just for data collection. The first pair (PAIR1) was composed of one Italian native speaker (PAIR1ITL1) and one English native speaker (PAIR1ENGL1). The second pair (PAIR2) was composed of one Italian native speaker (PAIR2ITITL1) and of one German native speaker (PAIR2GERL1). The talk was via computer using a software of instant messaging and VoIP (i.e. Skype). Their language proficiency in L2 ranged from upper intermediate to advanced. Data are approximately 6 hours of conversations which constitute 3 different meetings organized as follows:

- Meeting n. 1, conversation is 30 min. in Italian and 30 min. in English (PAIR 1) and in German (PAIR 2), no previous topic choice;
- Meeting n. 2, PAIR 1: language of conversation English, topic choice ITL1. PAIR2: Language of conversation Italian, topic choice GERL1;
- Meeting n. 3, PAIR 1: language of conversation is Italian, topic is selected by the English native speaker. PAIR 2: language of conversation German, topic choice ITL1.
The current study focuses on modifications of conversation structure and on the leader's role due to content choice by one speaker, which is a condition often practised for Teletandem sessions. Particularly, research questions will be:

- What is the role of the native speaker in conversations? (RQ1)
- What is the role of the L2 speaker when she has chosen the topic for conversation? (RQ2)
- Is the speaker who leads topic development the same who tries to resolve communication troubles? (RQ3)

The analytical framework

Following partially Itakura (2001), the following dimensions are considered:

- sequential dominance, which is "concerned with relationship between utterances" (Itakura 2001: 1864) in which, unlike Linell's model, the unit of analysis is the move instead of the turn. In each exchange only the controlling move is counted without considering its numerical potential strength. A response is taken into account just to establish whether the initiation move is controlling or not;

- quantitative dominance is measured by the number of words said by each speaker. The second indicator "average turn length" is not measured since in dyadic conversation the quantitative distribution of words is "effectively a measure of average turn length" (Itakura 2001: 1871).

Differently from Itakura (2001), participatory dominance, which consists in the count of "interruption and overlap" (Itakura 2001: 1867), will not be considered since the use of the computer for communication severely restricts the possibility of interrupting and overlapping other speaker's discourse (Leone: submitted paper).

Sequential dominance

The investigation of "sequential dominance" is based on the analysis of the relationship between moves in an exchange, the latter being a basic structure in which a topic develops. As for initiations, topic moves could have different functions (e.g. eliciting relevant information/confirmation/repetition; Tsui 1994):

The analysis started from topic moves. A turn could contain one or more moves. Topic moves could be embedded into a response or follow a response. Therefore, a response plus a topic move was also possible.

Not all topic exchanges have been measured as dominant individual choice. Following Itakura (2001: 1865), a topic move is "considered controlling only to the extent that it succeeds in selecting a response appropriate to its type". Thus, the response which follows the initiation move must be a "complying action" which fulfils its illocutionary force.

Among others the following moves are considered "complying moves":

- information moves followed by "reactive expressions" (Clancy 1996)

Ex.1 PAIR2 M3A (0:00:38.9-0:01:01.4)
ITL1: gut sehr gut also heute müssen wir alles auf Deutsch machen ok
GERL1: [ok ich -x]
ITL1: [xxx]
GERL1: einfach für mich
ITL1: eh gut ((ride)) ich werde erzähle ich werde dir etwas über apulien erzählen meine Region ok
GERL1: ok schön

- moves which are followed by one or more turns of focus on forms

Ex. 2 PAIR2M2IT (0:20:37.7 - 0:20:51.8)
GERL1: (xx) e ehm ragnolo
ITL1: ragnolo
GERL1: sì e formica è formicola
ITL1: formicola

- moves which are followed by response after turns of backchannels or unfinished turns

Ex. 3 PAIR2M3GERM (0:13:35.6 - 0:14:39.4)
ITL1: jetzt ((musica ridono)) was denkst du daran
GERL1: ehm also ich konnte es nicht so gut verstehen((IT ride)) es war (xxx) na ja
ITL1: ja
GERL1: so (xxx)
ITL1: viel- gefällt dir die Musik
GERL1: ja

- moves which are followed by non lexical forms asking for repetition (e.g. uhmuhm) and which are actually interpreted as repetition requests.

Conversely, the following are considered as non complying moves:

- moves followed by listener responses (Clancy et al. 1996) such as backchannels which served as a continuer, e.g. display of interest (e.g. ya, ya) and jointly constructed turns as forms of collaborative behaviour (Ex.3).

Ex. 4 - (PAIR1M1part2ENG; 0:41:56.7 - 0:42:20)
ITL1: =yeah ((ride)) but sometimes you know e:hm I think e:hm because I remember with my friend when she had to leave we were talking and she said but I will be sad as well and I told her no you won't because actually the people who will be sad is who remain at home ((ride)) not the one who leaves ((ride))
ENGL1: right because you feel like the emptiness whereas she probably you know experiencing something new so she doesn't have as much time to like you know
ITL1: to miss me ((risate))
ENGL1: ((risate)) to (xx)
ITL1: yes but ok I I think that one day when my day will come and when I move I will see if it is the same or not ((ride))
ENGL1: right.

Problems in the analysis was found when analysing the end of a sequence of greetings (see Ex. 5). Is the closing of the sequence "ciao Stella" a strong move?

Ex. 5 PAIR2M3part1GERM (0:00:00.0- 0:00:38.9)
ITL1: hallo
GERL1: ciao Stella
ITL1: wie geht's
GERL1: gut und dir

Brief discussion of coding procedure and results

In order to compare data among different meetings (the first ones were 30 min. in Italian and 30 in English/German), both Meeting n.2 and Meeting n.3 have been divided into two events of approximately 30 min. For analysing data, finally there were 6 different events (M1part1IT, M1part2ENG, M2part1ENG, M2part2ENG, M3part1IT, M3part2IT) for each PAIR.
For sequential dominance, data analysis consisted in capturing complying topic moves and putting them in statistical relation with the total number of turns. On the other hand, interaction dominance has been quantitatively measured (i.e. words and not backchannels have been counted), by dividing number of words by the total number of turns.

Findings show inconsistency between sequential and quantitative dominance (see also Gass and Varonis 1986; Linell et al. 1988 and partially in Itakura 2001).

This analysis suggests:
- no tendency for the native speaker to be more active in conversations (RQ1). The native assists the interlocutor by showing that she is following her (e.g. see PAIR2M2part2 use of backchannels by ITL1);
- the non native speaker is not more active in conversation in which she has chosen the topic (RQ2). In fact, participation patterns only partially can be explained by the influence of content choice (e.g. see PAIR1M3IT behaviour of ENGL1);

Since data do not show the tendency by one speaker to be the leader, RQ3 seems not to be appropriate. Difficulty in communication is rare in the analysed Teletandem conversations, some of them are faced by code-switching, some others are skipped so as to let the conversation flow smoothly (Aston 1986).