THE USE OF SILENCES/PAUSES IN SYNCHRONOUS VOICE-BASED COMPUTER-MEDIATED CONVERSATION: A CONVERSATION ANALYSIS PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate how participants from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds use silence/pauses in synchronous voice-based computer-mediated communication (SVCMC). Conversations were recorded from a Skypecast chatroom (see Jenks 2009a). The recorded data were transcribed and then analysed by the author using Conversation Analysis (CA). Analysis of data revealed that pauses are used (1) to afford selected speakers an opportunity to display alignment after being engaged by the first speaker in the first pair part turn, (2) as a source of interactional pressure, (3) to look for a suitable response, (4) to help to build coherence, (5) to help to get attention, and (6) to signal a dispreferred response. Possible pedagogical implications for teaching and learning in a CMC medium, in general, and for using pauses in the SVCMC medium, in particular, are discussed.

1. Introduction

This paper will investigate the use of periods of silence in a synchronous voice-based computer-mediated communication (SVCMC). Although during silence no utterance is heard by listeners, it is not an empty or meaningless part of spoken discourse. Silence/pause should be treated as a key phenomenon which contributes to building the structure of discourse in the same way speech does (Jaworski 1993, 1997). Silence ‘is capable of expressing a whole range of discursive and propositional meanings’ (Jaworski 2005: 3).

Silence is a feature of conversation in any language and there have been many studies investigating its usage. Such studies are limited to text-based, telephone, or face-to-face conversation (Golato & Taleghani-Nikazm 2006, Kalman 2008a, 2008b). To the best of my knowledge, no previous studies considered silence specifically in an SVCMC environment, such as Skypecasts. However, much credit should be given to the study conducted by Jenks (2009a) as ‘the first to investigate the interaction that results from using Skypecasts’ (Jenks 2009a: 34). Jenks (2009b) discussed management of overlapping talk in Skypecasts and the connection of pauses to overlapping talk.

This paper aims to provide some explanations of how silence/pauses are used by SVCMC participants. That is, how participants from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds use silence/pauses to communicate in Skypecasts (see Jenks 2009a). In addition, possible pedagogical implications for teaching and learning in a CMC medium, in general, and for using pauses in a SVCMC medium, in particular, will be discussed.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been defined by Herring as ‘communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers’ (Herring in Rosell-Aguilar 2005: 2). CMC consists of two types of communication, synchronous and asynchronous. In synchronous CMC, interaction takes place in real time, as in online chatting or face-to-face interaction on digital tabletop displays. Text, voice, and video messaging or conferencing over the internet are other types of CMC (Chapelle 2003). The second type of CMC is asynchronous communication, where interactions do not take place in real time, such as in bulletin boards and e-mails.
2. Silence in conversation

In this paper, silence is defined as the period when no sound is uttered by conversation participants. Bruneau divided silence into three forms: (1) psycholinguistic silences such as pauses applied by participants to gain more time while conversing by slowing their speech, or to give listeners more time to process what they hear so that they would understand better, (2) interactive silences such as pauses which are mutually shared by participants of dyadic or small groups until someone takes the floor, and (3) socio-cultural silences which are related to religious practices in some religions (Kalman 2008a).

Nakane (2007) listed four main functions of silence: cognitive, discursive, social, and affective. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson listed three types of silences: ‘pauses’, ‘gaps’, and ‘lapses’ (Nakane 2007). ‘Pauses’ are silences that occur within a single turn, ‘gaps’ occur at a transition relevance place (TRP), and ‘lapses’ occur at a TRP when talk discontinues and the floor is not claimed by any of the fellow participants (Nakane 2007). However, in the rest of the paper, ‘silence’ and ‘pauses’ will be used interchangeably.

An interesting issue stated by Jaworski (1993) is related to the length of silences; the length of silences is found to be inconsistent among cultures and linguistic backgrounds. For instance, the length of pauses by Japanese participants tends to be longer than that of English participants (Jaworski 2005, Fujimura-Wilson 2007). In English, however, a lot of devices such as back channels, well, and you know can be employed to avoid pauses and fill interpauses (Shigemitsu 2007).

In this paper, the types of silences, which will be looked at from a conversation analytic perspective, are intra-turn pauses (i.e. pauses within a turn) and inter-turn pauses (i.e. pauses between turns).

3. Data and methodology

The data is audio-recorded from a naturally-occurring conversation which took place in a Skypecast chatroom. Skypecasts are ‘large multi-participant voice-only (video is not supported) teleconferencing rooms hosted by Skype’ (Jenks 2009a: 32). The data which is transcribed (See Appendix A) is about two minutes, but only a few extracts are analysed. The methodology used for analysing the data transcribed is conversation analysis (CA); an emic approach of CA is used to investigate and identify how far the data reveals how silence/pauses are used by Skypecast participants. Participants are from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds sharing the same Skypecast chatroom for the purpose of practising ‘language in a setting where rules, norms, and expectations are much more fluid, dynamic, and negotiable than in language classrooms’ (Jenks 2009a: 29).

4. Data analysis

In Extract 1, I will show how pauses are used to afford selected speakers (recipients of first pair part turn) an opportunity to display alignment after being engaged by the first speaker in the first pair part turn.

4.1. Extract 1

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>S1: the German are very proud of their language hehe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>and they don't like to to speak in English (0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>((sniffs))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>(0.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5  S2: well I don't know (0.3) be[cause like (0.5)

The first pause in this extract is a very long one. In line 2, the pause is three tenths of a second, followed by a sniff sound (line 3) which lasts for six tenths of a second and another pause of seven tenths of a second. This long silence (1.6 seconds in total) takes place after S1 addresses his talk to S2 (a German lady). S1 engages S2 in talk by embarking on a narrative about her native language and provides a long period of silence until she displays her alignment (Skarup 2004). This long pause, or part of it, could be part of a ‘suitable response search format’ comparable to Schegloff’s ‘word search format’ (Schegloff in Brouwer 2004: 96). The next turn (line 5) is allocated by S1 who selects S2, and not S3, because he is waiting for a response.

Extract 2 will provide examples of how pauses are used as a source of interactional pressure, and to look for a suitable response, help to build coherence, and help to get attention.

4.2. Extract 2

5  S2: well I du↑nno↓ (0.3) be[cause like
6  S3: [I am ((inaudible))
7  S2: (0.5)
8  S2: everybody: u:h has to learn English at school like
9  every every body (1.2) but (0.2) it's like different to
10  talk English I ↑mean we do: well I live in a city
11  where (0.3) a lot of touris↑mis going on ↓and (0.3) like
12  everybody who works in the store or (0.2) something like
13  that (0.4) u:h here she has to speak English

In line 5, a pause of three tenths of a second indicates S2’s search for a suitable response for S1’s talk in Extract 1. S1’s utterance in Extract 1 was a source of pressure for her because (1) she is culturally engaged to provide a comment or a reason why German natives do not like to speak English with non-German speakers, and (2) ‘an overly long silence builds up interactional pressure to do something to end the silence’ (Egbert et al. 2004: 183). In line 5, S2 starts with the turn-initial marker well to help build coherence and to politely get S1’s attention (Moreno 2001). In SVCMC environments such as Skypcasts, participants may rely on this strategy after long pauses to tell their fellow participants, and the speaker of first pair part turn in particular, that they is paying attention to what is being said. The three tenths of a second pause in line 5 leads to overlapping talk (lines 5-6) due to putting ‘each participant in a state of potential confusion, as one cannot rely on nonverbal language [(in such a SVCMC medium)] to anticipate who will then regain the floor’ (Jenks 2009b: 26). Another half a second pause (line 7) results from overlapping talk (lines 5-6) when S3 interrupts S2 after her (0.3 seconds) intra-pause (line 5). This intra-pause, as well as the falling intonation preceding it, are indicators for S3 that S2 wants to stop talking. The long pause in line 7 ‘opens the floor for re-bidding’ (Jenks 2009b: 26) and offers S2 an opportunity to complete her talk, add more detail to it, and clarify what she wants to say (lines 8-13) (Scollon & Wong Scollon 2004). Although both are bidding for the floor, it is also possible to say that S3 delays regaining the floor to enable S2 to resume her interrupted talk (Scollon & Wong Scollon 2004). In Extract 3, I will show examples of how pauses are used to signal a dispreferred response.
4.3. Extract 3

38  S1:  =and they and they told me that uh (0.3) German
39  people (1.1) mm: (1.7) DON'T LIKE to to:
40  to speak in English
41  →
42  S2:  >yeah because> they are (not used to that) then may be
43  they feel embarrassed (0.4) if somebody comes up to
44  them an- (0.2) say something and they don- know how to answer
45  it ((inaudible)) you †know

In this extract, S1 and S2 continue their discussion about German people being proud of their language and not liking to speak in English (see Extract 1). S1 is still imposing the same cultural stereotype about German people on S2 (a German native). S2, in this extract, is defending and justifying her people’s use of German (lines 42-45). In this regard, it is possible to say that the long pause in line 46 indicates two things. According to Avison and Banks (2008), it indicates that S1 expects some sort of response from S2; perhaps a more convincing or detailed one. My interpretation is based on what Schegloff (2007: 67-68) states:

The transition space between the first pair part turn and a dispreferred second pair part turn is commonly overlong, i.e., a gap. That is to say, the recipient of the first pair part does not start a responsive turn ‘on time,’ and the silence [(see line 41)] breaks the contiguity of first and second pair part ... the dispreferred response follows a noticeable gap after the first pair part.

Based on Schegloff’s description, the dispreferred response is located in lines 42-45 and indicated as such by the preceding pause in line 41.

5. Discussion

In light of the literature, the data analysed in the previous section have revealed how pauses are used in the SVCMC medium. In other words, what the functions of pauses in a SVCMC environment are. The data revealed that participants of SVCMC use pauses to offer a chance for speakers of the second pair part turn to display their alignment with the first pair part turn. For this type of alignment to be successful, it should be accompanied by selection of the second speaker. This selection is conditioned by engaging the recipient of the first pair part turn in a topic of his/her interest. That is, a piece of talk which stands for a non-verbal action such as pointing or looking at the speaker to be selected for next turn in face-to-face conversation.

That participants use pauses as a source of interactional pressure to end silence was a function revealed by analysis of the data. In SVCMC, interaction pressure of this nature is applied more than in the case of face-to-face communication. SVCMC participants were found to have a tendency to make use of pauses when looking for suitable responses, building coherence, and getting other speakers’ attention. The same situation, I believe, is true for face-to-face communication. However, in the absence of non-verbal cues, the typical environment for SVCMC, it was noted that participants rely on turn-initial markers, such as well (lines 5, 17, 30) and mm (line 47), to show their engagement in interlocution (Peng 2007).

In SVCMC, users’ struggle to avoid overlapping talk and to maintain smooth turn-taking due to the fact that ‘the onset of overlapping talk during this time span demonstrates the difficulty in projecting when it is appropriate to talk in multi-participant SVCMC’ (Jenks
The data has also shown that SVCMC participants use pauses to indicate dispreferred responses. Dispreferred responses often follow the pause.

6. Pedagogical implications

CMC is seen today as one of the computer applications that has the greatest potential impact on the field of language learning (Warschauer 1996). Research on CMC has revealed various advantages of CMC compared with face-to-face communication. Peterson (1997) stated that one of the main advantages of CMC is in promoting autonomy in learning, by providing an environment that is less restrictive (in terms of place and time) than the traditional classroom. It enables language learners to communicate inexpensively with native speakers of the target language as well as with other language learners twenty-four hours a day, and from different places, including the classroom, home, or workplace (Warschauer 1996).

Pedagogical implications will be discussed in this section based on Jenks’ (2009b) work. Jenks (2009b: 28) stated that ‘what we have is strong evidence that communicating in multi-participant SVCMC requires a new set of CMC skills and strategies’. To start with the teachers in SVCMC medium, they need to take into consideration the length, place, and timing of the students’ pauses to avoid cultural miscommunication. Different speakers of English as a lingua franca (ELF) may have different lengths, places, and timings of pauses when producing English words (Nakane 2007).

Students should first learn all possible functions of pauses available in the literature. Then they should learn how to use pauses positively and avoid using them negatively. They should learn how to offer a chance for speakers of the second pair part turn to display their alignment with the first pair part turn, select the next speaker, and engage the recipients in a topic of their interest. In the meantime, they should learn to minimise or end silence/pauses and to use pauses for suitable responses in SVCMC interaction in order to maintain a coherent conversation.

Furthermore, using pauses in SVCMC environments to avoid overlaps and to indicate dispreferred responses should be encouraged by the online teacher (Jenks 2009b). Such strategy is more emphasised in SVCMC medium than in normal or face-to-face classroom interaction due to the former’s lack of non-verbal communication and body language, such as gestures, eye contact, and facial and other body expressions which play a crucial role in conveying meaning in face-to-face communication.

7. Conclusion

Different uses and functions of silence/pauses in SVCMC Skypcasts have been revealed using the methodology of conversation analysis. Several pedagogical implications for teaching the use of pauses in SVCMC medium have been uncovered. Related skills and strategies available in the literature have been reviewed to provide teachers of ELF with ideas to use in the CMC-based classroom. Teachers in this online medium should take into consideration differences in the students’ production of pauses with regard to their lengths, places, and timing. Students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are not expected to produce the same pauses carrying the same features. Students should also be taught different functions of pauses so that they would be aware of them when they join any voice-based CMC environment.

In SVCMC, maintaining a coherent conversation which is free from overlaps forms a challenge for participants. However, overlaps can be avoided or minimised, and dispreferred
responses can be indicated by employing pauses as a voice-based communication technique in the medium of CMC.

Appendix A: Transcription conventions (modified from Atkinson and Heritage (1984))

[[ ]] Simultaneous utterances – (beginning [[ ] and (end ]])
[ ] Overlapping utterances – (beginning [ ] and (end ])
(0.4) Contiguous utterances
(0.4) Represents the tenths of a second between utterances
( .) Sound extension of a word (more colons demonstrate longer stretches)
( ,) Fall in tone (not necessarily the end of a sentence)
( ,) Continuing intonation (not necessarily between clauses)
( -) An abrupt stop in articulation
( ?) Rising inflection (not necessarily a question)
( !) Words ending with emphasis
( --) Underline letters or words indicate emphasis
( ↑ ↓) Rising or falling intonation
( 0 0) Surrounds talk that is quieter
( hhh) Audible aspirations
( .hh) Inhalations
( .hh.) Laughter within a word
( > >) Surrounds talk that is spoken faster
( < <) Surrounds talk that is spoken slower
(( ())) Analyst’s notes
( ) Approximations of what is heard
( $ $) Surrounds ‘smile’ voice
( ^ ^) Surrounds ‘trill’ voice

Appendix B: Transcription

1 S1: the German are very proud of their language hehe
2 → and they don't like to to speak in English (0.3)
3 → ((sniffs))
4 → (0.7)
5 S2: well I don't know (0.3) [cause like (0.5)
6 → S3: [I am ((inaudible))
7 → (0.5)
8 S2: everybody: uh has to learn English at school like
9 every everybody (1.2) but (0.2) it's like different to
10 talk English I mean we do: well I live in a city
11 where (0.3) a lot of tourists miss going on and (0.3) like
12 everybody who works in the store or (0.2) something like
13 that (0.4) uh here she has to speak English
14 (4.4)
15 S3: oh is that right what in uh (...) you mean just in like
16 cities (0.2) (hh) (...) where there are a lot of tourists
17 (1.2)
18 S2: uh yeah well it is normal when you go to he country (0.3)
19 I don't think (...) ((inaudible)) do speak English
20 but they don't use it you know (1.0) there is no chance
20 to use it because nobody: would ever come to
to count because there is nothing to see
(0.2)
23 S1: but if I am a foreigner (0.5) and I am in Germany
(0.4)
25 S2: yeah=
26 S1: =and I only speak English (0.5) and (0.3)
you can speak English (.) why don't you speak
with me in English
(1.2)
30 S2: well I would talk to you in English when you come up
to me and say hey what's up uh can you help me and
I will like OK what can I do! for you (0.2)
are you now
(2.0) where they were in uh in Germany
(0.8)
37 S2: °yeah°=
38 S1: =and they and they told me that uh German
people (1.1) mm: (1.7) DON'T LIKE to to:
(0.5)
42 S2: >yeah because they are (not used to that) then may be
they feel embarrassed (0.4) if somebody comes up to
them an- (0.2) say something and they don- know how to answer
(inaudible)) you know
(1.8)
47 S1: °mm° (0.2) °maybe°
48 (1.5)
49 S2: but isn't that the same like everywhere? (1.2)
50 I don- know

References


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