

A Case Study of the One- Child-Parent Relationship- The Application of Conversation Analysis

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Abstract

Conversation Analysis (CA), according to Jack Sidnell, is “an approach with the social sciences that aims to describe, analyze and understand talk as a basic and constitutive feature of human social life.” The one-child policy in China has recently been disputed to have bred a generation of spoiled and lonely children. This paper attempts at finding out whether a single child is a lonely child and whether he or she has been spoiled and lacks ability to negotiate with people around, by delving into the mechanism of “turn-taking”, “implicature”, and “Cooperative Principle” within a conversation that a school girl has had with her parents on a casual occasion.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis, turn-taking, implicature, Cooperative Principle

1. Introduction

To curb the massive population growth, China has adopted the one-child policy as one of the key national policies since 1979. It is believed to have prevented more than 300 million births ever since then. Another consequence of the policy has been the emerging of so called “little emperor”, a generation of self-centered children. A single child is believed as not only a lonely child but also a spoiled one who will not have learned to negotiate with others, and respect the give-and-take involved in many relationships, which may leave the child less capable of interacting well with people around him or her. This paper aims at finding out whether a child is a lonely child and whether he or she has been spoiled and lacks ability to negotiate with people around him or her, through an analysis of a conversation that a school girl has had with her parents on a casual occasion.

Conversation Analysis (CA), according to Jack Sidnell, is “an approach with the social sciences that aims to describe, analyze and understand talk as a basic and constitutive feature of human social life” (Sidnell, 2010, 1) CA is a well-developed tradition with a distinctive set of methods and analytic procedures as well as a large body of established findings. Sociologist Harvey Sacks (1935-1975) is generally credited with founding the discipline. This paper delves into the conversation by examining such key mechanisms as “turn-taking”, “implicature”, and “Cooperative Principle” respectively.

2. The Conversation Transcription

The following is a transcription of a conversation of a Chinese family of three. Among the conventions used in CA, the following occur in the extract (for a full account of CA transcription conventions, see Sidnell 2010: Ix-X):

[, left square bracket, vertically across two or more lines: alternative way of marking overlap.

., the period: a falling intonation contour

!, exclamation mark: exclamatory intonation

?, interrogation mark: rising intonation

=, equal sign: latches utterances without gaps

-, dashes: pause upper case WORD: loud talk underlining as in syllable: stressed syllable or word

(:), colon(s) after vowel: (degrees of) lengthening

°, the degree sign: the softness and quietness of the following talk.

//, double slash: point of overlap (corresponding to point where next turn begins)

(1.0), numbers in parentheses: silence, the number indicates the tenth of a second.

((cough)), double parentheses: the transcriber’s description of the events, rather than the representation of them.

In this piece of conversation the lines below are numbered for easy reference; they do not necessarily represent conversational “turns”.

1. Mum: I've had a bi::g meal // for supper =
2. Kid:= MUM =
3. Kid: I want some CAkes (1.0)
4. Mum: So you are hungry_NOW? =
5. Mum: You didn't want ANYTHING for supper, and now, you want cakes instead =
6. Dad: [We won't buy anything(Eyeing Mum)]
7. Dad: ° We left over a lot, and we had to get rid of the food. It's a kind of =
8. Kid: ((annoyed)) = [Well, well. I want NOthing at all
9. Mum: (2.0) Come on.
10. Mum: There is a supermarket //around the corner=
11. Kid: [I want nothing for myself. Go ahead if you want to buy any food for your own
12. Kid :I am afraid you two may be stuffed to DEA::TH quite soo::n =
13. Kid:=[Besides, I don't want to be so BA::D-looking as you TWO:: are-
14. (2.0)
15. Dad: Well? (1.0)
16. Dad: [°Let's go and play basketball, and do gymnastics on the e-electric //bar.=
17. Kid: =W hat?
18. Kid: YOU gonna do gymnastics on an Electric BAR?
19. Dad: =Oh, no!
20. Dad: °on a HORENSENTAL BAR
21. Dad: °So what? Am I brave enough? =
22. Mum: [=But it looks like rain
23. Kid: (laughs) Ha-ha
24. Kid =Don't you think you are a Su::pperman?
25. Kid: But Harry Porter is sure better than you =
26. Kid: I'll read you about him as soon as we get home=
27. Kid: [=What a terrific writing it is!
28. Kid: Only the scene of his going through the “Fire Dragon” covers TWO full pages
29. Mum: = [Oh, yeah. So you must learn from it
30. Mum: When it comes to writing a diary -you often boil down into a few lines what happens a //whole day=
31. Kid: but now I've got an “ORDER” from someone=
32. Kid: = I am prohibited to read Harry Porter. =
33. Kid: =Someone is always scolding me ALL Day long!

3. Conversation Analysis

The framework of topics consists of three participants who are Dad, Mum, Kid, the setting which is the participants' walking on a campus and the time which is after supper. The main topics are evolved around buying food, doing physical exercises, and reading Harry Porter series. Since this conversation is made by family members on a very casual occasion, the topic direction changes randomly. Topics are negotiated by the speakers, and the purpose of the conversation is to maintain the relationship between the interlocutors.

Firstly, according to Harvey Sacks, the basic unit of the conversation is the “turn”, that is, a shift in the direction of the speaking flow. Turns occur normally at certain well-defined junctures in conversation; such points are called “transition relevant places” (TRPs). A TRP can be done directly as in the case of “current speaker selects next speaker” (Sacks, 1995: II, 223). The second general rule of next-speaker selection is when “a next speaker selects himself” (1995: II, 224).

When it comes to the turns in the present conversation, obviously, the kid takes most of the turns, and she is dominating the conversation and feels free to express herself. She either interrupts as in line 8 and line 11 or selects the next speaker as in line 2, line17 and line24. The other two speakers are more passive in their turn-taking: they either wait to be chosen or take the turn at a long pause as in line4 and line 6, and line 9. The kid is selecting the next speaker by a direct request as in line 2.

When Dad responds by giving his opinion as in line 6 and line 7, the irritated kid interrupts him abruptly to take her turn as in line 8. Mum suggests buying cakes in the nearby supermarket as in line 9 and line 10. The kid turns her mother down at once to give vent to her displeasure as in line 11 and line 12 by hurling obscene languages at her parents. In line 16, Dad puts forward a suggestion to take exercises on horizontal bars with the intention of changing the previous disturbing topic by a deliberate slip of tongue, which he manages to repair to save the situation as in line 20. However, the kid laughs at him in line 17 and line 18, and she ignores his repair, selects her turn and goes on teasing him as in line 23 and line 24. Mum reminds both the kid and Dad of the changing of the weather as in line 22, evaluates the kid's utterance in line 29, expresses her agreement with the kid on her comment on Harry Potter, and goes on to nag the kid in line 30, which annoys the kid who launches another round of counter-attack in lines 31, line 32, and line 33 once more.

Secondly, implicature is a term coined by H. P. Grice (1913-1988), who was the first to systematically study cases, in which a speaker means differs from what the sentence used by the speaker. Grice classified the phenomenon of implicature into seven categories; they are figure of speech, relevance implicature, limiting implicature, strengthening implicature, ignorance implicature, damning with faint praise, and loose use. Additionally, Grice developed a theory to explain and predict conversational implicatures. Grice postulated a general Cooperative Principle and four maxims specifying how to be cooperative. Cooperative Principle contributes what is required by the accepted purpose of the conversation.

1. Maxim of Quality: Make your contribution true; so do not convey what you believe false or unjustified.
2. Maxim of Quantity: Be as informative as required.
3. Maxim of Relation. Be relevant.
4. Maxim of Manner. Be perspicuous; so avoid obscurity and ambiguity, and strive for brevity and order. (Grice 1975:47)

As far as the conversation is concerned, there is a relevance implicature in line 10 where Mum suggests that cakes can be bought in the nearby supermarket and an ignorance implicature in line 22 where Mum ignores Dad's attempt to showing off his bravery to cover up his embarrassment caused by his slip of tongue and a damn with faint praise implicature in line 32 and line 33 where the kid implies that it is utterly irrational for Mum to prevent her from reading her favorite books.

Lastly, with regard to the Cooperative Principle, the good-natured Dad's response in line 6 and line 7 flouts Maxim of Quality because he doesn't mean to reject her kid's request. He pretends to take Mum's side in order to show his disapproval of the kid's particularity about food. In line 8, line 11, line 12, and line 13, the kid's angry remark flouts Maxim of quality because she does want to eat cakes. She is rebelling to show how annoyed she is when refused and blamed by her parents.

Generally speaking, the conversation follows the Maxim of Quantity except that the kid provides too much information on Harry Potter as in line 22, line 24, and line 25. She tries to contribute to the conversation, hoping to share with the other two interlocutors her favorite books, which is not duly understood. If she succeeded, the conversation might shift to Harry Potter. Besides, the conversation follows the Maxim of Relation as the participants' contributions are relevant to the topic. And the conversation also follows the Maxim of Manner as is exemplified by the fact that the participants express their ideas clearly, briefly, and orderly.

4. Conclusion

All in all, from the above analysis, conclusion can be drawn that every coin has two sides: a one child in a family is both a spoiled child and a lonely child on one hand, and he or she is also an independent and confident child on the other. The kid has problem of having meals at regularly time but develops a bad habit of eating snacks, instead. She is less respectful to her parents when compared to a traditional Chinese girl. She is also a lonely child. Since she doesn't have a sibling or a child of her age to communicate with, she can only talk to her parents who obviously are not ready to understand her. She is not only manipulated and nitpicked by her mother but also monitored by his father, thus facing the attack from both sides, she has to launch counter-attacks three times when she feels her request rejected and her interests disapproved of. However, since there is not potential for arguments arising from favoritism and sibling jealousy, the parents can give, and the Kid can receive more quality time and attention. This often leads to increased self-esteem which, combined with increased independence, can lead to the child being more confident. Therefore, she is more independent and confident than a traditional Chinese girl. She reads Harry Potter series, and has a good taste for literary works. She is assertive and bold enough to confront her parents' authority head-on.

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