1. Two ways of studying social actions

Social actions performed through language are the focal object of research on speech act realization (speech act research, for short) and conversation analysis, among other approaches to discourse that I will not consider here. Yet because of their different disciplinary origins and histories, the two approaches are interested in different aspects of social action mediated through language and, specifically, through talk. Speech act research is primarily concerned with the semantic structures (“conventions of means”) and linguistic resources (“conventions of form”) by which speech acts are implemented (pragmalinguistics, “the linguistic interface of pragmatics”) and the social conditions for carrying out speech acts appropriately and effectively (sociopragmatics, “the sociological interface of pragmatics”).

Conversation analysis is fundamentally concerned with the sequential organization of action in talk-in-interaction. These differences in analytical focus make different demands on data. Speech act researchers draw on a large range of data types, including natural, elicited, interactional, non-interactional, and various forms of self-report data. As the main interest is in the conventions of means and form by which the focal speech act is implemented, non-interactional (e.g., written questionnaire) data specifically eliciting that speech act are considered an appropriate source. And even when the data are interactional, it is standard analytical practice to isolate the focal speech act from its interactional environment, submit its linguistic design to scrutiny, and relate the identified meaning and form conventions to discourse-external context factors. This approach has been particularly common in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research on speech act realization. It has yielded a wealth of knowledge about speech act strategies and their implementation in different languages, the relationship of indirectness and politeness, resources for mitigating and upgrading illocutionary force, and about
speech acts and their realizations as indices of social stance. Conversation analysis, on the other hand, strictly confines its data to naturally occurring talk-in-interaction, with the mandate to examine actions as they unfold in the sequential organization of the activity or analyzed segment. Rather than isolating speech acts from their sequential habitat and analyzing them according to pre-established categories, the analytical practice is to adopt an emic, interlocutors’ perspective by paying close attention to the meanings that the co-participants make relevant to each other through the details of their interactional conduct in the moment-by-moment unfolding of the interaction.

With few exceptions (e.g., Golato 2003), speech act research and conversation analysis have gone their separate ways, and to good effect. But for some pragmatic objects, drawing on both approaches in an integrated fashion may have analytical benefits that are not available through either speech act research or conversation analysis when deployed independently. One such object that will serve as an illustrative case is the repetition of questions and requests functioning as “question substitutes” (Heritage & Roth 1995).

2. Repeated questions

Repetitions can accomplish a wide range of discourse-pragmatic actions (e.g., Johnstone 1994). Any interactional element is a potential candidate for repetition, including illocutionary acts. The repeated actions considered here are questions, formatted either as “direct” questions (e.g., wh-questions) or as question substitutes, which have the structure of requests (e.g., “can you tell me”, “tell me”). Extract (1) provides a straightforward example, taken from an Oral Proficiency Interview (see Appendix for transcription conventions).

(1)

06 I: → Mm. ↑Can you tell me about- what- you did over
07 Golden Week?
08 C: Pardon?
09 I: → >Tell me what you did< for Golden Week, >over
10 Golden Week.<
11 C: °Yah’, I (.) worked as a (.) >assistant< of ca-,
12 >cameraman<, anduh one day I (.) met, =I’ve met
13 my (.) parents.=
14 I: =M↑m
15 C: in Okayama.
In lines 9 and 10, the interviewer (I) “repeats” the question issued initially. The repetition is prompted by an other-initiation of repair (8), by virtue of which the candidate (C) displays non-comprehension of the preceding directive. The subsequent version of the directive successfully repairs the initial problem, as evident from the relevant and extended answer turn that the candidate is now able to produce. Although the segment appeared in a particular institutional setting, this sort of sequence is very common in ordinary discourse and different types of institutional settings alike:

1. A asks a question (or issues another sort of directive).
2. B has a problem in hearing or understanding the question. So instead of answering (as projected by the question), B (other-)initiates repair.
3. A redoes (repairs) the question.
4. B answers the question.

Such other-initiated and self-repaired sequences have been examined extensively in the literature on repair (e.g., Schegloff 2000; Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks 1977). While this research provides a relevant backdrop to the focus of this paper, my main concern here is the formatting of the question when it appears a second time around—the repeat.

What is repeated when “Can you tell me about what you did over Golden Week?” reappears as “Tell me what you did for Golden Week, over Golden Week.”? In speech act analytical terms, the illocutionary act and the propositional act remain unchanged, but the locutionary acts differ in part between the two versions. According to Cushing’s (1994) categorization, the repetition we see here is partial in that it extends to illocution and proposition but only to some features of the locution; it is obligatory in that it is occasioned by the other-initiation of repair in the prior turn; and it is effective as evident from the successful answer provided by the candidate. But more importantly, it is not only the speech act analyst who identifies the illocution and proposition of the repetition as “the same” as those of the original question—the co-participants treat them as “the same” as well. Clear evidence for the participants’ understanding is the candidate’s answer, which fits precisely the response trajectory projected by both versions of the question, and the interviewer’s ratification of the answer.

What distinguishes the versions of the two questions is their linguistic and paralinguistic (prosodic) format—and the fact that they appear in different slots in the interactional sequence. Although for a fuller, and more accurate, analysis, the prosodic composition of the question turns needs to be considered systematically, I will here focus on their linguistic design and sequential placement, starting with the former. According to
a speech-act based analysis of requests (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper 1989), the first version ("Can you tell me about what you did over Golden Week?") falls into the category of conventionally indirect request—specifically, a “query-preparatory” or ability question format—, whereas the second (>Tell me what you did< for Golden Week, >over Golden Week.<) has a direct, locution-derivable format, i.e., the grammatical structure of the utterance determines its illocutionary force. The second version is upgraded in directness vis-à-vis the first. As the repeat request is also structurally simpler and, as is definitional for locution-derivable requests, its syntactic form and illocutionary force are closely matched, it could be understood as an instance of downward interviewer accommodation to the candidate’s comprehension difficulty (Ross 1995), sequentially occasioned by the other-initiated repair and its particular format. As the “open-class” repair initiator Pardon? (Drew 1997) casts the entire preceding action as a trouble source, the interviewer’s repair completion furnishes a trimmed version of the question substitute (can you tell me → tell me) that stands a better chance to enable comprehension. Of course, other design features of the repair turn may well contribute to its effectiveness, such as the repetition of the focal topical component Golden Week in the self-repair for Golden Week, >over Golden Week.< and the turn’s prosodic composition. An alternative, or additional, analysis could be that being prompted by the candidate’s display of noncomprehension to do the question over releases the interviewer from investing the repeated version with the same degree of politeness as the first.6

Extract 2, from a different set of Language Proficiency Interviews, includes multiply repeated directives.

(2)

01 I: → Okay, I’d like you to think to back (.) to yer(.)
02 → trip to Indonesia, and please tell me about it-
03 → tell me what you did.
04 C: (0.3) mm (0.8) my last visit to Indonesia
05 I: uhum
06 C: ah is for tseh mm (0.7) ahh: I took ah Singapore
07 air line
08 I: uh huh
09 C: tseh the reason I (0.4) took the (.) Singapore air
10 line is the price
11 I: → >"Okay"—excuse me- if you could tell me< what-
12 → what did you do in Indonesia.
13 C: (. ) wha-huh?=
14 I: → =what did you do in Indonesia
The interviewer’s first turn is composed of three directives. The first, formatted as a mitigated want statement (*I’d like you to think to back (. ) to yer (. ) trip to Indonesia*), foreshadows the upcoming question and specifies the topic (Scheglo¤ 1980). The initial element of the next action, *please*, projects the illocutionary force of the upcoming action, while the token can simultaneously be heard as a politeness marker (House 1989) to mitigate the locution-derivable directive (*please tell me about it*). The pronoun (*it*) anaphorically links to the topic *yer trip to Indonesia*, established in the preliminary directive.7 The third directive partially repeats the preceding request. Here, the interviewer self-repairs the grammatical object in *please tell me about it* from the pronominal *it* to an object clause (*tell me what you did*), with emphasis on the verb, and in so doing pinpoints the precise focus of her question. This repeated question directive preserves the directness level of the original version (locution-derivable) but omits the mitigating *please* and sharpens the question target, i.e., it slightly alters the propositional content. Shortly after the candidate begins his narrative, the interviewer intervenes with a turn comprising four units: (1) a turn-initial *okay*, which can be heard both as a token receipting the previous turn and as a discourse marker indexing the beginning of a new sequence; (2) an apologetic routine that is conventionally deployed to do an interruption (*excuse me*); (3) a question directive (*if you could tell me*), formatted as a conventionally indirect request with two syntactic mitigators (a hypothetical *if* clause, *could*) and (4) a question about the candidate’s activities in Indonesia, designed as syntactically independent of the preceding question directive (*what did you do in Indonesia not what you did in Indonesia*). The first three units, produced with accelerated speed, supply contrastive emphasis to the fourth unit, which carries the focal point of the repeated question and is articulated with normal speed. Notably, the question directive displays a marked increase in politeness, indexing the interviewer’s interruption as a dispreferred action (Lerner 1996). Prompted by the candidate’s other-initiation of repair (13), the interviewer does an “exact” repetition (Cushing 1994), i.e., she repeats the question verbatim, including the emphasis on the infinite verb (14)8. However the candidate responds to the repair completion with yet another repair initiation, this time requesting confirmation that he heard correctly the location specified by the interviewer (15). After confirming the candidate’s hearing, the interviewer produces two more versions of the question. These repeat questions (*what was your mission there what
were you doing) preserve the illocution and pragmalinguistic format of the preceding question (what did you do in Indonesia) but provide alternate reference expressions to the candidate’s activities in Indonesia. Once the interviewer issued the question in a direct (wh-) question structure, this format remained stable throughout the repeat series.

We have seen that the questions and question substitutes in the two extracts exhibited different levels of directness (in decreasing directness):

direct questions (wh-)
what did you do in Indonesia
what was your mission there
what were you doing

locution-derivable/direct
Tell me what you did for Golden Week, over Golden Week.
please tell me about it
tell me what you did

conventionally indirect
Can you tell me about what you did over Golden Week?
if you could tell me

Furthermore, two of the requests were mitigated with lexical and syntactic material (please tell me about it; if you could tell me), whereas the others were not.

For speech act research, accounting for the observed differences in the design of the repeated question directives is problematic. The standard explanatory resource in a speech act realization framework is the constellation of social variables pre-existing the interaction (relative power, social distance, degree of imposition; Brown & Levinson, 1987). More fundamental problems with unidirectional causal explanations aside, the difficulty with this explanation is that it does not lend itself well to explaining why in an ongoing interaction between co-participants in an ostensibly stable social relationship, repeated actions—actions whose imposition ranking is (supposedly) constant—exhibit differences in their pragmalinguistic formatting that are associated with different socio-pragmatic meanings. Whereas speech act research can locate these analytical difficulties but cannot solve them with its own methodological resources, conversation analysis provides the analytical strategies necessary to account for the formats of repeated directives. The solution offered by conversation analysis is its trademark analytical practice, the close examination of actions in the local, sequential context in which they are produced. Drawing on speech act research and conversation analysis in a combined analytical framework makes it possible to connect the prag-
malinguistic resources identified in earlier work on speech act realization to the sequential contexts in which they are deployed. Repeated actions are a particularly suitable object for such analysis.

Appendix

Transcription conventions

(0.8) Time gap in tenths of a second
(.) Brief time gap
= Latching of utterance segments
[ ] Overlapping talk
- Cut-off
: Elongated sound
. Falling intonation
, Continuing intonation
? Rising intonation
↑ Marked rise of immediately following segment

Under Emphasis
○ Decreased volume
> < Increased speed
→ Line discussed in text

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Notes

1. The label “speech act research” is chosen in deliberate opposition to the more common designation “speech act theory”. Speech act theory has its intellectual home in ordinary language philosophy and is thoroughly nonempirical. It is concerned with the conceptual analysis of speech acts, such as their definition, composition, conditions for production and recognition, classification, and conventional linguistic implementation. Speech act research, by contrast, is an empirical undertaking that focuses on the realization of speech acts in social contexts (e.g., Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper 1989). While speech act theory supplied speech act research with its focal investigative object and unit of analysis, speech act research builds on and contributes to linguistic anthropology, (applied) linguistics, cognitive and social psychology, and microsociology. It deploys a wide range of qualitative and quantitative social science research methods.
2. The distinction between conventions of means and conventions of form was proposed by Clark (1979).
3. The many (meta-)theoretical and methodological differences between speech act research and conversation analysis have been extensively discussed in the literature and cannot be addressed in this brief paper (Bilmes 1986; Schegloff 1988).
4. At the risk of oversimplifying, I consider questions and question substitutes as the same action (cf. Heritage & Roth 1995; Schegloff 1984).
5. “a partial repetition is an utterance that replicates only part of an earlier utterance; ... an obligatory repetition is one that a speaker is required to utter by regulation or convention. An effective repetition is one that succeeds in having the impact on the hearer that the speaker intends it to have, or that a post hoc observer takes the speaker to have intended it to have or considers that it might have had; an ineffective repetition is one that does not have such an impact” (Cushing 1994, p. 55).
6. A fuller analysis would show that the format of the first version of the question substitute (6/7) and its complete misfiring (8), as evident from the open-class repair initiator, are sequentially occasioned, viz. by a sudden topic shift.
7. The sequential separation of the topic on which a telling is requested, or about which a question is asked, and the focal directive itself has been observed in ordinary conversation (Schegloff 1980) and news interviews. Although news interviews differ from Language Proficiency Interviews in their institutional goals and participant structure (Heritage & Roth 1995), they share the generic interview format as their speech exchange system.
8. As one reviewer noted, it bears pointing out that the repair initiator “wha-huh?” (13) belongs to the same category of “open-class” repair initiators as “Pardon?” in Extract 1. As these unspecific problem indicators define the entire preceding action as troublesome (rather than specific segments), they make relevant a repetition of the complete prior action. However, the characteristics of the repetition may differ. Here, in lines 12 and 14, we see a verbatim repetition. In contrast, the repetition occasioned by “Pardon?” in Extract 1 was partial. The difference appears to be related to the reparability of the question: The more elaborate question substitute format enables reformatting in a simpler version, whereas the direct wh-question does not leave room for trimming. However, comprehension-facilitating transformations of direct questions are possible, for instance through topicalization: “In Indonesia, what did you do?” Such modifications are well-attested in the literature on foreigner talk and interactions involving less competent speakers (e.g., Gass 2003).

References


