Participant structure and the on-line production of discourse context

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Abstract

This paper presents the micro-analysis of one interrupted and unfinished Dutch ‘sentence’ that was heard in a popular Dutch Talk Show called ‘Sonja op Zaterdag’.\(^1\) It contains a self-correction that is produced as a change in ‘footing’ (Goffman 1979). The issue is raised whether the abandonment of the sentence-under-construction should be considered a random, ‘performance’ type phenomenon or whether it can be accounted for systematically in terms of discourse-level constraints on the interruptability of sentences (cf. Schegloff 1979). I will argue that the latter seems to be the case. Analyses of the data and hypothetical alternatives to it reveal that observed differences can be articulated in a dynamic discourse model in which utterances may themselves produce contextual updates (Polanyi and Scha 1983; Polanyi 1988; applied to classroom data by van Dam van Isselt 1993). It is suggested that the model should be extended to acknowledge ‘defective’ sentences.

1. Ethnographic background to the data

The interactional situation that contextualizes the data to be discussed needs little ethnographic elaboration. Most Dutch readers will be familiar with it and others may substitute any other talk show they are familiar with in which a well-known public figure is interviewed in front of an audience. What has the floor is a dialogue in which questions and answers are exchanged in a dyadic turn–by–turn format, speaker and listener roles switching back and forth between precisely two ratified participants. However, a broadcast interview distinguishes other subsets of participants as Goffman has shown at length in his ‘Radio Talk’ (1981). The dialogue is of a staged, formal kind, intended as it is for the eyes and ears of both a co-present and nonpresent overhearing audience. The former have no access to the ‘interview’ floor apart from producing back-channel cues like laughter or collusive communication at low voice. The latter are even more indirectly addressed, and, except in the case that phoning in to ask questions is

\(^1\) I thank Remko Scha for his valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper.
encouraged, are neither heard nor seen. At the global ‘speech event’ level, however, their involvement in and evaluation of what happens on stage, is of crucial importance, in some sense the point of the whole exercise. One of the ritual constraints on interactional behaviour originating at that public ‘overhearer’ level is that the illusion of ‘fresh talk’ should be created and sustained. If the interview has been rehearsed and edited prior to being broadcast that fact is usually concealed from the audience, and reference to it is taboo. Another requirement oriented to — which it shares with lay contexts of talk but which is even more salient in publicly transmitted, professional ones — is that speech production should be faultless, occurring without a hitch.

In the data that concern us here the interviewer, Sonja, is asking the interviewee, Ed van Thijn, whether he isn’t sorry he is no longer Home Secretary — he was forced to resign in the summer of 1994 and his diary about the events leading up to his resignation has just been published. When asking this question, Sonja inadvertently refers to van Thijn as the (ex) Foreign Secretary: a ritual fault as well as a substantive one. She corrects herself but then seems to get into further trouble: she suddenly stops and the sentence is left unfinished. In this paper I will try and trace why this could be the case and whether, as so often, there is orderliness in deviance.

2. Discussion of the data: discourse in sentences

In the data to be discussed a correction occurs in the middle of a question. A general remark may be in order on the pragmatic paradox of oral repair — and its essential impossibility. Talk is a linear phenomenon and utterances cannot be unsaid in the physical sense. For that reason oral corrections contain a cue signalling to listeners that a back-tracking operation has to be set in motion. The ‘trouble source’ has to be identified, then wiped out, as it were, and replaced by a more correct or felicitous alternative. But in replacing what was there before, corrections necessarily also replace what was to come before the correction occurred: by definition there is no ratified ‘slot’ for them in the discourse. As early as 1967 Hockett emphasized the inferiority and ineffectiveness of oral repair in comparison with written ‘editing’: ‘In speaking (...) erasure is a physical impossibility, and its seeming social equivalent is only a polite convention that usually works only superficially. Nevertheless all of us do try and cover up some of our lapses’ (reprint in Fromkin 1973:100). In view of the pervasive occurrence of both the lapses themselves and attempts to cover them up in natural

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2 ‘The production of faults can be progressive. The occurrence of one imperfection increases the chance of another, and that in turn increases the chance of consequent ones — as if, indeed, there were such a thing as getting rattled.’ (Goffman 1981:204)
talk, their investigation should be addressed seriously. They construct ‘inter­ruptions’ that affect and constrain the form of utterances — including sentences: ‘most commonly the integrity of the sentence is NOT preserved (Schegloff 1979: 268). I will therefore explore the hypothesis that there is a connection between the fact that the sentence was left incomplete and the fact that it was interrupted by a repair.

Data (1) global transcription & gloss in English

\[↑, ↓ = \text{marked rise, fall in pitch; CAPITALS = emphasis}\]

Sonja SPIJT het u niet dat u niet meer minister van buitenlandse za- [cut-off]
[pause; change in tone; short laugh] ↓ minister van BUITENlandse zaken!
minister van ↑ BINTERNlandse zaken ...
‘Aren’t you sorry that you no longer minister of exterior aff- [cut-off]
[pause; change in tone; short laugh] ↓ minister of EXterior affairs!
minister of ↑ I Nterior affairs ..’

van Thijn [short pause] Nou [Well]... [answers the question]

Something funny is going on here: the finite verb form bent (‘are’) which one would expect to follow in final position in Dutch subclauses of this type, is missing. As it is, the sentence is left hanging in the air, a deficient, incomplete token of its type. After a short pause van Thijn answers the question anyhow: in terms of the continuation of the current question–answer structure and the retrieval of speech act intentions there is no problem. We could dismiss the matter, decide that performance type features were at issue and leave it at that. However, the occurrence of the interruptive self-correction might lead one to hypothesize that a global constraint on the interruptability of sentences i.e. the accommodation of repair segments in the sentence-as-planned could be at issue. That strong hypothesis can be rejected at once. There are numerous counter-examples, for instance in the Schegloff corpus, some even involving a sequence of turns. A counter-example with respect to the data under discussion will be briefly discussed, prior to re-examining our original data in more detail.

Correction procedures may involve both current speaker or ‘self’ and one or more ‘others’. The preferred format for doing self-corrections, according to Schegloff et al. (1977), is a ‘same-turn self-initiated self-correction’, often pre­ceded by a repair initiator. Applied to our data such a procedure would yield the following ‘unmarked’ alternative:

Data (2) Hypothetical self-correction: ‘anonymous subtitler’ mode

\[S\]

Spijt het u niet dat u niet meer minister van buitenlandse za-
(sorry) ↓ minister van BINTERNlandse zaken – bent?
Clearly, in this case the continuation of the sentence is quite unproblematic. The sentential frame has been preserved intact in spite of the interruption and when the correction is over it can automatically be picked up again and finished as planned. We will have to refine our hypothesis: apparently a ‘sub voce’, local correction of the noun-phrase-under-construction is allowed. In that case the projected slot for Dutch bent is still ‘open’ and can be filled. Why is there no problem here? Let us consider and compare the prosodic, paralinguistic and nonverbal features involved in the production of the two types of self-corrections.

Low-intoned self-corrections of the type exemplified in data (2) occur frequently in everyday talk. They are typically produced in an editorial voice, as a kind of subtitling or gloss, signalling to listeners that what’s coming in next does not have the status of ‘next move’ but ‘other move’: in an underhand way they briefly insert a collusive meta-comment to the unit-under-construction, not the projected legitimate ‘next move’. Precisely this feature of their production enables listeners to recognize that a structural discourse shift has occurred and that they are to follow the editorial instruction implied: ‘read “a” as “b” and overwrite’. Conditions for the successful execution of such pseudo-off-record corrections are not only that they are recognized as initiating such a collusive subunit, but also, crucially, their timing: they have to be completed in the current context i.e. before some signal that could be interpreted as the initiation of a ‘next’ constituent is encountered.

Having made plausible that an inobtrusive, conventionally ‘given’ format is available to do the correction without upsetting sentence order or syntax, one could wonder why Sonja, who is an experienced public speaker, did not make use of that option. The Hockett quote may be enlightening in this respect: though we can pretend that the lapse did not happen and ignore it and overwrite it, it is still a social fact and public event; social conventions work only superficially and cannot erase the deed: it happened. And it has an ‘author’ as well as an ‘animator’ (Goffman 1981:144). In this social situation it was crucially important for the ‘author’ in her professional role of ‘animator’ or ‘public speaker’ to display competence in speaking: ward off threat to face implied in producing lapses or other influencies.

Features of the wider discourse context and situation are potentially significant and need to be taken into account. I mentioned above that the ‘interview’ event going on here is not just a dialogue or series of questions and answers exchanged between two participants: it is an embedding or public performance of one, that is designed and staged to be overheard by a co-present audience as well as being broadcast for nonpresent listeners. Goffman (1981) records how ritual

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3 Schegloff reports similar observations: ‘what has been “edited” is not entirely out’; ‘interlocutors can still answer questions that have been “replaced”’ (1979:265).
constraints on the production of speech errors prompt all kinds of evasive actions on the part of radio announcers: one strategy they use to distance themselves from their lapses is to construct another ‘author’ for them through markers of tone and voice. They locally embed a different speaker role, a different ‘self’, who makes fun of the earlier slip. These discourse shifts can only be identified by attending to prosodic and paralinguistic features (laughs, grunts, sighs etc.) of speech production. What constitutes ‘the’ data? Can more than one state of talk be sustained simultaneously? It seems we have overlooked some significant features accompanying the production of utterances.

More detailed transcription of data (1): ‘embedded actress’ mode

1 Sonja    SPIJT het u niet dat u niet meer minister van buitenlandse za- [cut-off]
2    --> [pause; sits back; looks away from addressee; different tone of voice; low key]
3    minister van ↑ BINNENlandse zaken!

The prosodic and paralinguistic features added in the ‘interline’ between lines 1 and 2 construct an interruption or ‘time-out’ with respect to the current ‘interview’ situation and the interactional roles associated with it. Briefly Ed van Thijn is not ‘current addressee’, as indicated by markers of gaze (breaking eye contact) and body language (move out of current stance). Over his head a mini-act is staged for the overhearer floor. Clusters of markers signal the structural discourse shift. Note that the repair mirrors exactly the type of intervention we would have expected had some physically ‘other’ speaker initiated the correction. If current speaker or ‘self’ fails to produce a correction in same turn, the next-preferred format, according to Schegloff et al., is for some ‘other’ to intervene in the following manner: a slight pause is inserted by which ‘next turn’ is delayed somewhat; then that turn is used to signal ‘error status’ for what has just been said by verbatim ‘copying’ or quoting the suspect materials — thus providing yet another opportunity for the original speaker to do the preferred move, i.e. self-correct. In our data something similar happens. Out of the blue suddenly another Sonja emerges from behind the old Sonja, a critical overhearer of her own output: the speaker in a different stance or ‘footing’. By switching voices, Sonja projects herself in the talk: ‘The old animator is cast off, as it were, (...) leaving a new animator in full charge of matters — the one able to fluently intone the correction’ (Goffman 1981:289). The new animator — I will call her Sonja₂ — expresses mild exasperation at what the original Sonja, Sonja₁ had just said: ‘silly girl, how could you say something that stupid!’ (tone of voice and derisive laugh warrant that interpretation). Sonja has doubled herself in an attempt to ward off threat to face. But blame is implied and blame has to be assigned where it is due. We, the audience included, may all laugh at the animator — only it turns out that wasn’t Sonja; the error was owned by someone else. The ritual requirement that
public speakers produce 'seemingly faultless fresh talk' (ibid.242) has been oriented to by a dramatic interlude of self-talk.

This anecdotal discussion of shifting contexts and interactional roles has not yet provided us, however, with a clear explanation or understanding of why Sonja should (have to) discontinue her sentence after she played her little 'act'. Has she indeed 'lost' her syntax? If so, why in data (1) and not in the hypothetical data (2)? Before we proceed to a more systematic investigation into what constraints on the interruptability of sentences might be involved and at what level(s) of description they should be defined, a last speculation relevant to our data and argument, is whether Sonja, having embarked on the theatrical correction mode, might have produced a different 'discourse-grammatical' continuation of her 'sentence'. Data (3) provides such an option, I believe. In order to highlight its most salient features I have indented the interruption:

Data (3): Hypothetical continuation of data (1)

1 SPIJT het u niet
2 dat u niet meer minister van buitenlandse za-
3 "minister van BUITENlandse zaken"
4 minister van BINNENlandse zaken!
5 -- > dat u dat niet meer bent? [literally: that you that no longer are]

In line 5 a back-tracking operation picks up the sentence at a point beyond the trouble source and finishes it from there.

Syntax does not acknowledge defective or incomplete sentences. We need a back-up system that defines the accessibility of already processed input data and accounts for the accommodation of new incoming units in an existing state of talk. The dynamic discourse model is an attractive candidate as it acknowledges units smaller than the sentence, processes them one by one as they come in and recognizes structural as well as linear transitions. In order to provide the tools to refine our intuitions and hypotheses about the data we will specify its main features below.

3. A hierarchically-ordered dynamic discourse model: most salient features

The discourse model proposed builds a structural description of an incoming discourse that accounts for changing contexts for the interpretation of utterances. Natural language data are processed in an incremental, left-to-right, linear fashion, one sentence or sentence fragment or elementary discourse constituent unit ('dcu') at a time. Out of these elementary units larger structures are built that are hierarchically ordered. One may think of this ordering in terms of the 'stack' metaphor: as a stack of units under construction. Thus, for each incoming unit the question is asked: 'what do we do with this unit; where on the stack does
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it have to go?' At the deepest level, the bottom of the stack, we find symbols like 'Interaction' and 'Speech event' which determine the nonlinguistic context of utterances and which define the 'default' context for the interpretation of events. It has to contain enough information to be able to resolve problems of deixis and reference of the first incoming unit. At the highest level, on the top of the stack, is the unit currently being processed. In between, all kinds of ongoing discourse activities (units-under-construction) may still be accessible for participants. These units can be called, interrupted, resumed, overruled and reembedded. Participants need to recognize these structural discourse shifts in order to understand what's going on: current utterances may be part of a meta-comment to a story-under-construction in answer to a question that was quoted as a question someone else asked in another interaction. All of these complex contextual changes and contextual updates have to be accounted for: that's why we need the stack.

A parsing mechanism assigns each incoming unit to a particular node in the 'Discourse Parse Tree' in accordance with rules and constraints laid down in the grammar. After an utterance has been processed, it will have changed, updated a hearer’s current information state: given the old state, the utterance produces a new one. Utterance meanings are functions from states to states. Nonlinguistic events, e.g. the entrance of a new undefined participant can also cause such updates.

Elementary dcus, when linguistically encoded, will typically have syntactic realization as a single clause, and phonological realization as a single phonological phrase — but they can also be realized nonverbally: by a semiotic gesture. Elementary dcus are always indexed for both socially determined context (e.g. 'interaction'; 'speech event') and linguistically determined context (e.g. 'story'; 'sentence') by means of feature-value pairs. Discourse operators that move the discourse in and out of the various units and subunits-under-construction may have verbal, nonverbal, paralinguistic or prosodic realization. Among those, 'POP'- and 'PUSH'-markers are the most relevant to our data. Pop-markers signal the moving out of a current unit (termination) and, as a side-effect, the resumption of some structurally available unit higher up in the Discourse Parse Tree. Push-markers move the discourse into a new (sub)unit which may be interruptive of an ongoing discourse activity.

The next question is obvious: how do we know which units (ongoing discourse activities) are structurally available and which are not? A general constraint defined in the grammar is that only nodes at the right edge of the discourse parse tree are open for expansion, i.e. to form new (sub)structures. The default case is for an incoming dcu to be subordinated or coordinated to the current node. In the case of a mismatch between 'incoming' and 'current' context frame indexes, a search is started for a (partial) match at an open right edge node higher up in the discourse parse tree. Open right edges can be expanded in two ways: by constructing a new dcu by means of a construction rule or extending an existing dcu by means of an extension rule. A return to a previously processed
open dcu (possibly indicated by one or more pop-markers) closes off the most recently processed dcu as well as all intermediate dcus. Constituents thus closed off become left nodes which are no longer accessible for expansion: ‘any attempt to add propositions to a closed unit will be accompanied by intonational repair or initiation signals and will receive a syntactic and phonological encoding as a new rather than a resumed unit’ (Polanyi 1988:616).

4. Re-analysis of the data

The discourse model described above allows us to be more articulate about our questions and intuitions with respect to the data — and explore the interruptability of sentences more systematically. We can now draw up hypotheses about our observations. The different types of corrections or interruptions involve a different type of structural subordination. Apparently they have a different effect on the structure of the stack and the accessibility of the units that are still on it. What does ‘not being able to finish a sentence’ mean in terms of this formalism? Can it articulate our claim that data (2) and (3) are unambiguously acceptable, whereas the continuation of data (1) as planned is blocked? Below, the relevant features of each of the data will be stated and discussed in the context of our argument.

Re-analysis of data (1) and (3): In data (1) prosodic and paralinguistic markers signal new interactional parameters (embedded play-acting) and therefore the creation of a new constituent and node. As that closes off intermediate nodes, the sentence fragment (dcu) has to be treated as a finished constituent and is no longer ‘current’, i.e. available for expansion. It ends up as an incomplete representation of a sentence with an unfilled variable for the verb. As for data (3), it was argued that there was an option for Sonja to continue after her little act, had she wanted to do so: not a very ‘neat’ one but possible all the same. The interruption has effected an update of the last-processed constituent but has also necessitated its closure. When the act is over, the interruption is popped off the stack and the information stored at the closed-off node must be re-encoded as a new, elliptical structure that is minimally able to ‘stand on its own’ as a syntactic unit in spite of having gaps.

Re-analysis of data (2): In data (2) the ‘sub voce’ correction does not count as a ‘next event’ in the current state of the discourse: it does not create a new node but effects an update at the current one. On its completion the previously processed dcu or sentence fragment still stands unaffected and is open for expansion: the value for the open variable can just be filled in.
Discussion. When building a structural interpretation of our data (1), we recognize the cut-off, changes in tone, bodily orientation, gaze and phonation as realizations of a discourse operator or 'push-marker'. A new unit is pushed onto the stack involving a parameter reset: next incoming utterances have to be processed in a different state of the discourse than the one that obtained before. The unit currently under construction (the sentence segment) is prematurely closed off and stored as if it were a finished object. The interruption locally constructs new interactional parameters (and assigns a complex value to 'current speaker'). When the embedded acting is over and the interruption is popped off the stack, the sentential phrase is no longer available for expansion. Because of the interactional frame-break that was produced on-line although no physically 'other' person was involved, it ends up as an incomplete representation of a sentence with an unfilled variable for verb.

In data (2) the 'sub voce' correction introduces a different dimension to the talk. A collusive strategy not unlike 'hand-to-mouth' gestures or whispering or briefly switching to a different code changes the status of 'what gets said' as not being a 'next event' but a 'nonevent' in the current setting and diminishes participants' responsibility for it. Conventional assumptions about mutual knowledge are cancelled or relaxed: something got said but I don't know whether you heard and I do not want to go on record for having said anything. This results in a peculiar case of embedding which can be subordinated with respect to the present information state without changing anything: it provides update instructions via the 'overhearer floor'. It locally constructs a frame that freezes the interactional situation by the speaker briefly retreating in a private, non-interactional stance, updating the current state 'on the sly', without taking over the floor. When completed, everything still stands as it was before the interruption and the sentence can be resumed and continued as planned, in 'normal' voice.

It is interesting to note — and relevant in the context of this discussion — that the same structural strategy can also be used to achieve the opposite effect: the correction of a physically 'other' person may be accommodated in some speaker's turn-in-progress and interactionally assigned the status of a self-correction although it was in fact 'authored' by 'other'. This phenomenon can be observed regularly in classroom talk and can be verified by the fact that, in the case of a teacher 'prompt', 'next slot' is left open for a routine teacher evaluation that constructs the error as 'not having occurred or at least not having been publicly perceived': 'very good'. In that case an update at the current node is effected and snappy timing is essential to block the interpretation that a next constituent is on the way (cf. van Dam van Isselt:98).

4 A manipulative version of this strategy (bending over in a conspiratorial manner; stage whisper) was used by Newt Gingrich's mother to make a rude comment about Hilary Clinton without claiming full responsibility for having said it.
If data (3) represents a ‘discourse-grammatical’ option to bring the sentence to a conclusion, how can we trace the nature of the ‘work’ involved in terms of the model? A back-tracking operation beyond the closure effected by the interruption is signalled by the re-run of earlier material (double ‘POP’); it involves the initiation of a new unit which anaphorically refers to the information (‘dat’) stored at the intervening node rather than actualizing that node. In spite of the anaphoric relationship and the gaps (ellipsis), the information has to be assigned the status of a new independent unit and receives a new phonological encoding. On the basis of one example one cannot, of course, speak of ‘evidence’, but we may observe that this is in accordance with what we would expect, given the constraints: ‘The restriction that only the rightmost nodes are structurally accessible seems to yield the correct predictions about the encoding forms of incoming propositions (Polanyi 1988:616)”

5. Conclusions

‘The common dyadic model of speaker - hearer specifies sometimes too many, sometimes too few, sometimes the wrong participants’ (Hymes 1974:54 quoted in Goffman 1981:144)

The micro-analysis of a ‘defective sentence’ was undertaken for multiple reasons. In the first place I wanted to establish that the notion ‘participant’ is often underanalyzed: in data (1) ‘too many’ participants would be postulated in Sonja’s interruptive self-talk; ‘too few’ in the dialogic interview as a whole, by not counting present and nonpresent audiences; ‘the wrong’ participant by assuming that van Thijn is addressee throughout, without recognizing Sonja’s time-out. Just as I can quote and re-embed what Goffmann wrote that Hymes said (see above), people can quote and re-embed themselves. Sonja does both: she quotes her own fault and then locally invents an ‘other self’ to do the correction, thus embedding one stance in another and one interaction in another — all in the course of a sentence-under-construction. That last observation has led to the main topic of the paper: an exploration of the ways ‘discourse can be inside sentences just as sentences can be in discourse’ (Schegloff 1979:266). The analyses suggest that ‘sub voce’ self-corrections can be accommodated freely while mini-performances cannot: their subordination at sentence-constituent level seems to be blocked. In order to trace the nature of constraints on the interruptability of sentences, the Polanyi–Scha discourse model needs to be extended in such a way that deficient sentence tokens can be acknowledged. This seems to be technically possible. More data in the area of the sentence-discourse interface must be subjected to detailed analyses in order to verify the generalizations proposed.

5 I cannot resist a minor correction: sentences are always in discourse(s).
Two other issues were briefly addressed. Paralinguistic and prosodic features of utterances function as discourse shifters or discourse operators; they have to be considered part of the form of an utterance and should be included in 'the' data. The analysis has implications also for proposals in the area of the organization of repair. 'Self' and 'other' are locally assigned values of parameters, not real-world utterers. They can apply simultaneously and be changed in the course of an evolving 'sentence', thus constructing the complex notion 'current identity': a speaker in one of her possible roles or guises.

References

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