An Analysis of the Oral Academic Discourse in Discussions

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[Abstract] In this study in progress, definition of terms, research questions, and the comparison with previous research on academic discourse are first presented. Then a conceptual framework consisting of three theories-- speech act theory by Austin (1962) and Seale (1969), frame theory by Goffman (1986) and Tannen (1993) and politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1983) – is explicated for analyzing the constructs of academic discourse and the way of carrying out the academic talk in interaction. Lastly a sample segment of the data extracted from tape-recorded verbal interaction between doctoral students and their professor is analyzed. Elaborative analysis in the future study will reveal useful conversational strategies in academic discourse community.

1.0   Introduction

In this global world, it has become inevitable for non-native speakers to be familiarized with an art of oral academic discourse in English in order to be a competent member of academic discourse community and to survive as an academic in no matter what kind of area we may be in. However, it is occasionally pointed out that Japanese academia in general cannot voice or take the floor in an appropriate way at an academic conference, for instance. Discourse analysis of this speech genre, elaborate enough to assist Japanese native speakers to learn the art of oral academic discourse, has been still hard to be found. In this paper, I would like to explicate the framework for analysis and show how the academic discourse data will be analyzed using a single segment.

1.1   Definition of terms

Some terms are often used ambiguously or in various manners. Here they must be treated in more specific way as follows;

1.1.1   Discourse

Discourse is a buzzword and used in many different ways. According to many researchers on discourse (e.g., Tannen, 1984), 'discourse' is language in sequence beyond the sentence. Other researchers (e.g., Brown & Yule, 1983) specify 'discourse' as language in use. 'Discourse' often in a capital D refers to language use as a social practice (e.g., Foucault 1971; Gee, 1996). In this study, 'discourse' refers to language in use in sequence beyond the sentence in a social context labeled as 'academic'.

1.1.2 Academic discourse:

According to some literature (e.g., Backman et al, 1996, Backman, 2003), 'academic discourse' is treated as language used in schools, as is applied in English as Academic Purpose (EAP) (e.g., Flowedew, 2000, 2003). Searching the literature for this study, I entered 'academic discourse' as a keyword, getting Swale's 'Genre Analysis' (1990). Swales suggests English in academic and research settings but focus on writing instead of speaking. In this study, 'academic discourse' refers to language in use for 'real' academic purpose.

What does 'academic' mean? In her doctoral dissertation (1997), Major cited Adamson (1993) for definition of 'academic discourse'. According to Adamson (1993), academic competence is the knowledge or ability to succeed academically, with two levels – the lower one and higher one. The lower level is for surface proficiency processing simple facts; the higher one is referred to cognitive ability to analyze the relationship of parts to a whole, synthesize and evaluate or judge validity of argument. On the other hand, Frank Smith (1990, cited by Major, 1997) values critical thinking skills consisting of classifying, comparing, analyzing, deducting, solving, questioning, critiquing, being skeptical and drawing conclusion. Elbow (1991) cited by Waring (2000) provides four characters of academic writing, (a) a version of reality that values explicitness and straightforward organization, (b) a way of talking to each other that excludes ordinary people, (c) a note of insecurity or anxiety imbued with cautiousness and (d) an element of display or a tendency to show off. These features may not be carried over to spoken discourse; however, the term 'academic' seems to be clarified.

Taken into account the aforementioned features, focal point is placed in 'critical thinking' as a vital construct for academic discourse. Accordingly in examining the discussions of oral discourse, the sequences of argument that includes disagreements will be extracted for analysis as arguments come from critical thinking. In terms of 'critical thinking', it seems wrongly too closely related to 'critical' and Japanese people are not good at. In fact, 'critical thinking' is composed of various elements such as connecting knowledge, accepting multiple perspectives and careful speculation without jumping into conclusion, some of which the Japanese may show strengths at as Christopher Long suggested in the lecture at the annual conference of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics in 2003. In the process of analyzing and interpreting the sequences of talk in interaction, the notion of 'critical thinking' will be clarified as well.

1.1.3 Discourse analysis

Much attention has been paid to the discipline of 'discourse analysis' in Japan; however, little agreement on its exact definition has been found. In Stubbs (1983), it is pointed out that it is too vast and too lacking in focus and consensus to allow for a comprehensive account. As pointed out by some discourse analysts (e.g., Stubbs, 1983;

Brown & Yule, 1983; Coulthard, 1977), discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary approach encompassing aspects on language use from linguistics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and philosophy. For another researcher, to study discourse is to examine the complex activity we loosely call social interaction. (Cicourel, 1980, p.101 cited by Kuhn, 1984) Discourse analysis is plausibly defined as the study of language in use in some specific context from multiple perspectives.

1.2   Research questions

In this study, the following questions may be explored.
(1) What sorts of speech acts have illocutionary power in constructing academic discussions?
(2) In what way are the speech acts such as disagreements framed and organized such as in turn-takings in oral academic discussions?
(3) In verbal interactions at discussions, in what way is the face-work maintained or threatened?

1.3   Previous studies

Some studies have been done on academic discourse with various perspectives but none of them are exactly the same of mine. In my study, discourse analysis will be carried out for the data of discussions by graduate students and their professor(s) and how the academic discourse in English is constructed is explored, with the speech act of argument including disagreement, agreement and assertion focused on. This is based on the belief that critical thinking is main construct to make discourse academic. In Kuhn's study (1984), speech act theory is adopted for his analysis; however, his focus is placed on the sequential organization and lists a series of speech act to cover the discussions, starting from starter, metastatement, elicitation, challenge and so forth, instead of extracting relevant segments. I rather choose one speech act of argument that corresponds to Kuhn's challenge. Admitting that speech act theory has been criticized in many places (e.g., Geis, 1995), it seems plausible to utilize the speech act theory in setting the criterion to choose the   relevant segments from the recorded data of naturally occurring talk in interaction. The criticism regarding speech act theory has been on lack of dynamic effects and limited area to be covered; therefore, these counter phenomena can be overcome via utilizing the other disciplines and treating an extended area encompassing the target speech act.

In terms of the way in which academic discourse is constructed in discussions, I adopt frame theory as Watanabe (2000) does. In order to find out in what way the academic discourse is framed, she elaborates the interaction based on Tannen's frame theory (1993) who adopts Goffman (1986) and Baterson (1972). In this study, however, I prefer the notion of frame to invade the sphere of CA convention that refuses taking account of schema or script. By forcing CA conventions into frame theory, the analysis

becomes more explicit. As Waring explicated (2000), CA conventions are partially from or related to Goffman's interaction theory (e.g., 1969) and Gumperz' contextualization inferences (e.g., 1982). If so, the frame theory, which is developed by Goffman, can be intertwined with CA conventions though the guidelines presented by Waring (2000) clarify the opposite direction of frame theory. In an actually analysis, turn-taking system, preference organization and adjacency pair system are utilized. In Waring's study (2000), the CA convention shows up as a main approach but in this study, frame theory comes first in order to enable the in-depth analysis involving framing to be carried out by violating CA guidelines.

Politeness theory is referred to by both Khun (1984) and Waring (2000); however, both researchers took it as a supplementary tool, such as a part of interactional sociolinguistics (Waring, 2000). Khun (1984) intertwined this theory in a part of speech act theory, which I believe irrelevant in the same token of putting frame theory into CA convention not versa visa, because politeness theory criticizes speech act theory for its luck of dynamism (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Therefore, in this study, politeness theory is treated distinctively from other disciplines, though it explores interactional phenomena. Politeness theory, in this study, functions as a tool to analyze some sociocultural factors such as age, gender and/or power relations.

Tannen's analysis of academic discourse (2002) focused on 'agonism', defined as 'ritual adversativeness' by Tannen. In her study, Tannen highlighted adversativeness, which might be generated by criticizing other's work . Tannen (2002) postulated framing academic discourse may lead to negative consequences such as an assumption that critical dialogue is same as negative critique. As a result, academic discourse may become an agonistic verbal interaction. She gave some suggestions to reduce agonism, citing the metaphor for 'critical thinking' as 'a group of builders constructing a building' instead of 'a boxing match with that of a barn-raising'   (McCormick and Kahn, 1982 cited in Tannen, 2002)

2.0   Conceptual Framework

Three theories are utilized for analyzing discourse strategies, that is, where or when, how and what they verbalize in order to manage the floor at academic settings. In other words, the nature of interaction derived from verbal exchanges in academic discussions are examined, analyzed and clarified based on these three theories.

Starting with speech act theory which deals with the smallest unit of communication, I will move to frame theory consisting of schema and script according to Tannen (1993) which notion can be applied to the conversational mechanism such as turn-taking system (e.g., Sacks et al., 1974) and preference organization (e.g., Pomerantz, 1984). Lastly politeness theory is utilized for analyzing the societal relationship between participants. Power relations, social distance and face-work whose original notion comes from Goffman (1969) are considered. These three theories may

collaborate and complement each other in investigating the verbal interaction of academic discourse. They will also explore how the verbal exchanges, labeled as academic, are constructed.

2.1 Speech Act Theory

The speech act is defined as the minimal unit of linguistic communication that has meaning or means something. (Searle, 1969; Kuhn, 1984) Therefore, the first focus should be placed on speech acts when examining and analyzing the oral discourse.

According to Thomas (1995), Austin, a linguistic philosopher, started to use 'speech act' which used to refer to an utterance and the 'total situation in which the utterance is made' (Austin, 1960 cited by Thomas, 1995). If 'speech act' had kept on referring to the total situation rather than the minimal unit, various criticisms (e.g., Geis, 1995; Thomas, 1995) could have been avoided because one of the criticism is from the perspective that speech act as a minimal unit cannot function to make utterances perform actions. Thomas (1995) pointed out the terms – speech act, illocutionary act, illocutionary force, pragmatic force and just force are used interchangeably, though illocutionary act should be one of three acts specified by Austin (1962). Three acts that Austin categorized based on the effects that each utterance performs, as follows;

(1) the locutionary act   -   an utterance with a certain sense and reference,
(2) the illocutionary act -   an utterance with some sort of effect on the addressee
(3) the perlocutionary act – an utterance producing certain consequential effects on a
                real action.

The term of speech act was originally referred to the function of utterance into act; therefore, the locutionary act and speech act seems to be contradictory. Consequently, in examining the talk-in-interaction rather than conversation (Psaths, 1995), the locutionary act should be excluded. Considering the fact that speech act theory initiated the discipline of pragmatics, the locutionary act cannot be accounted because of the inability of communication. In other words, without causing any sort of effect on the addressee, valid verbal interactions cannot be performed. However Austin's performantive hypothesis collapsed, according to Thomas (1995), because the notion the performative verbs that Austin named for verbs performing action cannot be guaranteed for bringing about actions and even an absence of performatives may well bring about actions. Even so, perfomative hypothesis seems meaningful and the notion of illocutionary force is employed in this study. I believe that Austin established the basis of pragmatics by making clear what is said and what is meant.

Searle (1969) and Grice (1975), both of whom were Austin's students, developed speech act theory into more systematical and specific frameworks respectfully. Searle (1969) included indirect speech acts and demonstrated eight different speech acts such as requesting, apologizing and so forth, which have been examined and analyzed by many researchers. He also explicated felicity condition that any speech act might result

in. Grice developed a series of maxims and introduced the notion of implicature.

On the other hand, Geis (1995) claimed some drawbacks of speech act theory and proposed dynamic speech act theory orchestrating with the approaches of conversation analysis and politeness theory. Geis added the word 'dynamic' because he argued that the static theory of speech act was made dynamic via including situated-ness brought about the approaches proffered by conversation analysts and social factors via politeness theory. Geis's comprehensive theory focuses and centers on speech act theory as indicated in the name of 'dynamic speech act theory'. In this study, these theories or approaches are treated separately and applied for discourse analysis.

2.2   Frame Theory

Frame theory is utilized for analyzing the micro construction of each segments of discourse. According to Tannen (1993), the notion of frame was first introduced by Bateson (1972), who explicates frame should explain the way in which people exchange signals and agree with the intention of their messages. Goffman (1974) elaborated this notion as a socially constructed nature of reality in our interpersonal relations. According to Tannen et al (1993), there are two categories in the use of 'frame', which are interactive frames of interpretation and knowledge structures, namely schemas. The first one refers to what is going on in interaction, further elaborated to include the notion of 'footing' by Goffman (1984). Second category i.e., knowledge schema, refers to participants' expectations about what is going on in the world. These two notions – interactive frames and knowledge schemas, should interact with each other and implement the analysis of academic verbal exchanges in this study.

The notion of 'contextualization inference and cue' termed by Gumperz (1982a) refers to the surface form of utterances indicating to be functional in the signaling of interpretative frames. In collaborating the frame theory, the notion of contextualization inference and cues functions as an important apparatus for discourse analysis, revealing the features determining the academic discourse.

Some approaches developed by Conversation Analysts such as turn-taking system or preference organization are closely related to this theory, though some Conversation Analysts (e.g., Schegloff) deny including background information that interlocutors carry. Conversation Analysis (CA) is derived from ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1969) and sociology mainly of Goffman. Therefore, it should be relevant to regard frame theory as a cue to expand to CA convention.

2.2.3. Politeness Theory

The last theoretical framework is politeness theory, developed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Their theory was based on Goffman's analysis of ritual elements in social interaction that introduced the notion of 'face' (1967). According to Goffman (1967), the term 'face' originally comes from Chinese 面子, meaning a self-concept projected by others. The aspects of face as basic wants, composed of negative and

positive faces are, accordingly, applied to acts threatening positive or negative face, which is called 'face-threatening act' (FTA). Brown and Levinson formulate the theory of politeness focusing on FTA, utilizing three variables – power, social distance and imposition. In academic discourse, which may involve the notion of 'agonism' – which is defined as 'ritualized advertiveness' by Tannen (2002), it is plausible to employ this theory related to an FTA. Some socio-cultural considerations involving the social identity including gender, power relations orchestrated with interpersonal distance in oral academic discourse may have to be included. The other variable - imposition, is quite situated and depends on the context in discussion. This variable seems to be dynamically related to other two variables – power and social-distance, which per se are not always static as well.

3.0 Method
3.1 Participants
    The participants for this study are graduate students and their professors at the Japan campus of an American University. They, pursing a doctorate in education, were admitted to be a member of doctoral cohort. The cohort consists of Japanese and non-Japanese. In terms of gender, there are more female students. Based on my observation, none of them have presented any difficulty in expressing themselves in English and most of them own a Master's degree from an American University. All the participants are now engaged in teaching English in Japan at a secondly school to four-year college. The number of participants will be around twenty. I prepared an informed consent and all of the participants signed it.
3-2 Procedure
    I have attended the coursework sessions once a week from March 2003. I have observed and taken a note when appropriate and recorded the sessions. The recordings are done with an MD recorder. The focal speech event of discussion and/or verbal exchanges such as questions and answers are extracted and transcribed according to Tannen's convention (1984).

4.0 Analysis and Discussion
    The segments of verbal exchanges in discussions are interpreted on both micro-level and macro-level. The verbal exchanges are constructed by both speakers and hearers. Through the analysis of the way in which they exchange verbally represents 'being academic', the elements charactering 'being academic' are crystallized. Speech acts such as disagreement, persuasion, assertion and the like, appropriate in discussions are focused on in the process of this micro-analysis. In addition, the analysis of collocation is added for pedagogical applications.
    The following is one of the segments from the doctoral seminar on testing at an American University that I observed.

1.   Professor: what kind of hypothesis is that?
2.   Students: null hypotheses=
3.   Professor: =null.(.) yeah, that's the basis of everything that we do essentially for all hypotheses. (.)
        we don't want them to be true but the way we show that they are not true is by rejecting it.=
4.   Student: =we are not going to care for [it.
5.   Professor: [WE could care though (.) because what's happening maybe the case the negative case randomly fluctuated. SO: we are looking at the TV screen when we can reject that (.) then we could say they parallel
        that's the whole logic.
        that's all about.

(Transcription convention: Tannen, 1984)

The speech act of the utterance (1) is *elicitation* because the professor elicits the students' involvement, calling for the attention from the students. In the preceding part not shown above, he lectures and by this utterance he shifts the frame of lecturing into questioning or eliciting some sort of involvement in the seminar from the students. And the students give the correct response in the line (2). The professor has a power as well as obligation of giving a meaningful session which satisfies the students. In observing this verbal exchange, I had a feeling that the question given by the professor was taken too simple for some of the students but the professor seemed to make sure whether the students are equipped with a basis of statistics and listened to his lecture. In response of the students' answering the question, the professor latches on the students' utterance (2). This latching may be interpreted as an affirmative feedback or agreement. As some literature suggest (e.g., Pomeranz, 1984) no pause may indicate assessment of agreement. Regarding the organization of turn-taking system (e.g., Sacks et al, 1974), the turn (2) is much shorter than the turns taken by the professor. By latching on the students' utterance at the turn (3), the professor controls the size of students' turn at the transition relevance place, as well as showing the assessment of agreement. The turns (1) (2) and (3) construct the sequence of I (initiation) – R (response) – F (feedback) typical of classroom verbal interaction as proposed by Sinclair et al (1982).

On the other hand, 'yeah' in the turn (3) following the latched 'null' is regarded as an interactive discourse marker (Schiffrin, 1987). The professor uses 'yeah' in a rising intonation as shown above after a micro pause as he does here and in many other places not shown here. The professor, who is internationally well-known as an established scholar, may be trying to involve the doctoral students in his discourse as a token of solidarity supposedly. 'yeah' as a discourse

marker here in an academic discourse community is observed in 'non-academic' discourse community as well; however, here 'yeah' may function as a persuasion and an opening of the following elaboration as well.

At the end of the turn (3), one student takes the floor in the turn (4). The student latches on the professor's turn (3) as the professor does. By latching on the previous turn, the floor is gained here. As some social scientists notice (e.g., Foucault, 1972, Tannen, 1994), the power is in flux and dynamically interacts and/or coexists with other elements. In terms of face-work (an activity to negotiate the face at interactions), latching at the place, where is assumed not to be a transition relevance place, is regarded as a face-threatening act (FTA). Whether the place in which the student takes the floor at (4) is a transition relevant place is not obvious but the professor seems to be in the middle of elaboration and the student cuts the flow of his verbal action. The same action of latching at the turn (3) and (4) may be interpreted in a different way because the turn (2), where only two words are projected as a turn, presumably constructs a complete turn constructional unit; on the other hand, the turn (3) seems to be continual and the professor may intend to continue his elaboration. 'Knowledge is power' (Foucault, 1972) is projected in the academic discourse community as well as in other contexts. Thus, the professor here may well be rendering 'power'. However, the utterance proffered by the professor is impeded by the student. This phenomenon indicates the fluctuated dynamism of power relations.

The last turn (5) of this sample data starts by the professor's overlapping. The professor uses the high-pitched tone in overlapping the turn (4). This strategy may function as an emphatic disagreement with the previous turn. According to the literature (Pomeranz, 1984), however, disagreement can be indicated by a delayed response. Regarding the preference organization, Bilmes (1988), for instance, postulates the preference of disagreement in the context of discussions. Considering the constructs of so-called academic discourse, the features cast by 'critical thinking' may count. As one phase, 'critical thinking' may be harbored at the verbal exchanges of disagreements. In other words, the academic discourse is constructed via verbal exchanges of disagreements accompanied by legitimate endorsements of rationales. Here in this sample data, the professor proffers the speech act of *disagreement* and the rationale to endorse the disagreement with the student's utterance in (4). As a strategy in the turn (5), the professor uses the disagreement marker 'though' in order to project the position. At the same time, 'could', which is the auxiliary verb of subjunctive mode or mitigation, is employed. This strategy may be interpreted as reducing the FTA of the students. At the same time, 'could' may maintain the professor's 'face' of a professional academic because mitigating and/or subjunctive mode may allow for other possibilities. Absolute mode may devaluate the creditability of the professor as a professional

academic.

5.0 Concluding remarks

Even a small segmental sample data above reveals the complicated organization of verbal interaction at an academic setting. Further analysis of other segments in sequence will suggest that the participants interact and mediate each other and negotiate in a dynamic way via English. Utilizing each theoretical framework, the minute interaction should be clarified, as well.

For pedagogical implications for non-native speakers of English in an academic community, appropriate collocation per se will be presented in the future study. In the limited amount of data in this paper, for instance, 'though' and 'could' in the turn (5) may be provided the learners of academic discourse as their conversational strategy.

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