Ellipsis Marks in Interaction on Discussion Forums: The Case of Czech Pre-intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to introduce selected results of an analysis of pre-intermediate English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' interaction on asynchronous discussion forums. The findings are based on a learner corpus (299 postings within 8 discussion threads) compiled from two discussion tasks which were a part of a blended learning EFL course. The participants were Czech university students in the EFL course. Their proficiency in English was slightly below the fully developed CEFR A2 level. Conversation analysis (CA) was conducted on the corpus. The inductive and emic nature of CA made it possible to uncover some specific mechanisms underlying the learners' interaction on the forum. The results presented in this paper are related to non-verbal aspects of the learners' interaction on the forum, particularly to the use of ellipsis marks (i.e. multiple dots). It was discovered that ellipsis marks were used for listing, transition, personal evaluation, referring to the previous posting and asking for response when taking leave, thus ranging from non-interactive uses functioning on a sentence level to highly interactive uses which co-constructed exchanges on the forum. One of the most interesting findings is that when used at the end of a posting which included (explicitly or implicitly) a question or a request for answer, the posting was always replied to. On the other hand, when ellipsis marks were used at the end of a posting presenting one's opinion, the posting was never replied to. We interpret the latter use of ellipsis marks as completing the evaluation. The findings are related to other research findings and it is concluded that interaction on a discussion forum presents a specific platform, differing from speech or writing. The relevance of the paper to foreign language teaching and ICT in education lies in the outcomes of the analysis, i.e. the description of different uses of ellipsis marks in online interaction. The findings cast light on the nature of learner-learner interaction in a foreign language and on the ways of their utilizing ellipsis marks to express a wide range of meanings. More generally, this paper discusses how ellipsis marks helped the learners' reach mutual understanding, i.e. intersubjectivity. Thus the paper contributes to the theoretical grasp of online learner-learner interaction in English as a foreign language.

Keywords: interaction, computer-mediated communication, conversation analysis, ellipsis marks, discussion forum, English as a foreign language

1. Introduction

This study presents selected results from a larger research project whose main aim was to investigate the learning and use of English as a foreign language in a group of pre-intermediate students in a blended learning course (e.g. Tůma 2010, 2012). Based on the texts produced by students interacting on asynchronous discussion forums, a learner corpus was compiled. Since it seemed that some of the analyses, grounded in the cognitive SLA (second language acquisition) framework, resulted in inconclusive results, a more social SLA orientation was adopted in subsequent analyses in order to capture the nature of learner-learner interaction. Using conversation analysis, we described some of the underlying mechanisms regarding interaction in one discussion thread (Tůma 2013). In this study we present the results of an extended analysis capturing the whole corpus (i.e. eight discussion threads) and concentrate on the use of ellipsis marks as one of the aspects of non-verbal interactional means, which the previous study (Tůma 2013) did not address.

The structure of this study is the following. First, we briefly review studies on interaction on discussion forums. Second, we introduce the methodological background to researching interaction by means of conversation analysis. Third, we introduce the context for the study. Fourth, we present selected outcomes of the conversation analysis and discuss them.

2. Interaction on discussion forums

The shared activity and mutual influence among learners constitutes a fundamental part of the teaching and learning processes both in in-class teaching and online. Due to the grounding of the research presented in this study in dialogism (and relatedly in conversation analysis, see below) we prefer the term *interaction* to other terms such as communication or discourse, which seem to imply other theoretical and epistemological positions. We understand the term interaction in line with its etymology, i.e. comprising the adverb/preposition *inter* (between, among) and noun action borrowed from Latin *actio* (performing, doing), thus referring to the mutual influencing among participants.

We agree with Crystal (2011, p. 21) in that language used in online interaction "is identical to neither speech nor writing, but selectively and adaptively displays properties of both". Furthermore, different modes of delivery seem to differ in a number of features (Crystal 2011). It is therefore vital that (not only) educational research describe and understand the nature of online interaction.

Interaction in online settings has been studied from a number of perspectives, including quantitative linguistic approaches and conversation analysis. In the following paragraphs we outline some of the studies conducted in these traditions as well as authoritative accounts of the nature of online interaction.

Although the features of online interaction include the discourse, syntactic, lexical and morphological levels (for an overview, see Herring 2012), we focus mainly on typography. In online interaction generally, participants use a number of non-alphabetic symbols, non-standard capitalization, emoticons, drawings composed of keyboard characters and multiple punctuation (Herring 2012). Vandergriff (2013) used a microanalytic approach to study how multiple punctuation, lexical surrogates (e.g. "hmmm") and emoticons were used by a group of advanced learners of German. Emoticons have been studied extensively (for an overview, see Dresner & Herring 2010) and letter repetitions were studied, for example, by Kalman and Gergle (2014), who quantitatively approached a corpus of emails written within a US-based company. As far as ellipsis marks and blank turns are concerned, Ong (2011) analyzed how 16–17 year old Singaporean students used these features in a quasisynchronous chat.

As far as research on interaction on discussion forums is concerned, there exist a number of studies adopting conversation analysis (e.g. Stommel & Meijman 2011) to study online interaction more generally. Conversation analysis has also been employed to study specific aspects of online interaction (e.g. Ong 2011).

This study builds on the author's previous work (mainly Tůma 2013) in which one discussion thread was analyzed to reveal establishing the types of exchanges, the participants' dealing with redundant and late messages, the ways of using emoticons and the participants' (re)orientation towards the learning task. A follow up analysis was aimed at more in-depth exploration of the way specific typographic features were used in the discussions. In the present study we focus on ellipsis marks.

For the purposes of our research, we adopt dialogism as an epistemological framework and conversation analysis presents an analytic tool.

3. Dialogism and conversation analysis

Linell (1998) introduces dialogism along with monologism, in whose opposition dialogism can be understood. Relatedly, Marková (1982) speaks of the Cartesian and Hegelian frameworks.

Whereas in monologism the individual is viewed as an analytical unit, dialogism presupposes actions and interactions in their contexts as analytical units (Linell 1998, p. 7). In monologism, cognitive functioning is often viewed through the computational metaphor, which implies one-way understanding of communication. The speaker (sender) produces an utterance to be decoded by the listener (receiver), which presupposes the passive role of the listener (Marková 1982, pp. 60–79; Rommetveit 1988). However, in dialogism interaction is understood as the mutual reaching of higher intersubjectivity, which implies active roles of the participants (Marková 1982, pp. 140–183). It follows that each utterance presupposes a partner to whom it is addressed (Vološinov 1973, p. 85).

In monologism, interaction is viewed as information transfer from the sender to the receiver. Thus interaction becomes "largely an epiphenomenon, reduceable to sequences of individual actions" (Linell 1998, pp. 23–24). On the other hand, dialogism views interaction as a collective process in which the participants mutually influence each other and in which any utterance "makes response to something and is calculated to be responded to in turn" (Vološinov 1973, p. 72).

From the above positions it follows that context of interaction is viewed in different ways in the two frameworks. Whereas in monologism one can decontextualize utterances (Rommetveit 1988), in dialogism context plays an important role (Vološinov 1973, pp. 85–93). Context in dialogism can comprise the previous utterances and the situatedness of utterances. It should also be stressed that context in dialogism is viewed

dynamically: on the one hand, the aspects of context are pre-structured, on the other hand they are re-newed and re-constructed during interaction (Linell 1998, pp. 127–158).

As far as the nature of language is concerned, dialogism generally views language as a form of social action, which is also relevant to conversation analysis (Schegloff et al. 2002, pp. 4–6), in which interaction realized by means of language is referred to as "talk-in-interaction" or "institutional talk" (Drew & Heritage 1992).

It should be pointed out that the dividing line between ordinary talk-in-interaction and institutional talk is rather blurred (Drew & Heritage 1992, p. 21). In the context of this study, the institutional character of the interaction under investigation was in that the participants used English to interact despite their shared mother tongue (Czech) and also in that they contributed to the discussion forum as a part of the course assessment. The way the task was designed (see below) also shaped the interaction.

Conversation analysis (henceforth CA) was employed in this research as the main analytic tool. CA aims at understanding social order through analysis of talk-in-interaction, building on ethnomethodology, which is compatible with dialogism as discussed above.

The underlying assumption is that talk-in-interaction is important in social life in terms of both everyday concerns and society at large (ten Have 2007, p. 10). Relatedly, CA deals with naturally occurring talk-in-interaction, which is the object of analysis. Other defining positions of CA include the emic (i.e. participants') orientation (ten Have 2007, pp. 34–35), the views that "talk-in-interaction is systematically organized and deeply ordered" and that "the production of talk-in-interaction is methodic" (Hutchby & Wooffitt 1998, p. 23; see also Seedhouse 2004, pp. 14–16).

CA can be characterized as an inductive and data-driven analysis. The analytic procedure can be outlined in three steps. First, the analyst starts by identifying relevant phenomena and related passages, which is often referred to as "unmotivated looking" (ten Have 2007, pp. 120–121; Seedhouse 2004, p. 38). Second, the analyst carries out a micro-analysis of the passage in which the phenomenon of interest occurred. As a result, a provisional analytic scheme is formulated. It should be pointed out that the participants', i.e. emic, perspective is adopted; mechanistic treatment of the data is generally rejected in CA (Schegloff et al. 2002, p. 18). Third, other instances are to be found in the corpus in order to refine the provisional analytic scheme. This can be achieved by locating similar cases or deviant cases (ten Have 2007, pp. 147, 153). Steps 2 and 3 require a systematic and thorough analysis (ten Have 2007, p. 162).

The findings are generated by the refining of the provisional analytic scheme. Starting in a unique (micro)context, similarities are sought with other instances, thus working with a more abstract contextual level (Schegloff 1987; Seedhouse 2004, pp. 208–215). The robustness of the analysis can be achieved by comprehensive data treatment, which covers all the relevant data in the corpus (ten Have 2007, pp. 147–149).

It should be emphasized that CA does not aim at empirical quantitative or statistical generalizations (ten Have 2007, p. 149). Instead, CA aims at "theoretical grasp of interactions' underlying 'rules' and 'principles'" (ten Have 2007, p. 150; see also Seedhouse 2004, pp. 253–261), which can be achieved through analytic induction as we described above.

4. Context for the study

In this study build on our previous research conducted in an EFL course taught at a regional public university in the Czech Republic in the academic year 2010/11. The target level of the course was the CEFR (2001) A2 level and within the online component of a blended learning course, a set of online discussion tasks was conducted. A learner corpus was compiled from the forum threads, which comprised the core of the online discussion tasks. The discussions were realized by means of Moodle discussion forums within the course in which the students had enrolled.

The corpus comprises eight discussion threads: four from the beginning of the semester and four from the end. In the first discussion the students were asked to introduce themselves, find things in common, choose a name for their group and elect a group leader, whereas in the final discussion the students introduced their plans for summer holidays and were asked to find some plans that they had in common. The discussions lasted

for 12–14 days each and the students were asked to follow the discussions and contribute from their homes at least three times per week. There were five persons in each group and each group was dedicated a single discussion thread. In total, the corpus encompasses 13,622 words in 299 postings (for more information on the design of the online discussion tasks, see e.g. Tůma 2010, 2012).

5. Research findings

In this section we present the findings related to the use of series of dots, which can be referred to as a row of full stops or ellipsis marks. Typically, there were three dots, but two, four or five dots also occurred in a chunk. Altogether there were 67 occurrences of ellipsis marks. In seven occurrences, ellipsis marks were used in combination with emoticons (e.g. "... :-)") or in combination with onomatopoeic expressions ("wow... :-)", "....hehe"), in which the interpretation seems to be a complex one and influenced by the other element typical of this type of interaction. We therefore concentrate mainly on the uses of ellipsis marks as such.

The analysis showed that the uses of ellipsis marks can be situated on a continuum. One end of the continuum presents the use of ellipsis marks for listing, thus functioning at the sentence level, while the other end of the continuum is an interactive use of ellipsis marks, thus functioning at the discourse level. We discuss the findings and illustrate them by examples. It should be pointed out that the extracts are presented in the form that they occurred on the forum, i.e. we did not correct or modify the extracts except changing student names for the sake of protecting their anonymity. For the purposes of this study we shortened some of the messages, which is indicated by [...].

5.1 Ellipsis marks as listing

One of the least interactive uses of ellipsis was that of listing, whose examples are shown below. Since this use of ellipsis marks does not seem to go beyond the sentence level, we only present relevant passages. The students used ellipsis marks at the end of a list (1) or a question (2). In (3) ellipsis is accompanied by "etc" and in (4) ellipsis is situated in front of the last object.

(1) [...] my favourite serials are HIMYM, Big bang theory, Dexter, Top Gear, The Simpsons,...

(2) And what movies do you like most? Comedy, horror, thriller ,....?

(3) [...] My hobbies are sport and music. I like skiing, swimming, skating, playing volleyball,...etc

(4) [...] I will sell my ceramics, earrings, pictures...and honey drink (mead) :-) [...]

With the exception of (4), the dots could be substituted for "and so on" or "etc". In (3) the actual presence of "etc" seems to emphasize the potential length of the list (this use of ellipsis marks occurred only once in the corpus), whereas in (4) the presence of the final object seems to be of importance, perhaps because of the playful use of the word "mead", which is similar to the Czech word for honey (i.e. "med", which does not denote the alcoholic drink made from honey). This middle use of ellipsis marks occurred only once and seems to be a borderline case between the use of ellipsis marks for listing and transition, since the dots may well stand for other objects, or solely indicate transition to an object of a different kind or, perhaps, a dramatic pause.

5.2 Ellipsis marks as transition

Multiple dots were also used as transition between different ideas, thus functioning on an above-sentence level. As discussed above, (4) could function as transition as well as listing. In (5) ellipsis connects the idea that the situation was easy to solve and the actual solution that Suzan becomes the leader of group C and that the participant is proud of Suzan. In (6), the dots link the apology with a reason. In (7) the ellipsis marks connect the problem that the group members were unable to find plans that they all had in common and what follows seems to be a request for a solution. In (8) a number of ideas are connected. The writer first shows empathy and understanding which she connects to her problem (she was assigned a non-standard bed at the student dormitories). This is linked to her personal feelings about the situation. Finally comes the coda.

(5) Suzan, you can see nobody responded to you, so everything is up to you.

It's easy... You are C leader and I'm pride of you ;-). [...]

(6) [...] I am sorry, that I am writing now..I was in Austria [...]

(7) […] I think it will be hard to find the plans that we have in common for the holidays. How I look, most often have something to do only some of the group and the rest is different..

What are we doing with it?

(8) Oh, I understand you... :-) I am from Moravia and I slept in additional bed 8 months... I was horrible... But I lasted out to the end :-) […]

It should be pointed out that the uses of multiple dots followed by a line break as exemplified in (7) were very frequent in the corpus, often resulting in a question, conclusion or another idea. Whereas in (5) the use of ellipsis marks seems to be replaceable by colon, in (6) and (7) conjunctions expressing cause and effect can be used, and in (8) more complex expressions seems to be needed to convey a similar meaning (e.g. the first series of dots can mean "because I had the same problem"). It can be concluded that the dots can represent a number of relationships between the elements that they connect. Apart from that, the use of the dots seems to complete the authors' argumentation.

5.3 Ellipsis marks in personal evaluation

The third use of multiple dots is related to evaluating the previous content. In (9) the writer is responding to a question related to the tragic flood in a number of towns (including Chrastava) in the country, while in (10) the writer is responding to another message expressing a dream of going to Australia and New Zealand.

(9) Yes, my parents had in Chrastava flood,but now everything is fine. They had water up to the thighs at home and two meters of the house,but they were doing well. Some people lost all their goods.....

(10) Once I would like to visit New Zealand too, my cousin was there 1 year and it was wonderful..

What these and other two messages in the corpus have in common is that the dots occur at the very end of the message. Our interpretation is that in these messages the authors intended to evaluate the message content, that is in (9) the author seems to be expressing the her parents were luckier than others, who lost all their properties, and in (10) the author appears to be agreeing that going to New Zealand is a good idea. Interestingly, all of the four messages of this kind were not replied to. This leads us to the conclusion that the scope of the ellipsis marks at the end did not go beyond the actual message. However, having read the postings, one tends to start considering or evaluating the situation as well. As compared the previously introduced uses, this use of ellipsis marks seems to be more interactive and dialogic.

5.4 Ellipsis marks for referring to the previous posting

There was one occurrence of ellipsis marks referring to the previous posting, in which the participant introduced himself and mentioned that he was enrolled in the study programme Leisure time pedagogy. The dots used in (11) refer his message asking the author additional questions.

(11) ...and what about you and our pedagogy of leisure time?Do you like it?

Used this way, the dots seem to substitute for the name of the addressee, and possibly a greeting and/or an explicit reference to his being enrolled in the same programme. This interpretation can be supported by the fact that (11) was responded to by the addressee.

5.5 Ellipsis marks as a part of asking for response when taking leave

The last and most interactive use of dots was that at the end of a message as shown in (12), in the forms such as "Thanks for your answer …" or "Bye, bye …".

(12)   Suzy: Hi Tom,

I thought, you will be teacher. Or you study Sports Management? I don't now...

Tom: Hi Suzy,

I won't be a teacher, I study a sports management. I would like to be a maneger. [...]

What is striking is the fact that all of these uses of ellipsis marks were successful in that the addressees (concrete individuals or any members of the group) always responded. It seems that the dots contributed to the construction of adjacency pairs in the forum exchanges. Of course, there were other question-and-answer exchanges without using ellipsis marks at the end of the first pair part, yet there were a number of occurrences

of unanswered messages. It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss the factors that contributed to the successful realization of question-and-answer pairs (this issue is partly addressed in Tůma 2013). We can conclude here that the use of ellipsis marks at the end of the first pair part seemed to complement the floor-shifting function of an utterance, i.e. nominating the other participant to contribute.

6. Discussion of findings and conclusions

As suggested in various parts of the presentation of results, it seems that there is a wide range of uses of ellipsis in pre-intermediate English learners' interaction on discussion forum. Some of the uses, such as example (4), can be mapped onto the equivalents in speech (e.g. pause) and others, such as example (1) are consistent with writing. However, there were a number of other and specific uses of dots which cannot be attributed to speech or writing. Especially asking for response when taking leave seems to be typical of discussion forums. This supports Crystal's view that online interaction "is more than an aggregate of spoken and written features" (Crystal 2011, p. 21).

As far as the body of existing research is concerned, our findings are in accord with Ong (2011, p. 227) in that ellipsis marks do not function only as punctuation marks, but they can carry a number of pragmatic meanings in different context and sequences. However, since Ong's (2011) study was conducted in quasisynchronous chat and focused on blank turns and ellipsis marks-only turns, the only overlap is in that both blank turns in quasisynchronous chat as well as ellipsis marks at the end of forum posting seemed to facilitate interaction. On the other hand, Ong (2011, p. 225) presented instances of more than ten dots in a row, while in our corpus the longest stretch of ellipsis marks was five dots long.

As far as use of dots at the end of an utterance is concerned, Vandergriff (2013, p. 5) holds that this marks the status of the turn as "unfinished" or "open". Similarly to Ong (2011), her study was conducted in (quasi)synchronous settings, which is not fully compatible with asynchronous discussion forums. According to our findings the occurrence of ellipsis marks at the end of the posting can, similarly to Vandergriff's interpretation (2013, p. 5), mark "the sequence as 'to be continued' and thus provides a space for expansion (perhaps akin to dialogic expansion [...])". However, in our data we also found ellipsis marks in final positions whose function was to evaluate the posting and did not elicit response (see section 5.3). The difference between Vandergriff's (2013) and this study is in that her class were a group of advanced learners of German, whereas the participants in this study were pre-intermediate EFL learners. It can be assumed that the use of ellipsis marks for evaluation (see section 5.3) did not elicit any response due to the limited range of language functions that the participants were able to convey. Indeed, showing empathy and support may require a relatively high level of proficiency (see *CEFR* 2001), especially without physical co-presence. In that case the evaluative nature of this use of dots would need reconsidering. However, the four messages analyzed in section 5.3 were different from those discussed in section 5.5, since they did not include an explicit (or implicit) a request for response caused by the lack of knowledge or agreement, which justifies the existence of a specific category.

As far as interaction on asynchronous forum is concerned, Stommel and Meijman (2011, p. 21) found that the use of ellipsis marks can signal hesitation and add that "it seems as if the dots are there for the readers to fill in what the writer has meant", which supports the number of interpretations that we afforded in sections 5.1–5.5.

As far as the limitations of this study are concerned, it should be pointed out that the method (CA) and theoretical and epistemological positions (dialogism) adopted in this study imply that interaction was the main focus. We therefore did not attempt to assign the frequencies of using ellipsis marks to individual students, which would require different (rather monologist) positions. Apart from that, it should be pointed out that we did not present the findings related to the absence of ellipsis marks in contexts similar to those in which ellipsis marks were used. Although in Tůma (2013) we analyzed instances of missing responses (i.e. incomplete question-and-answer pairs), the focus of this study and the space available did not allow us to discuss the (missing) uses of ellipsis marks in more detail from this perspective.

The findings seem to reflect not only the social actions, but also the participants' mutual understanding of the social actions. These organizations comprise a component of "the architecture of intersubjectivity" (Seedhouse 2004, p. 237), whose part is also the use of ellipsis marks. Thus the project outcomes can also contribute to our

understanding of how the interactional mechanisms facilitate intersubjectivity in interacting in a foreign language, which is in line with what social SLA proposed by Firth and Wagner (2007).

As far as the relevance of the findings to foreign language teaching is concerned, the findings support the view that the nature of online interaction is different from both written and spoken modes. Moreover, the learners in this study seemed to utilize ellipsis marks in a number of different ways to express different meanings. This should be acknowledged when dealing with online discourse in foreign language teaching – not only when reading texts, but also when the learners are expected to interact online. In relation to the outcomes of CA, ten Have (2007, p. 11) holds that "the core phenomena have been identified, but they can be explored further and there exists an enormous variety of settings, conditions, and languages for which the local organization of talk-in-interactions can be fruitfully studied". In line with this, this study hopes to contribute to the body of research on online interaction by revealing some of the mechanisms underlying learner-learner online interaction in a foreign language.

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