

“We Need to Think about the Grammar”: Practices for Opening Explanations on Language and Changing their Linguistic Focus

Mark Romig

Teachers College, Columbia University

INTRODUCTION

Although the role of grammar instruction is still highly debated within the field of second language acquisition and language pedagogy (Nassaji, 2017), explanations have emerged as fruit-bearing interactional phenomena that can illustrate the “how” of explicit grammar instruction (Fasel Lauzon, 2015; Hudson, 2011; Majlesi, 2018; Matsumoto & Dobs, 2017; Ro, 2021; Romig & Horan, 2023; Rosborough, 2011; Smotrova, 2014). A key feature of explanations is their sequential organization, described by Fasel Lauzon (2015) as consisting of an opening, a core, and a closing. In a nutshell, openings involve some problematization of prior talk, cores provide a candidate solution to said problem, and closings involve acceptance of that candidate solution. Researchers have revealed much about how cores are delivered, particularly focusing on how grammatical concepts can be illustrated through a variety of multimodal resources (Hudson, 2011; Matsumoto & Dobs, 2017; Romig & Horan, 2023; Rosborough, 2011; Smotrova, 2014), but less attention has been paid to openings and closings. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the bulk of content is delivered in an explanation core, but knowing how to open grammar explanations can be of particular importance for teachers in training who may not know when an explanation is due or how to initiate one themselves. Additionally, there does not seem to be any research detailing how to make clear that an explanation of a particular language point is grammatical, and not about any other linguistic issue (e.g., meaning, pronunciation, etc.). Thus, this paper adopts a conversation analytic framework to examine how a teacher opens an explanation sequence on the use of “so” and ensures that it is about its grammatical role as a coordinating conjunction, not on its meaning.

DATA AND METHOD

Data come from six hours of video recordings from two different high intermediate English as a Second Language courses that were conducted entirely over Zoom for adults in a community-based program. These courses were specifically designed to build students’ grammatical knowledge and writing skills, and each course was taught by a teacher with several years of language teaching experience. Students had a diverse range of first language backgrounds, and everyone had basic familiarity with using Zoom as a medium for taking classes. Pseudonyms were used for all participants.

I transcribed the video recordings using the Jeffersonian system with minor modifications for embodied conduct (see Appendix). When reviewing these recordings and transcripts, I first searched for instances where grammatical information was being given. After identifying these instances, I then conducted a broad sequential analysis, breaking down each explanation sequence into an opening, a core, and a closing. After reviewing my collection of 21 explanation

sequences, I chose to examine an explanation opening that ultimately focused on grammar, but that originally arose from a focus on other linguistic issues.

ANALYSIS

This analysis will focus on how an explanation about language can be opened by a student or a teacher by: (1) halting the progressivity of the current sequence, (2) isolating prior talk, and (3) querying isolated prior talk. In doing so, I will also highlight the work T does to change the focus of an explanation to be about grammar, not any other linguistic information. Prior to the extract below, T has been asking students to justify their answer choices to questions about transition words. Throughout, T has been sharing her screen, which displays the question, answer choices, and the correct answer. This extract begins with a typical initiation-response-feedback (IRF) sequence with T selecting Martina (MR), a student, to explain why she chose “so” instead of the other options (“that,” “hence,” or “therefore”) to the following fill-in-the-blank question (lines 01-02):

Newspapers are often written in language easy to understand, _____ they are usually more accessible than reference books.

Clearly, explanations can be elicited through such a direct initiation (e.g., by asking for an explanation), but my focus in this extract will be on how an explanation on the grammaticality of “so,” not one on its meaning (lines 04-07), is achieved.

Extract 1 Conjunctions vs. Transition Words

- 01 T: <Okay> let's move on to: um Martina:. Would you be okay explaining
02 number four.
03 (2.5)
04 MR: Sure. So: um newspapers are often written in language that is easy to
05 understand, uh yea I (pick) uh so. They are usually more a- accessible than
06 reference books. So it's like u:m (.) it's like a {consequence (.) for mm the
07 reason [that they] are often written in language.-T nods throughout}
08 T: [>You're right.<]
09 Mhm,
10 MR: Because it's um more easy than the books.
11 T: → You're ↑right, .h[h but-]
12 J: → [scuse me?]
... ((T gives J go ahead))
18 J: For me it's like awkward [be]cause sounds like more informal?
19 T: [hm.]
20 [Mm. Okay.]
21 J: [I (can't-)] uh what's the difference {between so and thus in this
22 scenario.-T nods exaggeratedly}
23 T: → So actually I was gonna point out .h in terms of meaning, (.8) as
24 Martina mentioned, it's comin- coming up with a reason and then
25 coming wi- up with the- um (.2)-g up {cause and effect-holds space to left and
26 then right; J nods} So {reason-holds space to left} and {uh the- the result,-folds
27 hands over each other to right; J nods} right? Everything works. {So, thus,
28 hence, therefore,-raises one finger on each word} all of {them can work in this

- 29 scenario.-*J nods*}So we need to think about the {grammar here.-*J nods* }
30 (1.0)
31 T: .h why do we need so, {w- why can't we use thus hence and
32 therefore.-*moves cursor to each word*} >We know therefore, (.) because
33 therefore is ↑a {(.)-((J mouths something)) {transition word.-*several*
34 *students nod*} Right? We learned >therefore is a transition word< so for
35 transition words what do we have to do. We have to finish the sentence,
36 (.)
37 KU: *brings index finger down in slashing motion*
38 T: Mhm ↑and use a comma. How about thus and hence?

T and J's turns (lines 11 and 12) represent two different ways in which the progressivity of the current sequence can be halted. T's delivery of a *but*-prefaced TCU, with its inherent contrastive meaning, in the feedback slot of the IRF sequence suggests that there was something that MR had missed in her explanation. At the same time, another student (J) tries to gain the floor with a turn-entry device (line 12). Both of these problematize some part of MR's turn, but it is not until J reveals (line 18) that what he found problematic was the ratified acceptance of "so" as the correct answer by T (lines 8, 11) because he believes that it is an informal word, which would be considered inappropriate within the context of academic writing. He does this by isolating prior talk (i.e., "so") through the use of an indexical directly after he has halted the progressivity of the current sequence discussing the appropriateness of "so." J then formulates a query (lines 21-22) on the difference between "so" and "thus" using two nominalized forms, which further suggests that "so" was what was being isolated in the prior turn since using non-nominalized forms would have required much more work (e.g., "it" and "the other answer choice that is more formal") and might have resulted in ambiguity (i.e., which other answer choice?). In sum, J halts the progressivity of the current sequence, isolates prior talk, and queries that isolated prior talk. Critically, the query that he delivers is about the *register* of isolated prior talk, not about its grammatical structure.

Thus far, "so" has been analyzed by participants in terms of meaning (MR) and register (J), but T engages in a great deal of work to change this analytical focus to grammar in lines 23-32. First, T's switch to the past tense and use of "actually" in a TCU-initial position presents the rest of her turn as a revision of prior talk (Clift, 2001), that is, a second take on her interrupted turn that halted progressivity in line 11. As T resumes her earlier attempt at switching the focus to grammar, she explains why meaning is irrelevant because all of the answer choices have the same meaning. She does this by isolating prior talk through an indexical (i.e., "everything") that captures all four answer choices previously discussed. She then makes clear that "everything" refers to all four answer choices by verbally and multimodally listing their nominalized forms (e.g., through the raising of her fingers one-by-one at the utterance of each word) in the exact order in which they appeared on the shared screen (lines 27-28). Providing a rephrasing of "everything" (line 27) immediately after this list (i.e., "all of them" in line 28) further signals that these indexicals referred to the list of four answer options. In sum, T isolates prior talk by indexically bookending a carefully delivered list of nominalized prior talk. The transition to a focus on grammar is not yet made explicit to participants, but it is clear at this point that the current focus on meaning or register is not appropriate.

T's call "to think about grammar" (lines 29) shifts focus away from MR's meaning-based approach and J's register-based approach, but the explanation opening is still underway. T's next

turn (line 31), which contains queries about the permissibility of “so” and impermissibility of “thus, hence, and therefore,” hearable as about the grammaticality (and ungrammaticality) of those words (i.e., that “so” is a coordinating conjunction and the others are “transition words” or adverbs). T’s continued use of nominalized forms and metalinguistic verbs (i.e., “need” and “use”) also contribute to the hearability of these queries as being about the grammaticality of the target words from the initial question prompt. T’s work to reorient the focus of this explanation opening to be on grammar (lines 23-32) then finally leads to the beginning of an explanation core (lines 33-38) detailing the structural role of each answer choice (e.g., that “therefore” is a transition word used to connect one clause to another after a comma).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have shown that an explanation about language can be opened through the three-part practice of halting the progressivity of the current sequence, isolating prior talk, and querying that isolated prior talk. Halting progressivity involved some kind of departure from prior talk, accomplished in this extract through a *but*-prefaced turn or an attempt to gain the floor. Isolating prior talk involved making some prior talk stand out from its surrounding stream of talk, and this was chiefly accomplished through indexicals. Queries were formulated by nominalizing isolated prior talk and asking questions about them, and it was the hearability of these queries as about particular linguistic issues that determined whether or not the forthcoming explanation would be about grammar. For example, J’s query followed his own analysis of the difference between words as being about formality, but T’s query followed her own analysis of the inadequacy of a meaning-based interpretation of the differences between those words and an explicit call to “think about grammar.” One way for a teacher, then, to ensure that students orient to a forthcoming explanation core as being about grammar is to make clear why a different focus will not suffice.

REFERENCES

- Clift, R. (2001). Meaning in interaction: The case of actually. *Language*, 77(2), 245-291.
- Fasel Lauzon, V. (2015). The interactional architecture of explanations in the second language classroom. *Bulletin VALS-ASLA*, 101, 97-116.
- Hudson, A. (2011). *Teacher gesture in a post-secondary English as a second language classroom: A socio-cultural approach*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.
- Majlesi, A. R. (2018). Instructed vision: Navigating grammatical rules by using landmarks for linguistics structures in corrective feedback sequences. *The Modern Language Journal*, 102(Supplement 2018), 11-29.
- Matsumoto, Y., & Dobs, A. M. (2017). Pedagogical gestures as interactional resources for teaching and learning tense and aspect in the ESL grammar classroom. *Language Learning*, 67(1), 7-42.
- Nassaji, H. (2017). Grammar acquisition. In S. Loewen & M. Sato (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of instructed second language acquisition* (p. 205-223). Routledge.
- Ro, E. (2021). The embodied work of teaching grammar and pronunciation in IELTS speaking tutorials. *Linguistics and Education*, 65, 1-15.
- Romig, M., & Horan, A. (2023). Taking grammar off the board as a resource for language

teaching. *Bulletin VALS-ASLA*, 117, 105-121.

Rosborough, A. A. (2011). *Gesture as an act of meaning-making: An ecosocial perspective of a sheltered-English second grade classroom*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Smotrova, T. (2014). *Instructional functions of speech and gesture in the L2 classroom*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, University Park.

APPENDIX

Transcription Key

.	(period) falling intonation
?	(question mark) rising intonation
,	(comma) continuing intonation
-	(hyphen) abrupt cut-off
::	(colon(s)) prolonging of sound
<u>word</u>	(underlining) stress
<u>word</u>	the more underlining, the greater the stress
WORD	(all caps) loud speech
°word°	(degree symbols) quiet speech
↑word	(upward arrow) raised pitch
↓word	(downward arrow) lowered pitch
>word<	(more than and less than) quicker speech
<word>	(less than and more than) slowed speech
<	(less than) jump start or rushed start
hh	(series of h's) aspiration or laughter
.hh	(h's preceded by dot) inhalation
(hh)	(h's in parentheses) aspiration or laughter inside word boundaries
[word]	(set of lined-up brackets) beginning and ending of
[word]	simultaneous or overlapping speech
=	(equal sign) latch or continuing speech with no break in between
(0.4)	(number in parentheses) length of a silence in tenths of a second
(.)	(period in parentheses) micro-pause: 0.2 seconds or less
()	(empty parentheses) inaudible talk
(word)	(word or phrase in parentheses) transcriptionist doubt
((gazes))	(double parentheses) non-speech activity or transcriptionist comment
\$word\$	(dollar signs) smiley voice
<i>word</i>	(italics) embodied conduct
{{(word))-words}}	dash to indicate co-occurrence of non-verbal behavior and verbal elements; curly brackets to mark the beginning and ending of such

Mark Romig is a doctoral student in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. He uses conversation analysis to conduct research on how classroom interaction contributes to second language learning, particularly during episodes of grammar and vocabulary explanations. He currently works as an adjunct in the Department of Curriculum and Education at CUNY Hunter and the Department of Teaching and Learning at NYU and as an instructor for the TESOL Certificate Program at Teachers College, Columbia University. Correspondence should be sent to Mark Romig, Email: mtr2140@tc.columbia.edu.