Discourse Turn in Online Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This article presents the detailed process how to identify discourse turn as analysis unit to conduct online discourse analysis with text chat and voice chat in parallel. The aim is to arise the discussion of the way to identify an analysis unit when involving online conversation, where it is difficult to form a neat turn in a traditional way because of time lag or lack of paralinguistic cues, leading to disrupted turns or overlapped turns.

Two techniques are applied in order to identity a discourse turn: combining and splitting techniques. It seems they are the appropriate methods in order to conduct my research analysis and answer the research questions based on the online discourse.

Key words:

Sending turn, speaking turn, discourse turn, discourse analysis

Introduction

According to the traditional definition, a turn refers to "both the opportunity to assume the role of speaker at a particular point of time in a conversation, and to what is said or done during the time for which the speaker role is continuously held by one individual" (Widdowson, 1978, p.7). In oral conversation, a turn can be a word, an expression, a string of utterances, an action, or just simple an 'mmm' vocal expression. In text-based messaging, a turn is sent by a participant by typing, which can be a letter (or some combined letters representing some special meanings), a word/words, a clause/clauses, a string of utterances, punctuation, emoticons, or a number/numbers. I call the turn of oral conversation, in face-to-face (F2F) or mediated by computer-mediated Communication (CMC), a speaking turn and one of text messages, a sending turn.

When involving online conversation, in text chat, the rule of adjacent turns is broken because of time lag, leading to disrupted turns (Herring, 1999). A similar situation also

occurs in voice chat in which disrupted and overlapping turns are very common because it is difficult for listeners to identify the potential completion of a turn without any paralinguistic cues. Therefore, it is impossible to use the neat turn, as traditionally defined.

Generally, when we say *turn,* whether a speaking turn or a sending turn, we normally indicate it to be the idea of either an oral speaker's or a text-based message sender's. However, this is not always the case in my data, which is online discourse consisting of text-based message and voice-based message, because the principle of one turn that normally indicate a speaker's idea in traditional F2F conversation is broken in synchronic computer-mediated communication (SCMC) chat. It is very common in my data for one complete idea to be separately expressed in several sending turns, which may be linked by surface cohesion or notional coherence. The same situation also exists in oral message turns, maybe because of a lack of paralinguistic features, which leads to significant "interruption" turns for breath or mind organisation in the process of conversation. Also, sometimes more than one completed idea is introduced in one speaking turn. Both situations in text-based messages and oral messages produce a large number of broken fragments of language and segments of a macro-level idea. Furthermore, it seems it is impossible to use simple sending or speaking turn to achieve a finer-grained understanding of the nature of the online interactions in my project. As a result, I have to define *discourse turn,* which is viewed as an ideal unit of oral participants or text-based message senders, which will be explained below.

Literature Review

By investigating the issues with the basic unit of analysis in a scrutiny of CMC discourse, Rourke et al. (2001) demonstrate that it is not always easy to determine exactly what constitutes a unit (even a paragraph may not be clearly identifiable). There is variance in analysis units, such as message units (Garrison et al., 2001), utterances (Curtis & Lawson, 2001), units of meaning (Henri, 1992), etc. Fahy (2005) points out that an analysis unit needs to be reasonably unambiguous for transcript analysis for different research purposes. Herring wisely claims that "defining units of analysis still pose challenges" (Herring, 2009, p.10). So it seems there are no universal approaches to analyse a discourse.

Herring (1996) proposes macro-segment which forms a macro idea unit. According to

Herring, there are two ways to fulfill a macro-segment: its notional coherence and surface cohesion. From point of view of surface cohesion, a macro-segment is based on consistent linguistic choices, e.g. personal reference, substitution, tense usage, or sentence structure. Moreover, a macro-segment can also be formed explicitly by introducing a macro-level idea, such as: what I think is:…; my opinion is this:...; my answer is.... Furthermore, the identification of macro-segments does not always depend on linguistic signals, which of course provide useful cues; however, it exists "solely on the grounds of its notional coherence, without any explicit signals of its boundaries, and shifts in person reference, tense, etc. do not always correspond to the boundaries of macro-segments" (Herring, 1996, p.84).

The discourse turn is introduced, according to the idea of a macro-segment (Herring, 1996), which can capture the complicated situation in the SCMC environment, particularly when text-based and oral chat are in parallel.

Discourse turn

With the definition of a macro-segment in mind, a discourse turn can be a single sending turn, or a speaking turn. Or a discourse turn can be formed by more than one sending turn, or speaking turn. Or sometimes more than one discourse turn can be in one single sending turn or speaking turn. Furthermore, because my data is text- based and oral chat in parallel, a discourse can also be one or more than one sending turn plus one or more speaking turns. I will address explicitly how to form a discourse turn with the examples retrieved from my data below. I will term a language function unit to form a discourse turn, which is based on surface language cohesion, and an idea unit based on a macro-level idea which is based on notional coherence. I also use two techniques, in my term, combining and splitting technique. It is necessary to state again that this article is not aimed to analyse a research question(s), rather than to bring a discussion how to identify an analysis unit to conduct online discourse analysis.

Combining technique

Excerpt 1

Text chat				
1	13:36:18	Learner67	大家 {all}	i agree
2 turns				
2	13:36:25	Learner67	大家 {all}	too

Excerpt 2

Text chat				
1	14:23:35	Learner67	大家 {all}	french is
1 turn				
2	14:23:51	Learner67	大家 {all}	french is better than Japanese

We can see that sole sending turn 2 in Except 1 and sending turn 1 in Excerpt 2 cannot form a meaningful idea unit. They are dependent on sending turn 1 in Excerpt 1 and sending turn 2 in Excerpt 2. In this case, I use the "combining technique" to integrate language function units in two sending turns (maybe more than two in other cases) into one discourse turn.

Excerpt 3

Text chat				
1	14:05:32	Learner67	大家{all}	I miss her
2	14:05:49	Learner67	大家{all}	my girl friend

In Excerpt 3, we can see, Sending turn 1 and 2 form a meaningful idea, respectively. However, we can see that her refers to my girl friend in Sending turn 1. Therefore, according to the sense of the macro idea unit formed by linguistic cohesion, these two sending turns form one discourse turn. Thus, again, the combined technique is applied here.

Excerpt 4

Text chat				
1	14:12:33	Learner67	大家{all}	yes
2	14:12:53	Learner67	大家{all}	it happens

Unlike Excerpt 3, in Excerpt 4, a discourse turn can be formed by two sending turns which are notional coherence.

Excerpt 5

Text chat				
13:30:42	Learner37	Learner39	it is a good pracitce	1
13:30:51	Learner37	Learner39	practice	2

Here, we can see Learner37 sent "practice" in Sending Turn 2 to correct her incorrect spelling in Sending Turn 1. In this case, these two turns form a discourse turn.

Excerpt 6

Text chat				
	13:44:04	Learner04	Learner39	Have you visited Denmark? Do you hope to go there?
1	13:44:21	Learner39	Learner04	hehe.. being abroad is my dream
2 turn				
2	13:44:29			but this dream still under planning
1 turn				
3	13:44:49	Learner39	Learner04	I hope I will make it in 2008.

In Excerpt 6, each of the sending turns form a completed idea unit, respectively.

However, according to notional coherence, they form a macro-level idea unit to respond to the question Have you visited Denmark? Do you hope to go there? So again, I use the "combining technique" to form a discourse turn. Such a situation is very prevalent in text-based messages in my data.

Excerpt 7

Text chat				
14:08:02	Learner164	Learner152	YOU CAN SPEAK	
14:08:07	Learner152	Learner164	😎	1
1 turn				
14:08:22	Learner152	Learner164	I have no mic now	2

Here we can see Learner152 sent a smiley to Learner164 in Sending Turn 1, and then she told her that she had no mic in Sending turn 2. By examining and making sure there was no particular message relating to the smiley in Sending Turn 1, it seems there is no doubt these two sending turns make up a meaningful idea unit, which is intended to provide the response to Learner164's utterance "YOU CAN SPEAK". Therefore, with such a macro-level idea, these two sending turns are put together as a discourse turn. Actually, this is common in my data in text chat; sometimes emoticons only make sense with the detailed information expressed by language.

As already discussed, my data is discourse with text-based and oral messages in parallel. It is no accident that some oral discourse is repeated by typing in a text-based message, as seen in Excerpt 8.

We can see a complicated situation in Excerpt 8. The tutor not only spoke in voice chat, he also repeated part of what he said in the text-based message. Without the bond of voice chat, it is difficult to make sense of what "save time, steal time, budget time, plan time and kill time" really mean, although they are meaningful forms as language units. In this case, with the combining technique, the oral chat and text-based message forms a discourse turn under the name of a macro-level idea. Here, text chat functions as a blackboard in an F2F classroom.

Excerpt 8

Text chat				Voice chat
				Tutor01
				You know about time we can er we can save time, right, we
14:23:29	Tutor01	大家{all}	save time	Can save
1 turn				can save time, we can er
14:23:34	Tutor01	大家{all}	steal time	steel
				steal time, what else. We can
14:23:42	Tutor01	大家{all}	budget time	er
2 turns				budget time, Programme 2dget time time simply means to plan time, we can
14:23:49	Tutor01	大家{all}	plan time	plan
				plan our time. And we can also …
14:23:55	Tutor01	大家{all}	kill time	kill
				time. Now you should be be able to know the answer.

In voice chat, it is also common for several speaking turns to form a discourse turn. But the situation is slightly different. A fashion in oral discourse is to use formulae which explicitly bring macro-level ideas, such as I think … ; my opinion is …; what I think …; I want to say something about Question 1, to respond to a question, or today's topic is … and I want to talk ... . But sometimes, it also comes with the grounds of its notional coherence without any explicit signals, for example:

Excerpt 9

Voice chat		
Tutor01	Learner52	
	I am I am er er a kindergarten teacher. I found in my class most of kids are self-centred, demanding and inconsiderate. They are, I think the result is er the result is affected by their parents and teaching ideas. Parents are willing to do anything for the happiness of their kids. Just as you say, they are giving whatever their kids want. In my mind, I think it's not, er, it's not for their parents to show love to their kids,	1
yeah		
	it is to spoil their kids. Er but I want to ask their parents, why don't you think what their actions result their children in this way, Er It will yeah, it will first behaviour addictive and yeah, and in my class during my class break, I found many children talk with others on how how many trousers do you have, how they look, and how many places they have been to and how expensive is that clothes, and so on. So it is not good to compare with material possession. And	2
enhem		
	for me I think it is a responsibility of their parents to develop their kids to the, to be a good characters. They should they should they should er show their real love.er in my er In my opinion, love is understanding, compassion, and caring, I can give some advice, er yeah maybe parents should spend time staying with their kids. go out with them Or spend kid's holiday with them, kid's birthday yeah, to give them some little gift. And Or read some stories, etc that it wil it is real love. Yeah. That's I think.	3

In this excerpt, after Tutor01 called Learner52's name, before the tutor asked her question, Learner52 began to talk about the topic: whether or not today's kids are given too much, which was displayed on the warm-up page. Learner52 talked about the topic, but it seems there was no strong link with the topic, as well as no explicit signals to say what she wanted to discuss. However, it cannot be denied that she talked about something under the name of the topic, albeit loosely. So, with the grounds of its notional coherence, these speaking turns form a macro-level idea of the topic. Thus, Speaking Turns 1, 2, and 3 are combined to form a discourse turn.

Excerpt 10

Voice chat		
	Tutor01	Learner06
		can you hear me?
1	yes I can hear you	
		ok,
2	your voice is very clear	

In Excerpt 10, Tutor01 produced two speaking turns to answer Learners06's question. Turn 1 "yes I can hear you" directly responded to "can you hear me?" and then he said "your voice is very clear" as a complement to his previous answer. However, between these two speaking turns, Leanrer06 interrupted with a possible judgment of the possible completion of Tutor01's speech. It is obvious, although Tutor01's two turns express two single idea units, that two speaking turns consist of a macro-level idea unit to respond to Learner06's question. Such a situation is quite common in my data.

Excerpt 11

Voice chat		
Tutor02	Learner31	
yanxiadid you come to beiwai for classes?		
	oh yes yes I I have I almost never lose classes though I am very	1
oh		
	far from Beijing. It is about it takes about 3 hours to get to Beijing	2

It is also common in oral messages (also as seen in Excerpt 9) that the learner's response to the tutors question is "interrupted" by Tutor02's "oh" as an acknowledgement,

which is technically divided into two speaking turns, Speaking Turn 1 and 2. From the point of linguistic function, Speaking Turn 1 is an incomplete sentence, which is broken by "oh" and Speaking Turn 2 continues the sentence starting in Speaking Turn 1. Furthermore, the idea of the second part of Speaking Turn 2 is different from the idea of the first part. But there is no doubt that these two speaking turns form a macro-level idea to answer the tutor's question. Thus, these two speaking turns assemble a discourse turn.

Excerpt 12

Voice chat		
	Tutor01	Learner33
1		Oh yes, yes, er and I don't think they spoil me I think the most important thing is that the grandfather er grandpa or grandmother can spoil care their grandson or granddaughter. butt father and mother sometimes spoil them butt they didn't realise it realise it because it can give you an example, my father think er a child should you learn something such as er swimming such as singing so he sent me to learn those things. So they spent much money on such things and they think that is not spoil me. I think this is really spoil me am not feel feel feel 感谢 {grateful} Because I I am not feel
	grateful, grateful	
2		yes I am not grateful
3		I am not think they spent much money on it than they spent much time time with me I just think they make me very busy and make me feel very tired So I am not grateful and think they er they do good things to me, they er they money on this they spoil me and the and the this is another type of spoil.

In Except 12, Learner33 talks about her idea that parents or grandparents spoil children, but she was unable to express 'grateful' in English and switched to Chinese. Tutor01 provided assistance without Learner33's request and then Learner33 accepted this assistance "yes, I am not grateful". She then continued to talk about her previous idea. In this case, Speaking Turn 1 and 3 form a discourse turn. Here, it must be noted that actually 2 and 3 are labeled as being in the same natural oral expression turn. However, it is very clear that this

speaking turn consists of two different ideas unrelated explicitly or implicitly. Thus, they are viewed as different discourse turns, according to the splitting technique as addressed below.

Splitting technique

There have been lots of examples of how to combine separate sending/speaking turns into a discourse turn. Now this section explores the situation in which a single sending or speaking turn can be split into more than one discourse turn.

Excerpt 13

Voice chat
Tutor02
ok, that sounds great Katherine, and I think that sounds a really good idea.
Owen, do you have anything else ready about er the impaiment of modern development and traditional Chinese culture?

In Excerpt 13, it can be seen that the tutor's first comments addressed previous oral talk "ok, that sounds great Katherine, and I think that sounds a really good idea". Then he requested learner45 to talk about the impairment of modern development towards traditional Chinese culture. It is apparent that the first segment of language is evaluation and the latter is a question, which are two different idea units. In this case, the splitting technique is applied. Thus, one speaking turn is split into two discourse turns. The necessity of splitting a turn largely turns up in oral discussion.

Interestingly, although the need to split a turn occurs in voice chat, I did not find any similar situations in text chat. The reason may lie in the short message style of text chat which only uses several words. Despite several text-based messages containing tens of words, they are significantly in the minority.

Conclusion

A discourse turn is not evident or easily captured in text chat because of rampant disrupted turns and time lag. Similarly, in voice chat, maybe because of a lack of

paralinguistic cues, a speaking turn is very easily disrupted or overlapped, like Excerpt 9, 10 and 11. Such a complicated situation required me to be very cautious during the process of forming a discourse turn. It is necessary to understand not only the meaning of text, but also to be aware of particular meanings in the context in which a conversation occurs, or to recognise pragmatic meaning inside the utterance. I frequently had to read previous and backward content over and over again to avoid any mistakes or omissions; I continuously struggled the mixture of trial and error, during which I had the experience of making mistakes, getting stuck, feeling frustration and depression, and then a joyful moment before I became stuck again.

Initially, the discourse turn was employed to produce the categories for the exchange structure to define a turn is an Initiate, a Response or other elements. The use of the discourse turn helps me to see a completed element in an exchange structure and captures the nature of the exchange structure in text chat and voice chat, which helps to delineate the role of tutors and learners in the online classroom.

Moreover, because the formation of the discourse turn is based on the idea unit, it helped me to see the content of participants talked about. Also, I can connect content analysis with exchange structure analysis to further see, for example, what content tutors/learners initiate and focus upon. Furthermore, I also used it as an analysis unit to analyse language alternation in text chat and voice chat, language varieties in text chat, NOM and facilitator talk.

Although I realize it is a tricky method and I cannot say it is the only possible representation because different people have different views centred on their own research aims, based on my data, I have to say the discourse turn is the only possible technique I could use to help me reach my study aim.

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