Conditional Relevance in Internet Relay Chat

Kyooshiek **Kim**
(Seoul National University)

Kim, Kyooshiek. 2006. Conditional Relevance in Internet Relay Chat. ***SNU*** *Working Papers in English Linguistics and Language* ***5, 12-25.*** Internet relay chat (IRC) discourse has often been observed that adjacent turns are not interactionally relevant to each other. Due to this characteristic, some scholars have proposed that there is little coherence in the conversational structure of IRC. Their proposal, however, seems to result from applying the adjacency pair concept only serially, considering only the turns that physicallv precede or follow each other. Rather, turns should be understood to have "conditional relevance," that is, upon the initiating first pair part turn, the responding second turn is due and relevant even though the responding turn may not be provided immediately. Using the concept of conditional relevance, this paper attempts to demonstrate the structural coherence of IRC. Despite the specific restraint of IRC mechanic system and the problem that the concept of turn is rather different from that of face-to-face communication, IRC can be explained as being structurally coherent under the concept of conditional relevance. (Seoul National University)

Keywords: Internet relay chat, sequence organization, coherence, conditional relevance

1. Introduction

This paper aims to explain the problem of structural coherence of Internet relay chat (IRC hereinafter) with the application of conditional relevance.

According to previous IRC researchers, problems can be found in IRC data, which has to do with superficial incoherence. Judging from experience, it is not easy to grasp how the sequences are organized in a given IRC situation, such as in a chat room. Below is presented an example of this superficial incoherence. Hemng (1999: 9) presents the following examples:

(1)

1. <Satine_> wb heat
2. <{english}{rose}> yw Chynny
3. <IceMan> hello Malena, how are you?
4. <Malena_191> good iceman, U?
5. <heatseeker> thanx satine
6. <IceMan> hey ASHIED, looking for some prv chat?
7. <IceMan> fine thanks
8. <{english}{rose}> hey deb36uk hugssss
9. <ASHIED> no iceman
10. <Dani> i am still here, got a lot of private messages
11. <deb36uk> hi english rose
12. <Dani> scoty???
13. <TweetyB> bbiab
14. <IceMan> no trouble at all

This sequence of chat does not seem to show a coherent or consistent flow of turn-takings among the participants. Most of the turns do not have any direct meaning relation with the previous turn. Only turn 4 contains a direct meaning relation with turn 3, while the others do not. Therefore, the sequence seems so confusing that it would be no easy matter to grasp the contents of the entire conversation.

On account of this superficially incoherent system, IRC can be regarded as a very problematic case in terms of coherence, especially in linguistic approaches. Previous IRC scholars have often mentioned that IRC does have limitations with reference to coherence from linguistic perspectives and attempted to supplement IRC coherence with such social aspects as language plays, as in Herring (1999).

Herring (2001a) also centers around the social aspect of IRC. She claims: "social and cultural factors contribute importantly to the constellation of properties that characterizes computer-mediated discourse." (Herring 2001a: 625) Herring (2001a: 618) mentions again, as in Hening (1999): "text-only IRC is sometimes claimed to be interactionally incoherent, due to limitations imposed by computer messaging system on turn-taking.. computer-mediated exchanges involve unpredictable and sometimes lengthy gaps between

messages, and exchanges regularly overlap." In addition, Herring (2001a) argues that in IRC disruption of turn adjacency and lack of simultaneous feedback are obstacles to interactional management of IRC. Despite this problem, we claim that the structural coherence is also found in IRC. To prove the structural coherence of IRC, we apply the concept of conditional relevance in analyzing IRC data.

Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997) have attempted to explain IRC coherence in sociolinguistic terms. They have studied data from Project H and collect evidences that prove the existence of the "thread" between IRC messages. (Rafaeli and Sudweeks 1997: 8) The thread of IRC messages can be defined as the chain of interrelated messages, constituting the central unit of interest in studying computer mediated groups. The interactivity is defined as the dependency among messages in threads, and it is examined by the analyses of the IRC contents or by the observation of the IRC data in terms of linguistic or sociolinguistic view. Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997: 13) conclude: "the content on the net is less confrontational than is popularly believed: conversations are more helpful and social than competitive." This view regards the IRC coherence positively. Their view admit the existence of the IRC coherence, but it focuses on the social relations or ties among IRC participants. Instead we aim to analyze the IRC coherence in the framework of conversation analytic approach, especially with the application of conditional relevance.

2. Theoretical backgrounds: Conditional relevance in sequence organization

Before we explain the IRC structural coherence with the application of conditional relevance, it would be helpful to outline the major concepts of sequence organization, including conditional relevance, for the criterion of structural coherence is whether a sequence is well-organized or not.

Sequence organization is related with the whole structure of a conversation. Levinson (1983: 309) points out: "the overall organization of conversation has been studied mainly on the telephone calls at first." It is not, however, by virtue of 'being on

the telephone' that such conversations contain most features of overall organization, but by the fact that phone calls also belong to a class of interactions, like a chat on the street or over the fence, that share many features. Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998: 38) point out: "a key notion in CA is that turns are not just serially ordered (that is, coming one after the other); they are sequentially ordered."

All types of conversation have recognizable sequences. Adjacency pairs, local management organization in themselves, are the basic unit that constitutes conversational sequences. It is very clear that adjacency pair is the fundamental unit of conversational organization. Adjacency pairs are prototypically made up of such paired utterances as question-answer, greeting-greeting, offer-acceptance, apology-minimization, etc., which are deeply related with turn-taking system as techniques for selecting a next speaker.

The parts of adjacency pairs are not always strictly adjacent to each other. As Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998) admit, legitimate insertions come between first and second parts. In such cases, the notion of conditional relevance (Schegloff 1968) will be helpful. Conditional relevance posits that adjacency pairs are bound together by a certain expectation which has to be attended to. Through this expectation, mutually relevant turns are linked to one another even when they are not strictly adjacent. There are some utterances conventionally paired such that, as soon as the first part is produced, the second part becomes relevant though the two parts do not appear in serial order. Here we can find that sequential properties are different from serial ones. Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998: 40), therefore, claim: "the next turn in adjacency pair sequence is a relevant second part. But that need not be the next turn in the series of turns making up some particular conversation."

Consider one example from Levinson (1983: 304. In: Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998: 40).

(2)

1. A: Can I have a bottle of Mitch?
2. B: Are you over twenty one?
3. A: No.
4. B: No.

Though this material shows a question-answer adjacency pair, the utterance of B at line 2 is not an answer to the question of A at line 1. Line 2 is indeed the first part of a new pair: "another question and answer pair produced as an insertion sequence" as Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998: 40) indicate. This insertion does mean that B ignores the question in line 1, but it "defers the answer until relevant information (in this case, whether speaker A is old enough to buy beer) has been obtained. As we see, A orients to that deferral by answering the inserted question in line 3, rather than, for example, asking his initial question again or complaining that it has not been answered. Once the insertion sequence is completed, B shows that he is still orienting to the relevance of the original adjacency pair by moving on line 4 to provide the relevant second part." (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998: 40-1) From this fact, we can discover the way participants establish the mutual understanding of each other's utterances through conditional relevance.

In process of sequence organization, the concept of adjacency pair should not be understood as a law-like constraint on participants or empirical generalization. Adjacency pairs show that participants are attempting to understand each other's utterances in process and provide a relevant response to them through conditional relevance.

Besides adjacency pairs, there are other types of **turns** that constitute overall organization of conversation. They are pre-sequences, inter-sequences, and post sequences. Presequences are used to prefigure the specific kind of action that they potentially precede. (Levinson 1983: 346) Pre-invitations, pre-requests and pre-arrangements are examples of pre-sequences. Insertion-sequences come between adjacency pairs, functioning as a repair or a temporary hold in turn-taking system.

3. Analysis of conditional relevance in Internet relay chat

We have discussed the IRC coherence in its explicit structure, applying the concepts of turn-taking and sequence organization. Among the already mentioned CA concepts, the issue of conditional relevance is discussed here with regard to the specific IRC situation where only two participants are chatting.

There are not a few cases where adjacency pairs do not appear in serial order as we have examined in Chapter **3.** Conditional relevance explains that even in such cases, the first pair part expects its relevant second pair part. As we will see in the following section, adjacency pairs in the strictest serial order are not discovered easily even when only two participants are conversing with each other.

3.1. Conditional relevance in Internet relay chat

Often even in a single sequence of IRC where only two participants are chatting, adjacency pairs do not appear in serial order. For example, when a participant A chats with another participant B, a posted message from A that is directly related to another message from B sometimes does not follow the message from B in serial order. Instead, another message from A that is not related to the targeted message from B intervenes, making the two related messages crossed. This situation is summarized as follows and it a kind of conditional relevance.

Then one question should be asked. In an IRC situation with only two participants, does conditional relevance occur since the two participants are not aware of what they are chatting now? Without any doubt they are fully aware of what they are talking about and what message they should be posting at their turn. One may wonder if it would be possible to maintain structural coherence in serial order as well as in sequential order when only two participants are constructing a sequence. Though admitting that even in FTF conditional relevance is applied between only two participants, we need to consider what specific conditions in IRC cause conditional relevance. This issue is discussed both linguistically and extra-linguistically.

In extra-linguistic terms, conditional relevance is inevitable since there should be intervals between IRC message production by the participants and its presentation on the computer screen. These intervals are not produced by any linguistic or comrnunicational limitations. They are the products of the mechanical system underlying the IRC environment.

From linguistic perspectives, there is a more significant reason for the IRC conditional relevance. For one thing, each participant tends to plan her/his intended messages in advance and post them by splitting a turn of message into several parts. Such turn splitting is more frequently found in IRC than in FTF, and it becomes a major cause of the more frequent occurrences of conditional relevance.

By conditional relevance, IRC participants attempt to make their newly produced messages linked to their pairs, which means that the efforts to maintain the IRC conversational coherence is sustained. Such an effort imply that conditional relevance is a way to maintain the conversational coherence of IRC. Indeed even when physical adjacency pairs are not found, communication tends to be successful among IRC participants due to conditional relevance. Though more time would be required to link a second pair part to its first pair part due to the intervals between the production of messages and their posts on the computer screen, IRC participants manage to interpret the messages sent to them, send their messages to the intended participants and make them recognizable.

3.2 Analysis of conditional relevance

Based on the claims in the previous section, an example of conditional relevance will be analyzed as follows: (www.icq.com February 9, 2006)

(3)

1. <BerenErchamion> why should I not tell her what I **feel?**
2. <BerenErchamion> I've been like going crazy for these last few days
3. <BerenErchamion> all cause of her
4. <Guest_36> no, don't do it....
5. <Guest_36> won't work

In (3) the lines 1 and 4 are adjacency pair as question-answer relation, but they are not serially adjacent to each other. Conditional relevance explains here that the first pair part, the line 1, expects its relevant second pair part, which appears at line 4. This is

caused by the fact that BerenErchamion posts three messages while Guest–36 is reading them and producing his response on the keyboard. Guest_36 may start to reply to the line 1 as soon as it is presented on the computer screen. His reply is presented on the screen at line 4 only after it is received by the chat room system, though. Another possible reason for the occurrence of conditional relevance is as follows: BerenErchamion habitually splits a turn of message into several posts. Taking this possibility into consideration, the lines from 1 through 3 can be one turn originally. While BerenErchamion is splitting a turn of his into three fragments and posting them serially, the replying turn of Guest–36 is shoved to line 4.

On the other hand, the next example shows a case where an adjacency pair is placed serially as only two participants are chatting.

(4)

1. <Guest_36> has she got another bf?
2. <BerenErchamion> I don't think she has a bf

In (4) we also find an example of question-answer adjacency pair. This case shows that the two turns of the adjacency pair are adjacent to each other in serial order. When only two participants are chatting, one of them can respond to the other after the first pair part of adjacency pair is presented on the screen. Alternatively the other participant can respond to the second pair part by awaiting and watching it posted on the screen. Thereby adjacency pair can be maintained in serial order in one-to-one chat settings only if the participants await the each other's post and then respond to it. Nevertheless as in (3) conditional relevance is also required in one-to-one chat. This is because the participants do not consider the gap between turn construction process and its presentation on the screen or they block serial adjacency by splitting a turn into several fragments. The coherence of turn allocation, however, is guaranteed through conditional relevance.

We consider the coherence through conditional relevance in (5).

(5)

1. <jezzy> hi guys
2. <BerenErchamion> I don't think she does
3. <BerenErchamion> hello
4. <Roadkill> hey jezzy

One-to-one chat is not sustained in (5) as more participants join. A new participant, jezzy, enters this chat room and another participant Roadkill, who has been silent so far, posts a greeting message intended to jezzy. Lines 1 and 3 (or 1 and 4) constitute a greeting-greeting adjacency pair. Line 2 is inserted between the two pair parts, making serial adjacency violated. Instead conditional relevance is applied here again to support sequential coherence. The inserted message of line 2 is related to the previous sequence of (4). BerenErchamion has already produced line 2 even before the entrance of jezzy at line 1 and he identifies jezzy's entrance after his message is presented at line 2. At line 3 BerenErchamion's response to line 1 is presented and at line 4 Roadkill's second pair part to line 1 is presented. These two cases constitute two pairs of conditional relevance cases. Such a practice is frequently observed in the IRC setting. Though the serial coherence is not found in such a case, the participants continue to communicate with each other maintaining the sequential coherence through conditional relevance.

We consider another example of conditional relevance in (6) where though such typical adjacency pair as question-answer or greeting-greeting is not found, mutually relevant pairs are surely observed.

(6)

1. <Guest_36> we married 4 years next month
2. <BerenErchamion> I've really no idea what to say
3. <BerenErchamion> but I can't wait 5 months
4. <Guest_36> we've got a lill girl
5. <BerenErchamion> in two years and maybe we'll never see each other again
6. <BerenErchamion> oh well lucky you
7. <BerenErchamion> and happy you

Participants in (6) consist of only two members, Guest–36 and BerenErchamion. There is only one sequence here as well. Their adjacency turns are not serially adjacent, though. The response to turn 4 is not 5, but 6 and 7. This happens because turn 5 has been displayed on the screen when BerenErchamion start keyboarding the message of turn 6. In such a case, Guest_36 does not have any difficulty in matching her/his turn 4 with turns 6 plus 7 to construct adjacency pairs, since s/he has already anticipated that a paired turn would surely appear even after other turns intervene. Therefore, this case is an example where conditional relevance plays a decisive role in maintaining an IRC sequence.

The following IRC data shows an extreme case of conditional relevance. (www.icq.com, January 4, 2005) This includes lengthy messages.

(7)

1. <htredneck> just because YOUR information is NEW and INNOVATIVE and can be proved w/ some mathematical equation, it doesn't mean it is RIGHT...
2. <Jake4343> why should we know
3. <Jake4343> i don't
4. <Quasargon> sounds like a rationalization for ignorance
5. <Sailor> yeah
6. <Jake4343> call it what you will
7. <Sailor> [htredneck] you are injurying my ey
8. <Quasargon> the key is to not be too quick to think you're right
9. <Jake4343> you can't teach the non learnable
10. <Sailor> false
11. <Quasargon> think of all of the possibilities that could invalidate a theory
12. <Sailor> you can teach everything
13. <Jake4343> they have all the answers
14. <htredneck> could be... justifiable ignorance maybe quas? hahaha... I agree w/ your arguments. and I really don't know how to better present my assertion here. I don't like the idea of being

a jelly fish or a weak lemming, but false confidence is just as bad in my mind

A participant, htredneck, is posting very lengthy messages repeatedly. In doing so, he makes his adjacency turns far away from their pairs. On his style one of the participants, Sailor, comments that he is injuring her eyes, which means that htredneck's way of posting messages are disturbing other participants. His lengthy style does not only disturb others but also himself: his adjacency turns are drawn back to a long distance. In this situation, however, at line **14** htredneck posts the response to the related message at 4. That is, he manages to maintain adjacency turns coherently through conditional relevance.

In the following chat (www.yahoo.com. October 29, 2005), part of SCENXAD's turns are not adjacent serially to its pair though they are in the same sequence. At line **3**, Spellboundbythedevil3 asks for an example of punk music. SCENXAD's post at 4, however, is not sequentially adjacent to turn 3, but it is linked to turn **1.** The adjacency pair of turn **3** comes at 5. This is an example which does not observe adjacency turns serially. Such a disjunction of related turns is caused by SCENXAD's attempt to continue the message initiated at 1, during; which Spellboundbythedevil3 intervenes to offer an answer to turn **1.** Even after the insertion occurs, SCENXAD posts an answer to the question of Spellboundbythedevil3, which shows that there is an effort to maintain the IRC coherence even after the turn insertion.

(8)

1. SCENXAD : nihilist i read your profile, expressing rage thru heavy metal is stifling, try punk
2. SCENXAD : hey spellbound
3. Spellboundbythedevil3 : >.> punk as in? please say your referring to old punk and not the new junk.
4. SCENXAD : metal closes ya down, punk opens you up
5. SCENXAD : punk as in sex pistols, ramones, clash, stiff little fingers, buzzcocks, badreligion
6. SCENXAD : etc etc etc

In (8) lines 3 and 5 constitute the adjacency pair of question-answer relation.

There is another example (www.yahoo.com. October 29, 2005) in (9) where the message of SCENXAD constitutes conditional relevance relation with others. At line 7, "Amen" is used originally to be linked to his message at line 4, but it comes to seem to be a damnation on himself since it falls into conditional relevance by the intervention of maggie's message, "scen you SUCK". This situation is also triggered by the intervals between the message production and its posting. Despite such an embarrassing outcome, SCENXAD still attempts to maintain IRC conversational coherence by posting a proper answer at line 9 to maggie's message of line 6.

(9)

1. SCENXAD : damn my spelling is getting worse every day
2. Antidiva-diva1 : u know what not just debbie...
3. BluestSky77 : who else
4. SCENXAD : i loved it when each season the cosby kids were getting older so he would introduce a new young cosby to look cute
5. Antidiva-diva1 : let's put the entire cast fromt the view to sleep
6. maggie : scen you SUCK
7. SCENXAD : amen
8. Antidiva-diva1 : all sitcoms do that
9. SCENXAD : maggie that rumour has never been proven

Though the intervention of other turns causes conditional relevance in a single sequence, the IRC coherence is not completely violated. From these either in the case of only two participants or in the case of more than two, conditional relevance will occur. This conditional relevance makes a sequence structurally coherent even when it seems to violate adjacency pair.

4. Conclusion

We have so far explained the structural coherence of IRC through conditional relevance. In the IRC environments, multiple participants process multiple sequences simultaneously, which cause the superficial disorder of turn allocation. Due to the specific property of IRC that the process of message production and its display on the computer screen is asynchronous, and also due to the tendency of turn split, it becomes less probable that adjacency pairs occur in serial order. Despite these limitations, mutually relevant turns are constructed wen after a very long interval, which implies that IRC participants attempt to establish the structural coherence of IRC through conditional relevance.

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Kyooshiek Kim
cupclassic@daum.net