

Discourse Trajectory and Participant Harmony  
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EDU530: Assignment 2  
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### Introduction:

Larsen-Freeman and Cameron offer this light on discourse trajectory: "Visualization of a complex discourse system invokes the image of a multidimensional landscape with hills and valleys, over which the system roams, creating a trajectory"(2008, p.175). In this model, conversations move along various attractor basins--which can be seen as more routine and comfortable modes of communication--or move out of attractor basins and into new modes of talk. Changing modes are considered shifts (known as 'phase shifts') in the routine, for example: unexpected topic shifts, violations in common adjacency pairs or highly creative conversational activity. The trajectory can then be seen as the element of time, the moment to moment (microgenetic) "...trace of the conversation, showing the choices made and directions taken. It represents the immediate history of the talk..."(p. 175). Along a discourse trajectory then, participant harmony emerges as a dance of moves, exchanges and transitions as speakers create a landscape of mutual trust and understanding.

### Context:

This is a conversation between myself (a native English speaker EFL teacher living in Korea) and my wife (a Korean native and an English and Japanese language learner) with interview-style elements. The analyzed segment occurs between the 4th and 11th minutes of a 27 minute discourse. While I introduce the theme (language learning) at the outset, there is no pretense to foreground specific topics. What transpires is a casual conversation about language learning. We are seated at a table in our living room.

### Format and Devices:

The discourse is broken up into nine sections: both topic and syntactic boundaries have been considered in creating these sections. The main devices employed here are: Goffman's system

constraints (mostly turnover and backchannel signals), Levinson's deictic markers, Halliday and Hasan's lexical reiteration, lexicalization (from McCarthy, 1991, pp. 68-71), negotiating and co-constructing meaning (from Nunan, 2007, pp. 96-98) and Larsen-Freeman and Cameron's complex systems framework (focusing on trajectory as mentioned in the introduction).

### Section One:

01-T: Ah. How do you develop yur vocabulary and yur ((clears throat)) language skill. ah without. you know. studying the grammar?

02-S: ....Grammar. ah very basic grammar at the school..we did school so don't worry about that much grammar.. so if I. I'm not correct then maybe teacher will correct that.

03-T: Ah hah.. They will correct it even when you're out ah walking around and ah. and having conversation?

04-S: Yes, with teacher then.. I::: I told my teacher. if I:. if I talk wrong then please correct that//

05-T: //Ah Ha//

06-S: //and then teachers always correct me..

Lexical reiteration of the word 'grammar' in lines 1 and 2 suggests that the speakers agree to topicalize 'grammar' as a subject. S's pause at the outset of line 2 is a bid for time in relation to the rather broad topic selection. S then makes a successful narrowing of the topic toward the notion of grammar *and* correction. In turn, T reiterates the word 'correct' in line 3 signaling the acceptance of the idea of grammar correction, alternatively known as 'teacher feedback on errors'. In line 4, S introduces the concept of learner-centeredness ("I told my teacher. if I:. if I talk wrong then please correct that"). The topic of teacher treatment of student error and the subtopic of learner-centeredness remains prominent throughout the speech event analyzed in this paper.

### Section Two:

07-T: Ahh. that's. yah. So:. ah. if you didn't tell the teacher it's ok, when you're out and about ah having fun.. ah.. do you think they would correct you. ah. anyway. or do you think.,=

08-S: =No. no. no.. sometimes correct. very wrong then ah he she doesn't understand then. at that time correct ((laughter))//

09-T: //((laughter)) Otherwise she let's it go,

10-S: Yes.

11-T: and just prefers to communicate,=

12-S: =Yah. but teacher's ah. a:h. by teacher's personality,//

13-T: //Uh huh//

The trajectory then moves along the same attractor basin but into the subtopic of correction in and out of the classroom (line 7). S bids for a turn in line 8, taking the cue from T (slight pause and rise in intonation). The consistent latching of utterances (here and throughout the discourse) indicates a developing pattern in which exchanges are connected in a harmonious fashion. Examples of alignment here are an overlap (the laughter in lines 8 and 9) and a syntactic completion (lines 11 and 12).

### Section Three:

14-S: //some people. some teachers.. even though students didn't ask.. but. she corrects.

15-T: A:h.. ah in yur=

16-S: =Like E before,

17-T: Uh huh..

18-S: He. I didn't said. I didn't say correct. please correct but he always corrected ((laughter)) so...

19-T: ((laughter))

20-S: sometimes conversation is no good. at that time.

The attractor basin, having established some degree of comfort between the speakers, is directed exophorically when S (line 16) employs third person (E = teacher) and temporal deixis (before) referring to a teacher we both know and with whom S had studied previously. The overlap of laughter (lines 18 and 19) indicates possible humorous mutual memories of both people and a particular time in history. Relexicalization (McCarthy, 1991) "...concerning how speakers reiterate their own and take up *one another's* vocabulary selections..." (p. 69) is becoming a significant thread that pulls the discourse together, develops the topic and subtopics, co-constructs meaning-making and promotes speaker mutuality: it is part of what will eventually be called 'participant harmony' in this discourse.

#### Section Four:

21-T: A:h. so. in your case. um. ah. there is some kind of happy medium,. and that means if//

22-S: //Yah//

23-T: //ah. what's //that...

24-S: //If I=

25-T: =What's that mean to you?

26-S: Yah. happy medium is ah the best to me.

27-T: How do you tell what is the happy medium?

28-S: In Korea?

29-T: When you're studying any language and=

30-S: =Oh=

31-T: =you need correction on one hand but on the other hand you want to: be understood, and enjoy the. the exchange,=

32-S: =Um=

33-T: =and the conversation,=

34-S: =Uh huh=

35-T: =and on the other hand. as I mentioned. you ah. you need to have some correction in order to develop, skills=

36-S: =Uh huh.

This section shows a significant shift in language choice. T introduces the metaphor of a "happy medium" (line 21) and the consequent relexicalization of this metaphor exemplifies a "lexical/conceptual pact...bring[ing] together information from two different domains into a compact, memorable, and vivid phrase"(Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008, p.183). The dual domains of vocabulary and concept merge to supply a specific meaning in the context of this discourse. On an ideal and general level, teacher and student are seen by both T and S as collaborators in how to employ corrective feedback both in and outside the classroom environment. This is a blending of error correction and learner-centeredness into a single topic.

#### Section Five:

37-T: So how do you know what the happy medium is?

38-S: ...When we talk. I always ah. ah. ah. I feel.. that's a happy medium.

39-T: Uh huh=

40-S: =Teachers ah never correct very strongly,=

41-T: =Uh huh.

42-S: and I didn't ask very strongly so always it goes happy medium

43-T: ((laughter))//

44-S: (((laughter)))

45-T: //So the happy medium is kind of a natural=

46-S: =Uh hum,=

47-T: =way of=

48-S: =UHM hum?=

49-T: =communicating

50-S: Yah=

51-T: =O::h,

52-S: Even though we talk ah our friends when we talk.. at that time we don't understand or it's. ah.  
if they are wrong then we can say.. so=

53-T: =Even=

54-S: =I think ah. very. um.. very naturally it goes. happy medium.

55-T: Ah. so:. in the. the ah. the natural way of speaking IS the happy medium.

56-S: Yes. I think so.

In this section, backchannels and overlaps are prominent, often signaling comfort and agreement, allowing the trajectory to glide along its course. Figurative 'nudges of encouragement' provide a distinctive flow in the state space landscape of the experience. Backchannels are difficult to transcribe, are tuned to speaker mood (as an emotional state) and may be more akin to music than language... they may even be seen to be a bridge in the direction of non-verbal communication. Paralanguage (prosody, gesture, facial expressions) is tightly interwoven with backchanneling in this rather deep attractor basin.

Section Six:

57-T: Ahh. There's. What if you as you mentioned there was another teacher before but he was correcting all the time.. ah. Why did he do that?

58-S: He thinks he is my teacher,

59-T: Uh huh=

60-S: =so he has ah.. maybe he had some a sense of ah. responsibility about teacher so//

61-T: //Ah hah,=

62-S: =he wanted let me ah progress very fast about English.

63-T: Ah hah. so. to me that says that um. he wasn't paying attention to the happy medium

((laughter))

64-S: =Um=

65-T: =He was=

66-S: =I=

67-T: =paying attention to his own=

68-S: =yah=

69-T: =sense of responsibility? perhaps=

70-S: =Yah. I think so. teacher's responsibility.

In line 57, T's use of discourse deixis ("as you mentioned... before...") makes reference to S's previous teacher (E) as described in Section Three above. In this way, T is reintroducing the topic of teacher correction in relation to S's past experience with this teacher (E). Once again backchannels are common, signaling that both speakers are interested in maintaining harmony.

What may be called 'thought markers/signals' (the "ahs" and "ums" that occur in speaker utterances) are manifest in this section and throughout the discourse. Perhaps these microseconds are employed by T and S to co-adapt with and to check each other's paralinguistic. Speaker

attention to paralanguage is a significant aspect of harmonious communication and can, perhaps, be an avenue for further study.

### Section Seven:

71-T: Ah. but what if the teacher's ah. sense of responsibility.. a:h. includes correcting every mistake.

72-S: U:m,.

73-T: the student makes. ah. how do you. you prefer to have some communication=

74-S: =Um hum.

75-T: .how do you tell the teacher=

76-S: =Uh hum.

77-T: .that ah. that that kind of communication is not natural.

78-S: Uh I think in the classroom that's OK because =

79-T: =Uh ok.

80-S: ah ah teacher in the class is teacher. so we are going out.. and ah teaching students and talking, at that time I don't think teacher have to always ah=

81-T: =Uh huh=

82-S: =correct student's talking.

It's known that English has few markers for social deixis. Compared to the Korean language, where social deixis is embedded in the language itself (sometimes called the "honorific system") English is seen to come up short: "Speakers of these languages often mention their discomfort with the meager options available to mark social deixis in English" (Hatch, 1992, p. 222). In this section T refers to "the teacher" in an impersonal manner to mean 'any teacher'. S, on the other hand, foregoes the use of the article such that the illocutionary force comes across as personal and

respectful (e.g., "teacher in the class is teacher" line 80). There is some indication that S has chosen to use the word 'teacher' without an article as a cultural L1 transfer. Further research would be necessary to confirm this hypothesis.

### Section Eight:

83-T: What about the situation where ((clears throat)) the student's only time to practice English with a native speaker is in the classroom,

84-S: I think correct is ah better better.

85-T: Ah.

86-S: .all the time correct.

87-T: U::h Um Does that include correcting every mistake?

88-S: . A:h. I don't think every mistake. but ah. for sentence. ah need some ah. ah.. currency?

89-T: Ah. currency fluency?

90-S: Yah.

91-T: fluency. A::h ok. so the fluent=

92-S: =prepara like prepara prepar...

93-T: A::h. preparation?

94-S: Yah.

95-T: So...

96-S: Ah 'to' or something like that...

97-T: Preposition.

98-S: Preposition. some ah... sometimes ah not correct. at that time it doesn't think. it's ok. don't correct.

99-T: A::h very good

100-S: Yah... probably.

The negotiation and co-constructing of meaning is considered by Nunan (2007) as "...interactional 'work' carried out by speakers and listeners to ensure that conversations flow smoothly..." (p. 97). This happens twice in this section. First, in line 88, S signals a comprehension check ("currency?"), T follows up (in line 89) with a clarification request ("currency fluency?") and S confirms that "fluency" is the correct vocabulary item in line 90. Similarly, in line 92, S bids to introduce another word/concept ("prepara like prepara prepar"), T checks for comprehension in line 93 ("preparation?") and perhaps expresses confusion that serves as a clarification request in line 95 ("So..."). S then follows up and clarifies in line 96 ("Ah 'to' or something like that") and the actual word/concept is revealed in line 97 ("Preposition") and confirmed by S in line 98.

This type of co-construction is most likely where 'learning' takes place in language classrooms but not necessarily where meaning-making is optimal. From this point of view, bids for the negotiation of meaning are seen as 'pitstops' along the trajectory of collaborative dialog. As such, there is always the possibility of a communication breakdown.

In regards to the discourse event in this paper as a whole, it is this section that pushes the trajectory toward "...what we have referred to as Kauffman's 'edge of chaos' (1995). Here the system is highly unpredictable as it adapts rapidly, or self-organizes, in response to a changing landscape (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008, p. 176). As the speakers adapt to the critical point attractor (the unstable nature of negotiation) the conversation self-organizes and, once again, establishes a jointly created attractor basin as harmony is maintained.

#### Section Nine:

101-T: Oh interesting. so you're saying that ah small mistakes=

102-S: =Uh huh=

103-T: =that don't interrupt the meaning=

104-S: =Yah=

105-T: =can wait for. for ah. a more appropriate time to. to correct.

106-S: Yah I think so.

107-T: Ah.

108-S: Yah. I agree with you.

109-T: Ah.

110-S: Um.

In this last section, it is the paralinguistic (not documented in the transcription) that holds sway over the dialog, and it is the backchanneling (more or less intermittent) that points us to the nods of the head, the smiles, the softer tones of voice, the subtle gestures and the overall relaxed mood as this section (and this discourse event) comes to a close. The topic (teacher feedback on student error) is, for the time being, completed, and the discourse slows down to a comfortable glide as a new (and as yet undetermined) topic waits in the wings.

#### On Cohesion and Coherence:

According to Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008), "...a person has 'a latent potential' to use language. It is only in a suitable discourse environment that this potential is actually realized through the talk in that environment" (p. 174). The cohesive devices used to analyze the discourse in this paper (in the Format and Devices Section) are basically tools employed in examining the speakers' co-construction of dialog. The participants collaborate in the moment to make meaning and to create mutual understanding of the main topic (corrective feedback) and related topics (language inside and outside the classroom, learner-centeredness, the 'happy medium'). The latent potential for language use becomes successful talk-in-interaction when the speakers achieve coherence while communicating and collaborating in real time. Cohesive devices then, to borrow a wonderful metaphor (which comes dialogically from many sources) are the breadcrumbs that lead

us both into and out of the forest of discourse analysis. They are the bits and pieces of 'language as a landscape' that we utilize to see where we've been. They are not cognitive devices we employ in the moment in order to make sense to one another. They are the after effects of a successful collaboration in the meaning-making process.

### Application to Language Teaching:

This conversation (and analysis) brings up some interesting issues in regard to language teaching:

- 1) When given the opportunity, students are capable of bidding for topics that they have a stake in. This was seen in Section One where the student very naturally presented the ideas of error correction and learner centeredness.
- 2) Lexical reiteration brings focus to the dynamic concepts behind certain content words (eg., 'correct' in Sections Two and Three) and can make the explicit use of such vocabulary more salient (and therefore more amenable to internalization) for the learner in the classroom.
- 3) The relexicalization of metaphors (e.g., 'happy medium' from Section Four onwards) can be springboards to wider/deeper topicalization as well as bonding elements between classmates and teachers. Metaphors are a potential source of harmony and humor in the classroom.
- 4) 'Thought markers/signals' give students time to not only produce language, but to topicalize and organize the information they wish to communicate (as in Section Six). Teachers need to be aware that 'wait time' may be a necessary test of patience in some cases.
- 5) Different cultures/languages have different attributes that may be absent in the target language (Section Seven and the notion of social deixis) and need to be brought into awareness.
- 6) The NoM is 'interactional work' and great care is necessary so as not to make the conversation itself a 'workout'. The flow of communication calls for both 'work' and 'play' in the classroom setting.

7) Backchanneling and paralanguage walk hand-in-hand, and the more able the teacher is in interpreting and employing positive signals (both verbal and non-verbal) the more harmonious the discourse will become.

### References

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### Appendix A: Complete Transcription

01-T: Ah. How do you develop yur vocabulary and yur ((clears throat)) language skill. ah without. you know. studying the grammar?

02-S: ....Grammar. ah very basic grammar at the school..we did school so don't worry about that much grammar.. so if I. I'm not correct then maybe teacher will correct that.

03-T: Ah hah.. They will correct it even when you're out ah walking around and ah. and having conversation?

04-S: Yes, with teacher then.. I::: I told my teacher. if I. if I talk wrong then please correct that//

05-T: //Ah Ha//

06-S: //and then teachers always correct me..

07-T: Ahh. that's. yah. So:. ah. if you didn't tell the teacher it's ok, when you're out and about ah having fun.. ah.. do you think they would correct you. ah. anyway. or do you think=

08-S: =No. no. no.. sometimes correct. very wrong then ah he she doesn't understand then. at that time correct ((laughter))//

09-T: //((laughter)) Otherwise she let's it go,

10-S: Yes.

11-T: and just prefers to communicate=

12-S: =Yah. but teacher's ah. a:h. by teacher's personality,//

13-T: //Uh huh//

14-S: //some people. some teachers.. even though students didn't ask.. but. she corrects.

15-T: A:h.. ah in yur=

16-S: =Like Eric before,

17-T: Uh huh..

18-S: He. I didn't said. I didn't say correct. please correct but he always corrected ((laughter)) so...

19-T: ((laughter))

20-S: sometimes conversation is no good. at that time.

21-T: A:h. so. in your case. um. ah. there is some kind of happy medium,. and that means if//

22-S: //Yah//

23-T: //ah. what's //that...

24-S: //If I=

25-T: =What's that mean to you?

26-S: Yah. happy medium is ah the best to me.

27-T: How do you tell what is the happy medium?

28-S: In Korea?

29-T: When you're studying any language and=

30-S: =Oh=

31-T: =you need correction on one hand but on the other hand you want to: be understood, and enjoy the. the exchange,=

32-S: =Um=

33-T: =and the conversation,=

34-S: =Uh huh=

35-T: =and on the other hand. as I mentioned. you ah. you need to have some correction in order to develop, skills=

36-S: =Uh huh.

37-T: So how do you know what the happy medium is?

38-S: ...When we talk. I always ah. ah. ah. I feel.. that's a happy medium.

39-T: Uh huh=

40-S: =Teachers ah never correct very strongly,=

41-T: =Uh huh.

42-S: and I didn't ask very strongly so always it goes happy medium

43-T: ((laughter))//

44-S: (((laughter))

45-T: //So the happy medium is kind of a natural=

46-S: =Uh hum,=

47-T: =way of=

48-S: =UHM hum?=

49-T: =communicating

50-S: Yah=

51-T: =O::h,

52-S: Even though we talk ah our friends when we talk.. at that time we don't understand or it's. ah. if they are wrong then we can say.. so=

53-T: =Even=

54-S: =I think ah. very. um.. very naturally it goes. happy medium.

55-T: Ah. so:. in the. the ah. the natural way of speaking IS the happy medium.

56-S: Yes. I think so.

57-T: Ahh. There's. What if you as you mentioned there was another teacher before but he was correcting all the time.. ah. Why did he do that?

58-S: He thinks he is my teacher,

59-T: Uh huh=

60-S: =so he has ah.. maybe he had some a sense of ah. responsibility about teacher so//

61-T: //Ah hah,=

62-S: =he wanted let me ah progress very fast about English.

63-T: Ah hah. so. to me that says that um. he wasn't paying attention to the happy medium ((laughter))  
64-S: =Um=  
65-T: =He was=  
66-S: =I=  
67-T: =paying attention to his own=  
68-S: =yah=  
69-T: =sense of responsibility? perhaps=  
70-S: =Yah. I think so. teacher's responsibility.  
71-T: Ah. but what if the teacher's ah. sense of responsibility.. a:h. includes correcting every mistake.  
72-S: U:m.,.  
73-T: the student makes. ah. how do you. you prefer to have some communication=  
74-S: =Um hum.  
75-T: .how do you tell the teacher=  
76-S: =Uh hum.  
77-T: .that ah. that that kind of communication is not natural.  
78-S: Uh I think in the classroom that's OK because =  
79-T: =Uh ok.  
80-S: ah ah teacher in the class is teacher. so we are going out.. and ah teaching students and talking, at that time I don't think teacher have to always ah=  
81-T: =Uh huh=  
82-S: =correct student's talking.  
83-T: What about the situation where ((clears throat)) the student's only time to practice English. with a native speaker is in the classroom,  
84-S: I think correct is ah better better.  
85-T: Ah.  
86-S: .all the time correct.  
87-T: U::h Um Does that include correcting every mistake?  
88-S: . A:h. I don't think every mistake. but ah. for sentence. ah need some ah. ah.. currency?  
89-T: Ah. currency fluency?  
90-S: Yah.  
91-T: fluency. A::h ok. so the fluent=  
92-S: =prepara like prepara prepar...  
93-T: A::h. preparation?  
94-S: Yah.  
95-T: So...  
96-S: Ah 'to' or something like that...  
97-T: Preposition.  
98-S: Preposition. some ah... sometimes ah not correct. at that time it doesn't think. it's ok. don't correct.  
99-T: A::h very good  
100-S: Yah... probably.  
101-T: Oh interesting. so you're saying that ah small mistakes=  
102-S: =Uh huh=  
103-T: =that don't interrupt the meaning=  
104-S: =Yah=  
105-T: =can wait for. for ah. a more appropriate time to. to correct.  
106-S: Yah I think so.

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