Requests: Knowledge and entitlement in writing tutoring

Innhwa Park

Department of Languages and Cultures, West Chester University, 232 Mitchell Hall, West Chester, PA 19383, United States

A B S T R A C T

Contributing to research on request forms and their relation to the various dimensions of authority, this conversation analytic study examines how the tutee requests for the tutor's help during the agenda-setting phase of writing tutoring interactions. In particular, this study analyzes two distinct request forms (e.g., I don't know x vs. I want x) used by the tutee and argues that the tutee invokes the domains of knowledge and entitlement as meaningful alternatives in making a request. The data consist of approximately 14 h of video-recordings collected at a U.S. university writing center. The investigation shows how the interactional goal (e.g., knowledge development) as well as the external reality (e.g., writing stage) are conveyed and utilized in real time interactions.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Since their establishment in the 1930s, writing centers have grown as an integral part of many universities as they support writers through individualized instruction (Carino, 2003; Carter-Tod, 1995; Corbett, 2013; Williams, 2005). Based on the work of Bruffee (1984), peer tutoring has been utilized as one of the common models in writing centers (Williams, 2005). Much research has shown how peer tutoring can benefit both participants cognitively (Bargh and Schul, 1980; Doise and Mugny, 1984; Durling and Schick, 1976; Foot et al. 1990; Forman, 1994; Gartner et al., 1971; Webb, 1982), meta-cognitively (Annis, 1983; Benware and Deci, 1984; Hartman, 1990; Sternberg, 1985), and interactionally (Falchikov, 2001, 84–113, Rogoff, 1990; Sideridis et al. 1997; Topping, 1996; Topping and Ehly, 1998). As the tutor navigates the role of simultaneously being a peer and a tutor, peer tutoring entails much collaboration and negotiation between the tutor and the tutee as they each engage in learning (Park, 2014; Trimbur, 1987; Williams, 2005).

As a form of institutional talk, writing tutoring talk is goal-oriented and has identifiable structures and patterns (Agar, 1985; Drew and Heritage, 1992; Sarangi and Roberts, 1999). Based on his review of discourse analytic studies on courtroom and medical interactions, Agar (1985) identifies three major phases in such institutional talk. First is diagnosis that fits the client and the presented problem to the institutional frame; second is a directive phase that provides direction of what to do about the problem; and third is reporting, which involves keeping a record of the talk. Upon her analysis of writing center sessions with both L1 and L2 writers, Williams (2005) expands Agar's model by adding a goal-setting phase. She notes that after introductions, the tutor elicits the writer's goal for the session often by offering to help (e.g., How can I help you today?) (pp. 40–41). This phase in which the tutee presents a problem that has prompted the visit to the center precedes the diagnosis phase. This goal-setting phase parallels the agenda-setting phase found in tutoring via telephone conferencing; the participants identify the topics to be addressed and seek agreement on the session's agenda (Horton-Salway et al., 2008). The focus

of this study concerns this agenda-setting phase. In particular, I analyze distinct ways in which the tutee requests the tutor's help as they set the agenda for the session.

Making a request is widely recognized as one of the basic activities carried out in human interaction, and requesting can be achieved through a variety of linguistic forms including statements, imperatives, and questions (Clayman & Heritage, 2014; Drew and Couper-Kuhlen, 2014; Curl and Drew, 2008; Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Lindstörm, 2005; Wootton, 1981). As reviewed in Curl and Drew (2008), much research on requests is based on the following research traditions: speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975), politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987), and conversation analysis (Schegloff, 1979). While the two former traditions treat different linguistic forms as intrinsically more or less polite and as being used according to predetermined sociological roles of the interactants (see Watts, 2003 for the overview of the politeness theory), the latter tradition pays a closer attention to the interactional circumstances in which requesting occurs such as the sequential organization of turns and the shaping of the participants' interactional roles in situ (Craven and Potter, 2010; Curl and Drew, 2008; Goodwin, 1990; Hienemann, 2006; Lindstörm 2005).

In particular, recent CA studies on requests and directives have shown their connection to different dimensions of authority. Following Heritage and Raymond's (2005) work on the ways in which participants assert epistemic authority in assessment sequences, much research confirms that parties to interaction orient to their relative knowledge of 'who knows what' to accomplish social actions (Heinemann, 2008; Heritage, 2007, 2010, 2012; Koshik, 2005; Park, 2012a; Raymond, 2010; see Heritage, 2013 for the detailed review of epistemics). In particular, based on the comparative analysis of the request for information and the request for confirmation in health visitor interactions, Raymond (2010) shows that participants deploy and treat the two types of questioning – yes/no interrogatives and yes/no declaratives – as meaningful alternatives that convey distinct epistemic statuses; the former conveying a larger gap in the participants' knowledge in and right to know what is being discussed at the moment while the latter conveying a smaller gap.

In conjunction with studies on epistemic authority, a growing body of studies shows that participants also orient to deontic authority – the right to determine future actions. (Craven and Potter, 2010; Emmison and Firth, 2012; Lindström, 2005, Stevanovic, 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012); see also Curl and Drew, 2008). In her study of senior citizens' requests to home help service providers, Lindström (2005) shows various syntactic forms such as imperatives, questions, and statements can be used to make a request; imperatives in comparison to questions underscore the requester's entitlement while statements highlight how the request may be negotiated. Building upon Lindström, Heinemann (2006) distinguishes positive and negative interrogative forms of requests in home help visit interactions. She shows positive interrogative requests (e.g., Will you x?) invoke features such as willingness, permissibility, mitigation, and non-routine while negative interrogative requests (e.g., Can't you x?) presuppose ability and invoke features such as the lack of mitigation and routine. Curl and Drew (2008) also compare two linguistic forms of making requests – modal verb formats (e.g., Can you x?) vs. I wonder-prefaced formats – and note that participants' choice of linguistic forms for making a request reflects their understanding of the contingencies associated with the granting of the request. Compared to modal verb formats, participants use I wonder-prefaced formats when their request is subject to different contingences unknown to them (schedules, procedures, practices, etc.), thus constructing themselves as potentially lacking entitlement. Lastly, Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012) carefully examine how participants orient to their interlocutor's deontic rights in making decisions on joint future actions. A "mock" information receipt (e.g., I see) and approval in response to an announcement as well as a decision announcement in response to a proposal are shown as incongruent responses that display the responder's claiming more deontic rights than what is afforded in the provided turn.

Most recently, Clayman and Heritage (2014) discuss an array of practices in requests and offers and show the ways in which participants orient to the distribution of underlying benefits of the action. They suggest that a basic congruence between benefactive stance and benefactive status is ordinarily sustained over the request/offer sequence, resulting in recurrent and generally reliable turn design (e.g., linguistic formats), while the exact contour of the unfolding of the sequence is subject to adjustment in situ. As various underlying dimensions are in play for actions-in-sequence, Clayman and Heritage (2014) hypothesize a hierarchical relationship among the mechanisms of epistemics, deontics, and benefactives; they propose that the mechanisms of the epistemics may be most broadly applicable while those of the benefactives being the most narrowly applicable. Further, Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012) call for further research in the interface between epistemic and deontic authority, suggesting that an epistemic domain of expert knowledge may be used as a basis for claiming and defending one's deontic rights.

Adding and responding to this body of research on requests and their relation to the various dimensions of authority, the current study analyzes how the tutee requests the tutor's help during the agenda-setting phase of writing tutoring interactions. In particular, in an institutional setting in which the benefactor–beneficiary relationship is relatively stable, this study focuses on the domains of knowledge and entitlement. It argues that the tutee invokes the two domains as meaningful alternatives in making a request based on the substantive content of the request. In the first section, I show low epistemic cases in which the tutee uses an epistemic downgrade (e.g., I don't know x, I'm not sure x) to request for help during the agenda-setting phase. The request involves a problem that is broad and vague. Next, I show high entitlement cases in which the tutee uses a highly entitled form of request (e.g., I want x (you to do x)). The request in these latter cases involves a specific problem. I then discuss how the relationship between the two domains of knowledge and entitlement is manifested in the context of writing tutoring interactions.