Who Owns Language in Online Real-Time Interactions?

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Abstract

Research on epistemics in conversation has shown that various difficulties arise in conversation when there is no symmetry in knowledge, and how interlocutors navigate the asymmetries introduced by epistemic status and epistemic stance (cf. Heritage & Raymond, 2005). Yet, there is no empirical study which shows how these asymmetries are navigated between German native speakers (L1 speakers) and language learners (L2 speakers). The data presented in this paper entail examples where language learners of German are more knowledgeable (K+) about the target culture and native speakers are less knowledgeable (K-) about their own culture. It shows that there is an ongoing competition between L1 and L2 speakers, specifically between their *status-based authority*, which addresses what native speakers should know, given their status (Drew, 1991) and *source-based authority*, which deals with actual experience (Enfield, 2011).

Keywords: conversation analysis; epistemic stance; epistemic status; intercultural communication; L2 language education

1. Introduction

Research on epistemics in conversation has shown that numerous difficulties arise in conversation when there is no symmetry in knowledge. This research shows how interlocutors navigate the asymmetries introduced by epistemic status and epistemic stance (cf. Heritage & Raymond, 2005). Yet, there is no empirical study which shows how these asymmetries are navigated in L2 interactions. Using conversation analytic methodology, I will first demonstrate how language learners of German (L2 speakers of German) display their cultural knowledge and how German native speakers (L1 speakers of German) orient toward their own lack of knowledge. Then, I will show how German native speakers (L2 speakers of English) display their cultural expertise and how English native speakers orient toward that. In the end, I will compare two examples.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Epistemics and Repair

Epistemics is a concept of conversation analysis (CA) that has been largely discussed by John Heritage (2012a; 2012b; 2013), and in co-authorship with Geoffrey Raymond (Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Raymond & Heritage, 2006). In CA, epistemics "focuses on the knowledge claims that interactants assert, contest and defend in and through turns-at-talk and sequences of interaction" (Heritage, 2013, p. 371). Consider the example below:

    1) (JS : II : 28, as cited in Drew, 2012, p. 135)
       01 Jon: T's- tsuh beautiful day out isn't it
       02 Lin: Yeh it's jus' gorgeous . . .

Jon and Lin are talking about a beautiful day. In line 01, Jon states that the day is beautiful. The turn includes a tag question which elicits confirmation. Lin, first confirms by producing the acknowledgement token "yeh" and upgrades the assessment by using the adjective 'gorgeous' (Pomerantz, 1984). From this example, it is noticeable that both Jon and Lin have first-hand access to the same information. That is, they share knowledge about the location and weather. But what happens when interlocutors do not have access to the same knowledge at the same time? The way Jon formulates the question signals that he knows that the day is beautiful and that he seeks Lin's agreement.

If Lin's epistemic status, however, was K-, she would have formulated her answer differently, e.g. 'What?' (Drew, 1997), which would suggest that she has issues understanding or hearing. In this example, Lin would use the open-class word 'what' to signal that she needs a further clarification on what Jon is talking about and in doing so, she would repair his utterance. Lin would utilize a mechanism of conversation (repair) to deal with the trouble that arose in the talk. There are also other ways for her to initiate this repair. She could use phrases such as 'whaddyoumean'; wh-question words such as 'where' (alone or together with a partial repeat of the trouble source turn, i.e., 'where is the beautiful day'; the phrase 'y' means plus a candidate understanding of the prior talk; and a partial repeat of the prior talk with upward intonation (Jefferson, Sacks & Schegloff, 1977; Schegloff, 1997).

It is also possible that her epistemic stance (emphasis in the original) will change moment-by-moment because epistemic stance is "managed through the design of turns-at-talk" (Heritage, 2012, p. 377). But is it possible that she does not understand what is going on because she does not have access to what Jon is talking about? Is it possible for Jon to assume that Lin would know how the weather is because Lin is supposed to be at the same location as Jon (even though that might not be the case)? Put differently, speaker's TCUs and turn's design demonstrate their beliefs/assumption and knowledge about their co-participants' knowledge status/stance. We can say that they model their own turn-at-talk so that listeners can better understand them, but that is not the case if interactants are supposed to show expertise based on their status. This concept is observable in intercultural interactions as well and is the scope of this study.

3. Material and Method

The examples presented in this paper are drawn from a larger study consisting of 28 total hours of video-recorded real-time conversations between L2 learners of German and German native speakers via the online platform, Talk Abroad. All participants in the study are undergraduate students who have been studying German for three semesters in a Midwestern University. They were enrolled in a blended

German 1103 (German 3) course in the spring semester of 2019 that met three times a week. In addition to their conversations with native speakers (four conversations throughout the semester), the participants also had access to authentic videos about different modern cultural topics in Germany, such as transportation modes, sports, living in Germany, and entertainment.

The analysis in this paper, however, is based on seven hours of conversation between L2 speakers of German and L1 speakers of German on Talk Abroad, an online platform that provides conversation practice with native speakers. All students enrolled in this class provided their consent to allow the researcher to access their video-recorded conversations with German native speakers at Talk Abroad and their online entries. The German interlocutors are L1 speakers of German (L2 speakers of English). They are students and work at Talk Abroad. The German interlocutors provide their consent to allow Talk Abroad owner to give internal and external researchers access to their recordings for research projects. Examples were transcribed using the transcription notation developed by Jefferson (1985). Mondada's (2018) conventions were used for multimodal transcription.

I have found 8 instances of K+ and K- in terms of cultural knowledge in which either L1 speaker of German is more knowledgeable about the L2 speakers' culture (American culture), or in which L2 speaker of English is more knowledgeable about L1 speakers' culture (German culture). Such examples include music, movies, and geography. In this paper, I will show two examples (see results section) about the topics on entertainment i.e., music and movies.

4. Results

The first example is drawn from a conversation between Aiden (AID, L2 speaker of German) and Theodor (THE, L1 speaker of German). The goal of their conversation is to share more information about entertainment in Germany and the U.S. Therefore, Aiden has prepared some questions about Theodor's favorite music genre. Prior to the excerpt below, Aiden and Theodor talked about the weekend activities and the weather conditions. Aiden also asked Theodor what his favorite music was. After this sequence, Theodor asks Aiden: "*Gehst du zu Konzerten oder so?* " (Do you go to concerts?). Note that Aiden is a researcher at the Ohio State University who grew up in China and who has been to Germany (Berlin, Erfurt, and Bamberg), and who is still in contact with his colleagues in Germany. The only band that Aiden knows is *Wanda*, an Austrian indie pop band founded in Vienna in 2012.

Example 1, April 9, 2019, 0:03:44-0:05:03

Mondada's modal transcription legend:

*THE gesture	+THE gaze	@ AID typing

230	THE was-was ist deine lieblingsmusik
	what-what is your favorite music
231	AID a:h ich liebe ich mag a:hm pop music
	a:h I love I like a:hm pop music
232	a:h indie rock a:hm und und a:hm
	a:h indie rock a:hm and and a:hm
233	klassisch a:h chinesisch music
	classical a:h Chinese music
234	u:[hm das ist u:hm ja:
	u:[hm it is u:hm yes:
235	THE [mhm
236	AID ich habe ein band von deu-von österreichi
	I have one band from ger-from austria
237	u:hm a:h gehört a:h von meiner u:hm
	u:hm a:h heard a:h from my u:hm
238	ersten deutschklasse u:hm u:hm die band ist a:hm
	first German class u:hm u:hm the band it a:hm
239	-> wand-hast du-hast du- hast du die wanda gehört
	wand-have you-have you-have you heard of wanda
240	THE -> wie-*wie ist der name*
	*how-*what is the name**
	puts a finger on his ear
241	AID wanda
242	THE wanda *kannst du es schreiben*
	*wanda *can you write it**
	typing in the air
243	AID u:hm ja@
	u:hm yes@
	@typing--------------------------->>
244	(0.8)
	> >-----------------------@
245	AID wanda
246	we a[en de a
247	THE [wanda
248	a:h ich google kurz
	a:h I will google it
249	AID m:hm
250	THE eine sekunde
	just a second

251   +wanda+
       +reads from screen+
252   -> nein ich [kenne sie nicht
       no I   [don't know them
253   AID [nein
         [no
254   THE nee ich kenne sie nicht
       no I don't know them
255   was für musik machen die
       what kind of music do they make

(Aiden starts explaining)

In this example, Aiden is prompted by Theodor's question in line 230 to talk about his favorite music, and he answers Theodor's question in lines 231-234 with various hesitations and lengthened vowels. Aiden listens not only to pop, indie rock, and classical Chinese music (lines 231-233), he also has knowledge of an Austrian band, namely Wanda, which he was introduced to in his first German language class. In doing so, Aiden not only claims knowledge about the band (he does not only mention its name), but he also states additional details about the band (it is an Austrian band, not a German band, even though he starts off in line 236 with deu and then self-corrects it). It is remarkable that Aiden could have mentioned any other band, not a band from a German-speaking country, but by mentioning this band, cultural product (music) becomes relevant. Moreover, Aiden adds another information about the source of his knowledge which is his first German language class (lines 237-238). In so doing, he also justifies his limited knowledge as he has heard about this Austrian band only in that German class; thereby, he also validates the source of his knowledge. That is, the German language class, the instructor or instructional material are the reason why he knows about his cultural information, and not through some random experience. In line 239, Aiden asks Theodor whether he had ever listened to this band.

Now, let us take a closer look at the talk following Aiden's question in line 239. Theodor does other-initiated repair (Schegloff, 1997) as he is asking Aiden to repeat the name of the band. We observe that Theodor treats the problem as a hearing problem by putting a finger on his ear while asking Aiden to repeat the name of the band (*wie-wie ist der name*).

In line 241, Aiden repeats the name of the band, which is not sufficient for Theodor to display his understanding in his next turn. In line 242, Theodor first repeats the name of the band. By using an echo answer in the same line, Theodor appropriates Aiden's formulation (Svennevig, 2003) and he tries to "present and explicitly register just-retrieved, new, or corrected information" (Betz, Taleghani-Nikazm, Drake & Golato, 2013, p. 133). At this point, his echo answer is not a standalone. It is followed by a question, which indexes that hearing the name again was not enough for him to recognize the band. Moreover, by asking Aiden to type the name of the band in the chat feature on the platform, Theodor displays that hearing the name was not enough for him to recognize the band, thereby still treating it as a hearing/pronunciation problem and not his K-. Theodor needs to see a written form of the word to register it.

In line 247, Theodor repeats, again, the name of the band as he registers the receipt of information. Even after identifying a phonological and graphemic form, he is not able to relate it to a potential semantic form and needs to find this band online. Only after finding the information online, he admits that he does not know the band. His online search also has the verifying function of Aiden's pronounced and written form.

As Heritage and Raymond (2012) observe, "each question establishes a distinctive gap in knowledge, a distinctive epistemic gradient, between questioner and respondent" (p. 180). In the first example, the question about the Austrian band Wanda unveils that the L1 speaker of German is less knowledgeable of culture in German speaking countries (he repeats two times that he has never heard of the band (lines 252 and 254)), whereas the language learner Aiden claims his cultural knowledge and makes this moment culturally relevant for both interlocutors.

The second example is drawn from a conversation between Luke (LUK, L1 speaker) and Sophia (SOP, L2 speaker). Luke and Sophia already met once on Talk Abroad, and this is their second conversation in which they talk about different kinds of entertainment in Germany and the U.S. Similar to the previous example, Sophia has prepared some questions for Luke about entertainment in Germany. Her first question is presented below. After this sequence, Sophia continues asking questions about the popularity of American movies in Germany.

Example 2, April 11, 2019, 0:00:50-0:02:05

100   SOP hast du einen lieblingsfilm
       do you have a favorite movie
101   LUK hab ich einen lieblingsfilm
       do I have a favorite movie
102   ja, fight club
       yes, fight club
103   (0.2)
104   SOP fight club,
105   LUK $hast$ du einen lieblings [film?
       do you have a favorite [movie?
106   SOP [ein
          [an
107   american (0.2) film
       american (0.2) movie
108   LUK ja, klar natürlich ja
       yes, of course yes

109   SOP interessante ((loud laughter))
         Interesting
110   LUK ((loud laughter))
111   SOP worum geht es
         what is it about
112   LUK <u>fight club</u>
113   kennst du ihn nicht?
         you don't know it?
114   (0.2)
115   SOP a:h nein ich habe nicht sehen [fight club
         a:h no I have not seen [[fight club
116   LUK [okay
            [*okay*

(Luke continues explaining what the movie is about)

In this sequence, Sophia elicits information about Luke's favorite movie in line 100. He repeats her question partially (he uses the first person – *ich*) in line 101 and answers the question in line 102. His favorite movie is fight club (a 1999 American film directed by David Fincher), which turns out to be a trouble source for Sophia. In line 104, after a short pause, Sophia repeats the name of the movie with upward intonation to offer her candidate understanding of the name of the movie. Please note that Sophia did not expect to hear the name of an American movie. It is a surprise for her that Luke is mentioning a cultural product that is relevant and should be well known in American culture. Even though Luke treats this moment as less important for their conversation (en passant) in line 105, in which he shifts the topic by asking Sophia about her favorite movie, Sophia does not answer Luke's question, but she rather continues with the previous topic and comments on the film (it is an American film, as if she did not expect it) in lines 106-107. She also assesses the fact that Luke watches American movies as interesting in line 109. For her, it is a surprising moment, something that she did not expect.

Even after the first part of the side sequence, she does not answer Luke's question, but she rather asks about the movie in line 111. She treats this moment as learnable i.e., she seeks more details about the American movie that she should be familiar with based on her status i.e., being an American. In line 112, Luke repeats the name of the movie and surprisingly asks *Kennst du ihn nicht*? He offers here his candidate understanding of Sophia's question in line 113. He registers now that the problem is not the name of the movie but rather the fact that Sophia does not know anything about the movie. In line 115, Sophia admits that she has not watched the movie.

5. Discussion

These data excerpts exemplify how L1 and L2 speakers negotiate epistemic status as K+ or K- surface the interaction and how it is questionable who actually owns language in real-time online interactions: the L1 speaker who is a language expert but not a cultural expert, or the L2 speaker who positions himself as a cultural expert but not as a language expert. The first example is about German music and shows that the male language learner of German is K+ about the target culture (the co-participant's culture), whereas the L1 speaker of German is K- about his own culture. The second example is about an American movie and demonstrates that a male L1 speaker of German is more knowledgeable about the female L2 speaker's culture (American culture). Please note that their cultural identities are treated as 'omnipresent identity' (Kurhila, 2001, p. 1104), which means that interlocutors' identities can be made relevant at whichever point in conversation. Points in conversation under investigation are structured in that way that they bring up different cultural backgrounds of the interlocutors, or at least assumptions that native speakers should know more about their own culture. They also show that the prompts and preparation for these interactions do not raise learners' awareness of the fact that their L1 co-participant may not know everything about their own culture or what's happening locally or in other German-speaking cultures, for example, and vice versa.

Moreover, both examples show how culture is dynamic and changing and how L2 speakers may show expertise on something they have only limited access to. They also show that there is an ongoing competition between L1 and L2 speakers, specifically between their *status-based authority*, which addresses what native speakers should know, given their status (Drew, 1991) and *source-based authority*, which deals with actual experience (Enfield, 2011).

Furthermore, both examples are significant for understanding the behavior of speakers who are expected to know about their own culture. When their co-participants (who are not expected to know about the other speakers' culture) bring up some cultural products and claim expertise* in cultural domains i.e., music and/or movies, speakers first look for clarification by using repair (*wie-wie ist der name*) repetition with upward intonation (*fight club*). Both examples show that names of music bands and movies might be a trouble source. As Kurhila (2001) states, "pronunciation is probably the domain where the native-like command of a language is most difficult to obtain (for adult learners). […] It is the written language which is more rigidly codified by language planning" (p. 1098). Neither Theodor nor Sophia corrects the pronunciation of L2 speakers (Aiden and Luke). They rather repeat the names to clarify their understanding and to seek for more information. In doing so, they also show their K- status, which is evident in the aftermath. Theodor also asks Aiden to write the name of the band in the chat feature just to solve his hearing problem. Both examples showcase the beginning of learning moments. Once Theodor and Sophia admit that they do not know about the band or the movie, they show their interest in by asking *Was für Musik machen sie*? and *Worum geht es?* Both Aiden's *source-based authority* (Drew, 1991, p. 28), the fact that he knows more than the L1 speaker (Theodor) about the band because his first German teacher told him about it, or because he experienced it himself (Luke), compete against Theodor's and Sophia's *status-based authorities* (Drew, 1991, p. 28) and win. That is, Aiden, the L2 speaker, teaches Theodor, the L1 speaker of German, about Austrian culture. Luke, the L2 speaker of English, teaches Sophia, the L1 speaker of English, about American culture. These learning moments emerge from asymmetrical knowledge between the ascribed and the achieved status (Enfield, 2011). That is between the knowledge that one can expect from an L1 speaker to be familiar with and the knowledge that L2 speaker has achieved because of the information he had received from another source (his first German teacher) (Aiden) or because he watched the movie (Luke). Both examples illustrate side sequences. There is no progressivity till both Theodor and Sophia get more details about the band or the movie. They put the progressivity on hold. Even when Sophia's co-participant (Luke) attempts at shifting the topic, she digresses back to the movie.

6. Conclusion

Contrary to my expectations, L1 speakers do not treat these moments as teachable because of the lack of their expertise. Rather, L2 speakers (Aiden and Luke) treat them as such once L1 speakers (Theodor and Sophia) show their interest. In addition, these examples show that culture from German speaking countries is present in German classes and that American culture is very popular in Germany, too. The L2 speaker of English (Luke) is a better expert in American culture than the L1 speaker of German (Theodor) in his own culture.

Notes

*I use the verb to claim here because the knowledge of the L2 speaker is limited (see Heritage, 2007).

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