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# Repairs in Conversation: A Demonstration of Competence

## Abstract

### Introduction

The field of speech errors and repairs is a relatively new one. Repairs have been studied from a number of angles, notably by Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks (1977) and Jefferson (1974). Schegloff et al. saw merit in investigating repairs because of their role as a "self-righting mechanism for the organization of language in social interaction." They focused, for the first time, on the repair rather than the error. Jefferson suggested in her paper that repairs might have an even more important role than the correctional one--that they are in fact, an interactional resource. The use of certain phrases, lexical items, or even speech acts may mark a speaker with a certain role or status within a restricted domain. "Errors" and their repairs allow speakers a wide range of meanings. Jefferson cites the lexical pair "cop" and "officer" in repairs such as:

I told that to thuh--uh--officer.

She claims that the speaker began to say "cop" as evidenced by the use of "thuh" rather than "thee" which would ordinarily be used before a word beginning with a vowel such as "officer." She contends that this pair ~mon~rates contrastive domains of talk, along with their appropriate roles for speakers. She chooses clearly defined pairs such as the above, or "Negro" and "colored"; but of course, many utterances cannot be so clearly attached to specific roles or domains.

The purpose of this study of simulated negotiation sessions is to present a taxonomy for certain types of repairs and give further evidence for the claim that repairs are an interactional resource and, as such, are a part of native speaker competence. It can be seen from the data below that, while structural changes made in repairs may vary a great deal, changes in content are generally of two types: those which adjust the force of an utterance and those which shift its focus. Because speakers are often well into the first portion of an utterance before changing strategies, the hearer is in a good position to decode both portions of the utterance. The hearer thus has access to two, sometimes contradictory, messages. Furthermore, the speaker may use these paired messages to imply dual meanings.

Repairs in Conversation:  
A Demonstration of Competence

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Introduction

The field of speech errors and repairs is a relatively new one.<sup>1</sup> Repairs have been studied from a number of angles, notably by Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks (1977) and Jefferson (1974). Schegloff et al. saw merit in investigating repairs because of their role as a "self-righting mechanism for the organization of language in social interaction." They focused, for the first time, on the repair rather than the error. Jefferson suggested in her paper that repairs might have an even more important role than the correctional one--that they are in fact, an interactional resource. The use of certain phrases, lexical items, or even speech acts may mark a speaker with a certain role or status within a restricted domain. "Errors" and their repairs allow speakers a wide range of meaning. Jefferson cites the lexical pair "cop" and "officer" in repairs such as:

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for the claim that repairs are an interactional resource and, as such, are a part of native speaker competence. It can be seen from the data below that, while structural changes made in repairs may vary a great deal, changes in content are generally of two types: those which adjust the force of an utterance and those which shift its focus. Because speakers are often well into the first portion of an utterance before changing strategies, the hearer is in a good position to decode both portions of the utterance. The hearer thus has access to two, sometimes contradictory, messages. Furthermore, the speaker may use these paired messages to imply dual meanings.

### Past Research

A great deal of the research on speech errors has, in fact, been on slips (see Fromkin 1973, 1980). Most of this has focused on phonological slips, although some studies have included lexical slips as well. It is interesting to note that in phonological slips, most errors are corrected at the following word boundary (Nooteboom 1980). This is quite different from the repairs beyond the phonological level, as seen in the data below.

Jefferson's view of repairs as a part of the systematic interaction defining roles and identifications has been discussed above. Her basic Error Correction Format will be used in the analysis below.

$$\text{Word}_1 + \text{Hesitation} + \text{Word}_2$$

This formula has been expanded to include larger pieces of discourse, labelled chunks, instead of simply words.

$$\text{Chunk}_1 + \text{Hesitation} + \text{Chunk}_2$$

1. Among the negotiating team-- would the NT\* be willing to accept that exchange?

\*NT=negotiating team

Related to the study of repairs , there is a growing body of research on politeness phenomena (Brown and Levinson 1978, Lakoff 1973). In an attempt to follow rules of politeness, a speaker may make a repair. These researchers have stressed the pragmatic importance of talk. Lakoff suggests various Rules of Rapport which interact with the conversational maxims originally proposed by Grice (1975).

- RR1. Don't impose.
- RR2. Give options.
- RR3 Be friendly.

She suggests that these rules are most relevant when the act of talk is more important than the content. In the data below, it will be seen that Lakoff's rules are both regularly invoked and flouted when repairs are made.

Brown and Levinson (1978) cite numerous devices for displaying politeness, many of which can be seen in the data. What is evident from the research into politeness phenomena is that the use of various devices in conversation, including repairs, is far from random; rather it is part of an interactional repertoire available to all fluent speakers. These devices include syntactic and lexical changes and may invoke these rules of politeness.

2. We need our chairman--don't we need our chairman to agree to that?  
(shift to the politer question form)

Alternatively, these rules may be flouted, inviting implicatures such as, "I could threaten you but I won't."

3. What I'm trying to point out--I can't--that solution is totally no win for me.  
( shift from an outright bald refusal to a less committed representative)

### The Present Study

Most research on repairs has examined casual conversation and, in this respect, the present study is different. The corpus in this case

consists of several simulated negotiations collected for another purpose.<sup>2</sup> Each four hour simulation involved sixteen people, eight on each team. There were four people on each intragovernmental team (IGT), and four on each of the two negotiating teams (NT). The players on the NT had to follow the instructions of their IGT, although they were allowed some latitude. They had to come up with one of a number of prescribed solutions for each of six issues. Each participant had his/her own interests to look after as well as the team's. Each IGT and NT met in a caucus at the start of the simulation to map out their strategy. This was followed by a meeting of the two NTs to hammer out solutions. Both of these meetings were taped. The data analyzed below are only from the joint sessions of the NTs.

The data collected by this method are not completely spontaneous because the participants are given a framework in which to interact and the topic is fixed. However, it is clear from the tape that, aside from topic, the participants' speech is not closely monitored. The length of the sessions minimized the inhibiting effect of the tape recorder. The semiplanned nature of the simulation has a distinct advantage for a study such as this: to a large extent, certainly more so than in casual conversation, intention can be determined. At the beginning of each simulation, each participant is given an individual "ideal" outcome, that is, one which will give him/her the highest score. Assuming a sense of competition is in operation, it is possible to get a very good idea of participants' intentions both from listening to the caucus tapes and examining scores.

The data taken for analysis, consisting of seventy-eight instances of repairs from eight hours of material, are rather specific. As Schegloff et al.(1977) point out, not all repairs involve errors and not all errors are repaired. In this study, only substantive repairs

(Prince, Frader and Bosk 1982), that is, those which involve the addition or replacement of material, were examined. Moreover, only those repairs within one turn at talk were included; those excluded contained confounding variables, such as overlaps and interruptions. Utterances too short to code were considered false starts and left unanalyzed.

4. Do--can we agree on that?

Also omitted were the phonological slips of previous studies. The basic format for repairs in this study will be similar to Jefferson's as noted above.

Chunk<sub>1</sub> + Hesitation + Chunk<sub>2</sub>

The hesitations were defined as phrases such as "y'know", or "I mean" and pauses which disconnected the first and second parts of an utterance. In the present study, hesitations are independent of word searches. It is important to the categorization and interpretation of repair types that hesitations be distinguished from word searches. According to Jefferson, the hesitation in structural repairs instructs the hearer that the "prior term is syntactically disconnected with the subsequent term" and, if combined would not produce a grammatical utterance. In word searches, a speaker pauses while casting for a word, but Chunk<sub>1</sub> + Chunk<sub>2</sub> taken together will produce a grammatical utterance.

5. On the 500, I don't think there's--I think it's ah--100,000.

Some repairs were categorized as word searches even though they involve replacement of material. These contained numeric references to various solutions and issues.

6. Let's say the Swiss has three-er--five representatives on the board.

Thus, of the seventy-eight utterances chosen for analysis, twelve were rejected on the basis of the above criteria.

Analysis of Repair Types

I. Toners

Of the remaining sixty-six instances of repairs in the corpus, the overwhelming majority seemed to fit into two major categories. The first has been labeled toners. These involve an adjustment in the force or strength of an utterance. They may be uptoners, which give an utterance a more aggressive tone and increase imposition on the hearer, or downtoners, which are softeners because they lessen speaker imposition on the hearer.<sup>3</sup>

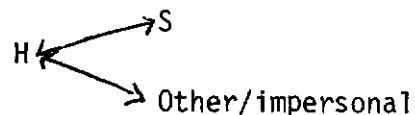
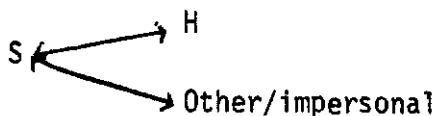
7. I don't think--I know our team will not accept that. (uptoner)

8. You've got to send it to your--you gonna send it to your IGT? (downtoner)

As can be seen from the above examples, these toners can manifest themselves in a number of surface forms--in anything from a lexical substitution, as in (7), to a change in syntax or speech act, as in the shift from an imperative demand for action to an interrogative request for information (8).

II. Shifts in Focus

The second type of repair involves shifts in focus. These are not quite as simple as the one dimensional toners. A speaker may shift the focus of an utterance away or toward him/herself. This may mean a new focus on the hearer or an impersonal, or "other" form. "Other" in this case usually means "they" or the IGT. Possibilities for focus shift repair can be graphically represented as follows:





9. See this is the problem. We can't--our IGT can't take this.  
(S → other/impersonal)
10. ...if we have--if like your side has four representatives on the board....  
(S → H)
11. I mean you could--we could involve some armament that you might want to make of steel.  
(H → S)
12. You said you were willing--that the status quo was fine with you.  
(H → other/impersonal)

Once again, focus shift may be realized on a number of structural levels.

Of the sixty-six utterances, fifty-nine were found to fall into one of the two above categories.

TABLE 1 Frequency of repair types

Uptoners	14
Downtoners	18
Total Toners	32
S → H	3
S → other/imp	11
H → S	6
H → other/imp	3
Other/imp → S	5
Other/imp → H	3
Total focus shift	31

The discrepancy in the numbers is due to the fact that some of the utterances contain both a toner and a shift in focus.

13. I think we're--#IV is going to have to be the solution.  
(uptoner: lexical change from "I think" to "is going to have to")  
(focus shift: S → other/impersonal: "I" to "#IV")

### III. Surface Forms of Repairs

These two manipulation, toners and shifts in focus, have a number of surface forms. Lexical substitution and insertion are the simplest.

14. Are you willing to give us--or-- concede on any of the issues?  
Some lexical substitutions may be efforts to avoid certain taboo terms.

15. Alright, we don't give a --it doesn't matter to us whether it's say 8,2 or 6,4.  
(toner)

Jefferson (1974) points out that obscurity can be an ingroup or intimacy marker. This may indicate that the participants are aware of their dual role; that is, "I know we're all really just a bunch of students, but we have to act properly for now."

Syntactic changes can be more complex and varied. Pronoun changes, such as you--we, I--you, are quite common, but reversal of subject and object can also be found.

16. We are now proposing that the offer of status quo--that you'd accept it as the full agreement.

Impersonalization is another device, often found in conjunction with passivization.

17. But we are willing--there are concessions that can be made. Of course, the reverse process is also possible. It could be argued that (16) is an instance of reactivation. Another syntactic device is making a complement from a previous utterance, frequently of the "I think (that)" variety.

18. The Swiss balance sa--I think the Swiss balance safeguards most of your fears in this.

These can be seen as hedges of, "words or phrases which make things fuzzier" (Lakoff 1972), and will be discussed further below.

Beyond these examples is a rather nebulous area which straddles the discourse and syntactic levels. Occasionally, for example, an interrogative transformation appeared to be a straightforward syntactic change, but in addition resulted in an alternative speech act.

19. Well, what is y--let's get their proposition on it.  
(syntactic change: interrogative to declarative)  
(speech act shift: request to a suggestion)

Other changes were more complex, such as this shift from an offer to a request.

20. What I would be willing to do--What I would be interested in seeing your response to....

On the other hand, this change in speech act was much simpler:

21. We would give--OK--we'd take #3.  
(change from an offer to a representative)

Table 2 gives a few examples of these repairs/manipulations.

### Discussion

#### I. Dual Messages

According to Jefferson (1974), the hearer can decode and process these dual messages. She relates the separate messages to certain roles and domains. It is difficult to be so specific about the data presented here. However, it is possible to posit that both messages find their mark during negotiation. Both toners and shifts in focus blatantly invite implicatures. By "catching oneself in time," it is possible to display potential aggressive behavior as well as conciliatory postures. One can indicate that there is room to maneuver without making a direct concession.

22. He's gonna accept--he's gonna want #1.

Specific demands and be relaxed to more general ones:

23. OK, what have you--have you decided on anything?  
(change from WH to yes/no question)

#### II. Politeness and Repairs

Downtoners and some shifts in focus seem to correspond to some of the work which has been done on politeness phenomena (Brown and Levinson 1978, Lakoff 1973). Brown and Levinson refer to a number of devices found in the data above such as pronoun shifts, the use of impersonals and passives, and hedging as ways of displaying politeness. Lakoff's Rules of Rapport often apply, whether they are observed or flouted. Of course, it is not always the case that a negotiator (or any conversational participant) wants to be polite; a speaker may flout rules by using uptoners and other

	TONERS	FOCUS SHIFT
LEXICAL	<p>We cannot get our person to back down on 6 unless we get a <u>substantial</u>--ah--y'know--something <u>that's clearly a little bit in our favor over here.</u> (downtoner)</p> <p>I <u>don't think</u>-- I <u>know</u> our team will no accept that. (uptoner)</p>	<p>We can't-- <u>our IGT</u> can't take this. (S→other/impersonal)</p> <p>....if <u>we</u> have--like-- if <u>your side</u> has four representatives on the board..... (S→H)</p>
SYNTACTIC	<p>OK, what have you--have you decided on anything? (downtoner) (shift from WH to yes/no question)</p>	<p>But <u>we</u> are willing--there are concessions that can be made. (S→other/impersonal) (passivization/impersonalization)</p> <p>You said that <u>you</u> were willing-- that the <u>status quo</u> was fine with you. (H→other/impersonal) (subject/object reversal)</p>
DISCOURSE	<p>You've got to send it to your-- you gonna send it to your IGT? (shift from an imperative request for action to an interrogative request for information) (downtoner)</p>	<p>Well, what is yo--let's get their proposition on it. (H→S) (shift from an interrogative request for information directed at the opposing team to an imperative suggestion to own team)</p>

more aggressive forms. RR1 (Don't impose) is particularly evident in shifts in focus. They can be used to distance the speaker from the hearer or process.

24. If we're-- if our man is elected-- once he's elected....  
(shift from "we're" to "our man" to "he's" places the speaker farther from the action)

Toners can also follow RR1 as in (19):

- Well, what is y--let's get their proposition on it.  
(By changing from a direct question to the opponents using the pronoun "your" to a suggestion to his own team using the pronoun "their", the speaker lessens the imposition on the original hearer)

RR2 (Give options) also occurs quite often. Both toners and shifts in focus may be used to give options.

25. We cannot get our person to back down on 6 unless we get a substantial--ah, you know-- something that's clearly a little bit in our favor over here.

Of course, RR2 can be flouted to limit options as well.

26. We can look at--we can accept things like this.

### III. Hedging in Repairs

Hedging is a device of particular interest in repairs because they emphasize the speaker's lack of certainty or commitment. Prince, Frader, and Bosk (1982) divide hedges into two types, approximators and shields. Approximators affect the propositional content of an utterance, whereas shields affect the relationship between the speaker and the proposition. Shields are, in turn, divided into two types, plausibility and attribution shields. The first, of the "I think + clause" or "I guess + clause" variety, is generally an expression of doubt.

- I think his feet were blue. (Prince et al. 1982)

Attribution shields indicate a shift in responsibility away from the speaker, very much like some of the shifts in focus defined earlier in this paper.

According to Dr. Smith, there was a dramatic response after medication.  
(Prince et al. 1982)

There are, indeed, instances of approximators in the data:

27. How would you--we would like to see maybe full payment under restitution as a corollary to that.

However, these are not regularly found at the repair site, while shields are.

28. We were mostly--our IGT(shield) sort of(approximator) liked the fact that for the first time....

It is quite possible that the negotiating process, like the physician-physician discourse in Prince et al.'s article, contains an abundance of utterances which "reflect the speaker's real concern about his/her commitment to a certain belief"(Prince et al. 1982). They also contend that hedges occur with much greater frequency in assertions than questions. It may also be the case that certain speech acts, such as demands or offers, are subject to the greatest hedging. However, the number of hedged repairs is not large enough to make such a determination from these data. What does seem apparent is that, in addition to the dual nature of the utterances processed by the hearer, uncertainty or lack of commitment is also an important part of the message.

29. That's a--I think that's a pretty good offer.  
(shield)

30. I'd like to g--I don't think it should be that high of a number.  
( shield)

As has already been mentioned, this study does not imply that these repairs are part of planned, conscious behavior, nor does it provide evidence for Freudian slips, that is, that the error was what one really wanted to say. However, repairs do occur frequently and in an orderly fashion. They do not appear to be limited to certain speakers or speech acts, rather they occur throughout the four hour simulations and are made by all speakers. Unless the hearer simply blocks out all but the corrected utterance and never processes what was almost said, he/she has access

to both messages, as well as anything implicit in the fact that a dual message has been passed. Jefferson (1974) refers to the "production of just enough error to convey one's habitual terminology without inheriting complaints (from its recipient)." Another way of expressing this thought could be that by "catching oneself in time," one can make use of the first part of an utterance without having to take responsibility for it. These repairs must be regarded as something quite separate from slips or errors, or even from self-righting mechanisms. Their frequency, range systematic occurrence indicates that they must be viewed as an integral part of competence, and not, as was once thought, as part of incompetence.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The data for this study were provided by Stephen Weiss-Wik through his research supported by the National Science Foundation. I am indebted to him for the use of his data and for his ideas in working through them.

<sup>2</sup>These simulations are based on an exercise designed for the State Department for the Foreign Service Institute (Winham and Bovis 1978).

<sup>3</sup>This terminology is somewhat different from Edmundson's use of the term downtoner (1976). In his work, a downtoner is a type of tag used to soften an utterance.

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