Confronting misconduct with interrogatives: a cross-linguistic perspective

It is a ubiquitous phenomenon of everyday interaction that participants confront their co-participants for behaviour that they assess as undesirable or in some other way untoward. In a set of video data of informal interaction that comes from the PECII corpus (Parallel European Corpus of Informal Interaction) I have collected cases of what we call ‚direct confrontations‘ in English, German, Italian and Polish data.

This study presents work in progress and focuses on interrogatively formatted confrontations. It has already been shown that interrogatives can do much more than ask questions in the traditional sense (Huddleston 1994). They can also function, for example, as directives (Lindström et al. 2017) or, more specifically, as requests (Curl/Drew 2008), invitations (Margutti/Galatolo 2018) or reproaches (Klattenberg 2021). What makes them particularly interesting for cross-linguistic comparison is that the four languages that are considered provide different morphological and (morpho-)syntactical ressources for the realization of interrogative phrases. For example, while in German and English the word order in a phrase can make an interrogative recognizable in a clear way, in Italian there is no specific syntactic resource so as to make prosodic design the only way of indicating the interrogative function of an utterance (Rossano 2010). From an interactional point of view, interrogatives are interesting because even when they convey irony rather than soliciting an answer: in any case they open up a conditionally relevant space for an answer or, at least, for a reaction. So the ‚culprit‘ winds up in a situation that is not only (potentially) face-threatening, but also hard to evade, as it seems.

This study uses the method of conversation analysis and interactional linguistics. It is based on a collection of 98 interrogative confrontations that embraces the four languages mentioned above. Besides some quantitative considerations, e.g. about the relation between interrogative and non-interrogative confrontations and their subtypes, differences and commonalities in the formal design of interrogative confrontations (e.g. polar questions vs. content questions vs. tag questions, Rossano 2010; Hayano 2013) will be examined. Just as well I analyze reactions to such confrontations, both from a more formal point of view (cf. Enfield et al. 2019, 279) and from an interactional perspective (e.g. acceptance/compliance vs. challenging/defiance, Kent 2012; Cekaite 2020). A more detailed zooming in on the sequential unfolding of some particularly interesting instances of confrontational interrogatives will make the picture complete.

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