

THE EVOLUTION OF REPAIR: EVIDENCE FROM ONLINE CONVERSATIONS

According to Dingemanse et al (2013), a baby's first word is not "Mama" or "Papa" but the single-syllable "Huh?". Already in early infancy children use "Huh?" to divert the flow of the interaction and elicit a response from their caregiver. The development of such forms of coordinated joint action is a prerequisite for the ontogeny of language (Clark, 2009) and is equally important in adult language use. Studies of utterances such as "Huh?" have shown that they constitute a large family of interactive **repair** mechanisms that are used by interlocutors to deal with problems of intersubjectivity (Schegloff, 1992). Repair consists of two main components (1) Mechanisms for initiating repair, i.e. signaling to others that there is some "trouble" (2) Mechanisms for performing the repair, i.e. resolving the problem via elaboration or reformulation. Crucially, (1) and (2) can be performed by the same or by different people. For example, the utterance "*The next shape is the green one, oops I meant the red one*" is a self-initiated, self-repair, whereas in the exchange below B initiates repair with "huh?", but the correction is performed by A.

A: the next shape is the green one

B: huh?

A: oops I meant the red one

One important dimension along which repair mechanisms differ is their ability to locate and diagnose the problem. For example, "Huh?" and "What?" do not specify the nature of the problem, whereas "when?", "where?", "who" diagnose the problem as concerning a time, place, or person. Even more specific are partial repeats such as "Partially diagnose the what?".

Studies on the emergence of referring conventions have demonstrated the importance of repair: If participants are able to repair each other's referring expressions, this leads to quicker convergence on more systematized, abstract representations (Galantucci and Garrod, 2011). This is a recurrent finding which occurs across modalities (Healey et al., 2007).

To investigate repair in closer detail, this talk presents an analysis of interactions on the social media site reddit.com. Currently 7% of all US adults use reddit, and the archive, consisting of billions of messages from 2005-2015 is freely available from archive.org. Since each message specifies whether it was edited by the user, this allows automated identification and analysis of a large subset of repair mechanisms. By examining users' conversations throughout this 10 year period, we show how the community conventionalizes its own repair mechanisms via (1) repurposing of existing mechanisms, and (2) the development of novel mechanisms. Examples of both are given below:

1. Repurposing self-repair markers as other-repair

Garcia and Jacobs, (2014) showed that people append asterisks to their turns in order to perform self-repair, e.g. "*Let's grab a beere. *beer*". Over a period of 6 years the asterisk was gradually repurposed to perform other-repair, e.g.

A: Let's go for a drink

B: *drink

2. Developing novel forms of repair-initiation

During the same period, users developed the convention of using FTFY (Fixed That For You) to perform other-repair, a mechanism that became increasingly honed for targeting the preceding turn, e.g.

A: When is It you're free? Tomorrow let's go get a pizza.

B: "get some dim sum and a beer" FTFY. It's been a while.

By tracing the development of repair in the corpus, we argue that in addition to referring conventions, interlocutors also develop community-specific routines for identifying, signaling and correcting problems in the interaction.

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