Politeness in Law Tutorials

Stefanie Pillai
Faculty of Languages and Linguistics
University of Malaya

Introduction

Tutorials are part and parcel of the academic life of university students. The students usually have to prepare answers for tutorial questions given to them before each tutorial. In law tutorials, a tutor would also ask further questions as a means of eliciting answers from students; controlling the direction of the discussion; and managing the discussion. Thus, such a tutorial would be based on a series of question and answer sequences. In comparison to the students, the tutor can be perceived to be the person in control of the tutorial (+ *power*), and the one who knows the answers to the previously given tutorial questions, as well as to the questions that she asks during the tutorial (+ *knowledge*).

A question and answer sequence is generally considered as an adjacency pair, that is, two utterances by two different speakers which are adjacent to each other (Schegloff, 1977). A question asked by speaker A is supposed to be answered in the next utterance by speaker B. Further, the answer given by speaker B should be the one that A expects or wants. In other words, there is a 'preferred' answer (Levinson 1983: 307).

Grice's Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1967), particularly the Maxims of Quality and Relation subsumed under this Principle, can also be applied to the kind of answer expected of a speaker. For example, speaker A would expect speaker B to answer his question truthfully and in a relevant manner. The concept of politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1978) would also require speaker B to provide an answer to speaker A's question to avoid any loss of face for either party

In a law tutorial, students would be expected to answer their tutor's questions because they are supposed to have prepared the answers to the tutorial questions. Further, since the tutor is in a position of authority, it would be considered rather rude if the students did not respond to the tutor's questions during the tutorial. Since the tutor would presumably already know the answers to the questions she is asking, there would definitely be a 'preferred' answer to any given question. However, in an actual tutorial there are times when an answer is not forthcoming, or the answer given by the students is not one the tutor wants. This could lead to a breakdown in communication.

Research Questions

In view of the above, the following research questions are examined in this study·

1   How did the tutor deal with instances when she did not get an answer to her question?
2.   How was politeness manifested or inherent in the way the tutor dealt with instances when she did not get an answer to her question?
3.   How do (1) and (2) relate to the concept of an adjacency pair?

Methodology

The data was originally used in a study on questions and answers in law tutorials (Pillai, 1996). The data is derived from an audio recording of three one-hour law tutorials of one tutorial group.

The theoretical framework for this study stems from Conversational Analysis, an approach to discourse which 'seeks to discover methods by which members of a society produce a sense of order' (Schiffrin, 1994:232). It is based on the premise that 'interaction is structurally organised' (ibid.. 236).

One aspect of interaction that reflects such an organisation is turn-taking. Turn-taking means that only one speaker is supposed to talk at a time (Sacks, 1972). Order in an interaction is maintained by the way speakers are accorded and take their speaking turns. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974:12) outline two components that govern turn-taking. The first is the 'turn-constructional component' where turns are taken at structural units. The second is the 'turn-allocational component' which relates to the obligation to speak when one is allocated a speaking turn.

Thus, turn-taking can be seen as a framework within which the orderly transmission from one speaker to another takes place. It is a 'local management system' (Levinson, 1983 297) which helps to ensure the systematic and smooth flow of an interaction.

An adjacency pair is one of the ways of managing turn-taking. This is because the selection of the next speaker and even the kind of utterance that follows can be governed by the concept of an adjacency pair (Coulthard and Brazil, 1992: 51).

In relation to this, this study examined question and answer sequences in law tutorials to determine how far they fitted into the normal concept of a question and answer adjacency pair (i.e. where a question asked by one speaker is answered in the following speaking turn by another speaker). Question and answer sequences which did not seem to fit into the concept of adjacency pairs were further analysed to see how this phenomenon was dealt with by the speakers, particularly the tutor.

Results and Discussion

Not surprisingly, most of the questions in the tutorials observed (173 of the 195 question and answer sequences identified) were initiated by the tutor. The questions asked by the tutor also governed turn-taking in the tutorial as the

tutor's question signalled that she expected the students to take over the floor by answering her question. Most of the time she left the floor open; the assumption being that somebody would attempt to answer her question. This assumption seemed to be shared by the students most of the time. In fact in 103 of the 173 teacher-initiated questions, the students provided answers immediately after a question or series of questions. The tutor obtained the answers she wanted without always having to select particular students. Students were aware that they had to reciprocate when asked a question. Therefore, either individual students self-selected themselves or there was a chorus answer. This illustrates the underlying notions of cooperation and politeness being applied by the students as discourse partners in the tutorials (refer to Example 1 and 2).

Example 1 (Tutorial One): Self-Selection by Student (T = Tutor   S = Student)

T·   Can you think of any other: features or any other factor which: can help okay ensure the judges are independent?

S.   The restrictions of-on parliamentary discussion on the conduct of a judge.

Example 2 (Tutorial Three): Chorus Answer by Students (T = Tutor SS = Students)

T·   Uh: .right: now is there: uh a possibility for a person under ISA to be detained longer than two years?

SS. Yes.

However, 50 out of 173 of the tutor's questions were not immediately answered. Instead there was a discernable pause of more than one second. Thus, instead of a question-answer sequence (Q-A), there was a Question-Pause sequence (Q-P). Since the tutor's communicative intent in asking a question was closely related to her + *knowledge* and + *power* roles, any breakdown in communication, signalled by a pause or silence after her questions, was dealt with. In other words, she did not seem to take offence at the students for not answering her questions but instead took the responsibility to repair the breakdown. She did this mainly by asking another question (in 31 of the 173 sequences). Therefore, the question after the pause can be considered as a re-

pair strategy giving rise to a question-pause-question (repair strategy)-answer sequence (Q-P-Q[RS]-A).

Based on Faerch and Kasper's communicative strategies (1983:81), the repair strategies used by the tutor can be viewed in terms of cooperative or non-cooperative achievement strategies (i.e. strategies aimed at finding alternative or better ways of communicating meaning):

* Cooperative Strategies (where a speaker tries to resolve the communicative breakdown by himself) through repetition, reformulation, rephrasing and expansion

* Non-cooperative strategies (where the speaker solicits help from other discourse participants) by soliciting and nominating.

About half of the repair strategies were

i.   repetitions, where the initial question was repeated verbatim, or at least the general idea of the initial question was repeated (refer to Example 3); and

ii.   reformulations, where the initial question was made 'more specific' to guide the students towards the preferred answer (French and MacLure, 1979·13) (see Example 4).

Example 3 (Tutorial Two): Repetition of Question by Tutor

T·   Any other differences between them?   **(Qi)**
     So under article one four nine there need not be a proclamation of
     emergency as in article one five zero.
     Any other differences?   **(Qii repeats Qi)**
SS: (5 SECOND PAUSE – NO RESPONSE)
T·   Any other differences?   **(Qiii repeats Qii)**

Example 4 (Tutorial Two): Reformulation of Question by Tutor

T: What is the specific provision,   **(Qi)**
      that you mentioned?
SS: (1 SECOND PAUSE – NO RESPONSE)
T·   Executive can make laws,   **(Repeats previous answer)**
      any type of laws? **(Qii reformulates Qi by cueing the students
                                 towards the appropriate answer)**

Apart from repetitions and reformulations, the tutor also rephrased her
questions when the original form of the question failed to elicit a reply from
the students. This can be seen in Example 5, where the tutor first prefaced her
second question with an explanation. She then rephrased the first question and
added more information to direct the students towards her preferred answer.

Example 5 (Tutorial Three): Rephrasing of Question by Tutor

T·   Now can either parliament... or the executive further delegate okay..
      powers to make laws okay and not mere laws but laws... which can
      be inconsistent with the constitution?   **(Qi)**
SS: (3 SECOND PAUSE – NO RESPONSE)
T: That means there's a further delegation of power.**(Explains)**
      Okay the constitution uh gives power to parliament **(Explanation
      continues for the next 7 lines)**
      But can parliament,   **(Qii rephrases Qi)**
      Okay can parliament okay, through the act or can the executive—
      can the Yang Di Pertuan Agung through an ordinance delegate pow-
      ers to another body okay to make laws okay which can override the
      constitution?

The fourth repair strategy involved expanding elliptical or general ques-
tions in order to specify what a previous question was referring to. For in-
stance, the tutor reformulated the question *Why not?*, which was in reference
to a previous answer, into

   *Are you saying that the court should not look into the question of whether
   it was justified in the first place?*

This made her meaning in the first question more explicit.

There were a few instances where, instead of using the four repair strategies previously mentioned, the tutor solicited help from the students or nominated someone from the class to answer a question when nobody seemed to want to answer her question. This is illustrated in Example 6, where the tutor first solicited an answer from the floor. None of the students chose to take this turn by providing an answer. The tutor, therefore, nominated a student to answer her question.

Example 6 (Tutorial One): Tutor Solicits Answer and Nominates Student to Answer Question

T·   Does it help define the meaning of misbehavior if he comes to his
      office late?   **(Qi)**
      Does it go beyond that?   **(Qii is an alternative to Qi)**
SS: (8 SECOND PAUSE – NO RESPONSE)
T·   Anyone?   **(Soliciting)**
SS: (11 SECOND PAUSE – NO RESPONSE)
T·   Yes, A?   **(Nominates student A)**

Because of the cooperative nature of conversation and adjacency pair principles, most of the tutor-initiated questions were answered by the students. However, in 14 cases, the tutor failed in her bid to get an answer, despite her attempts to remedy the situation. She then proceeded to answer the question or questions herself. This is illustrated in Example 7.

Example 7 (Tutorial Two): Question (Tutor)-Pause-Answer (Tutor)

T: Any other difference?   **(Qi)**
SS: (27 SECOND PAUSE – NO RESPONSE)
      Is there any other factors,   **(Qii reformulates Qi)**
      which.. distinguishes between these two provisions?
SS: (7 SECOND PAUSE – NO RESPONSE)
T: Okay, if you look at the —   **(Answers her own question)**
      for example the ISA.
      It has more or less

It can be noticed that the tutor did give the students the opportunity to answer the question. As far as possible, she wanted the students to answer her questions. Perhaps, this suggests that her main aim was not to merely provide the students with knowledge, but to determine the extent to which the students knew and were aware of the main issues related to a particular topic.

In only 5 of the 173 tutor-initiated questions, did the tutor fail to elicit any answer at all from the students. However, these questions were generally part of classroom management designed to check if students were clear about the main issues being discussed (refer to Example 8).

Example 8 (Tutorial Two): No Response From Students

T·   No more questions on this?   Q
SS: (2 SECONDS - NO RESPONSE)

In 20 of the 173 tutor-initiated questions, the tutor's question was followed, not by an answer, but by another question by a student. This appears to contradict the nature of a question and answer adjacency pair because in theory, a question is supposed to be followed by an answer. The second question was a request for the tutor to clarify what she meant in her previous question, or a request for her to repeat her previous question. The second question would then have to be answered before the discourse could continue. Students also tended to answer the tutor's question in the form of a question as a tentative way of giving an answer. Perhaps they were not sure of their answers and thus, to minimise any loss of face if they got the answer wrong, they structured their answers in the form of questions (refer to Example 9).

Example 9 (Tutorial One): Question (Tutor) Followed by Question (Student)

T·   Do you think the federal constitution um. gave clear guidelines as
      to what was meant by misbehaviour?   Qi
      Don't you think that um: that would be a way to resolve uh this
      issue if you know the meaning of the word?   Qii

S.   But now they have a code of ethics isn't it? **(Answer in question form)**

T: Uhuh.

S.   So if um: they go against the code of ethics then they can be punished.

Summary of Findings

1.   How did the tutor deal with instances when she did not get an answer to her question?

In such cases, the tutor asked further questions which acted as repair strategies. These questions were repetitions, reformulations, rephrases, expansions of the previous question or questions. There were also times when she solicited for help from the students or called upon individual students to answer her questions.

2.   How was politeness manifested or inherent in the way the tutor dealt with instances when she did not get an answer to her question?

It was the tutor, and not the students (although they were in a – *power* position) who attempted to remedy the communication problems. She did it in a way that gave students another opportunity to answer her questions correctly by directing them towards her 'preferred' answer. This seemed to be largely motivated by her desire or intent to get students to display their knowledge. This also tends to reduce loss of face for the students as it gives them the chance and the confidence to get the answer right in the following speaking turn. Thus, the notions of politeness and cooperation are generally maintained throughout the tutorials through the various questioning strategies used.

3.   How do (1) and (2) relate to the concept of an adjacency pair?

The data shows that the discourse in this particular law tutorial is structured on a question-answer framework, based on the premise that a question demands an answer. This structure generally works because of the principles underlying adjacency pairs. Further, following the principles of politeness and cooperation, it is assumed that the answer is relevant or is the 'preferred' answer to the

adjacent question. These assumptions are also related to the fact that the discourse takes place in a classroom situation, with the teacher-figure in control of the discourse content and management. The data shows that although most of the time these principles were observed by the participants, there were instances when they seemed to be broken. In such cases, the tutor would use certain repair strategies so that the second part of the question and answer adjacency pair could be forthcoming.

Conclusion

Politeness manifests itself in many ways in different forms of conversations. In a teacher-controlled or teacher-led situation such as the tutorials observed, the role of the teacher, or in this case tutor, plays an important role in providing a conducive learning atmosphere. One way to get the cooperation and participation of students in a tutorial is through the use of repair strategies like the ones discussed in this study This makes it less threatening for the students to answer questions and speak in class. The use of such strategies also allows the teacher to direct, control and manoeuvre the flow of the classroom discourse.

REFERENCES

Brown, P and Levinson, S. 1978. Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena. In E. Goody (ed.). *Questions and Politeness Strategies in Social Interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 56-311

Coulthard, R. M. and Brazil, D. 1992. Exchange Structure. In R. M. Coulthard (ed.). *Advances in Spoken Discourse* London: Routledge. 50-78.

Faerch, C. and Kasper, G. 1983. Plans and Strategies in Foreign Language Communication. In C. Faerch and G. Kasper (eds.). *Strategies in Interlanguage Communication*. London: Longman. 20-60.

French, C. and MacLure, M. 1979 Getting the Right Answers and Getting the Answers Right. *Research in Education*, 22.1-23.

Grice, H. P 1967 Logic and Conversation. In P Cole and J L. Morgan (eds.) 1975. *Syntax and Semantics 3. Speech Acts* New York: Academic Press. 41-58.

Levinson, S. C. 1983 *Pragmatics* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pillai, S. 1996. *Adjacency Pairs. Questions and Answers in Law Tutorials at the University of Malaya.* Unpublished Masters Thesis. University of Malaya.

Richards, J. C., Platt, J and Platt, H. 1972. *Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*. Essex: Longman.

Sacks, H. 1972. On the Analyzability of Stories by Children. In J Gumperz and D. Hymes (eds.). *Directions in Sociolinguistics* New York. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 325-345.

Sacks, H., Schegloff E. A. and Jefferson, G 1974. A Simplest Systematics for the Organsation of Turn-taking for Conversation. In J Schenkein (ed.) 1978. *Studies in the Organisation of Conversational Interaction*. New York: Academic Press. 7-55.

Schegloff, E. A. 1977 Sequencing in Conversational Openings. In J Gumperz
        and D. Hymes (eds.). *Directions in Sociolinguistics*. New York: Holt,
        Rinehart and Winston. 346-380.

Schiffrin, D. 1994. *Approaches to Discourse* Cambridge, MA. Basil Blackwell.