

Camilla Lindholm

Leealaura Leskelä

A conversation analytical approach to a/symmetries

Herausgegeben von
Bettina M. Bock & Thorsten Merl

Berlin
Die Junge Akademie
August 2023

doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10320993

A Symmetrie

Interdisziplinäre
Perspektiven

Abstract

In everyday thinking, symmetry is often approached as a conventional and ordinary state of affairs: something we expect to encounter in normal everyday situations, for example, in a conversation between two speakers with the same language skills. In contrast, asymmetry is commonly considered to be something unconventional and out of the ordinary taking place under special circumstances. This everyday thinking is, however, challenged by Conversation Analysis, in which neither symmetry nor asymmetry is seen as a stable state of affairs but rather as processes in which the ordinary and unordinary can vary from one moment to another.

Ordinariness is an ongoing achievement.
Harvey Sacks, 1984

This text presents symmetry and asymmetry from the point of departure of conversation analysis (CA). In everyday thinking, symmetry is often approached as a conventional and ordinary state of affairs: something we expect to encounter in normal everyday situations, for example, in a conversation between two speakers with the same language skills. In contrast, asymmetry is commonly considered to be something unconventional and out of the ordinary taking place under special circumstances, such as in interaction between two speakers who do not have the same level of language skills.

This everyday thinking is, however, challenged by CA, in which neither symmetry nor asymmetry is seen as a stable state of affairs but rather as processes in which the ordinary and unordinary can vary from one moment to another. To explain this a little more, let us consider a situation in which one participant is an adult native speaker of a language and the other is a language learner who may need linguistic support to participate. The imbalance between their language skills creates asymmetry, which, by common assumption, constitutes a permanent barrier that wea-

kens their conversational cooperation remarkably. In CA, however, this imbalance is seen as something that may, occasionally, surface as relevant in the conversation, for example, if the language learner does not understand what the native speaker said and requests help. At the next moment, however, when the difficulty in understanding is solved, the asymmetry between the speakers may disappear and lose its relevance to the participants. It was to this that Harvey Sacks, the founder and pioneer of CA, was referring when he said that “ordinariness is an ongoing achievement.” (Sacks 1984: 413–415)

Viewing a/symmetries as processes rather than stable states of affairs is also highlighted by the observation that both ordinary and unordinary features occur in all conversations. Although we can generally define what is expected, and thus ordinary, and what is unexpected and unordinary in interaction, the presence of unexpected features in a certain situation does not mean that this conversation is to be defined as unordinary. For example, mutual understanding (referred to as intersubjectivity in CA) is a highly expected state of affairs between two speakers who have the same language skills, but as it happens, understanding troubles also occur in these conversations. Understanding troubles – though certainly more frequent in

a conversation between speakers with asymmetric language skills – cannot be defined as a feature defining one interaction as unordinary.

If unordinariness can occur in linguistically symmetric, ordinary conversations, and, on the other hand, a linguistically asymmetric conversation can, at least partly, proceed ordinarily, it is significant how the participants handle these situations. Handling here refers to how they manage to solve problems and negotiate their participatory roles and what meaning they give to what they treat as expected or unexpected action; thus, more generally, it concerns how symmetry and asymmetry are displayed, produced, and interpreted in the course of interactions. In CA research, these questions are approached more from the point of view of the realities shown by the participants in authentic interaction than as philosophical or moral questions. It is, thus, not about whether a/symmetry is right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable but what it is like for the participants experiencing it and how they orient themselves to it.

In this article, we examine the dilemma of a/symmetry from a conversation analytical perspective. We focus especially on linguistic asymmetry, which we have studied in our research into conversations between people with dementia and caregivers and between people with intellectual disabilities and professionals working with them.

Conversation analysis, a/symmetries, and atypicality

Initially, the primary research interest of CA was to study what people do with talk, how talk is used to perform everyday actions, and what the consequences of these actions are (cf. Schegloff 1995). Thus, early CA research aimed at discovering the basic principles used by participants with similar linguistic abilities to interpret each other's actions. The assumption was that participants who had the same kind of linguistic abilities and cultural backgrounds would implement these principles as uniformly as possible (e.g., cf. Heritage 1984). Soon, however, interest also arose in such interactions where there are differences in the linguistic or cognitive abilities of the participants (for atypical interaction research in CA, see Wilkinson 2019). CA researchers became interested in conversations between speakers of first and second languages (e.g., cf. Kurhila 2003) and between persons with aphasia and speech therapists or family members (e.g., cf. Laakso 1997; Goodwin 2003). Later, the research on linguistically asymme-

tric interaction expanded into the areas of socio-emotional disorders, such as autism spectrum disorder (cf. Maynard 2005; Sterponi and Fasulo 2010; Stevanovic et al. 2017) and cognitive disorders, including dementia (cf. Guendouzi and Müller 2006; Lindholm 2008; 2015; Mikesell 2009; Jansson and Plejert 2014; Jones 2013) and intellectual disabilities (e.g., cf. Antaki, Finlay and Walton 2008; Antaki and Chinn 2019; Leskelä 2022).

Over the past two decades, a growing body of research involving participants with communication problems has developed into a subfield of CA research. This research is often referred to by the general term atypical interaction. In an article published in 2019, Ray Wilkinson demonstrated that CA research on atypical interactions often concentrates on problems in the progressivity of the conversation, atypical problems of understandability and hearing, and the production of atypical actions, such as confabulations. The notion of atypical interactions partly overlaps with the concept of asymmetric interactions, even though the notion of linguistic asymmetry also refers to interactions involving first-language and second-language speakers (cf. Leskelä and Lindholm forthcoming; Leskelä 2022).

According to the accumulating research findings on asymmetry and atypicality in interaction, it could be stated that linguistic asymmetry often, but not permanently and automatically, leads to the endangerment of intersubjectivity between the participants. Sacks' early statement of ordinariness as an ongoing achievement is, in a way, highlighted in reverse: unordinariness is also an ongoing process in a conversation. Although the speakers do not have the same linguistic skills, the conversations between them are not entirely unordinary and deviant but may, at least occasionally, proceed quite ordinarily (cf. Shakespeare 1998).

Asymmetries motivating and challenging communication

Asymmetries of knowledge, also known as epistemic asymmetries, refer to differences in participants' access to the information at hand and their rights to articulate that information. Asymmetries of participation occur particularly in institutional interaction and are related to participants having different and complementary roles with different rights and duties. Language asymmetries are seen to arise in situations where the language skills of one or more participants

are restricted while the other participant or participants do not have such restrictions. In this sense, linguistic asymmetry has a principled connection with the participants' abilities, recalling the concept of atypical interaction.

All the asymmetries mentioned above can cause problems and confusion for the participants, but interactional research does not consider asymmetries in conversation as something inevitably negative. Rather, they can be resources that motivate communication (cf. Linell and Luckmann 1991). For example, participants' different access to information can provoke a need to communicate: the doctor usually has more knowledge about medicine than the patient, so the patient wants to hear the doctor's opinion on their illness. On the other hand, the patient has more knowledge about their illness or condition and its progress, which motivates the doctor to listen to the patient. Indeed, interaction for the purpose of transferring information would be unnecessary if all participants had the same knowledge (cf. Linell and Luckmann 1991).

Interestingly, various types of asymmetries are often associated. For example, asymmetries in knowledge can be related to asymmetries in participation, participatory actions, and participatory roles. A teacher has more knowledge about the topic of a school lesson than the students and acts in accordance with their institutional role, for example, when sharing the speaking turns, correcting pupils' mistakes, and bearing the main responsibility for moving the situation forward. When a group of language learners is taught, the linguistic asymmetry is also interconnected.

Despite the fact that asymmetry, in many situations, can be a key motivation for speakers to act, it can also be a challenge, especially when it is not expected by or familiar to the speakers. This can be noted, for instance, in situations where an adult is speaking with a child: usually, the adult automatically takes into account that the child must be addressed with simple language and may need explanations of different kinds. However, when the adult is talking with an adult who needs linguistic support, linguistic asymmetry can be challenging because it is not something with which they are familiar (cf. Leskelä, Mustajoki, and Piehl 2022). The almost automatic adjusting of language that often takes place when talking with a child is replaced by uncertainty about fundamental questions concerning the interaction, such as who knows more and who less about the topic (epistemic asymmetry) or who is responsible for moving the situation forward (participatory asymmetry).

Asymmetry is often connected to different participatory roles: the role of the interviewer is different than that of the interviewee, and the teacher acts in a different way than the student. It is, thus, often relevant to name certain participatory roles to make sense of the actions available to different actors. When it comes to the different abilities of the participants, however, naming the participatory roles requires sensitivity. Merely referring to certain groups of people, such as to people with disabilities or with memory-related illnesses, requires careful consideration as some names can be perceived as condescending or stigmatizing (for the appropriateness of referring to people with intellectual disabilities, see, e.g., Bock, Lange, and Fix 2017). However, terminology needs to be developed to describe the varying roles of the participants in interaction. In the case of linguistic asymmetry, it is relevant, for example, to refer to a participant with more extensive language resources and to a participant with limited language skills. Recently, the following has been presented (e.g., cf. Leskelä 2022):



It should be mentioned that these concepts are not completely neutral, and they can be problematic, because counterexamples are easily found in authentic data: a linguistically more competent speaker may occasionally be in need of linguistic support and vice versa. In our opinion, this, however, reinforces the CA view of a/symmetry as a variable state of affairs in a conversation rather than a permanent role possessed by a participant. A linguistically more competent speaker is therefore mostly or mainly more competent, and a speaker who needs linguistic support often needs support. While aware that these concepts can be criticized, we nonetheless use them in this text.

Although the participatory roles may vary, one characteristic of linguistic asymmetry seems to be related precisely to the roles of a linguistically more competent participant and a participant who needs linguistic support, namely the division of communication labor. Asymmetry is manifested in the fact that this labor is distributed unevenly between participants: the linguistically more competent participant seems to bear a greater responsibility for moving the conversation forward (cf. Linell 1998; Leskelä and Lindholm 2023) and to offer linguistic support to the conversation partner (e.g., cf. Leskelä and Lindholm 2023).

The following examples illustrate this: in a conversation between a person with aphasia and a relative, the relative often actively participates in searching for a word if the person with aphasia cannot find the word they are looking for (e.g., cf. Laakso 1997). In conversations between first- and second-language speakers, the first-language speakers often try to solve comprehension difficulties differently than in interactions between two first-language speakers (e.g., cf. Kurhila 2003). In three-part conversations involving a person with intellectual disabilities, a family member, and a healthcare professional, it has been observed that the family member occasionally acts as a broker if they fear that the interaction between the other two parties could otherwise fail (e.g., cf. Chinn 2022). Linguistic asymmetry can therefore lead to situations where the more competent speakers perform different actions than they would in linguistically symmetrical situations.

Some special features of linguistic asymmetry

Confabulations refer to actions in which the speaker says something that is not true at the moment but without a conscious intention to lie (cf. Schneider 2008). Confabulations are usually associated with certain neurological conditions characterized by a decline in cognitive skills, such as intellectual disability or dementia. Confabulations may be challenging for the more competent participants because they threaten the shared world that is usually presumed as the basis for communication and, thus, violate the Gricean maxim of quality (“Only say things you believe to be true. Do not say things that you cannot back up with evidence”).

In extract (1), Harri, a young Finnish man with Down syndrome, is talking with Eeva, a middle-aged support worker, about a topic related to Harri’s previous job, which, for some reason, he lost some time ago. In line 1, Eeva presents an assumption regarding why Harri lost his job (some sort of trouble there). Harri responds with a minimal acknowledgment token (l. 2). Eeva’s following turn in line 3 (you don’t know how to tell the time) contains a more precise assumption about the circumstances leading to Harri losing his job. This, however, elicits another kind of response from Harri, which initiates an apparent confabulation episode between the speakers:

EXAMPLE 1.¹

- 01 Eeva: *but there was some sort of trouble there because you had to quit the job. ((looks keenly at Harri))*
 02 Harri: *yep ((looks down at his hands))*
 03 Eeva: *one trouble seem to be (.) that you don’t know how to tell the time. ((looks down, then again to Harri))*
 04 Harri: *(.) I do. ((nods, looks at Eeva))*
 05 Eeva: *(.) you know [how to tell the time.] ((looks at Harri))*
 06 Harri: *[yes.] ((looks at Eeva))*
 07 Eeva: *.th what time is it. ((looks at Harri))*
 08 Harri: *(.) it ish (1.2) ((looks at his wristwatch)) two.*
 09 Eeva: *it is quarter past one. ((looks at Harri))*
 10 Harri: *past one.*
 11 Eeva: *(.) yea. .h and then when - if you can’t tell the time in the (local)works you got into*
 12 *a bit of trouble over there with the working hours (and) I don’t .hh something like that I’ve heard.*
 13 *do you remember yourself ((looks to Harri))*
 (Tva 1.8., Free conversations)

The topic of the conversation is related to Harri’s experience domain, and he is, thus, entitled to talk about it as a first-hand source. As Eeva in line 3 brings up her assumption that Harri does not know how to tell the time, she shows some knowledge of the matter, but as Harri directly denies this (I do), Eeva needs to figure out how to proceed. In line 5, she continues with a turn in which she repeats the claim made by Harri (you know how to tell the time) as if to make sure this is what Harri is claiming. In response, Harri produces a minimal confirmation (l. 6): he knows how to tell the time. Eeva’s next turn (l. 7) is what could be called a test question: she asks Harri to say what time it is. Harri looks at his wrist and says that it is two o’clock. As the time happens to be quarter past one at this point, Harri’s answer seems to reveal that his understanding of the time is vague; thus, the claim that he knows how to tell the time seems to be verified as confabulatory. Eeva corrects him verbally in line 9, which is confirmed by a partial repetition of the correct time by Harri (l. 10).

From Eeva’s point of view, the situation has progressed quite straightforwardly so far: she has made direct assumptions about a topic concerning Harri and has asked one test question, which may be common in the classroom but rather rare in other types of interaction. Eeva’s turns have been short, unambiguous, and lacking indicators of uncertainty (such as hesitation sounds).

1 The example is transcribed according to the conventional CA transcription (e.g., cf. Ochs, Schegloff, and Thompson 1996; Hepburn and Bolden 2013) but somewhat simplified for readability. The participants speak Finnish, translated into English by Leskelä. The example is from Leskelä’s research data.

When Harri's answer is revealed to constitute a con-fabulation, there is a clear change in Eeva's speech. In lines 11–14, she produces a long and linguistically complex turn about the importance of knowing the time in the workplace. Here, in contrast to her previous turns, she emphasizes her own uncertainty about the reason Harri lost his job (you got into a bit of trouble over there; I don't .hh something like that I've heard). Finally, she transfers the matter to Harri by asking his opinion. Eeva's final-turn question thus softens her earlier directness, and the softening is certainly necessary, because Harri's firing and the reasons for it, as well as whether he knows how to tell the time or not, are Harri's business, and his, rather than Eeva's, to tell (for sharing epistemic rights and responsibilities, see, e.g., Heritage 2012; Stivers et al. 2011). In this extract, we see how Eeva softens her expressions after it has become clear that Harri is con-fabulating. Thus, she offers him the opportunity to once again assume a position of epistemic authority regarding his own case.

Acquiescence, or so called "yea-saying," refers to an action in which a participant expresses agreement with the co-participant's opinion despite actually disagreeing with it or confirms the co-participant's interpretation of their own speech even though it is wrong (e.g., cf. Matikka and Vesala 1998).

Acquiescence can cause problems for the more competent speaker, particularly when interviewing a person with intellectual disabilities or in other situations where it is necessary to determine their opinion on certain matters. The assumption that the participant with an intellectual disability may answer in a manner that they think is in line with the more competent speaker's view raises insecurity in the more competent speaker, who can thus find it hard to rely on the answer given (cf. Leskelä 2012; Leskelä and Lindholm 2023.) Using CA to analyze acquiescence is, however, rather difficult, because this method aims to avoid making assumptions on what speakers do or do not want to say. In order to use it, we need to monitor step by step how the participants progress in the interaction and how they react to each other's turns, and clear cases of acquiescence can still be difficult to find.

The following extract, although not a clear case, contains indications of possible acquiescence. This example is from an interview in which Hanna, a 30-year-old psychologist, is interviewing Merja, a middle-aged woman with intellectual disabilities, about her experiences of using social services as a person with intellectual disabilities in Finland. The interview is structu-

red by a list of questions. As extract (2) begins, Hanna produces a question on the topic of physiotherapy.

EXAMPLE 2.¹

- 01 *Hanna: you know what that- what the physiotherapy is*
 02 *Merja: heh*
 03 *Hanna: is that familiar*
 04 *Merja: in the camp [xxx] [well ((looking at H))*
 05 *Hanna: [w- in the camp there's this kind[a that kinda little ((looking at M))*
 06 *Merja: [ye- yea ((looking away from H))*
 07 *Hanna: exercis[es and massage and stuff like that what is*
 08 *Merja: [ye he exercise he ((looking away from H))*
 09 *Hanna: good for the muscles*
 10 *Merja: [yea ((looking away from H))*
 11 *Hanna: has it been like that in the camp you mean ((looking at M))*
 12 *Merja: [yea ((looking back to H))*
 13 *Hanna: yes*
 14 *Merja: and sometimes we take a walk in the camp*
 (2.1., Interviews)

Merja responds to Hanna's question with a small laugh (2). It remains uncertain whether Merja knows what physiotherapy is, and Hanna repeats her question (l. 3). The repeated question takes the form "is that familiar," which is a formulation repeated throughout the interview. Merja initiates a response with a few unarticulated words but self-interrupts when Hanna produces overlapping talk. In line 5, Hanna makes the interpretation that Merja was referring to having physiotherapy at the camp, which would constitute a logical connection to the question at hand, and goes on to describe what physiotherapy is (a little exercise and massage, lines 5 and 7). During Hanna's long turn, Merja nods and laughs a few times, but she is not gazing at Hanna. At the end of Hanna's turn, Merja turns her gaze once more on Hanna (line 12), who has been gazing at Merja throughout her turn. When Merja starts her turn in line 14, she refers to other activities at the camp. We can reflect on whether Merja's straying glances to the side and her minimal responses are indications of a tendency to acquiesce. She confirms Hanna's interpretations as correct with short affirmative particles (ye-yea, ye, yea, lines 6, 8, and 10), but the small laughs and the gaze to the side may indicate that she finds this interpretation problematic. Hanna's long turn does not allow Merja to elaborate on the topic of

1 This example is transcribed according to the conventional CA transcription (e.g., cf. Ochs, Schegloff, and Thompson 1996; Hepburn and Bolden 2013) but somewhat simplified for readability. The participants speak Finnish, translated into English by Leskelä. The example is from Leskelä's research data.

the camp and add possible information not related to physiotherapy. Merja does not deny or interrupt Hanna's interpretation but allows it to continue, which could indicate acquiescence. When the word "camp" is re-introduced at the end of Hanna's turn, Merja turns her eyes to Hanna again and continues with a new topic related to the camp.

It cannot be determined for sure from the participants' actions whether acquiescence occurs or not. However, acquiescence is necessary to take into account as a phenomenon potentially relevant to the participants. We must also remember that acquiescence can occur in linguistically symmetric interactions, even though no research exists on the topic, at least not under the term acquiescence. Thus, atypical actions in general are not necessarily something that occurs exclusively in atypical interaction, but it may rather be a question of their frequency in certain contexts. The subject should be studied further, in which case it would be possible to specify whether the linguistic asymmetry between participants also affects the quality of the phenomenon in some way.

Participatory actions

In addition to institutional roles, linguistic asymmetry often leads to asymmetries in participation, with the linguistically more competent participant taking responsibility for the conversation. This becomes clear especially when the linguistically less competent participant has very restricted resources, such as in the longitudinal study by Heidi Hamilton (1994) that addressed communication involving a person with Alzheimer's disease whose final vocabulary consisted of two words. In a series of convincing analyses, Hamilton showed how the linguistically more competent participant was able to create content to which the person with dementia was able to respond. The contributions of the more competent participant enabled the individual with dementia to use her sparse resources.

Thus, linguistically asymmetric interactions are often dependent on the contributions of the more competent participant. The stronger participant's skills are resources, but certain challenges are also involved in the asymmetrical patterns. This becomes visible in the following extract featuring GE, a professional caregiver, and Martin, who is a client at a daycare center for individuals with dementia. The participants are engaged in a conversation about Martin's family, and initially (l. 1) GE makes a statement about Martin having grandchildren.

EXAMPLE 3.¹

- 01 GE: *you also have grandchildren*
02 Martin: *children, yes I have*
03 GE: *what are their names*
04 Martin: *two*
05 GE: *what are their names*
06 Martin: *well (0.6) you ask too difficult questions ((laughs))*

GE's initial turn is not syntactically formed as a question but as a statement. However, she is making a statement about a topic that Martin is supposed to know best, which transforms a turn syntactically formed as a declarative into an initiative in need of acceptance or rejection by the other party. Martin also produces a confirming response in line 2. However, it is unclear whether he has fully grasped the contents of GE's previous turn, because his response refers to his children rather than his grandchildren. However, GE does not attempt to correct his interpretation of her turn but continues with a follow-up question about the names of Martin's grandchildren. Again, Martin's response (l. 4) is not aligned with the question. His fragmentary response "two" appears to be a syntactic continuation of his previous turn in line 2, constituting a syntactic completion of a confirming response about his children. GE's repetition of her question (l. 5) seems to be a reaction to Martin's previous response, which did not answer her question. By repeating her question, GE treats Martin's previous response as problematic. The repetition of the whole turn further demonstrates that she has not made an interpretation of which elements in her question Martin found difficult. Martin's response in line 6 shows his incapacity to answer her question. The turn-initial token "well" in combination with a pause indicates difficulties, and he then explicitly expressed his incapacity by referring to the features of her questions. This expression is followed by laughter, which expresses delicacy and embarrassment related to the incapacity to respond to her question (cf. Lindholm 2008).

As demonstrated in extract (3), the caregiver poses several questions, and the person with dementia struggles to respond to these questions, which ultimately leads to an expression of embarrassment. Causing embarrassment because of communication problems is obviously not desirable, but simultaneously, this example demonstrates a dilemma experienced by the linguistically more competent partici-

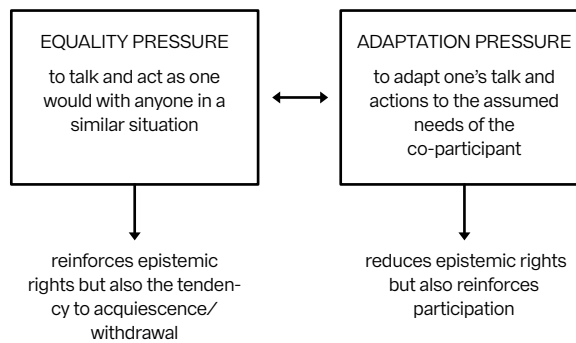
1 This example is transcribed according to the conventional CA transcription (e.g. cf. Ochs, Schegloff, and Thompson 1996; Hepburn and Bolden 2013) but somewhat simplified for readability. The participants speak Swedish, translated to English by Lindholm. The example is from Lindholm's research data.

pant. Because of Martin's linguistic and communication difficulties, he takes very few initiatives in conversation, and his contributions are mostly restricted to responses to initiatives posed by others. To engage him in conversation, the linguistically stronger participants often need to pose questions and produce other types of initiatives. These initiatives, on the other hand, may lead to situations of embarrassment and delicacy, such as in extract 3. Thus, the asymmetries may have undesirable results that the linguistically stronger participants obviously cannot estimate when they produce their initiatives.

The communicative dilemma of linguistic asymmetry

The pressure for equality is driven by the speaker's desire to treat the co-participant's contributions according to common conversational routines that feature in interactions between equal partners. This pressure emphasizes the need to treat the co-participant as someone possessing full epistemic rights and responsibilities. Simultaneously, however, if there is no attempt to adapt language or actions to make them more understandable and accessible to the co-participant, a situation may arise where the linguistically less competent does not comprehend what is going on, which itself often reinforces the tendency toward acquiescence.

The pressure for adaptation can be defined as a desire to adapt one's language and actions to the needs of the co-participant. Adaptive actions include, for example, attempts to use simplified language or make formulations of the co-participant's talk to increase understanding and cooperation. These actions are likely to reduce the epistemic rights and responsibilities of the co-participant because they emphasize the latter's need for help to cope with the conversational situation. Despite these consequences, the actions may, however, also bridge the linguistic and interactional gap between the participants and help them make sense of what is going on. As such, adaptive actions may, contradictorily, facilitate the full participation of the linguistically less competent participant. Balancing these two pressures is one explanation of the documented difficulties of more competent participants when dealing with linguistic asymmetry (cf. Leskelä 2021a).



The more competent participant is often challenged by this cross-pressure and may look for ways to act both ethically and functionally in the right way. This is indicated, for example, by the fact that professionals working with people with intellectual disabilities have often made requests for advice on how to speak Easy

Language¹ in interaction with their clients (cf. Kartio 2010; McVilly 1997). In Finland, a set of guidelines for interacting in linguistically asymmetric situations has therefore been formulated for this purpose (Easy Language in Interaction, ELI Guidelines, see, e.g., Leskelä 2022). The aim of the guidelines is to give concrete and practical advice suitable for everyday interactions that the more competent participants can use when interacting with participants who need linguistic support. The guidelines are based on two sources of information: information about linguistically asymmetric situations that has been collected in practical development projects carried out by Finnish intellectual disability organizations (e.g., cf. Hintsala 1997; Kartio 2010) and information from CA research into the special features of linguistically asymmetric interaction (e.g., cf. Leskelä 2012; Lindholm 2012; Kurhila 2003; Leskelä and Lindholm 2023). A crucial role is played in both sources by authentic conversational data where interactants are dealing with the challenges of linguistic asymmetry, sometimes successfully and sometimes less successfully.

Summary

It is not, however, completely clear to what extent this negotiability also applies to linguistic asymmetry. As participants' linguistic and cognitive challenges may be somewhat permanent, we could take as a point of

1 Easy Language is defined differently in different countries (cf. Lindholm and Vanhatalo 2021). In Finland, it is defined as a language form in which vocabulary, language structures, and content are modified to be more readable and understandable than in standard language, and it is targeted at people who have difficulties reading and understanding Standard Finnish or Swedish (e.g., cf. Leskelä 2021b).

departure that individuals either possess or do not possess certain language resources. Thus, the more competent speaker would constantly hold the position of being more competent, whereas the less competent participant would need linguistic support at every moment. According to CA, this is not the case, but linguistic asymmetries can also be a subject of negotiation. However, it is to be taken into account that in interactions, such negotiation takes place by language, which can be challenging for both parties. Less competent participants may have less ability to recognize and respond to the implications, skills which are necessary if participants are to negotiate their asymmetric positions. A more competent participant may not know, especially if unexpected or atypical actions are performed, whether or not they can rely on the intersubjectivity between the participants.

When intersubjectivity is at stake, participants are often puzzled about how to carry on, and the pressure to solve unexpected challenges is usually on the more competent participant. Our research suggests that the linguistically more competent speakers often struggle under two intersecting pressures: on the one hand, they try to act in linguistically challenging situations as they would in any other situation, but on the other hand, they make an effort to take into account the restricted linguistic resources of the co-participant. This leads them to constant monitoring of their own performances and adjusting of their actions to changing situations.

In CA research, interactional asymmetry is approached from two, partly overlapping, views: one emphasizes the conversational situation, in which different kinds of asymmetries may occur (e.g., asymmetries in the participants' knowledge, participatory roles, and language skills) and the other emphasizing how one participant's special needs and shortcomings affects the cooperation between the speakers (atypical interactions). CA research related to both trends has been carried out for several decades. In this article, we presented a few examples from authentic interactional data presenting situations where the interaction can be characterized as both linguistically asymmetrical and atypical. In these situations, our interest was on what kind of actions were available to the linguistically more competent participant when they tried to simultaneously take into account the special linguistic needs of the co-participant and still act and speak in the same way as anyone would in a similar situation.

Finally, it can be concluded that, despite the relatively long-term interest in CA research, we still know very

little about how a/symmetries are displayed in interaction between different participant groups. In the context of linguistic asymmetry, it is not yet possible to form an overall picture of the means by which language negotiations are conducted. However, we trust that the cumulative research data will provide a more accurate picture of linguistic asymmetry in the future as well as the means by which the challenges it brings up can be tackled.

References

- Antaki, Charles, W. Finlay, and Chris Walton. 2008. "Conversational Shaping: Staff member's Solicitation of talk from People with Intellectual Impairment." *Qualitative Health Research* 17, no. 10: 1403–1414.
- Antaki, Charles and Deborah Chinn. 2019. "Companions' Dilemma of Intervention when they mediate between Patients with Intellectual Disabilities and Health Staff." *Patient Education and Counselling* 102, no. 11: 2024–2030.
- Bock, Bettina M., Daisy Lange, and Ulla Fix. 2017. "Das Phänomen 'Leichte Sprache' im Spiegel aktueller Forschung. Tendenzen, Fragestellungen und Herangehensweisen." In "Leichte Sprache" im Spiegel theoretischer und angewandter Forschung, edited by B. M. Bock, U. Fix and D. Lange, 11–34. Berlin: Frank & Timme.
- Chinn, Deborah. 2022. "'I have to Explain to him': How Companions broker mutual Understanding between Patients with Intellectual Disabilities and Health Care Practitioners in Primary Care." *Qualitative Health Research* 32, no. 8–9: 1215–1229.
- Clare, Isabel and G. H. Gudjonsson. 1993. "Interrogative Suggestibility, Confabulation, and Acquiescence in People with Mild Learning Disabilities (Mental Handicap). Implications for Reliability during Police Interrogations." *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* 32, no. 3: 295–301.
- Drew, Paul and John Heritage. 1992. *Talk at Work. Interaction in Institutional Settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goodwin, Charles. 2003. *Conversation and Brain Damage*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.
- Guendouzi, Jacqueline and Nicole Müller. 2006. *Approaches to Discourse in Dementia*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hamilton, Heidi. 1994. *Conversations with an Alzheimer's patient. An Interactional Sociolinguistic Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hepburn, Alexa and Galina Bolden. 2013. "The Conversation Analytic Approach to Transcription." In *Handbook of Conversation Analysis*, edited by J. Sidnell and T. Stivers, 57–76. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Heritage, John. 2012. "The Epistemic Engine. Sequence Organization and Territories of Knowledge." *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 45, no. 1: 30–52.
- Heritage, John. 1997. "Conversation Analysis and Institutional Talk: Analyzing data." In *Qualitative analysis: Issues of Theory and Method*, edited by D. Silverman, 161–182. London: Sage
- Heritage, John. 1984. *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hintsala, Susanna. 1997. *Tuettua vuorovaikutusta. Selkoryhmän ohjaajan opas. [Supported interaction. A Guide for easy language reading groups.]* Helsinki: Kehitysvammaliitto.
- Jansson, Gunilla and Charlotta Plejert. 2014. "Taking a Shower: Managing a Potentially Imposing Activity in Dementia Care." *Journal of Interactional Research in Communication Disorders* 5, no. 1: 27–62.
- Jones, Danielle. 2013. "A Family Living with Alzheimer's Disease: The Communicative Challenges." *Dementia: The International Journal of Social Research and Practice* 14, no. 5: 555–573.
- Kartio, Johanna. 2010. *Selkokieli ja vuorovaikutus -projekti. [Easy Language in Interaction project]* Helsinki: Kehitysvammaliitto.
- Kitzinger, Celia. 2013. "Repair." In *Handbook of Conversation Analysis*, edited by J. Sidnell and T. Stivers, 229–256. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Kurhila, Salla. 2003. *Co-constructing Understanding in Second Language Conversation*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.
- Laakso, Minna. 1997. *Self-initiated Repair by Fluent Aphasic Speakers in Conversation*. *Studia Fennica Linguistica*. Helsinki: SKS.
- Leskelä, Leela. 2022. *Selkopuhetta! Puhuttu selkokieli kehitysvammaisten henkilöiden ja ammattilaisten vuorovaikutuksessa [Speak easy language! Spoken easy language in interaction between persons with intellectual disabilities and professionals]*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.

- Leskelä, Leelaaura. 2021a. "Showing Knowing. Negotiating About Epistemic Authority in Interaction Between Persons with Intellectual Disability and Professionals." *Journal of Interactional Research in Communication Disorders* 11, no. 1: 26–51.
- Leskelä, Leelaaura. 2021b. "Easy language in Finland." In *Handbook of easy languages in Europe*, edited by C. Lindholm and U. Vanhatalo, 149–190. Berlin: Frank & Timme.
- Leskelä, Leelaaura. 2012. "Ymmärrysvaikeuksien käsittelyä kehitysvammaisten henkilöiden ja heidän ohjaajensa keskusteluissa" [Dealing with understanding troubles in conversations between people with intellectual disabilities and their support workers]. In *Haavoittuva keskustelu [Vulnerable conversation]*, edited by L. Leskelä and C. Lindholm, 184–234. Helsinki: Kehitysvammaliitto.
- Leskelä, Leelaaura. 2006. "Yhteisymmärrystä rakentamassa. Tapaustutkimus epäsymmetrisestä keskustelusta." [Constructing understanding. A case study of an asymmetric conversation.] In *Vammaisuuden tutkimus [Disability research]*, edited by A. Teittinen, 46–85. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.
- Leskelä, Leelaaura and Camilla Lindholm. 2023. "Selkopuhe kehitysvammaisen henkilön kielellisen osallistumisen tukena." [Supporting linguistic participation of people with intellectual disabilities with spoken easy Finnish]. In *Kieli, hyvinvointi ja haavoittuvuus [Language, well-being and vulnerability]*, edited by M. Lindeman, M. Luodonpää-Manni, J. Paananen, and C. Lindholm, 33–55. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.
- Leskelä, Leelaaura and Camilla Lindholm. Forthcoming. "Selkokielen tutkimus yhteiskunnallista yhdenvertaisuutta edistämässä." [Easy language research for promoting societal equality]. In *Tutkimusretkellä selkokieleen [On a research journey to easy language]*, edited by L. Leskelä and C. Lindholm. In review.
- Leskelä, Leelaaura, Arto Mustajoki, and Aino Piehl. 2022. "Easy and plain languages as special cases of linguistic tailoring and standard language varieties." *Nordic Journal of Linguistics* 45, no. 2: 194–213.
- Lindholm, Camilla. 2015. "The Interactional Management of Confabulation in Dementia Care Encounters." *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 48, no. 2: 176–199.
- Lindholm, Camilla. 2012. "Vuorovaikutuksen haasteita ja mahdollisuuksia. Tapaustutkimus muistisairaiden päivätoiminnasta." [Challenges and chances in interaction. A case study in interaction in day care for people with memory-related illnesses.] In *Haavoittuva keskustelu [Vulnerable conversation]*, edited by L. Leskelä and C. Lindholm, 57–98. Helsinki: Kehitysvammaliitto.
- Lindholm, Camilla. 2008. "Laughter, Communication Problems and Dementia." *Communication and Medicines* 5, no. 1: 3–14.
- Lindholm, Camilla and Ulla Vanhatalo (eds.). 2021. *Handbook of Easy Languages in Europe*. Berlin: Frank & Timme.
- Linell, Per. 1998. *Approaching Dialogue. Talk, Interaction and Contexts in Dialogical Perspectives*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Linell, Per and Thomas Luckmann. 1991. "Asymmetries in Dialogue: Some Conceptual Preliminaries." In *Asymmetries in Dialogue*, edited by I. Marková and K. Foppa, 1–20. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Matikka, Leena and Hannu Vesala. 1998. "Acquiescence in Quality-of-Life Interviews with Adults who Have Mental Retardation." *Mental Retardation* 35, no. 2: 75–83.
- Maynard, Douglas. 2005. "Social Actions, Gestalt Coherence, and Designations of Disability: Lessons from and about Autism." *Social Problems* 52, no. 4: 499–524.
- McVilly, Keith R. 1997. "Residential Staff. How they view their Training and Professional Support." *British Journal of Learning Disabilities* 25, no. 1: 18–25.
- Mikesell, Lisa. 2009. "Conversational Practices of a Frontotemporal Dementia Patient and His Interlocutors." *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 42 (2): 135–162.
- Milne, Rebecca, Isabel Clare, and Ray Bull. 1999. "Using the Cognitive Interview with Adults with Mild Learning Disabilities." *Psychology, Crime and Law* 5, no. 1: 81–99.
- Ochs, Elinor, Emanuel A. Schegloff, and Sandra A. Thompson (eds.). 1996. *Interaction and Grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pillet-Shore, Danielle M. 2017. "Preference organization." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*, edited by Jon Nussbaum. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.132
- Pomerantz, Anita and John Heritage. 2013. "Preference." In *Handbook of Conversation Analysis*, edited by J. Sidnell and T. Stivers, 210–228. East Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sacks, Harvey. 1984. "On Doing 'Being Ordinary'." In *Structures of Social Action. Studies in Conversation Analysis*, edited by J. M. Atkinson and J. Heritage, 413–429. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schegloff, Emanuel. 2007. *Sequence Organization in Interaction. A Primer in Conversation Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schegloff, Emanuel. 1995. "Discourse as an Interactional Achievement III: The Omnirelevance of Action." *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 28, no. 3: 185–211.
- Schegloff, Emanuel, Gail Jefferson, and Harvey Sacks. 1977. "The Preference for Self-correction in the Organization of Repair in Conversation." *Language* 53: 361–382.
- Schneider, Armin. 2008. *The Confabulating Mind. How the Brain Creates Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shakespeare, Pamela. 1998. *Aspects of Confused Speech. A Study of Verbal Interaction between Confused and Normal Speakers*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Sidnell, Jack. 2011. *Conversation Analysis: An Introduction*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sidnell, Jack and Tanya Stivers. 2013 (eds). *The Handbook of Conversation Analysis*. Wiley-Blackwell, West Sussex.
- Stevanovic, Melisa, Pentti Henttonen, Sonja Koski, Mikko Kahri, Liisa Voutilainen, Emmi Koskinen, Taina Nieminen-von Wendt, Pekka Tani, Elina Sihvola, and Anssi Peräkylä. 2017. "On the Asperger Experience of Interaction: Interpersonal Dynamics in Dyadic Conversations." *Journal of Autism* 4, no 2. <https://doi.org/10.7243/2054-992x-4-2>
- Sterponi, Laura and Alessandro Fasulo. 2010. "How to Go on: Intersubjectivity and Progressivity in the Communication of a Child with Autism." *Ethos* 38, no 1: 116–142.
- Stivers, Tanya, Lorenza Mondada, and Jakob Steensig. 2011. "Knowledge, Morality, and Affiliation in Interaction." In *The Morality of Knowledge*, edited by T. Stivers, L. Mondada, and J. Steensig, 3–24. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stivers, Tanya, N. J. Enfield, Penelope Brown, and Stephen Levinson. 2009. "Universals and Cultural Variation in Turn-taking in Conversation." *PNAS* 106, no. 26: 10 587–10 592.
- Wilkinson, Ray. 2019. "Atypical Interaction: Conversation Analysis and Communicative Impairments." *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 52, no. 3: 281–299.