Signalling expectations on topic nomination in teacher-student interaction: Insights from a pragmatics of metacommunication

Marion Nao

The presentation will examine excerpts of spoken discourse in which teachers and students signal their expectations of who is to nominate topic in conversation-for-learning, i.e. informal interaction which is institutionally staged for the implied acquisitional benefit of the L2 learner (Kasper 2004). It draws its data from recordings of interaction between ‘native’ teachers and Japanese learners of English in the conversation lounge of a Japanese university, in which the students are advised to pre-select a topic of conversation prior to approaching an on-duty teacher. This presents an attempt to deinstitutionalize interaction which is otherwise assumed, somewhat problematically, to revert to an asymmetrical ‘classroom’ default, namely, one in which the teacher nominates topic, and with consequent implications on the trajectory of interaction.

The presentation sets out to explore and chart participant expectations through 1) their use of pronominal deixis, such as ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘we’, along with ‘talk about’ - a form of metacommunication, or talk about talk, which makes explicit their topical intent, and 2) their negotiation of topic as sequential organization in the opening phases of interaction. This provides us with valuable insights into the perspectives of the teacher and student participants with regard to the particular institutionalized practice of pre-allocating the nomination of topic to students. It may also lead us to consider whether such pre-emptive attempts to invert teacher-student roles by pre-allocating speaking rights to the students are, in fact, effective in engineering conversation in institutional contexts of interaction.