Discourse structure of academic talk in university office hour interaction

Holger Limberg
Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg

Abstract

In line with some promising studies dealing with a particular academic speech event at the university level (He, 1993; Tracy, 1997), this paper analyzes recordings of another established form of spoken academic discourse at university outside the classroom; viz. office hour interactions between faculty and students (cf. Carpenter, 1983). Office hour appointments at two German universities were video-recorded and subsequently transcribed according to conventional transcription notations. The study draws upon two levels of analysis. Firstly, a phrasal sectioning (cf. Young, 1990) is performed to highlight different stages in the organization of office hour talk, which are decisive for a fruitful consultation and indispensable to conform to official standards in academia. Concurrently, on an interactional level findings from conversation analysis are used to display how this form of consultation unfolds, and how participants orient towards both, the respective institutional tasks as well as the discourse partner.

What becomes clear from this preliminary study is that the academic significance of office hours is often underestimated. Those cases in which complex academic matters are under discussion demand careful action-taking and mutual orientation by both participants. This face-to-face encounter has multiple consequences for the academic and the social relationship between teacher and student, as well as for pedagogical practices and institutional (i.e. educational) circumstances at large.

Key words: Office hour, academic talk, institution, discourse structure

Introduction

University students perform various activities with respect to their academic study. Each of these activities involves at least one, but mostly several types of academic skills, central to a place of learning. The major skills are writing, reading, listening, and speaking. In practice, students write term papers, listen to lectures, read research papers or books, and acquire speaking competence by interacting with their teachers and peers inside as well as outside class. Among these skills, ‘academic talk(ing)’ is considered to play a major role for students becoming socialized into the university community (Mauranen, 2003). The present paper investigates a specific academic speech event—the office hour—to have a better understanding of its structure and the discourse processes taking place therein.

The output of research in the field of academic discourse has created a pronounced discontinuity between studies dealing with the spoken vs. written mode of academic communication; mainly to the disadvantage of the verbal mode (Swales, 2001; Biber et al., 2002). Even within research on spoken academic discourse, the analyses on language use in academic settings are predominantly focused on seminar interaction or (lecture) talks (e.g. Flowerdew, 1994; Weissberg, 1993; de Klerk, 1995). Thus, little is known about office hours as an instance of academic talk, and, moreover, about how this talk is conducted to accomplish academic business between teachers and students (but see Carpenter, 1983). This speech event exists alongside the predominant teaching
environments at tertiary level (most notably, seminars and lectures). Perhaps this is why it has remained marginalized in linguistic research, despite the fact that its value in academic as well as social terms continues to be significant for both parties.

The analysis of office hours in this paper mainly draws on conversation analytic methods of data analysis. It is based on an empirical body of video tapes gathered at two German universities. Office hours of different members of staff in the English Department were recorded and subsequently transcribed according to established conventions set up by Conversation Analysis (henceforth, CA). As the project is still in progress, the present analysis is based on 20 transcriptions of different office hour interactions that, in sum, serve as a representative subset of the whole collection of recordings I gathered over the course of one year.

**Discourse structure of office hours**

A professor or lecturer generally schedules a time slot of one or two hours a week in which s/he sits in the office and expects students to come and talk about academic business or clarify administrative matters. It is assumed that the majority of students come and see the professor/lecturer of their own free will; although occasionally a student is requested by the teacher to sign up for an appointment. However, these meetings often emanate from academic areas associated with teaching or administration, and thus cannot be considered as ‘natural’ or ‘ordinary’. Although students are not institutionally required to see their professors, and no form of academic evaluation is attached to these meetings, office hours have to be clearly demarcated from spontaneous encounters. An office hour is part of a teacher’s professional duty in this institution, and it offers a platform for students to discuss academic matters with their teacher.

According to my data, the discourse in office hours covers a wide range of topics pertinent to a university context. In its least formal variant, it might simply be chit-chat about some matter that is only indirectly related to academia. Conversely, in full-fledged interactions the participants negotiate serious academic issues such as exam topics or the content of coursework. Additionally, other academic matters outside the seminar context, such as going abroad or receiving academic credits for one’s study, are sometimes the subject of the interaction. Hence, the discourse structure depends to a large extent on the topic or theme at issue. But due to the institutional nature of this talk, similar conventions apply in office hours as in any other form of talk between an institutional affiliate and his/her ‘client’ (see Drew & Heritage, 1992; Agar, 1985; Drew & Sorjonen, 1997). In the following sections I will display a phrasal sectioning of the discourse framework in office hours to show what ‘gets done’ in each section. Based on conversation analytic research on the organization of conversation as well as the method of phrasal sectioning, I have divided a single office hour frame into 5 ‘superordinate’ sequences (see Schegloff, 1986; Young, 1990).

**‘Prebeginning’ and ‘Summon-Answer Sequence’**

Following Schegloff (1968) and his pioneering work on conversational structure, I regard the scheduling of office hours, viz. the institutional desideratum for this academic platform, as the first part an opening sequence which calls for an answer on the part of the student. The answer (though not entirely spontaneous) is thus the students’ appearance at the appointment. In practice, this is often initiated by a
knocking at the teacher’s door to signal that a student is waiting outside. In Schegloff’s terms (1968: 1080) the summons is an “attention-getting device”; i.e. a device that calls for a response from the student. Thus, knocking at the office door is the response to the summons (‘scheduled office hour’), and, concurrently, the first part of the following sequence which signals to the teacher a request for entry (see example 1, below). This form of ‘interactional’ exchange occurs at the beginning of office hours before the verbal exchange is opened. Regardless of how this ‘summon-answer sequence’ is in situ realized, depends on the habitual and institutional routine of the respective teacher and the university. According to Whalen and Zimmermann (1987), the activity that is tied to and exhibited in, for example, the office hour summons, is referred to as the ‘prebeginning’. It is not part of the interactional talk, but nevertheless an important element of the encounter.

Example 1:

→ (knocking at the closed office door)
→ 001 Teacher: YES
002 (2.0) (door opens)
003 Student: hello
004 Teacher: hello=
005 =come in

The identification sequence (‘opening’):
Regardless of the state of the office door (open vs. closed), any form of initial encounter conventionally starts with a greeting sequence (see Whalen & Zimmermann, 1987; Schegloff, 1986). The greeting sequence allows for two interactional achievements. Firstly, it is a ritualized and polite routine to signal participation and orientation towards the other (Goffman, 1963; Laver, 1981). It therefore contributes towards a friendly atmosphere from the outset, rather than a strict pursuance of the agenda as maybe the case in other institutional contexts. Secondly, it allows for a mutual recognition of the other party, which is particular important from the viewpoint of the teacher (cf. Schegloff, 1986). By invoking mutual recognition, the teacher can already draw upon information from past encounters that might be relevant for the present talk. This eases the process of coming straight to business as it signals to both sides that certain expectations are present.

Identification can occur either visually (i.e. simply seeing the student evokes an identification by the teacher; see ex. 2), or it is provided for verbally through self-introduction (see ex. 3). It is thus the responsibility of the student to provide the necessary information to the teacher about his/her identity in case the teacher cannot consummate the recognition. However, it has to be pointed out that recognition frequently occurs, but it is not directly turned to in the interaction. Against the background of larger universities, many teachers seem to recognize faces rather than directly recalling students’ names.

Example 2

→ 001 Teacher:*name* (of the student outside the office door)
002 (3.9) (student enters)
003 Student: hello
004 Teacher: hallo
Example 3

005 Teacher: who's next? ((coming back into the office))

006 (1.2) ((student enters))

→ 007 Student: it's me

008 Teacher: right=

009 Student: =(xxx)

→ 010 (1.2)

011 u::m (0.8) *name*

012 hi

Outlining academic business ('matter of concern')

The ‘distribution rule’ allocates how the right to talk is implicitly distributed among the interactants (Schegloff, 1968). Office hours are generally student-initiated talks, so it is the student’s right to assign the topic to the agenda. Yet, topic selection and topic distribution are by no means unreservedly chosen, nor academically unrelated, as noted above. The academic and institutional frame of this talk pre-assigns a range of topics relevant to this setting. Sequences in which the talk deviates from the assigned task occur at certain stages in office hour talk, and they serve particular functions (see Limberg, in preparation). Office hour talks are always (but not exclusively) task-oriented; with a view toward solving students’ problems, while conforming to academic standards and fulfilling students’ requests. The student, therefore, has the right to utter the initial turn that sets the topic of the emerging talk. The institution, on the other hand, implicitly retains the right to narrow the range of topics as well as the organizational circumstances in which office hour talks are situated.

My data shows that the outline of a student’s business can be locally managed in two ways. One option is introduced by an ‘opener’ on the part of the teacher, which signals the student that the teacher is ready to start the session. It communicates that s/he is now at the student’s disposal for the assigned time. Moreover, the ‘opener’ structures the talk and identifies a clear point of beginning (cf. He, 1993). A prototypical example of this ‘opener’ sequence is exemplified in the following instance:

Example 4

004 Teacher: come in.

005 Student: thanks.

006 (10.0) ((student enters; S and T sit down))

→ 007 Teacher: what can i do for you?

The teacher orients to the respective institutional role, responsibilities and professional duties associated with his/her institutional rank. S/he does so in a two-fold manner: by communicating the understanding that it is his/her duty to help the student in academic matters, and thereby implicitly inviting the student to explicate his/her concern (line 7). Alternatively, in the absence of an explicit invitation the student may self-select by way of the existing distribution rule, and utter his/her problem by claiming the right assigned to the ‘information-seeking’ participant in this context. Example 5 illustrates this case:

Example 5

((student enters after teacher’s invitation; then sits down))

004 Student: okay?

005 (1.2)

→ 006 okay (.) now i applied for german,
but i don’t know if i will get a place.
Teacher: uh hm
Student: and if i don’t get a place what can i do?

In turn 4 the student checks for confirmation to utter her concern because no ‘opener’ precedes her turn (here signaled by the discourse maker ‘okay’). After a pause of 1.2 seconds, another ‘okay’ is produced, which signals that the student is ready to outline her matter of concern. Interestingly, no ‘opener’ follows after the first ‘okay’, so the student continues her turn and presents her topic. This outline is introduced by another discourse marker ‘okay’ (line 6ff.) followed by a short pause before she pinpoints her problem. In quantitative terms, there is tendency for students to make use of the ‘distribution rule’ by self-selecting after the identification/greeting sequence in order to focus on their matter of concern. However, more data has to be analyzed to confirm this tendency.

Negotiation of academic business (negotiating and reaching a solution)
I have given this section the preliminary heading ‘negotiation of academic business’ for two reasons. It denotes the core of an office hour, which, to a large extent, decides the outcome of the interaction as well as whether certain interactional and academic goals are achieved. Secondly, there are several activities that participants must perform or that have to be negotiated in order to meet personal, academic and institutional ends. In a brief but not exhaustive outline, the following activities become relevant in this section. The teacher has to exhibit his/her understanding of the academic issue at hand, and be in a position to help the student with the available resources. In a straightforward scenario, the teacher immediately presents a solution upon the student’s outline of concern, such as providing the relevant information or taking some action that is dispatchable on the spot. Conversely, in the case of a complex academic agenda, s/he must display a clear understanding and professional orientation to the student’s concern and his/her interest in this matter. This requires an interactive ‘working-out’ of the essence of the student’s concern as well as providing a transparent answer to it. The interactive unfolding in this section is often exhibited in terms of question-answer sequences, which elicit the relevant information for the teacher to be able to offer an adequate solution.

This phase is also vulnerable to certain flaws, which can lead to miscommunication. If the actual concern is not intelligibly communicated by the student, or the teacher does not show adequate interest in discerning out the student’s concern, the interaction might lead to a break down of communications, or, equally undesirable, to frustration on both sides. It is only when the task- and goal-orientation of both participants is mutually accepted and conceived that the office hour talk can proceed smoothly.

The final part of this phase is the section in which a solution is presented or interactively worked out by both participants. It is often difficult to separate the sequences in which a solution is presented as in independent phase. Since ‘negotiation’ and ‘solution’ are often dynamically intertwined, it makes more sense at this point to include it in this phase. The solution sequence as well as the whole negotiation phase is strongly tied to the academic business and the availability of resources on the part of the teacher. In simple academic matters, the proposed phase structure seems to be more clear-cut than in those cases in which more complex matters are under discussion. In more complex matters, the teacher must reveal the core of the student’s problem or his/her intention in seeing the teacher at present by way of several question-answer
sequences, which are frequently imbued with intermediate conclusions and summaries. This demands close attention to the task, a high level of transparency, and mutual reflection on both sides.

Finally, as soon as a solution is worked out, the other party must accept this; thus acknowledging the relevance of the proposition (for example, by a minimal response of ‘okay’). Several agreement markers (cf. Davidson, 1984; Schegloff, 1982; Guthrie, 1997) signal types of agreement (weak or strong) or an acceptance of the proposed solution. This acceptance sequence can either immediately precede or be part of the closing sequence, or it can result into another ‘reopening’ of the talk to provide a slot for a further (sub)topic (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Several negotiation sequences can be found which usually terminate with pre-closing items such as ‘okay’, ‘alright’, or ‘uh hm’. Example 6 shows a pre-closing from an office hour talk in which the topic was the student’s grammar test. After having given feedback on the test, the teacher allows the student to have a look at her mistakes outside the office. In this respect, he has made it clear to her that she is not allowed to copy the test. The student’s ‘okay’ (line 258) signals acceptance of this procedure, and is responded to with an ‘okey-doke’ (line 261) by the teacher to complement the pre-closing sequence.

Example 6

257 Teacher: so
→ 258 Student: okay
259 [I’m just in front of] the door
260 Teacher:[don’t worry about that]
→ 261 okey-doke

Thus, both interactants have finished negotiating the topic, and accept the prevailing conditions upon this procedure.

Closing sequence

Closing sequences in office hours are a delicate matter on three levels: technically, academically, and socially (cf. Levinson, 1983; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). There is one device that frequently occurs prior to, or as part of the closing sequence, viz. an appreciation marker (‘thank you’ or ‘thanks’) from the student addressed to the teacher (cf. Aijmer, 1996). In this respect, the students signal their satisfaction with the encounter and the help or information that they have been given. This device is related to the content of previous topic slots, and it signals an orientation towards a (seemingly) ‘service-like’ nature of office hours. Strictly speaking, office hours could be taken as a form of service for which the service-giver (i.e. the teacher) receives some sort of gratification. Because it is clear that this form of service is pedagogical in nature, it can not be equated with other types of service (e.g. judical service). Moreover, it is understood that other forms of gratification (e.g. money) are not accepted in this context. Out of the twenty interactions in my data, all but one uttered an explicit form of gratitude in the closing sequence to orient to the ‘service’ they have received, such as the following example displays.

Example 7

504 Teacher: =uh hm
505 (7.5) (student puts his jacket on)
506 okay?
507 (2.6)
Conclusion

The phrasal sectioning that is presented above follows conversation analytic features as widely exposed in CA works, but it also points to linguistic/sequential features that are distinctive of this type of academic talk. A five-part sectioning is proposed as a superordinate structure along which office hours often proceed. The phases suggested here have been given labels according to the major activity taking place therein. Additionally, they are to some extent prototypical for consultation settings in institutions. Ideally, office hours proceed in the following order: i) summon-answer/prebeginning; ii) opening with identification/recognition and a greeting exchange; iii) outlining of the academic business, followed by iv) negotiating the concern or problem including the co-construction of a solution; and finally, v) the closing section with ritualized leave-taking, expression of gratitude and sometimes a reference to (possible) future encounters in seminars or elsewhere, such as the phrase ‘see you next semester’ exhibits in example 7.

If the academic matter under discussion is fairly straightforward and the professor/lecturer has access to resources to help the student immediately, the interaction will proceed smoothly and expediently. However, in more complex topics or academic tasks the interaction can run the risk of failing. In office hours with more elaborate matters, the transparent five-part structure is frequently imbued with several discussion points, question-answer sequences, pre-résumés, feedback and even social talk. Even though both parties often show great willingness to perform these encounters efficiently, mutually existing differences and misinterpretations are hardly negotiated face-to-face and remedied on the spot. Thus, more interactional work is needed on both sides to negotiate the matter and to reach a conclusion successfully.

On account of this, the significance of office hours in an academic context has to be rethought. Office hours represent an academic setting in which important topics are discussed that are relevant to a student’s academic career. Since the setting is more private and confident than in any other university framework, a learner-centered atmosphere has to be created through talk that fosters students’ learning and helps them to become socialized in the academic community.

References


Notes

1 Unless specifically noted, I use the terms ‘teacher’, ‘lecturer’, and ‘professor’ in unison to refer to the different members of the (teaching) staff at a university, all of which are institutionally required to hold office hours. It is not my intention at this point to differ systematically between different positions or ranks within the university system and the implementation of their office hours. Thus, for the current paper I subsume the different members of teaching staff under the term ‘teacher’.

2 The transcription notations have been developed by Gail Jefferson and utilized in the examples cited in this work. For reasons of readability, the transcription has been kept to a minimum, and is consistently typed in lowercase letters. Individuals’ names have been left out to conceal the participants’ identity. The main symbols are as follows (see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984):

- \[\text{overlap of speech}\]
- \(=\) latching
- \((0.5)\) pause
- 
- 
- 
- \(\circ\) indicates whisper
- \(:\) indicates prolongation of a sound
- \(*\text{name}*\) conceals the name of the student
- \((xxx)\) unclear speech
- \(((\text{txt})\)) non-verbal activity
- \(\rightarrow\) indicates the TCU or turn the author is highlighting

3 It has to be remarked once again that the organization and implementation of office hours is institutionally-purported and culture-specifically implemented. In Germany for instance, a member of the teaching staff tends to have a weekly office hour of 1-2 hours during the semester. Moreover, office hours are not institutionally obligatory for German students. Despite the heterogeneity of this academic talk, contingent upon the academic business or the respective context in which it takes place, I suppose that the core structure outlined here is generally applicable to all these forms of consultations, regardless of their content or institutional rank of participants. However, further treatment is needed on this matter (cf. Limberg, in preparation).

4 Such an instance does not occur in my data, partly due to the institutionalized implementation of this talk in German universities. However, since I am only referring to a potential continuum of informal – formal modes in office hours, such a scenario might theoretically be possible to occur, although its frequency is hardly significant.

5 Carpenter (1983) has proposed a three-part frame of office hours consisting of the following phases: student’s display, professor’s input and mutual discussion afterwards. This frame describes the main part of an office hour, but leaves out the marginal conversational elements such as opening and closing.

6 Not every professor or lecturer assigns appointments or specific time slots to individual students. Frequently, as least in Germany, you find so-called ‘open’ office hours where students come and wait till it is their turn.

7 Theoretically an interaction between a professor and a student might simply be about a topic unrelated to academia, such as football, vacation plans, or current affairs. However, this type of talk would bear little topical or structural identification with the academic study. In this case, it would be a bit precipitate to label this form of talk as ‘academic’ or to refer to it as an instance of ‘office hour’, despite the fact that it takes place in an institutional setting.

8 This conversational practice, which is not exclusive to institutional talk, is referred to as ‘formulating’ (Drew, 2003). It describes the activity of formulating the meaning of what someone has said. In advising contexts, this is an important activity by which the advisor performs several tasks; most importantly s/he exhibits his/her understanding of the student’s problem.