

18/11/2014 Udin Kamituddin

Udin



# Proceedings International Seminar Language Maintenance and Shift IV

November 18, 2014

xviii+488 hlm. 21 x 29,7 cm

ISSN: 2088-6799

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## GROUNDING IN FACE-TO-FACE CONVERSATION: AN ETHNOGRAPHY STUDY

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### Abstract

*Grounding is the process of achieving mutual understanding or belief about what was said between participants in a conversation. Its role is of a paramount important in communication to succeed. This paper examines the models of grounding styles that commonly occur among the teens. The study employed qualitative approach to analyze specific utterances using Clark's and Traum's theories of grounding in communication. The research has shown the use of tag questions is less than the use of interrogative forms. The switch of topic dialogue from an uninformative to informative one is another grounding style that the respondents adopted.*

*Key words: grounding, joint actions in communication*

### Introduction

Communication is a collective activity or joint actions of the first order. Joint actions refer to the coordination of individual actions by two or more people. (Clark:1996, p.59). When two doctors work together in the operation room, for example, they need to coordinate both the content and the process of what they are doing as to succeed in their joint actions. To coordinate on content, the participants must coordinate in what they intend to do and to coordinate on process they must coordinate their physical and mental systems they recruit in carrying out those intentions. Moreover, they cannot begin to coordinate on content without assuming the so-called shared information or common ground-that is, mutual knowledge, mutual beliefs, and mutual assumptions (Clark & Larson, 1982; Clark & Marshal, 1981; Lewis, 1969; Schelling, 1960) cited in Herbert H. Clark and Susan E. Brennan, chapter 7, p. 127). Paralleled to this is what Clark has said that two people's common ground is, in effect, the sum of their mutual, common, or joint knowledge, beliefs, and supposition (1996, p. 93). In other words, common ground is a form of self-awareness-self-knowledge, self-belief, self assumption-in which there is at least one other person with analogous self-awareness. From this point of view, the technical notions of *mutual belief*, *mutual knowledge*, *mutual assumption*, and *mutual awareness* are specifics to the common ground.

If one considers the importance of common ground in communication to succeed, one should be aware of the presence of grounding at all levels. This is because grounding is the process of achieving mutual understanding between participants in a conversation (Traum and Allen, 1992, p. 1). Grounding is the process of adding the common ground between agents. It involves reaching a state of mutual understanding (or belief) about what was said and meant. It can include any achievement of commonality between agents, including actual beliefs about the communicated information and joint intentions or goal for future action. In the words of Clark (1996, p. 221) to ground a thing is to establish it as part of common ground well enough for current purposes. Clark further stated that grounding should take place at all levels of communication. Both contributors and respondents should contribute to in a conversation. Contributors present signals to respondents, and then contributors and respondents work together to reach the mutual belief that the signals have been understood well enough for current purposes.

This paper discusses how the communication process in a collaborative situation varies depending on which type of technical system is used.

### *Purpose of study*

This study is designed to address the need for information about the important role of grounding in face-to-face conversation as well as to investigate the possibility of specific characteristic of grounding styles of teenagers.

### *Research Questions*

In order to meet the research goals outlined above, the following questions are expected to guide the inquiry:

- Do teenagers develop their own styles of grounding?
- If so, what are their styles of grounding?

### **Method**

#### *General Study Description*

The present study is based on dialogue data by teenagers. The dialogue took place on 24 August, 2014 in the school terrace lobby at 11 am after tuition. The dialogue was casual conversation in Indonesian language, involving no specific objectives or tasks. The contents of dialogue included weather, their experience, and common friends. The length of dialogue was about 15-20 minutes. In the process of data collection, the researcher has recorded the verbal communication between the participants while carrying out their task. The audio visual recordings between the participating pairs were then transcribed in a fairly straightforward way. This was done because the researcher did not notate intonations, prolonged sounds, overlapping speech, pauses, or other linguistic phenomena of the more specific kind, since he was only interested in the semantic contributions, meaning and utterances, i.e. more of *what* was said than *how* it was said. Although the verbal communication in those conditions was most likely accompanied by non-verbal communication such as object manipulation, gestures, facial expressions, and body positioning, he ignored non-verbal communication in his analysis. However, the transcriptions of the audio visual recordings have been systematically examined and carefully analyzed in light of the theories about grounding in communication.

#### *Participants*

The subjects of this study were two girl students of grade XI of SMAN 2 Cirebon. The participants of the research had known each other and had talked to each other almost every day either during or after school time.

#### **Literature Review**

To the best of the researcher's knowledge after browsing literature he did not find readings that discuss the grounding styles of teenagers. Under this situation, it is quite hard for him to provide related data on previous studies. It is, therefore, this study focuses on examining the teenagers' grounding styles based on Clark's theory of grounding in communication (1996, pp. 221-252) and on Traum's models of grounding process (Traum, 1994; Traum & Dillenbourg, 1996, 1998) cited in Tim Paek and Eric Horvitz, *Conversation as Action Under Uncertainty*.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Grounding is so basic to communication-indeed, to all collective activities or actions. It occurs in face-to-face conversation even in personal letters. Grounding is defined as the process of achieving mutual understanding between participants in a conversation (Traum and Allen, 1992, p.1). Grounding is the process of adding the common ground between agents. It involves reaching a state of mutual understanding (or belief) about what was said and meant. It can include any achievement of commonality between agents, including actual beliefs, about the communicated information and joint intentions or goals for future action. In the words of Clark (1996, p. 221) to ground a thing means to establish it as part of common ground well enough for current purposes. Researchers have examined the kinds of communication failures that result from lack of grounding at the successive levels to establish mutual understanding (Brennan & Hulteen, 1995; Dillenbourg, et.

Al., 1996) cited in Paek and Eric Horvitz, *Conversation as Action Under Uncertainty*. From this perspective it can be inferred that to certain extent grounding is a key to the success of communication including face-to-face conversation.

Clark and Brennan (p. 128) stated that there are two main factors that shape grounding, namely: purpose and medium of communication. The first factor is *purpose*-what the two people are trying to accomplish in their communication. The other is the *medium* of communication-the techniques available in the medium for accomplishing that purpose, and what it costs to use them. In this sense, grounding in communication might take place to change as the purpose or the medium of communication or both of them change.

According to Clark (1996) speaker and listener ground mutual understanding at four levels. At the most basic level, which I denote as the *channel level* a speaker *S* attempts to open a channel of communication by executing behavior *B*, such as an utterance or action, for listener *L*. However, *S* cannot get *L* to perceive *B* without coordination; *L* must be attending to and perceiving *B* *precisely* as *S* is executing it. Likewise, at the *signal level*, *S* presents *B* as a signal *s* to *L*. Not all behaviors are meant to be signals, as for example, scratching an itch. Hence, *S* and *L* must coordinate what *S* presents with what *L* identifies.

The *intention level* is where the task of understanding the *semantic content* of signals occurs. Here, *s* signals some propositions *p* for *L*. that *L* recognizes to be the goal of *S* in signaling *s* is *how* *L* will arrive at *p*. This again takes coordination.

Finally, at the *conversation level*, *S* proposes some joint activity "*a*" which *L* considers and takes up by providing a conditionally relevant response defined by *a*. *S* cannot get *L* to engage in the proposed activity without the coordinated participation and cooperation of *L*. In summary, all four levels require coordination and collaboration to establish mutual understanding. (Paek and Horvitz, 1999, pp.2-3).

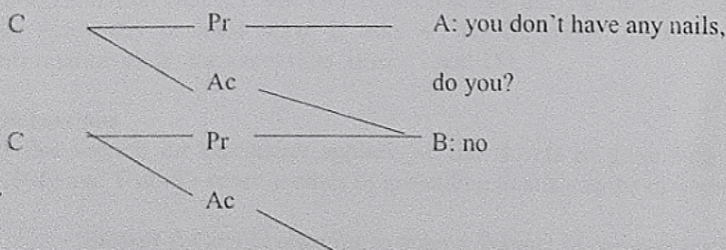
Clark & Schaefer (13:259-94, 1989) cited in Traum and Allen (1992, p. 8) states that grounding as the process of achieving mutual understanding requires contributions from both parties which consist of a presentation part and an acceptance part. Contributions is anything that a person does during a conversation that both carries some content (content specification) and assists the participants in establishing a mutual belief that the hearer believes she understood the content of the presenter's act (grounding). Clark and Schaefer (13:259-94, 1989) cited in Novick et al (1997, p. 2) defined their terms (contributions) as follows:

Presentation phase

"A" presents utterance *u* to consider. He does so on the assumption that, if B gives evidence *e* or stronger, he can believe that B understands what A means by *u*.

Acceptance phase

B accepts utterance *u* by giving evidence *e* that she believes she understands what "A" means by *u*. She does so on the assumption that once A registers evidence *e*, he will also believe that B understands. A contribution graph (Clark & Schaefer, 1989).



Respondent "A" initiates to ground the conversation. Then B coordinates by attending to and perceiving A's utterance. B shows her implicit signaling of understanding with her answer "Yes" (line 2). She acknowledges A's statement. This phase is called acceptance phase or confirmation act or signal level. Both A and B repair their grounding of content that can be seen from their use of tag questions (lines 2 and 5).

Although a tag question can change the interpretation of a declarative utterance from an inform to a YNQ the respondents do not mean to. They used tag questions form merely to ground the content of conversation and not to change the previous grounded content. Hence, it can be inferred that one way of grounding models that the respondent adopted was "repair grounding." The two respondents also used interrogative questions (lines: 6, 9: "Do they speak Sundanese?", 12, and 14). The use of interrogative sentences denotes a request for repair by the other party. Schegloff et al. called the term ReqRepair as a *Next Turn Repair Initiator* (Traum and Allen, 1992, p. 4). Yet, the interrogative question (line 8) does not indicate a ReqRepair since B was not really asking A to tell her whether A went to Bali. She merely wanted to keep the social wheels' turning smoothly and to assure that a friendly courteous relationship exists between them. This process is also a part of grounding models. Because if B really wanted to confirm A's previous statement (line 7), she would have attempted to get the other agent (A) to acknowledge his previous utterance (line 8). She would explicitly ask A again whether he went to Bali (ReqAck).

Another model of grounding process is seen in the respondents "uninformative exchange about the weather" (lines 1-5) indicating that the social relationships between them exist (ReqAck). Since respondent B was not successful in getting the information that she really needs (up to line 5), she closes off the current DU as ungrounded with her reply "No" (line 6). Moreover, she went on grounding by switching the dialogue topic, i.e. from uninformative exchange to informative exchange with her query about holiday (line 6).

From this point of view, it can be concluded that switching the topic of conversation is a model of grounding process. Above all, the respondents employed "an adjacency pairs" as a technique in their grounding process. For example, B asked: Have you ever been visiting Bali on school holiday? (line 6). A replied: Yes, .... (line 7).

### Conclusions

To conclude, the researcher found that the collaborators in conversations seemed to have no problems in hearing and understanding each other as no utterances were repeated by them. Repetition of a word or a phrase during conversation denotes that listeners heard only part of the complete statement. With regard to the styles of grounding among the teens, the research reveals three characteristics of grounding, namely: repair grounding which is shown by the use of an interrogative sentence. Moreover, the respondents used tag questions less frequently than interrogative forms. The purpose of the use of this model is to ground the content of the conversation. The switch of topic dialogue is considered as another model of grounding, i.e. the switch from an uninformative topic to the informative one. The adjacency pair is also considered a technique to grounding conversation.

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# CERTIFICATE

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as

A PRESENTER

in International Seminar

## Language Maintenance and Shift (LAMAS) IV

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Semarang, November 18, 2014

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