Strategies for targeting prior turns: A cross-linguistic corpus study

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In conversation, interactants constantly refer back to their own and the interlocutors' utterances. Consequently, speakers of all languages must have available linguistic strategies to target (parts of) a preceding turn. In this paper, we explore how speakers of three syntactically diverse languages accomplish this task: Standard German, peninsular Spanish, and Yurakaré (isolate, Bolivia). As a test case, we investigate the interactional environment of verbal non-minimal feedback which offers a somewhat controlled conversational setting for such an endeavor, as by definition feedback engages with some prior talk by the interlocutor (e.g. Stubbe 1998). Moreover, it is frequently met by a response or continuation that potentially manifests how the feedback was understood (Tolins & Fox Tree 2014), which means that we have some measure of success of the feedback signal achieving the intended reference.

On the basis of conversational corpora (unpublished; Torreira & Ernestus 2012; van Gijn et al. 2011), we demonstrate that all three languages deploy a range of strategies for establishing reference to a preceding utterance in feedback position: anaphoric expressions, discourse markers (see also Portolés 2001), full and partial repetition, co-completions, fragmentary sentences, and (often elliptical) information questions. However, languages differ as to the syntactic manifestation of these formats and the extent to which they make use of them (see Clancy et al. 1996; Stubbe 1998, inter alia). Our interest in this paper pertains to the question whether there is a correlation between feedback practices and morphosyntactic properties of the expressions used to carry them out.

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