The Paradox of Question and Answer Episode of Thesis Examination

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Abstract: The main concern of this research is the exploration of tendencies made by the participants of a thesis examination in enacting their roles through their speech function choices. Interpretation of the data is based on the principle of critical discourse analysis within the systemic functional linguistic. The results show us the paradox of a Qustion - and - Answer episode of a thesis examination. It lies in the fact that it must operate in an academic atmosphere, be brief and frightening, and the examiners initiate the interaction by demanding information from the student, and yet it is a joint production of conversation in which, while enacting their supportive roles, the examiners contribute to sustaining the interaction, making it half-way between casual and pragmatic conversation. Based on the findings: some suggesions addressed to examiners are made.

Key words: speech function, role-relation, Question-and-Answer, episode.

After completing the writing of a thesis, a thesis writer will undergo an examination before the Board of Thesis Examiners. The examination is usually divided into four episodes: (1) Opening; (2) Presentation; (3) Question-and-Answer; and (4) Closing. It is the Question-and-Answer (hereafter Q-and-A) episode which is considered as the core of a thesis examination and in the focus of this study. In this episode, the examiners assess how students defends his/her ideas. The student's success or failure depends much on this episode.

A Q-and-A episode, as the name indicates, substantially comprises the examiners' questioning and the student's answering the questions orally, so that in general it displays the use of spoken language. In other words, this episode is basically a dialogue or a conversation between the examiners and the student. Therefore, functional interpretation of it as the exchange of speech functions (speech acts) can be conducted (Eggins and Slade 1997:169).

As a process of exchange, Halliday (1994:68-69; also Matthiessen 1995:434-436) argues that conversation involves two parameters: (1) the speech role, is the speaker giving or demanding, and (2) the nature of the commodity exchanged: either information or goods and services. When these two parameters of exchange are cross-sectionally taken, they result in four basic speech functions of English that speakers can make to initiate a piece of conversation, as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Speech Roles and Commodities in Conversation

Speech Role	Commodity exchanged	
	Information	Goods-and-Services
Giving	Statement	Offer
Demanding	Question	Command

Sources: Halliday 1984:13; Eggins 1994:150; Eggins and Slade 1997:181; Martin 1992:32

Although conversation is not just a mechanical process of taking turns but a process of making meaning (Eggins and Slade 1997: 169), Sacks *et al* (1974: 704) suggested two turn-taking rules. The first rule states that current speaker may select next speaker. If they do not, then the second rule applies: any other speaker may self-select, and the first to do so has right to the floor. But any other participant in the conversation, either prior speaker or a third party, may of course break the rules and come in and talk without right.

Concerning the types, conversation might be classified into formal and casual. Eggins and Slade (1997: 19-20) distinguish between *pragmatic conversation* to refer to pragmatically oriented interactions and *casual conversation* to refer to interactions which are not motivated by a clear

pragmatic purpose, and display informality and humor (Eggins and Slade, 1997: 20). They also claim (45) that casual conversational exchanges differ from pedagogic exchanges in two ways:

(1)   At the exchange level pedagogic exchanges typically consist of three 'slots', in a sequence motivated by movement towards completion, while casual conversational contexts reveal far more open-ended exchange types.

(2)   In casual conversation interactants rarely ask questions to which they already know the answer. Therefore, the types of moves which occur in initiating slots of conversation are very different from those in pedagogic exchanges. They include "real" questions, statements of opinions, commands, offers, etc. The slots which occur after the responding slots do not generally consists of evaluating moves but are either recycling types of moves (queries, challenges) or additional "afterthoughts" of various kinds.

Role-relation enactment patterns of a particular discourse can be identified through discourse structure patterns. Eggins and Slade (1997: 53) state that discourse structure patterns operate across turns and are thus overtly interactional and sequential.

Now that role enactment patterns operate across turns, the units of discourse analysis to seek these patterns are turns: all the talk produced by one speaker before another speaker gets in. However, since these patterns are concerned with speech function choices, we cannot use turns to analyze speech function because one turn can realize several speech functions, such as in the following excerpt.

R:resp:reply:acknowl   166/a NSE_1 = = (i) Okay, okay, *ya*.
C:prolong:elaborate   166/b   (ii) Okay *mbak Susi* (iii)I know
(iv) you
Have mentioned several
sentences.

O:I:statement:opinion 166/c   (v) And in my opinion if this table - I mean your examples here are taken from the - taken from … = = let say from Webster, Hornby, …

We can see from this excerpt that within a single turn NSE_1 is performing two quite different discourse tasks. First, he is responding to the student's answer, and second he is giving the student information how to arrange the examples in the table.

This example also shows us that although the turn is a significant unit in the analysis of conversation, it is not always the same with discourse functions. Discourse functions, i.e. speech functions, are realized through grammatical patterns, while the grammatical patterns are expressed through clauses. Therefore, Halliday suggests that the discourse patterns of speech functions are expressed through moves (in Eggins and Slade, 1997: 185).

The importance of speech functions in the analysis of discourse structure of conversation to explore the role-enactment patterns and the inadequacy of Halliday's speech function classifications to the more subtle speech function patterns of casual conversation have motivated Eggins and Slade (1997) to develop a more delicate speech function description. This results in their speech function network, of which its major subcategories are presented in Figure 1. (See Eggins and Slade, 1997 for more complete description of their Speech Function Network)

This figure captures the main resources available for interactants to engage in a sequence of talk. It captures the difference between conversational moves which open up new exchanges, and moves which sustain exchanges. While opening moves initiate negotiation of a new proposition, sustaining moves keep negotiating the same proposition.

Sustaining moves may be produced either by the same speaker who has just been talking or by other speakers taking a turn. Sustaining moves produced by the same speaker are labeled continuing speech functions while those produced by the other speakers are labeled reacting speech functions.
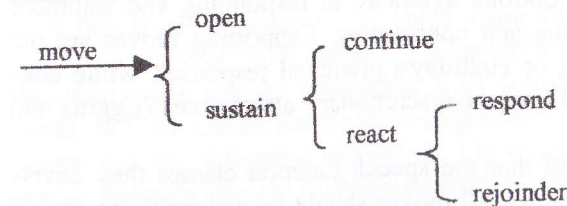

Figure 1: Major Speech Function Classes

Source: Egins and Slade (1997: 192)

There are three options available for a speaker to continue his speech: by monitoring, prolonging, and/or appending. Monitoring moves are produced when the speaker focuses on the state of the interactive situation, for example by checking that the audience is following, or by inviting another speaker to take turn, in which the invited response is set up as a supporting response. These seem to be similar to those described by Long (in Alwright and Bailey, 1991: 123) as 'comprehension checks', i.e. the speaker's query of the interlocutors to see if they have understood what was said. When a speaker prolongs or appends his own speech, he might do so either by elaborating, extending, or enhancing his prior move.

Prolonging moves are those where the same speaker adds his contribution by providing further information, because very often what one wants to say cannot be realized with a single move. Appending moves occur when a speaker makes one move, loses the turn because of unplanned intervention from another speaker, but he regains the turn and produces a move which represents a logical expansion of his immediately prior move.

To sustain the interaction, besides continuing his own speech, a speaker may also give reactions to another speaker's moves so that turn transfer occurs. Two basic options are available in the reacting speech function, i.e. responding and rejoinder speech functions.

Responding-reactions are reactions that move the exchange toward completion, while rejoinders are reactions, which in some way prolong the exchange. Therefore, when a speaker wants to end the conversation he has to choose responding-reaction moves. Choosing rejoinder moves, on the other hand, implicitly means that the speaker is not yet satisfied with what another speaker has contributed to and tries either to explore further details or to offer alternative explanations.

There are two main options available in responding and rejoinder speech functions; supporting and confronting. Supporting moves are the preferred responses of CA or Halliday's predicted responses, while confronting moves are dispreferred or discretionary alternatives (Eggins and Slade, 1997: 201).

Egins and Slade claim that the speech function classes they developed are comprehensive, in that all moves should be assignable to one of the classes included. The criteria for establishing speech function catego-

ries are linguistic, not intuitive: for each class of speech function, realization criteria can be specified drawing principally on the system of interpersonal meaning.

One of the assumptions underlying a thesis examination is that it is within pedagogical discourse, so that the pattern of interaction seems to be similar with that described by Sinclair and Coulthard (in Nunan 1993: 36-37), in which one of the examiners initiates the interaction, usually by asking a question to which he/she knows the answer, the student gives responses, and the examiner provides some sort of evaluation of the responses. Sinclair and Coulthard called the three-part structure (the IRF) an exchange. Thesis examinations resemble classroom environments, in which the roles, functions, and power relationships between participants are well-defined (Nunan, 1993: 37). Therefore, it is very natural that the examiners take the role of initiators while the student be the respondent.

In relation with the first assumption, another assumption is that within the fundamental types of speech role proposed by Halliday (1984: 11-12; 1994: 68), the speech role of thesis examiners in initiating the interaction will tend to be 'demanding' while that of the student be 'giving', and the commodity being exchanged will be 'information' rather than 'goods and services'. In addition, like all sorts of examinations, a thesis examination must operate in an academic atmosphere, which is often perceived by students as 'frightening'. Last but not least, the conversationalists in a thesis examination will choose supporting moves in the negotiation in order to end the conversation or to achieve the exchange closure.

With those assumptions in mind, substantial questions arise: "How are these assumptions reflected in the language used by thesis examiners and the student?" Should a thesis examination be something 'frightening' for the student or a joint production conversation (Stubb 1983: 21) in which the speakers constantly take account of their audience by designing their talk for their hearers?" A study made by Mehan (in Cohen 1998: 217) indicates that "with respect to a teacher's oral questioning, in reality, the interrogator and the respondent work together to jointly compose the 'social fact' we call an answer to-to-a-question". More specifically, this research has the following objectives: (1) to give a brief account of the speech function choices of thesis examiners and the student in a Q-and-A episode of a thesis examination; (2) to give a brief account of the role-

enactment patterns in a Q-and-A episode of a thesis examination,

The results of this research give readers insight into the nature of thesis examinations in general and the Q-and-A episode in particular, i.e. how each participant enacts his/her role-relations in the examination. For students, the results of this research make them be able to determine the most appropriate test-taking strategy in undergoing a thesis examination in particular and oral interview in general. For both teachers and students the results might be used to develop the teaching of speaking skills, especially to make a sustained conversation.

METHODS

This research substantially follows the eclectic approach proposed by Eggins and Slade (1997) as reflected in their Speech Function Network. It is a critical discourse analysis within the systemic functional linguistic tradition.

Data

This research uses tape-recorded naturally occurring data of approximately sixty minute Q-and-A episode of an oral thesis examination at the S1 level, which took place on February 20, 2003 in the English Department of the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Muria Kudus University.

Participants

There are five participants comprising one examinee (female) and four examiners (male). The examiners are categorized into two, i.e. Supervisor Examiners and Non-Supervisor Examiners (hereafter SEs and NSEs respectively). In the transcript, the five participants are labeled as the following:
(1) the examinee is labeled Student,
(2) SEs and NSEs are labeled according to who spoke first: SEs are labeled SE_1 and SE_2 while NSEs are labeled NSE_1 and NSE_2

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The unit of analysis of this research is move. Interpretive analysis of

the data consists of three steps: (1) identifying clauses; (2) identifying moves, and (3) coding speech function.

Move identification was done according to the grammatical criteria suggested by Eggins and Slade (1997). Moves were numbered within turns using a, b notations, and put after the turn numbers 1, 2, 3 etc. Hence, 2/a means move one of the second turn. The speech function for each move was coded contextually following the CA's notion of 'sequential implicativeness of interaction': what each move means is in large part dependent on what has just been said (Eggins and Slade 1997: 215). To keep coding manageable, the function of each move was interpreted in relation to only one move, i.e. the nearest relevant prior move.

Synoptic interpretation (Eggins and Slade 1997:215) of the results followed the Critical Discourse Analysis proposed by Fairclough (1995), concerning the link between the micro-event and the macro-social structures, and Fairclough (2001; 2003), concerning the dialectical relationship between discourse and other elements of social practices.

FINDINGS

The whole result of the analysis is built in the transcription of the Q-and-A. The Q-and-A of the thesis examination under analysis consists of 59 exchanges, ranging in length from 2 to 32 moves. The summary of the speech function choices is presented in Table 2, while the summary of the turns and moves is presented in Table 3. (For ease of presentation, these two tables are displayed successively as appendices.)

The analysis of the text also revealed that there were some moves which were not assignable to any speech function classes. This was due to the fact that during the course of the examination competition between the student and the examiners to take turns was relatively high so that overlaps between turns were also relatively high. These overlaps resulted in incomplete moves which were difficult, if not impossible, to assign.

Discussion

A Q-and-A episode of a thesis examination is divided into four *rounds*, so as not to overlap with the term *turns*. The first round is devoted to NSE_1, the second to NSE_2, the third to SE_2, and the last to SE_1. Every

examiner is allotted equal time of around 15 minutes to speak, and it is the job of the Chairperson to assign those rounds. Another context that must be taken into account is power relationship. The relationship between the examiner and the student is that of expert and novice.

Synoptic Interpretation: Interpreting the Quantification of the Speech Function Choices

If we consider the categories of speech functions that are produced by the five participants, Table 2 shows us that almost all of the speech functions which appear in The Speech Function Network developed by Eggins and Slade (1997) are chosen by the examiners. This is due to the fact that the role of examiner they occupy gives access to manipulate all of the speech functions when interacting with the examinee. The student's choices, on the other hand, are less varied, especially in the opening speech functions. This is because her lower social role constraints on the frequency and types of openings that can be made let alone in an examination. It can be seen from the table that the student initiates twice only using an offer and a question of opinion. She does not use any command at all or attend by calling as what has been done by NSE_1.

If we compare the speech role of giving with that of demanding, we will see that Table 2 shows us that the examiners tend to give rather than to demand in initiating the interaction: 29 giving (25 statements and 4offers) as opposed to 26 demanding (8 commands and 18 questions). And in terms of fact/opinion difference, Table 2 also shows us that they prefer opinion information for both statements and questions. This suggests that the degree of affective involvement between the examiners and the student is relatively high, because they will more freely discuss opinions than facts (Eggins and Slade 1997:193-194). Despite this, the tendency of the examiners to give opinion information to the student is an indication that they are exercising their authority as experts over her as a novice, as Halliday (1984:12) says that "If I am giving, you are called on to accept; if I am demanding, you are called on to give."

Concerning the commodity exchanged, Table 2 reveals that the participants rely on information rather than on goods and services, since the number of statements and questions is greater than that of commands and offers.

With respect to the grand total of the move production, the examiners use most of their moves to continue their own speech, by means of prolonging. This means that they do not straightforward or say all that they want to say in one single move. And in continuing their speech, they mostly elaborate, i.e. they say the same things in different ways. This suggests that they do less to broaden subsequent discussion.

The high appearance of registering moves of the examiners indicates that they provide enough supportive encouragement for the student to take turns. Other responding-reactions employed by all participants in relatively high frequency are supporting replies, which include accepting, complying, agreeing, answering, acknowledging, and affirming. Now that supporting replies indicate a willingness to accept the propositions or proposals of the other speakers, supporting replies from the examiners indicate their acceptance of the student's propositions. And in relation with the exchange structure proposed by Coulthard and Brazil (1992:71), the examiners' supporting replies must be in the Follow Up slots while those of the student must be in the Response slots. And since in a thesis examination conversation is mostly between the examiners and the student, it can be tentatively concluded that they support the student's responses.

If too much continuing is not so good an indication for examiners, it is good for a student. This is because he/she has to defend his/her thesis so that he/she has to talk much. When a student is able to produce logico-semantically related utterances, it means that he/she is able to arrange his/her utterances. And the student has successfully done this. She prolongs a lot using elaboration, extension and enhancement. She even appends a lot, indicating that to a certain degree she has won the fight of turn-taking, with or without support from the examiners.

The great number of the student's reacting responding moves is also a good indication because it means that she gives sufficient reactions, not just keeping silence listening to what the examiners are saying. However, from another perspective it indicates that she accepts being positioned as a respondent and to negotiate the examiners' propositions. This is quite natural in a thesis examination because of her lower social role. And if the number of her reacting-responding moves is compared with that of her reacting-rejoinder ones, the former being twice as much as the latter indicates that, as a student, she has tried very hard to achieve the exchange

completion: not to be questioned further.

The dominant rejoinders produced by the examiners are tracking moves, indicating that they are willing to maintain contact and align with the student's position thus enacting their roles as supporters. And since the majority of the tracking moves are probing ones, it indicates that while enacting their roles as supporters they also contribute to promote continued talk. This is not the same with Eggins and Slade's claim (1997:212) that pragmatic interactions aim at exchange closure and completion, and tend to be very short (20). The dominant rejoinders of the student, on the other hand, are responding-resolvings, indicating that she wants to end the conversation as soon as possible.

The Q-and-A episode should not be frightening because there is a tendency that SEs assist their client. Their assistance can be illustrated via, for example, the following excerpt:

R:resp:dev:elaborate 10	NSE$_1$	= = (i)Ya, I mean …
O:I:statement:opinion 11	SE$_1$	[to student] = = (i)Maybe you have read some other plays.
R:resp:register 12	Student	(i)Ya.
C:append:elaborate 13	SE$_1$	(i)(Beside this one.)
R:resp:register 14	NSE$_1$	(i)Ya.
C:append:elaborate 15	SE$_1$	(i)That is what he meant.

SE$_1$'s statement of opinion in move 11, which is then continued with move 13, indicates a certain degree of egocentricity. Firstly because he interrupts NSE$_1$'s utterance and the second because he continues with move 15. This move clearly indicates his assistance to the student since it clarifies NSE$_1$'s utterance in move 10, filling this unfinished utterance with his own opinion, urging that as if it were NSE$_1$'s opinion.

Interpreting the Number of Turn and Move Production

In terms of the number of turns and moves, Table 3 reveals that there are two dominant examiners, i.e. NSE$_1$ and SE$_1$. NSE$_1$ gets 102 turns for 176 moves while SE$_1$ gets 73 turns for 91 moves. However, dominance in the context of pragmatic conversation is different from that of casual conversation. In casual conversation the participants compete for turns, or at least consider themselves to have the right to equal turns at talk (Eggins

and Slade, 1997: 217), so that certain participants are marginalized. In pragmatic conversation such as a thesis examination competition for turns between examiners, if exists, is not motivated by the feeling of equal right, because this has been equally distributed. Dominance in this context is then a matter of productivity and willingness to utilize the time allotment.

Considering that NSE$_1$ utilizes all the time allotment, we can roughly calculate the effective time allotment used by each examiner in each round based on the move production. If, for example, within his round NSE$_1$ gets 176 moves, 87 moves of NSE$_2$ must have been produced only in 0.49 of NSE$_1$'s time. Together with the opening move production, this then suggests how each of the examiners prepares what Ochs (in Stubb 1983:34) calls 'planned discourse', his questions as the stereotype of a Q-and-A episode of a thesis examination.

Compared with the overall turns and moves produced by the four examiners, the student is less dominant. She gets 175 turns out of the total 406 or 43.10% and 213 moves out of the total 608 or 35.03%. This clearly indicates that the examiners speak more than the student does or dominate the course of the Q-and-A episode of the thesis examination and thus marginalize the student.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The speech function analysis over the whole text reveals the following:
(1) The thesis examiners in the Q-and-A episode of the thesis examination under study prefer statements to initiate the interaction, while to continue the interaction they tend to choose prolonging moves. Meanwhile, in reacting-responding, they mostly choose supporting moves, of which they prefer registering and replying. In reacting-rejoinder, they also tend to choose supporting moves, both in tracking the prior moves (checking, confirming, clarifying, and probing) and in responding. Only minimal confronting reactions are produced. On the other hand, almost all of the speech function choices of the student are sustaining, of which are mostly reacting moves. The reacting moves produced by the student are mostly supporting. There are also some confronting replies produced by the student.

(2) The role enactment patterns in the Q-and-A episode of the thesis examination under study indicate its paradox. The paradox of the Q-and-A episode of the thesis examination then lies in the fact that it must operate in an academic atmosphere, be brief and frightening, and the examiners initiate the interaction with questions or demand information from the student, and yet it is a joint production of conversation in which, while enacting their supportive roles, the examiners contribute to sustaining the interaction, making it halfway between casual and pragmatic conversation. The Q-and-A episode of the thesis examination is a "collaborative supervising" in which one examiner collaborates with the other to give information to rather than demand it from the student, thus enacting not only their academic roles but also their social roles. "

Referring to those conclusions, I suggest that examiners be more direct in delivering questions or commands. Since thesis examinations are substantially the time for students to defend their theses, it is therefore suggested that examiners give more space and time to students to speak and not marginalize them. It is also suggested that anyone else analyze the same data using either the same approach or different one, other aspects of a Q-and-A episode as well as other episodes of a thesis examination be explored, so that we have more holistic insight about thesis examinations in general and Q-and-A episodes in particular.

Last but not least, it is interesting to quote Schiffrin's argument (1994: 88) concerning the problems of validity and reliability which often threaten social science research: "Would others agree with our analytic categories and be able to discover them independently of our own efforts?" The answer is "We cannot really be sure that we have 'correctly' identified the speech function of the utterance". This is because "discourse … can be interpreted differently by people because they have different backgrounds, knowledge, and power positions". (Fairclough 2001; Wodak & Ludwig 1999 in McGregor 2003).

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APPENDICES

Table 2: Summary of Speech Function Choices

Speech function		Participant				
		NSE_1	NSE_2	SE_1	SE_2	Student
Open:						
1. Attend		2	-	1	1	-
2. Initiate:	a. Offer	1	-	3	-	1
	b. Command	5	-	2	1	-
	c. Statement: opinion	7	3	4	2	-
	d. Statement: fact	2	3	1	3	-
	e. Question: opinion	3	2	4	1	1
	f. Question: fact	1	1	6	-	-
Total		21	9	21	8	2
Continue:						
1. Monitor		3	2	3	1	-
2. Prolong:	a. elaborate	20	18	5	4	18
	b. extend	19	8	1	5	8
	c. enhance	10	5	-	8	8
3. Append:	a. elaborate	14	2	5	2	11
	b. extend	4	1	1	-	14
	c. enhance	1	1	1	1	9
Total		71	37	16	21	68
React: responding:						
1. Support:	a. Develop: elaborate	4	1	1	-	3
	b. Develop:extend	2	1	6	-	2
	c. Develop:enhance	2	1	3	-	2
	d. Engage	1	-	-	-	1
	e. Register	22	8	19	4	9
	f. Reply	30	11	14	5	70
2. Confront: Reply		2	-	-	-	9
Total		63	22	43	9	96

React: rejoinder		NSE_1	NSE_2	SE_1	SE_2	Student
1. Support: a. Track:	- check	2	3	-	-	2
	- confirm	3	2	1	1	-
	- clarify	5	2	6	1	1
	- probe	4	7	1	1	1
b. Respond:	- resolve	3	3	2	-	41
	- repair	1	-	1	-	1
2. Confront: a. Challenge:	- rebound	2	2	-	-	-
	- counter	1	-	-	-	-
b. Response:	- refute	-	-	-	-	1
Total		21	19	11	3	47
Grand Total		176	87	91	41	213

Table 3. Summary of Turns and Moves

Turn/Move	Participant					Total	% Student
	NSE_1	NSE_2	SE_1	SE_2	Student		
Turn	102	36	73	20	175	406	43.10
Move	176	87	91	41	213	608	35.03