The Functions of Okay in Classroom Discourse v The Functions of Okay in Task-Oriented Discourse

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Introduction

Okay. Have you ever noticed how often this seemingly unimportant word appears in discourse of any kind, whether it is classroom discourse, telephone discourse, task-oriented discourse, etc.? Especially when it is being spoken about or noticed; it seems unavoidable and in fact almost necessary to complete one's vocabulary. This paper will summarize the findings of a study done in a New York City bilingual school on the functions of okay in bilingual classroom discourse, defining and exemplifying the different types of okay, and also noting previous research findings. It will then continue on to compare the uses of okay in task-oriented discourse, comparing and exemplifying from given data. Finally, it will compare the functions of okay to other linguistic techniques that function in similar ways.

Researcher Julie Broderick, when using 240 minutes of classroom transcripts collected at a bilingual elementary school in New York City, found that *okay* can be grouped into four primary classroom functions: 1) framing marker, 2) tag-positioned comprehension check, 3) affirmative releasing marker, and 4) negative releasing marker. She observed English and Spanish lessons from six different teachers, all of whom have different levels of proficiency in the two languages, some being English-dominant bilingual, some Spanish-dominant bilingual, and some balanced bilingual, those who generally function as fluent speakers of both Spanish and English in almost all language environments. At this school in upper Manhattan, over 95% of the 1,800 students are Hispanic and about half of the students are classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP). According to the Aspira consent decree of 1974, these students are guaranteed bilingual instruction, unless their parents choose to place them in a monolingual classroom.

Other researchers have also ventured into this field of study and found that in classroom discourse *okay* could appear at the boundary of two activities, signaling to the students that a new activity was about to begin (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975):

> Teacher: **Okay**. Everyone put your science books away and get out your calculators. We are going get ready for math.

Condon (1986) also found this function of the word to be present when observing families planning for vacations, but instead called it a 'transition point.' Still others, such as Merritt in 1984, found that in service encounters *okay* can be used to signal approval and acceptance. Merritt claimed that when customers make a request for information that *okay* is not an appropriate response, but rather a yes-type word must be given. However, when a customer requests action, *okay* is an appropriate response. The majority of his research dealt with the releasing function of *okay*, in which the speaker acknowledges through the use of *okay* that he is taking over the floor and is thus obligated to say something else or to take some non-verbal action. Later another researcher, Kovarsky (1989), observed *okay* in therapy sessions by analyzing videotapes of a speech-language therapist working with children on different language lessons. Her finds went along with those of Merritt, further supporting that a common function of *okay* is to release the other speaker from his or her turn. Kovarsky went step further and determined that sometimes the releasing function shows indirect disapproval of what the previous speaker said.

Classroom Discourse

Research Broderick found that in classroom discourse not only does *okay* function as framing marker as Sinclair and Coulthard found, but also in ways similar to those observed by

Merritt, Condon, and Kovarsky. The first use of okay, **the framing marker**, was originally observed by Schegloff and Sacks in 1973, in their noted work on telephone closings. They claimed that the use of *okay* by speaker A at the close of a topic was a signal to speaker B that he could then introduce a new topic. They stated that if speaker B introduced a new topic, than the initial *okay* produced by speaker A could be considered only a preclosing move:

A: It sounds like you had a fun time on your trip.
B: Yeah.
A: Well. **Okay**.
B: Oh, I wanted to tell you that I can't make it to the meeting on Tuesday.

Schegloff and Sacks added, however, if speaker B chose not to introduce a new topic, but rather reciprocated with *okay,* this would be the first move to close the conversation:

A: **Okay**.
B: **Okay**.
A: Well, I'll talk to you tomorrow.
B: Okay. See ya then.
A: Bye.
B: G'bye

Broderick defines a **framing marker** as "a cue which indicates to the listener that a topic has just ended and a new topic is about to begin." Although the teachers varied their types of framing markers used, all six of them did use *okay.* It was the most commonly used, appearing twice as much as the next highest function and accounting for exactly one half of the total number of uses of *okay.* Of the 219 uses of *okay* in the twelve lessons, 108 of them were used as framing markers. This was also the only function of *okay* that appeared in all twelve lessons. The following are examples of uses of the framing marker function, in both English and Spanish:

Teacher: (*beginning of the lesson*) **Okay**, yesterday we talked about words that make the /i/ sound. (*reading from a chart of sentences*) When Emily left, Little Bear was very sorry to see her go.

Teacher: *(as the students are getting out their Spanish reading books)* **Ok**. *(pause)* Hoy vamos a abrir a la página 108, abren sus libros, y 109. Vay(an) mirando al dibujo en esta(s) páginas 108 y 109. [**Okay**. Today let's open our books to page 108, open your books, and 109. Continue looking at the picture on these pages 108 and 109.]

The second function of *okay* that Broderick found in the bilingual classroom discourse is the **tag-positioned comprehension check**. This *okay* is placed in the tag-position at the end of a sentence and is used to monitor the listeners' comprehension. Broderick noted that this function of *okay* is always accompanied by rising intonation and was used in all but three of the twelve lessons observed. The teachers in this study varied in the frequency in which they used this *okay*, some using sixteen times in one lesson, whereas others did not use it at all in a number of lessons. Of the total 219 uses of *okay* in the lessons 49 were used in this function. The following are some examples of the *okay* functioning as a comprehension check:

Teacher: Ojos aquí por favor, porque les voy a enseñar como hacer los libros. Alvin, esoty esperando, **ok**? Todos Uds. Van a recibir una hoja. Y Uds. Van a doblar la hoja. Primero, van a doblar la hoja así. Segundo, Gizelle, guarda eso. Gracias. Van a doblar la hoja así, desde la izquierda a la derecha. Tercero, van a doblar la hoja otra vez, desde la izquierda a la derecha. Después, van a abrir la hoja, **ok**? [Eyes up here please, because I'm going to show you how to make the books. Alvin, I'm waiting, **okay**? All of you are going to get a piece of paper. And you're going to fold the paper. First, you're going to fold it like this. Second, Gizelle, put that away. Thank you. You're going to fold the paper like this, from the left to the right. Third, you're going to fold the paper again, from the left to the right. Afterwards, you're going to open the paper, **okay**?]

Teacher: Let's go on. We still have two more sentences. Remember that some words have more than one meaning, **okay**? So when you don't know what the word means, what can you do? *(pauses waiting for a student to answer, but no one says anything)* Read the sentence. You look for words that will help you, **okay**? to find the meaning of the word.

The third function of *okay* in the bilingual classroom discourse is the **affirmative releasing marker.** Broderick defines this function by saying, "It indicates approval of the

previous utterance, while also releasing the other speaker from having to continue talking."

Broderick found that this function of *okay* was not as commonly found as the two previously

mentioned functions. Still, all but three of the twelve lessons did contain at least one of these

uses of *okay* and the total 219 uses of *okay* 50 of them were used in this form. The following are

examples of the *okay* functioning as an affirmative releasing marker:

Teacher: You have to choose one of the words up here. What might she have in her pocketbook? A monkey, happy, sorry, money, or story
Student: A key.
Teacher: A key. That's true, she could have a key in her pocketbook. What else might she have in her pocketbook? Alvin?
Student: She had money in her pocketbook.
Teacher: Sure. Either one of those words could go in that space. Let's keep reading.
Teacher and Students: She liked to keep a _____ there too.
Teacher: Charlie?
Student: A monkey.
Teacher: A monkey! In her pocketbook!
Student: No. A key.
Teacher: **Okay**. That fits well there.

Teacher: Go ahead.
Student: *(reading aloud from the text)* Había… una bebé…que se llama [There once was…a baby…that is called- 'is named']
Teacher: llamaba [was called- 'was named']
Student: que llamaba Carlos, Carlos [that was name Carlos, Carlos]
Teacher: **Ok**. Que cosa era él? [**Okay**. What was he?]

The fourth and final function of *okay* in bilingual classroom discourse is the **negative**

releasing marker. This also releases the other speaker from having to continue speaking, but it

indicates dissatisfaction with the previous utterance. This function of *okay* was the least

commonly used of the four functions. Only five of the twelve lessons contained some use of

negative releasing markers and of the 219 uses of okay in the lessons only 12 were used in this

way. The following are examples from the data of *okay* as a negative releasing marker:

Teacher: Number five. Read it…read it to yourselves and see if you can figure out which one goes in the space.

Student: *(gasps for attention)*

Teacher: Sammy?

Student: Ahh. Tiny.

Teacher: **Okay**. Let's read the sentence with the word you put in it.

Teacher and Students: Emily took out a tiny nice pen and gave it to Little Bear.

Teacher: Was the pen she took out a tiny nice pen?

Student: No.

Teacher: See if you can find the word that fits a little better *(pause)* Edwin?

Student: Very

Teacher: **Okay**. Let's try that one. *(affirmative releasing marker)*

Teacher and Students: Emily took out a very nice pen and gave it to Little Bear.

Teacher: Does that make more sense?

Students: Yeah.

Teacher: I like that one too.

Student: *(reading a sentence from a classroom chart)* Un niño en el parque hizo una travesura y asustó a Iban. [A boy in the park played a prank and scared Iban.]

Teacher: ¿Qué significa esta palabra? ¿Una travesura? ¿Carlos? ¿Qué piensas tú? ¿Qué puede significar esta palabra? [What does this word mean? A prank? Carlos? What do you think? What could this word mean?]

Student: Que asustó... [That he scared…]

Teacher: Que alguien hizo algo, verdad? Que asustó al niño. Qué significa esta palabra? Una travesura? Diego? [That someone did something, right? That he scared the boy. What does this word mean? A prank? Diego?]

Student: Que, que, cuando venga un niño y tú haces... [That, that, when a boy comes and you do…]

Teacher: Como hacer una maldad o una broma? [Like doing a bad thing or a joke?]

Student: Y tirarlo en el piso. [And throw it on the ground.]

Teacher: **Ok**. Qué más? Qué significa esta palabra? [**Okay**. What else. What does this word mean?]

Student: *(inaudible)*

Teacher: Como tirar una piedra o algo así, verdad? Es una travesura? Sí. [Like throwing a rock on the ground or something like that, right? That's a prank. Yes.]

Task-Oriented Discourse

Thus far it is very clear through research and numerous examples that *okay* can either function as a framing marker, a comprehension check, an affirmative releasing marker, or a negative releasing marker in classroom discourse and other various settings, but how does it

function in task-oriented discourse? Task-oriented discourse is different from most other forms of discourse because the focus of consciousness is so strongly directed at the task at hand; nearly everything is in the immediate mode. Still, regardless of the different aspects of task-oriented discourse, *okay* is used quite often, maybe even more so than in other types of discourse.

After carefully analyzing a short piece of discourse from a 26 minute conversation between a husband and wife performing a seemingly simple task, I noted that *okay* was one of the most repeated words in the conversation. In the 2 minutes and 52 seconds that I analyzed this husband and wife team used *okay* 24 times, although not equally. The husband (player) used it 21 times, while his wife (the coach and one that should have been doing most of the talking) used it only 3 times.

From my analysis I found that in task-oriented discourse the uses of *okay* can be grouped into the same four functions, although they may not fit perfectly. It was hard to classify some of the uses of *okay* into the very neatly defined groups of framing marker, tag-position comprehension check, affirmative releasing marker, and negative releasing marker because unlike the classroom discourse where the teacher was the one always using the *okay*, the conversation I analyzed had two people constantly talking back and forth and many times at the same time.   Something that may have to be taken into account also is that although there are "rules" about the functions of *okay,* this couple did not necessarily follow them. For example an *okay* may have been said to function as a framing marker by one but the other chose to ignore it and kept talking about that same subject. The same is true of affirmative and negative releasing markers; although they signal that the other person does not need to take any type of action— verbal or physical—at times they still did. I don't believe that this would be the case in all task-oriented discourses, but is something that may be unique to this couple because of their

personalities. To further support this idea more research would have to be done with other people involved in task-oriented discourse.

The same was found in the task-oriented discourse data as was found in the data from the classroom discourse as far as the framing marker function being the most used. Of the 24 uses of *okay,* 16 were used as framing markers, which is almost two-thirds of the time. The following are some examples of the *okay* functioning as a framing marker in my task-oriented data:

Husband: **Okay** Snoopy's standin' on top of the skateboard.
Wife: Yeah.
Husband: Okay. **Okay** the music. Who's singing? (the first okay is used as an affirmative releasing marker)

Husband: That's his left hand.
Wife: That's what I said! Quit being arrogant (said with laughter and followed by an undistinguishable murmur).
Husband: You said it and I thought-- **Okay** fine. Now what?

In the classroom discourse the tag-positioned comprehension check was the second most commonly used, along side the affirmative releasing marker, although not having nearly as many as the framing marker. Since the framing marker was used the majority of the time in the task-oriented discourse the other three functions were used a minimal amount of times. Out of the 24 uses of *okay* only 2 were used as a comprehension check; once by the husband and once by the wife. The variance in this is probably due to the fact that they were not "teaching" anything as was the case in the classroom discourse, so there was not such a need to check for comprehension. As in the classroom discourse data the comprehension checks were accompanied by a rising intonation. The following are the two examples of the *okay* function as comprehension checks in the data:

Husband: Left hand. It's behind him.
Wife: No. It's in front, but that doesn't matter…

Husband: That's his right hand. Okay it's in front of him. He's holdin' it?
Wife: Yeah he's holdin' it in his left hand, which is your right.
Husband: No. See you don't know which hand is which**. Okay?**

Husband: What is the angle? Hundred eighty degrees:
Wife: We aren't allowed to describe it. We're just supposed to talk. It's umm. Okay. It's on backwards. **Okay?**

The third function of *okay*, the affirmative releasing marker, is the second most commonly used in the task-oriented discourse, but as was mentioned before the rules are not always followed. Sometimes the other person would proceed to talk even though the signal not to talk was given. Of the 24 uses of *okay,* 5 were used as affirmative releasing markers, all used by the husband.   The following are examples from the data of the *okay* functioning as an affirmative releasing marker:

Wife: Well yeah, I guess unless you were standing… well it doesn't matter just put it in that hand—the one under his ear.
Husband: (while wife is talking) Okay Karen I want ya… (this *okay* is used as a framing marker but then once she finishes what she is saying he goes back to what she was saying by adding an affirmative releasing marker)
           Okay under the ear.
Wife: The one under the ear.

Wife: Put it in Snoopy's left hand.
Husband: **Okay**.
Wife: And then…
Husband: Left hand. It's behind him…

The second example is an instance of the husband and wife team not following the "rules" of the *okay*. When the husband said *okay*, he had intended for his wife to stop speaking as indicated by the fact that when she spoke he continued with what he was saying. It is good to remember that because of their personalities it is probably not safe to use their behavior to make a generalization of all task-oriented discourse.

The last function of the *okay,* the negative releasing marker is the least commonly used in classroom discourse and also task-oriented discourse. In the data I analyzed, of the 24 uses of *okay,* only 1 was used as a negative releasing marker and the following shows how it was used:

> Husband: Is the line ninety degrees?
> Wife: (indistinguishable murmur)
> Husband: Hundred and eighty?
> Wife: five or ten degrees…
> Husband: A hundred eighty is a straight line, parallel with the horizon.
> Wife: Well it depends on which way you look at it, doesn't it?
> Husband: No.
> Wife: **Okay**. It's at a hundred and seventy degrees.

Related Linguistic Features

Malcolm Coulthard in his article *Advances in Spoken Discourse Analysis* (1992) discusses the key choices available in discourse, which have a similar function to some of the functions of *okay.* There are three key choices, which are high key, mid key, and low key. Key choices are made and recognized with reference to the key of the immediately preceding tone unit. As with the different functions of *okay* when using key choices one is asking for a specific response. For example, when one uses *okay* as a framing marker he is signaling that it is time to move to a new topic. This can also be done by using the high key, which also marks the beginning of a new topic. Similarly, when using *okay* as an affirmative releasing marker one is acknowledging approval of what has just been said and releasing the other person from the obligation to take further action, whether verbal or physical. This plays a similar role when one uses the low key, which does not add any new information, but instead verbalizes agreement. The mid key is used to show what will follow is additively related or topically linked with what has just been said and therefore does not function in the same way as any of the functions of *okay.*

Conclusion

Whether it is in classroom discourse, telephone discourse, task-oriented discourse, service related discourse, or discourse of any other type *okay* plays an important role. It is evident from research that *okay* can function in four primary ways and they are the framing marker, tag-positioned comprehension check, affirmative releasing marker, and the negative releasing marker. In both classroom discourse and task-oriented discourse the framing marker, signaling a new topic, is the most common use of *okay* and this same function can be brought about through the use of the high key. The tag-positioned comprehension check and the affirmative releasing marker proved to be secondarily common in both classroom discourse and task-oriented discourse. One can also accomplish the same function of the affirmative releasing marker by using the low key. The last function of *okay*, the negative releasing marker, proved to be the least common use of *okay* in both the classroom discourse and task-oriented discourse and there is no equivalent function of this seen elsewhere in discourse.

In conclusion it is fair to say that the functions of *okay* found to be prominent by researcher Broderick in bilingual classroom discourse are strongly supported by the analysis of the uses of *okay* in task-oriented discourse.

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