
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Conversations in Live Streaming Selling: A Case Study in China

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ABSTRACT

As a new emergence of commercial activities, live streaming selling, which shares the characteristics of both live streaming and online shopping, has been developing rapidly with the prosperity of the Internet and the pervasive use of mobile electronic devices in recent years in China. Given that the consumption in live streaming selling is stimulated by the real-time interaction between live streamers (online sellers) and customers to a great extent, how live streamers construct their conversations in order to attract the audience and hold on to potential customers arouses research interests from linguists. To answer the call for more research on live streaming selling and to enrich the body of studies on discourse other than English, the present study aims at examining how trouble sources in live streaming conversations were taken advantage of to attract the audience as well as how sequences of speech were taken to emphasize the essential purpose of live streaming. The case study is based on the conversations between Li Jiaqi, the top live streamer in China, and Jin Jing, his guest, during a session of live streaming selling. The analysis reveals that a) different forms of repair were initiated skillfully by the two live streamers to create humor to attract more audience, and b) strategies of turn-taking were used smartly to get the topic back on the track of selling.

KEYWORDS

Conversation analysis, Live streaming selling, Case study, Repair, Overlap

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1. Introduction

Live Streaming Commerce is a new mode of commercial activity that combines characteristics of both live streaming and online shopping, developing rapidly with the advancement of the Internet and ubiquitous usage of mobile devices (Kang et al., 2021). Currently, some social commerce ("s-commerce") and electronic commerce ("e-commerce") sites such as Facebook and Taobao provide live video streaming services for not only brands but also individuals to broadcast marketing activities and advertise in real time to sell products (Wongkitrungrueng and Assarut, 2020). Unlike TV shopping programs, live streaming selling has the nature of enabling sellers to demonstrate different facets of products to online customers actively in a relatively natural way, which is usually achieved by embedding advertisements of products into natural interactions between two sellers in the same live streaming room. Therefore, the conversation constructed under this context is "more or less natural conversation" (Adams, 1980: p.1) but still endowed with its own discourse characteristics, which deserves more attention and analysis from the linguistic field.

Drawing on literature in conversation analysis and environmental psychology, in response to the call for more academic research on the phenomenon of live streaming selling by many big companies, such as Alibaba and Tencent (AliResearch, 2020), this paper aims to uncover how live streamers' conversations are co-constructed and sequentially organized in order to achieve their commercial purposes, with the case of Li Jiaqi, the top online seller in China who accomplished the total sales volume reached 10 billion yuan on the "double eleven" day in 2021, and Jin Jing's sixth live streaming selling via Taobao Live, from the perspective of Conversation Analysis focusing on repairs and overlaps in their interactions, hoping to enrich the research of conversation analysis on live streaming discourse based on languages other than English.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overlap and Repair

Prior research on overlap in the conversation has identified different reasons why overlap occurs in daily discourse. Before what Sidnell (2010) concluded, Shriberg et al. (2001) conducted quantitative observations on the distribution of overlapping speech in natural multi-party conversations, including meetings and telephone conversations, and found out that overlaps in these contexts were usually caused by recognition systems and did not occur in random locations, but rather associated with some hidden events. Ma (2014) argued that overlap was just a special form of discourse, which she called “shared conversational right”. In her opinion, there are three reasons for overlap: a) the overlap caused by the listener interrupting the speaker forcibly, b) the misjudgment of transition-relevance place, and 3) the overlap caused by two or more people simultaneously speaking. Thereby, the right to speak was transferred from one party to the other and from one party to many parties, leading to two or more people exercising their right to speak at the same time, forming an overlapping phenomenon.

In terms of repair in conversation, the cause of repair appears to be extensive. In addition to correcting mistakes, it also includes eliminating misunderstandings and clarifying misinformation. It concerns almost all the problems that need to be repeated and dealt with again. According to Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977), the repair is a process of dealing with troubles that hinder communication in interaction in terms of hearing, speaking, and understanding problems. And more recent research explores not only what repair is and why repair occurs but also how the repair is initiated. Laakso and Sorjonen (2010) examined the means of how self-repair was initiated in the Finnish context and found that both non-lexical and lexical devices were used for self-repair initiation, among which the prosodic cut-off and particles were focused.

2.2 Discourse of Live-streaming Commerce

Based on the fact that live streaming commerce is a newborn mode of online shopping and has prospered mainly in Asia in recent years, research revolving around this phenomenon was mainly from the perspectives of consumer psychology and behavior (e.g., Basso et al., 2001; Lv et al., 2018; Chen and Lin, 2018; Wongkitrungrueng and Assarut, 2020; Kang et al., 2021), or retailing (e.g., Weathers et al., 2007), while only a few conducted through the perspective of Conversation Analysis to explore the discourse of live streaming commerce. This paper thereby was conducted trying to fill the research gap and enrich CA studies on live streaming discourse.

3. Data and Methodology

The episodes examined in this paper were extracted from a 42-minute video recording of Li Jiaqi and Jin Jing’s sixth live streaming sale via the platform of Taobao Live. Due to the fact that live streaming on the Taobao platform is open to the public and video recordings of each live streaming are officially accessible, consent for using the video recording as research data was not required. Li Jiaqi and Jin Jing are both native Chinese speakers, and Mandarin was used as the lingua franca in their live streaming selling. Excerpts were selected from two different phases of selling: before selling and while selling, with their richness in representing how the two live streamers constructed their sequences technically and collaboratively in order to create positive stimuli to customers in both phases so that their commercial purposes could be achieved. The selection of excerpts was made by the investigators after the complete video recording was examined in detail.

Data were transcribed manually in accordance with conventions of Conversation Analysis (Hepburn and Bolden, 2013). Given the nature of non-English data, pinyin, English word-by-word translation, and natural English translation were all provided with the purpose of facilitating the understanding of readers who are not native speakers of Chinese.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Repair in Conversations

4.1.1 Analysis

Excerpt 1 was extracted at the “before-selling” stage of the live streaming when the selling hadn’t really started. Li and Jin were talking about the variety show named “Let’s get married” that Jin was going to attend. In excerpt 1, we analyzed how the trouble source – “let’s get married,” was generated in the conversation and what different strategies of repair the two online sellers used to create humor to attract more audience.

Excerpt 1

1 de shiqing
COP NOT MYSELF FP, ANYWAY, IS MY ONE VERY IMPORTANT COP SHOW. FP. DO SOMETHING I WANT
COP DO.

It's not my own! Anyway, it is a very important show for me, to do something I want to do.

2 L : >jushi women jiehun ba<

IT IS LET'S GET MARRIED FP.

Which is, let's get married.

3 (0.7)

4 (The laughter of many people)

5 L : >jiushi jiemu< WO BUSHI WO SHUO NAGE JIEMU† Jiaozuo

6 jiehun ba nazhilei de huozhe shi jiushi(hhhmhhhh)

IT'S SHOW, I'M NOT, I MEAN THAT SHOW CALL MARRIED FP SOMETHING FP OR IS COP

It's the show! I'm not... I said that show is called "Let's get married" or something like that!

7 J : bushi shuo le† [bugaosu bieren ma? (hhhmhhh)

WASN'T SAY COP DON'T TELL OTHERS.

I told you that I am still not prepared to announce this.

8 L : [>bushi< (hhhmhhh)

NO

It is not like that!

9 L : ni buyao [LUANSHUO†

YOU DON'T TALK NONSENSE!

Don't talk nonsense!

10 J : (hhmh)(meiyou meiyou EI

NO NO FP

No no.

11 L : buyao LUANSHUO†

DON'T TALK NONSENSE

Don't talk nonsense!

12 J : bixu chengqing yixia (.wo gen lijiaqi xiansheng

MUST CLARIFIED COP, I AND MR.LI JIAQI

It must be clarified that Mr. Li Jiaqi and I

13 L : meiyou RENHE guanxi [jiushi hao pengyou

DON'T HAVE ANY RELATIONSHIP, JUST. GOOD FRIEND.

We don't have any romantic relationship. We're just good friends.

14 J : =[zhishi TA

JUST HIM

It's just him.

15 J : =zhishi ta danfangmian (hhmh)

JUST HIM UNILATERALLY

It's just his one-sided love to me.

16 J : >zhende zhende meiyou† dajia ne†

REALLY REALLY NOT, EVERYONE FP

We are definitely not lovers to each other, guys.

17 J : wozhidao dajia(.) [jiushi yizhi (hhmh) .hhh

I KNOW EVERYONE, IT IS ALWAYS

I know everyone is always

18 L : [hui-hui- (hhmh)

WILL WILL

will will

19 J : .hhh zhen zhende zhende meiyou ei zenme yixiazi dajia dou

20 yongguolai le, wo dou youdian lianhong. [Women

21 ZHWNSWESHI(.) zhende jiushi haopengyou eryl. °en hao°

22 shuowan(hhhmh)

REALLY REALLY REALLY NOTHING, FP WHY SUDDENLY EVERYONE ALL RUSH OVER FP, I COP A LITTLE BIT

BLUSH. WE

REALLY REALLY. JUST GOOD FRIENDS. FP, OK.

FINISHED.

It isn't like that... why is everyone flocking over all of a sudden? I'm too shy... We are really really just good friends, right? OK, I'm finished

In line 2, when projected Jin Jing's completion, which entailed new information that she was going to participate in a very important show for herself, Li Jiaqi then took the turn and extended the sequence by giving his idea about the name of the show ">jiushi women jiehun ba<" (Let's get married), which was a trouble source that could cause great misunderstanding. As a result, following a noticeable pause (line 3), the laughter made by the staff in the same room burst (line 4), from which Li Jiaqi realized that what he said really led to a misunderstanding here. Being hurried, he initiated his repair by saying "jiushi jiemu" (It's the show), trying to clarify that what he meant here was just the name of the show, rather than proposing to Jin Jing as everyone thought. Li Jiaqi's self-initiated self-repair here seems to be the end of this little accident; however, what Jin Jing responded made the situation interesting.

Despite being shocked by Li Jiaqi's speech, beyond everyone's expectation, Jin Jing ignored Li Jiaqi's repair but tried to affirm the trouble source, "bushi shuo le? [bugaosu bieren ma? (hhhhmhhh)]" (I told you that I am still not prepared to announce this), causing even greater misunderstanding to everyone. Apart from Li Jiaqi's rising tone and much louder volume, we also see his efforts correcting the misunderstanding directly from his repetition of "ni buyao [LUANSHUO]" (Don't talk nonsense). Following a pre-turn (line 10), it seems like Jin Jing was finally going to initiate her repair by saying, "bixu chengqing yixia, wo he Li Jiaqi xiansheng" (It must be clarified that me and Mr. Li Jiaqi). And Li Jiaqi also projected what might come out in Jin Jing's next sequence, so he caught the turn by speaking out his recognitional response "meiyou renhe guanxi" (We don't have any romantic relationship). But then, Jin Jing didn't give up on this punchline by aligning Li Jiaqi, rather, saying "=zhishi ta danfangmian" (It's just his one-sided love to me). What Jin Jing meant here was that Li Jiaqi had a one-sided love for her, causing another round of misunderstanding. In the end, Jinjing finally explained that "zhende jiushi haopengyou er yi." (We are really just good friends) to clarify their relationship. Therefore, Jin Jing's delayed other-initiated self-repair finally appeared.

4.1.2 Humor Created by Repair

Different from being stimulated by face-to-face interactions with service personnel in real world shopping environment (Park and Kim, 2003), the shopping behavior done by customers in Li Jiaqi and Jin Jing's live streaming was more likely to be stimulated by the language environment constructed by Li and Jin's interactions due to the nature of live streaming selling. According to Mehrabian and Russell's S-O-R model (1974), stimuli (S) contained in the shopping environment affect organisms (consumers; O) internally and emotionally and then lead to the approach or avoidance response (R) of consumers (Peng and Kim, 2014). Combining this model with the case of Li Jiaqi and Jin Jing's live streaming selling, it is clear that conversations co-constructed and sequentially organized by Li and Jin acted as stimuli to customers engaged in the live streaming, causing changes in customers' internal and emotional states. Resulting from customers' approach response, which is, buying products in the live streaming, detergent products by Liby were sold out very quickly, and Li and Jin's commercial purposes were achieved in this way.

According to the data that have been examined, the means by which Li and Jin repaired the trouble source "women jiehun ba" (Let's get married, see line 2) were distinct and deserved more discussion. Although we know from Li and Jin's chatting at the beginning that the live streaming did have been briefly planned in terms of the selling procedures and time management, this situation that happened at the before-selling stage was clearly natural and unexpected. As the party who generated the trouble source and the host of the live streaming as well, Li initiated his repair as soon as he recognized the probable misunderstanding caused by his previous turn, trying to maintain his reputation and clarify the actual relationship with Jin as friends. In contrast, Jin's response, which confirmed the trouble source, was even more unexpected, thereby leading to a dramatic reverse and causing a sense of humor. Then, a more interesting scenario happened. When Jin initiated a new turn, "wo he Lijiaqi xiansheng" (Me and Mr. Li Jiaqi, see line 12), followed by a noticeable protracted space, a hint seemed to be sent to Li that he should take the turn to continue the explanation of their relationship. As a good cooperater, Li did project the coming of Jin's delayed repair and caught the turn to continue the clarification of their relationship again, "meiyou renhe guanxi" (don't have any romantic relationship", see line 13). However, Jin's repair "zhishi ta danfangmian" (just his one-sided love, see line 15) in the next turn did correct the first trouble source, conveying the fact that "we are not married", but also generated another trouble source at the same time, that "but he is in love with me", which caused a new round of humor to the audience, amplifying the hedonic motivation (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003) consumers received in the live streaming shopping. Different from the unnatural and awkward way humor was displayed in TV shopping programs, in which speech of hosts have been well-planned and rehearsed, the authenticity of humorous conversations that are flexibly co-constructed by Li and Jin's interaction in the live streaming causes the audience' maintenance of concentration and interest (Chen and Lin, 2018), which contributes greatly to the approach response they made.

4.2 Turn-taking in Conversations

4.2.1 Analysis

Excerpts 2 to 4 were extracted at the "while-selling" stage of the live streaming. Li and Jin were introducing the main product they sold – laundry detergent pods by Liby. Being the brand ambassador of Liby, Jin was invited to be the guest in Li's live streaming to advertise the product. As the principal seller of the live streaming, Li was professional and responsible for introducing the

product in detail and encouraging potential customers to buy the product. In the chosen excerpts, we focus on how the sequences in their conversations were co-constructed in order to push the selling forward.

Excerpt 2

1 L: [SuoYi:, keyi ba:ng ni changxiao Yijun >de tongshi youxiao

2 zu<MA:N,

SO, CAN HELP YOU LONGTIME ANTIBACTERIAL COP SAMETIME EFFECTIVELY ANTIACARID

It can effectively protect you from bacteria and acarid for a long time.

3 L: Jiushi rang Manchong(.)ye buyao qinshi nide pi[fu

COP LET ACARID ALSO NOTTO ERODE YOUR SKIN

Which is to say, acarid will be kept away from your skin.

4 J: [=dui,[shide

YES YES

Yes, yes.

5 L: [=yinwei

BECAUSE

Because

6 XIAtian >le ma, dajia chuande yiwu<(.)jiushi dou bijiaode 87 tieshen le

SUMMER COME EVERYBODY WEAR CLOTHS COP ALL RELATIVELY NEXTTOSKIN FP

summer is coming, people prefer to wear next-to-skin clothes.

7 J: =Shi[de,

YES

Yes.

8 L: [Suoyi< wome:n zai >xiyifu de shihou< Yiding yao zhuyi

SO WE WHEN WASHCLOTHES COP MOMENT CERTAINLY NEED PAYATTENTION

Therefore, we should pay more attention to this aspect when washing clothes.

Excerpt 3

9 J: =xiangwei Fe:ichang Fe:ichang[de haowen

FRAGRANCE VERY VERY COP SMELL_GOOD

It smells very good.

10 L: [shi:de].

YES

Yes.

11 J: =yinwei tamen sangeren =ta yinwei(.) you (.) Sa:ng

12 gongxiao dou zailimi[an,

BECAUSE THEY THREE_PEOPLE =IT BECAUSE HAVE THREE FUNCTIONS ALL INSIDE

Because these three people, because it, it has three functions in one.

13 L: [=Shi

YES

Yes.

The main purpose of the conversation between the moderators was no longer warming up or free chat; instead, it was to introduce the product to the audience and sell it. The conversation was thereby not only between the two presenters but also between the party of presenters and the party of the audience. Thus, the structure of conversation at the “while selling” stage demonstrated distinctive features from the small talks at the “before selling” stage. Here we focus on the overlaps that occurred at this stage and divide them into two types: incidental overlaps, which are mostly seen in intensified supporting discourse, and intentional overlaps with the aim of emphasizing the theme or holding the turn-taking.

When Li and Jin got to the point and started to introduce laundry detergent pods, a lot of overlaps occurred in a specific pattern, as shown in excerpts 2 and 3. According to Yu (2003)’s understanding of “intensified supportive discourse”, it refers to a type of verbal feedback given by the listener with the aim of helping the current speaker to complete his or her speech and discourse turn and also giving supportive feedback on the information or ideas provided by the current speaker, but without the aim of taking turns (e.g., the turn taken by the next speaker when the previous one has completed his/her speech). As we see in excerpt 2, in response to Li’s introduction of the function of the product, Jin showed her high supportiveness by saying intensified supportive responses like “dui” (Yes) and “shide” (Right), both of which express a sense of agreement, as soon as she had projected Li’s completion. Such supportive discourse also occurred when Jin took the turn to introduce the product, as shown in excerpt 3. When

Jin expressed her praises for the fragrance and effectiveness of the product, Li Jiaqi said “shide” (Yes) in line 7 and “shi” (yes) in line 10, which were overlapped by Jin’s speech.

The significance of the intensified supportive discourse we discuss here may be better understood if we refer to the concept of Chinese crosstalk, which is a traditional Chinese form of stand-up comedy, including the provoke, who is the main joker, and the straight man, acting as a non-principal speaker in the performance, speaking very briefly but playing an important role in maintaining turn-taking and making the conversation more coherent and intimate. In such comedies, the discourse is usually well-planned in order to ensure the high-quality consistency of supportiveness, which is different from what we observe in Li and Jin’s conversation. The conversation between Li and Jin was real-time without preparation before; some of the supportive discourse may therefore be overlapped. For example, the “dui” (Yes) in line 4, “shide” (Right) in line 10, and “shi” (Yes) in line 13 were attributive to turn-recognitional overlap, which were produced based on the listener’s recognition of completion of the current speaker’s speech, while the “shide” in line 7 could be explained by turn-initial overlap which was caused by the previous speaker’s continued talk.

Excerpt 4

14 wan le .hhh wo gaosu ni JINTIAN LIBAI.

RUSH PURCHASE, DO NOT HESITATE, YOU COP CALCULATE COP TIME, .hhh LINK ALREADY ON FP, .hhh ALREADY PURCHASE FINISH FP, .hhh I TELL YOU TODAY LIBY

Hurry up. Never hesitate. While you are still calculating the discount, the link has already been uploaded. Already sold out! I tell you, today, Liby-

15 J: ta ZUI-ZUI-[(0.6)] zui [hemm::heh hhh.

IT MOST-MOST- [(0.6)] MOST

It is most- most- most

16 L: [°xu::°] [ZAI: SONG:]=

SHH ALSO SEND

Shh-- extra free gifts

17 L: =[yishiwu ke liuxiangzhu gei dajia, (0.4) haobuhao=

FIFTEEN PIECES IN-WASH_SCENT_BOOSTER_BEADS FOR YOU, (0.4) ALRIGHT

Which are fifteen scented-booster beads will be provided, alright?

Another purpose of the intentional overlap in Li and Jin’s conversation is for holding the turn-taking. As a professional seller, Li was clearly aware of his responsibility in the live streaming – to introduce and sell. Therefore, when he realized that the topic was about to be switched, he took the turn actively by interrupting Jin’s speech deliberately with the sound “shh” while Jin hadn’t completed her turn so that the focus of the conversation was changed back to the introduction and advertisement to the product.

4.2.2 Commercial Purposes Achieved by Turn-taking

Talking about keeping the audience’s concentration and interest, another strategy Li and Jin applied in their live streaming was to make their advertisement as intensive and fluent as possible. By inserting short affirmatives intensively in their turn-taking, such as “correct”, “right”, and “exactly,” to their partner’s introduction of products skillfully and frequently, consumers’ online shopping uncertainty regarding the product or the firm they are tackling with (Pavlou et al., 2007, cited in Lv et al., 2018) was reduced, and their trust towards sellers and products was therefore enhanced. In this way, customers’ approach response was preferred so that Li and Jin’s commercial purposes were finally achieved.

5. Conclusion

The present study aims at exploring how the speakers interacted with each other linguistically in order to co-construct a consumption-approaching shopping environment in live streaming selling through the lens of conversation analysis. A detailed depiction of the conversations between Li Jiaqi, the top online seller based on the channel of live streaming in China, and Jin Jing, his guest in the live streaming, was conducted. Data analysis in the study focusing on repair and overlaps has revealed that a) in Excerpt 1, the trouble source – “Let’s get married,” was treated and repaired skillfully by the two sellers so that a humorous and active environment was built to maintain the current audience and attract more potential online customers before the actual start of selling; b) in Excerpt 2 to 4, the intensified supportiveness for eliminating customers’ uncertainty of the advertised product was created by a specific pattern of incidental overlaps demonstrated in the interactions between the two live streamers, and the purpose of keeping the selling forward was re-emphasized through the intentional overlap acted by the main seller at the “while-selling” stage. As a result, their conversational strategies functioned well, as shown by the considerable volume of sales they created in that session of live streaming and the high popularity they enjoyed after that.

To conclude, the close examination of the sequential organization of Li Jiaqi and Jin Jing's interactions in their live streaming selling contributes to uncovering the conversational characteristics of the discourse in live streaming selling, an understudied field that deserves more attention and empirical research. Moreover, this study enriches the body of research on the analysis of discourses using languages other than English. Meanwhile, it has to be acknowledged that the limited case selected and the unitary lens through which the analysis was conducted lead to the main limitations of the current research. Future studies, thereby, are expected to conduct a detailed analysis of real-time cases covering more conversations of live streaming selling in other countries or using other languages, and dimensions other than repair and overlaps are also suggested to be scrutinized.

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