

## Original Paper

# Analysis of Conversational Repair in the Symmetrical and Asymmetrical Friendships: The Big Bang Theory as an example

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### Abstract

*The language people use could form an important part of their sense of who they are or their identities. This research aims to describe pragmatic features and conversational repair strategies employed in dialogues characterized by symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the study analyzes dialogues from the English sitcom The Big Bang Theory, specifically focusing on interactions between Sheldon and Penny (symmetrical relationship) and between Sheldon and Leonard (asymmetrical relationship). The findings reveal distinct patterns in conversational repair strategies across relationship types. In a symmetrical friendship, both self-repair and other-repair strategies are implemented to resolve conversational difficulties. Conversely, in an asymmetrical friendship, self-repair strategies are exclusively employed when the higher-status individual commits verbal errors. Furthermore, the study identifies specific attendant activities accompanying repair processes: apologies and instructions follow corrections in a symmetrical friendship, while compromise and complaints characterize repair sequence in an asymmetrical friendship. This research highlights the significance of employing appropriate conversational repair in daily communication across diverse interpersonal relationships, demonstrating how diverse repair strategies are used in different relationships to smooth the communication and maintain relationship dynamics.*

### Keywords

*conversational repair, symmetrical relationships, asymmetrical relationships, friendships, The Big Bang Theory*

## 1. Introduction

In daily communications, conversations frequently encounters various challenges, as conversations rarely proceed without disruption. Interlocutors commonly face difficulties in hearing, speaking, and understanding, necessitating the implementation of repair mechanism to maintain conversational flow.

Conversational repair, a crucial part of Conversational Analysis (CA), focuses on the repair mechanism. Extensive research has revealed multiple significant aspects of repair mechanisms, with scholars such as Sidnell (2010) demonstrating various repair initiation methods and their crucial role in maintaining intersubjectivity. However, the function of conversational repair in constructing and maintaining the speakers' and hearers' identities and authority has received limited attention, particularly within the context of symmetrical and asymmetrical social relationships and friendships. Understanding how social relationships influence repair strategies is crucial for selecting appropriate conversational repair strategies to avoid impoliteness and face-threatening situations in diverse social interactions.

Therefore, to address this research gap, this study analyzes dialogues from *The Big Bang Theory*, specifically examining interactions between Penny and Sheldon (symmetrical friendship) and between Leonard and Sheldon (asymmetrical friendship), to investigate the deployment of conversational repair strategies across different relationship dynamics.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Conversational Repair

It is evident that individuals often face challenges in turn-taking, hearing, or understanding during conversations. When such difficulties arise, conversationalists resort to a repair mechanism to signal trouble and restore mutual understanding to signal trouble and restore mutual understanding (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977; Egbert & Keating, 2011). The concept of repair, as an analytical tool, is integral to Conversational Analysis (CA) (Sacks, 1984; Schegloff, 1979, 1992; Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977), encompassing the correction of one's own speech or that of others. Schegloff et al. (1977) proposed a typological amplification via the replacement of "correction" with "repair", re-specified the distinction between "self-" and "other-" initiated, and proposed an "organization" for almost every instance of repair. Levinson (1983) describes repair as a modification suggested or made by the speaker, addressee, or audience to correct or clarify a prior part of the conversation. Sidnell (2010) defines repair as an organized set of practices through which participants in the conversation are able to address and potentially resolve such problems of speaking, hearing, or understanding. Repair can be initiated and executed by either the speaker or the hearer. Thus, conversational repairs can be classified into four types: self-initiated self-repair, other-initiated self-repair, self-initiated other-repair, and other-initiated other-repair. The talk typically indicates self-initiated repair by perturbations, hitches, and cut-offs (Sidnell, 2010). Besides, such repair is generally done in the same turn as the trouble source or in the transition space. According to Sidnell (2010), the major forms of other-initiation include open-class initiators such as "what?" and "huh?", question words such as "who?", "where?" and "when?", a repetition without any question word and the structure "y'mean".

Historically, conversational repair practices have been analyzed from psycholinguistic, applied linguistics, and pragmatic perspectives. Levelt (1983) defines three self-repair types: instant repair, anticipatory retracting, and fresh starts. Based on the three types of repair, Carroll (2011) proposed the

initiation techniques and analyzed the speakers' psychological mechanisms. Li, Peng, and Zheng (2022) investigated the role of conversational expansion in children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as a mediator between the mother's descriptive language and children's conversational repair strategies. Morgenstern et al. (2013) examined pragmatic abilities and the acquisition of self-repairs and other-repairs in children-adult interaction. Within CA literature, considerable work has focused on the face-threatening dimensions of "other repair" and other pragmatic functions such as advice-giving and politeness practices (Razfar, 2005). Jefferson (1987) considers repair as a vehicle for action, accompanied by a series of attendant activities. More recently, scholars have paid more interest in connecting CA with issues related to power, epistemic authority, identity, and ideology (e.g., Kim, 1993; Bamberg, 2000a, 2000b; Liebscher & Dailey-O'Cain, 2003; Egbert, 2004; Sidnell, 2005; Zhao & Huang, 2025). Egbert (2004) found that in the context of other-initiated repair, a coparticipant participates in a collaborative process to assign membership to him/herself or to other coparticipants, in which membership categorizing can be assigned, rejected, and insisted upon. Wang (2011) made an effort to find out the pragmatic reasons why conversation repair happens and how it will influence social relations by analyzing conversational repairs that occurred in the English sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. By combining critical frameworks with CA, researchers have explored repair practices within participation frames where speakers do not have equal access to the rights of initiating repair, especially "other repair" (Razfar, 2005). The phenomenon of social asymmetry and power dynamics inscribed in the practice of repair often arises in conversations between teachers and students, doctors and patients, judges and defendants, as well as between native and non-native speakers. Therefore, there are numerous studies focused on the use of conversational repair strategies in the context of classroom and court. In classroom interactions, students tend to favor more specific initiation techniques when communicating with the teacher, in an effort to avoid committing face-threatening acts that would seem inappropriate to their role in the classroom as listeners and learners (Liebscher & Dailey-O'Cain, 2003). Zhao and Huang (2025) emphasized the importance of considering the interpreter-initiated other-initiated self-repair (OISRs) as a shared responsibility to protect defendants' right to a fair trial in Chinese court within power dynamics. Although those studies enrich the understanding of conversational repair in relation to power, epistemic authority, identity, and ideology, most of them focus on the social asymmetry and power dynamics in classroom and courts and seldom consider the attendant activities followed by conversational repair. Therefore, the social asymmetry and power dynamics reflected in the practice of repair make it a fertile ground for analyzing conversational repair in the context of friendship and from an attendant activities perspective.

## 2.2 Symmetrical and Asymmetrical Relationships

Social relationships can be classified into various types, including personal, social, voluntary, involuntary, symmetrical and, asymmetrical relationships. ASCCC OERI (2023) defines symmetrical relationships as those where each person has approximately the same amount of power, while asymmetrical relationships involve one person having more power and enjoying conversational and

decision-making control than the other. Several studies have examined specific symmetric and asymmetric relationships such as leadership and couples. Glasø (2017) explored the symmetric and asymmetric relationships among specific kinds of leadership behavior, emotional reactions, and followers' attitudinal outcomes. Conversations are crucial for socialization practices, the production of identity and other social relationships, and constructions of authority (Egbert & Keating, 2011). It plays a vital role in establishing, maintaining, contesting, and analyzing cultural ideas and practices. Analyzing conversational repairs in symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships reveals how identity, relationship, and authority are constructed through dialogues.

### 2.3 Sitcom

The sitcom, short for "situation comedy", is a serialized comedic program where each episode revolves around a different situation. Nowadays, English situation comedy is top-rated around the world. In each different situation, there are the same characters who return from episode to episode. Researchers have carried out much research on sitcoms. Wang (2013) analyzed the personalities and relationships of the characters in *The Big Bang Theory* from the perspective of the turn-taking mechanism. Liu (2022) used *The Big Bang Theory* as an example to reveal how humor is formed in Western sitcoms, aiming to help the audience understand American humor.

*The Big Bang Theory* is an American sitcom which has twelve seasons. This sitcom has five main characters: two male scientists who are roommates, Leonard and Sheldon; Leonard's girlfriend, Penny; and their friends, Howard and Rajesh. Dialogues between characters with various relationships can provide substantial data for research on conversational repair.

In summary, conversational repair has been studied from psycholinguistic, applied linguistics, and pragmatic perspectives. Although researchers have focused on conversational repair in relation to power, epistemic authority, identity, and ideology, few have examined the features and attendant activities of conversational repair in the context of symmetrical and asymmetrical friendships. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the features of conversational repair that occur in the dialogues of symmetrical and asymmetrical friendships in *The Big Bang Theory*. Specifically, it addresses the following questions: What conversational repair strategies are respectively used in symmetrical and asymmetrical friendships? What attendant activities accompany these conversational repair strategies?

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Research Design

A qualitative methodology was adopted in this study to analyze dialogues between Leonard and Sheldon and between Penny and Sheldon concerning conversational repairs. In *The Big Bang Theory*, Sheldon, one of the main characters, strongly desires to control others, particularly reflected in his relationship with Leonard. Leonard, the roommate of Sheldon, has always been a people-pleaser due to the influence of his original family. Unlike Sheldon, Leonard always makes a compromise and bears more of Sheldon. Leonard is at a lower disadvantage when talking to Sheldon (Wang, 2013). Therefore,

the relationship between Leonard and Sheldon can be reckoned as asymmetrical, and their dialogues can serve as the data source for analyzing dialogues exchanged between individuals in asymmetrical relationships. Unlike Leonard, Penny knows how to refuse others and has the same amount of power as Sheldon. When Penny disagrees with Sheldon, she expresses her emotion in words, indicating that the position is also balanced in the sitcom (Wang, 2013). Therefore, the friendship between Penny and Sheldon is symmetrical. Their conversations can be utilized as the data source for the analysis of dialogues between individuals in symmetrical friendships.

### 3.2 Corpus of the Study

The corpus for this study encompassed the dialogues involving conversational repairs between Leonard and Sheldon and between Penny and Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory*. The dialogues were collected from the 24 episodes of the fourth season of *The Big Bang Theory* and the first 12 episodes of the eighth season of *The Big Bang Theory*.

### 3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

To precisely identify dialogues containing conversational repairs, the researcher employed a dual approach of reading scripts and watching videos. The research focused on excerpts from conversations involving repair phenomena, specifically from the 24 episodes of the fourth season and the first 12 episodes of the eighth season of *The Big Bang Theory*. Not all interactions among Penny, Sheldon, and Leonard were recorded, only those containing repairs. Initially, the researcher meticulously reviewed the scripts and videos multiple times to identify dialogues with conversational repairs. Subsequently, the collected data were verified for accuracy. In total, 24 instances of repair were identified: 12 between Penny and Sheldon and 12 between Leonard and Sheldon. These conversational repairs were then classified based on the maker of the trouble source and the four types of conversational repair strategies.

In the 12 conversations between Penny and Sheldon involving repairs, Penny made seven errors, utilizing all four types of conversational repair strategies. Sheldon made five errors, with the strategies employed being other-initiated self-repair and other-initiated other-repair. In the 12 conversations between Leonard and Sheldon, Leonard made six errors, employing self-initiated self-repair, other-initiated self-repair, and other-initiated other-repair. Conversely, Sheldon made six errors, using self-initiated self-repair and other-initiated self-repair. The distribution of repairs used by each character is shown as follows:

**Table 1. The Distribution of Collected Repairs for Each Character**

Maker of trouble sources	Conversational repair types	Frequency of samples
Penny	self/other-initiated self-repair	3
	self/other-initiated other-repair	4

Sheldon (talk with Penny)	other-initiated self-repair	1
	other-initiated other-repair	4
Leonard	self/other-initiated self-repair	2
	other-initiated other-repair	4
Sheldon (talk with Leonard)	self/other-initiated self-repair	6

#### 4. Result

The analysis of the collected data was grounded in Schegloff's (1977) theory of conversational repair. Although various dialogues among the three characters exhibited repair phenomena, not all samples were presented here. The researcher selected particularly representative samples for further analysis. This section first provides a descriptive analysis and samples, followed by contextual interpretations and related discussions of attendant activities occurring during repairs.

##### 4.1 Repair in the Conversations Involving Symmetrical Relationships

As previously noted, the relationship between Penny and Sheldon's can be deemed as symmetrical. The descriptive analysis of conversational repair is provided according to the maker of the trouble source.

##### 4.1.1 Repair in the Conversations when Penny Makes Errors

In the 12 conversations between Penny and Sheldon that involve repair, Penny made seven errors. The repairs include self-initiated self-repair, other-initiated self-repair, self-initiated other-repair, and other-initiated other-repair. Examples from the data are illustrated below:

##### Example 1 (self-initiated self-repair)

Penny: Look, Sheldon, before you race off to the fertility clinic, you might want to think about - uh, gee, I don't know - maybe actually spending some time with her.

Sheldon: You mean dating?

Penny: Yeah.

(S04E01)

Self-initiated repair is typically indicated by perturbations, hitches, and cut-offs in the talk (Sidnell, 2010). In this conversation, Penny intended to offer Sheldon some suggestions. However, she was unprepared to provide suggestions when she began talking. So she used "uh, gee" to initiate and repair the conversation.

##### Example 2 (other-initiated self-repair)

Penny: This is a big night for Sheldon. Right, Sheldon?

Sheldon: Big night? The winter solstice is a big night. It's over 14 hours in Southern California.

Amy: That's an amusing factoid.

Sheldon: Thank you.

Penny: No, no. My point is, uh, tonight is Sheldon's first official date. Discuss.

(S04E01)

When Penny said “a big night for Sheldon” and realized Sheldon misunderstood her meaning, she repaired the conversation. Sidnell (2010) proposed that one form of other-initiated could be a repetition without any question word. Sheldon’s repetition of “Big night?” promoted Penny to repair her statement with the phrase “My point is”. Therefore, this is an example of other-initiated self-repair.

Example 3 (self-initiated other-repair)

Penny: Oh, okay. Well I guess it’s just the two of us, huh?

Sheldon: Actually. It’s three of us.

(S04E16)

In this dialogue, Penny was uncertain whether she and Sheldon were alone at home. She expected Sheldon to affirm or repair her by using “huh?”. Then Sheldon repaired her with “actually”. Self-initiated other-repair exists in this conversation.

#### 4.1.2 Repair in the Conversations when Sheldon Makes Errors

Among Penny and Sheldon’s 12 conversations that involve conversational repairs, five errors are made by Sheldon. The other-initiated self-repair, and other-initiated other-repair strategies are used to repair Sheldon’s errors. Examples from the data are presented below:

Example 4 (other-initiated self-repair)

Penny: Okay, Sheldon. What can I get you?

Sheldon: Alcohol.

Penny: Could you be a little more specific?

Sheldon: 40 milliliters.

(S04E07)

In this conversation, Sheldon was sad and wanted to drink, so he went to the restaurant where Penny worked. When Penny asked what he wanted to drink, Sheldon gave a general answer to Penny. Then Penny used a question to encourage Sheldon to give more specific information about what kind of alcohol he wanted. In this example, other-initiated self-repair is used.

Example 5 (other-initiated other-repair)

Sheldon: If we work backward, correcting for observation bias and postulate an initial dating age of 15.

Penny: Whoa, wait, wait, wait. I did not start dating at 15.

Sheldon: I’m sorry. Sixteen?

Penny: Fourteen.

Sheldon: My mistake.

(S04E01)

This example involves other-initiated other-repair, where Sheldon incorrectly guessed Penny’s dating age. Penny used “whoa, wait, wait, wait” to initiate the repair, then she repaired Sheldon’s error and gave the right dating age.

#### 4.2 Repair in the Conversations Involving Asymmetrical Relationships

The relationship between Leonard and Sheldon is asymmetrical. In this relationship, Sheldon is the one

who has more power and enjoys conversational and decision-making control. The descriptive analysis of conversational repair in their dialogues is also organized respectively according to the maker of the trouble source.

#### 4.2.1 Repair in the Conversations when Leonard Makes Errors

Among Leonard and Sheldon's 12 conversations that involve conversational repairs, six errors are made by Leonard. Self-initiated self-repair, other-initiated self-repair, and other-initiated other-repair are used to repair Leonard's errors. The following samples are selected within the dialogues between Leonard and Sheldon:

##### Example 6 (self-initiated self-repair)

Leonard: Sheldon, why are you doing this?

Sheldon: It's my job.

Leonard: No, I-I mean, why are you going to so much trouble to prove that you're smarter than Wolowitz?

(S08E02)

The context of the conversation is that Howard took Sheldon's class, and Sheldon made an effort to prepare a lesson plan for Howard, which could intellectually emasculate Howard. Then, Leonard asked Sheldon why he did like this. However, Leonard's original speech led to Sheldon's misunderstanding. Leonard used "I mean" to initiate the repair of his previous speech. This sample is an example of self-initiated self-repair.

##### Example 7 (other-initiated self-repair)

Leonard: If future Biff goes back to 2015 right after he gives young Biff the almanac, he could get back to the 2015 with Marty and Doc in it. Because it wasn't until his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday that 1955 Biff placed his first bet.

Sheldon: Wait. Whoa, whoa. Is "placed" right?

Leonard: What do you mean?

Sheldon: Is "placed" the right tense for something that would ... from the future?

Leonard: Had will have placed?

(S08E05)

During a discussion about the film *Hot Tub Time Machine* whose timeline was complicated, Leonard's use of "placed" prompted Sheldon to question the tense. Therefore, he reminded Leonard to correct his grammar through words "wait, whoa, whoa" and a question. Then, Leonard corrected his grammar mistakes under Sheldon's guidance. The repair strategy used in this example is other-initiated self-repair.

##### Example 8 (other-initiated other-repair)

Leonard: You're clearly upset about Amy being gone, and you're trying to replace her with a bunch of cats.

Sheldon: Clowder.



Leonard: What?

Sheldon: A group of cats is a clowder. Or a glaring.

Leonard: Okay, yeah, fine.

(S04E03)

In this dialogue, when Sheldon realized Leonard used the wrong quantifier to describe cats, he corrected Leonard's mistake. This conversation is an example of other-initiated other-repair.

#### 4.2.2 Repair in the Conversations When Sheldon Makes Errors

Among Leonard and Sheldon's 12 conversations that involve conversational repairs, six errors are made by Sheldon. The types of conversational repair used are self-initiated self-repair and other-initiated self-repair. The samples below are chosen as examples:

##### Example 9 (self-initiated self-repair)

Sheldon: I wasn't making a joke, I was merely stating a fact. Amy and I have a superior relationship to yours.

Leonard: You don't honestly think that, do you?

Sheldon: Y...Leonard, I assume you knew.

(S08E03)

In this conversation, Sheldon used the cut-off to initiate his repair of the speech, exemplifying self-initiated self-repair.

##### Example 10 (other-initiated self-repair)

Sheldon: Marty and Doc never brought the time machine...

Leonard: W-Wait. Is "brought" right?

Sheldon: Marty and Doc never had have had brought?

Leonard: I don't know. You did it to me.

(S08E05)

In a discussion about film *Hot Tub Time Machine*, after Sheldon pointed out Leonard's tense mistake, Leonard also pointed out Sheldon's mistake. Leonard used "wait" and a question to tell Sheldon that there was a mistake in his speech. Then Sheldon corrected his grammar mistake by himself. Therefore, this dialogue contains other-initiated self-repair.

#### 4.3 Repair as a Vehicle for Action

Jefferson (1987) suggests that: "In the course of the business of correcting we can find such attendant activities as e.g., 'instructing', 'complaining', 'forgiving',... 'apologizing', etc. That is, the business of correcting can be a matter of, not merely putting things to rights,... but of specifically addressing lapses in competence and/ or conduct." (p. 88)

In the conversations between Penny and Sheldon, attendant activities like apology and instruction are observed. As example 5 mentioned above, after Penny corrected Sheldon that she did not start dating at 15, Sheldon apologized, saying "I'm sorry" and "my mistake". In the following example, it is found that Penny tried to instruct Sheldon to calm down following the correction of a lapse.

### Example 11

Sheldon: It's an earthquake. I knew it.

Penny: Sheldon, it was just a little tremor.

Sheldon: A little tremor that turns routine sinus surgery into a frontal lobotomy. Oh, I don't care for this at all. Oh, I need to see he's okay.

(S08E09)

The context of this conversation is that Leonard had sinus surgery, and Sheldon was worried about Leonard. When there was a tremor in the hospital during Leonard's surgery, Sheldon used "earthquake" to express his fear and worry. Penny tried to make him calm down by correcting him.

The attendant activities involved in repairing speech in the conversations between Leonard and Sheldon include compromise and complaint. In example 10 above, Leonard's correction of Sheldon was motivated by revenge for Sheldon's previous deliberate correction. In example 8, after Sheldon's correction, it follows Leonard's compromise, using "okay, fine" to make a compromise.

## 5. Discussion

The analyzed data reveal interactions in symmetrical (Penny and Sheldon) and asymmetrical friendships (Leonard and Sheldon). Interpersonal relationship influences the employment of conversational repair strategies. In a symmetrical relationship, both self-repair and other-repair are used regardless of who makes the error. However, in an asymmetrical relationship, when the higher-power individual (Sheldon) makes errors, only self-repair is employed to save face. Leonard, with lower status, uses both self-repair and other-repair strategies to make the conversations more clearly. Early research on repair highlights a preference for self-correction. According to Sidnell (2010), one reason for the dispreferred status of other-correction is that the participants often treat unmodulated other corrections as constituting, or at least as preliminary to, disagreement. Wang (2011) suggested that people sometimes seek repairs to evaluate themselves in good personal qualities, such as appearance, competence, ability, etc. Leonard never repairs Sheldon's correction when Sheldon makes mistakes in the conversation. The reason why self-repair is used more frequently by Sheldon when communicating with Leonard than with Penny is that he wants to save face. Sheldon believes he is the smartest among his friends and wants others to agree with him. He avoids Leonard's correction to maintain his self-image as the smartest among his friends. Leonard responses to Sheldon's correction often involve actions like compromise and complaint due to his lower status. In contrast, in a symmetrical relationship like Penny and Sheldon, Sheldon is indifferent to whether his mistakes is repaired by Penny or himself. Penny and Sheldon have equal status in their friendship, and they have equal rights in language use.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the pragmatic features and types of conversational repairs in symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships. The findings suggest that self-repair and other-repair are used to correct other people's errors in a symmetrical relationship. However, in an asymmetrical relationship, only self-repair strategy is used by the higher-power individual to save face and maintain status. Attendant activities like apologies and instruction occur in a symmetrical relationship in correcting conversation lapses. Attendant activities like compromise and complaint occur in an asymmetrical relationship. It is proved that conversational repair strategies are used variously in these two relationships, following different attendant activities as responses. These findings can provide valuable insights into guiding people to select appropriate conversational repair strategies for diverse interpersonal relationships, such as symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships. Using appropriate conversational repair strategies in daily communication allows speakers to avoid misunderstanding and maintain certain social relationships.

Despite providing an initiative analysis of the repair features in *The Big Bang Theory*, this study has limitations. First, the analysis was conducted solely by the researcher, potentially affecting the accuracy of repair classification. Second, the data are limited. In this paper, the data are only collected from all episodes of season 4 and the first 12 episodes of season 8 of *The Big Bang Theory*, which may not provide a comprehensive view. Additionally, the conversations in *The Big Bang Theory* are television dialogue, which differs from natural conversations. Therefore, in further studies, researchers can explore conversational repair in natural conversations involving symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships.

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