The structure of conversation

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Before starting…

Before starting, let's brainstorm to revise the content of the previous lessons. Let's start with a question:

WHAT IS CONVERSATION?

More brainstorming…

- Are there differences between written English and spoken English?
- Is written English more important than spoken English?
- What is a text? Are texts written or oral?
- What is the purpose of discourse analysis?

More brainstorming…

- What is the role of context in discourse?

- Does it influence *form* and *meaning?*

Spoken Exchanges

Major types of spoken exchanges:
- face-to-face exchanges (private or more public and ritualized)
- Non-face-to-face exchanges (telephone calls)
- Broadcast materials (TV chat show or radio programme)

What does conversation consist of?

- Spoken language
- Speech is
  - spontaneous
  - temporary
  - made permanent through recording and transcription

Transcribing speech…

… is an attempt to represent in a written form the sounds and words of spoken language;

… is very difficult because conversation is obviously far more than words

More than words…

- Body language
- Prosodic features
  - intonation
  - speed
  - stress
  - volume
  - silence
  - laughter

A little experiment…

Listen to the story your friend has to tell and then try to answer the following questions:

- Is the story embarrassing?
- Is the story funny?
- How is your friend feeling at the moment? Embarrassed? Amused? Sad? Happy?
- How do you know?

Some other considerations…

- How do you know what is appropriate and what is not?
- Do we speak always in the same way no matter what the situation is?
- How do we learn about *appropriateness*?

Of course not!

To operate efficiently in conversation, our knowledge has to stretch far beyond an awareness of individual sounds or words. Instinctively, it seems, and usually without any formal training in the rules of conversation, we are nevertheless capable of structuring and building conversation appropriate to the situation in which we find ourselves. It seems that our early years of language acquisition and our subsequent years of talk have taught us all we need to know.

Another little experiment…

The following remarks are all likely to be spoken by parents attempting to teach young children the finer points of conversation. Consider them and discuss the rule of conversation they could be asking the child to learn…

Activity

- Don't interrupt me while I'm speaking
- Speak when you're spoken to.
- What's the magic word?
- Don't tell me what to do.
- Don't say that in front of your Gran.
- Don't say 'what', say 'pardon'.

Turntaking and structure

- Don't interrupt me while I'm speaking
- Speak when you're spoken to

These two remarks target a basic rule of conversation:

PEOPLE TAKE TURNS

Turntaking and structure

In British culture, you need to know when to talk and how to gain a turn.

Only 5% of the speech stream is delivered in overlap.

It's not just a matter of good manners!

Turntaking and structure

Think about silence.

How can we interpret silence in the following situations?

- Parents confronting their children, and children remaining silent (Two cases: young children vs. teenagers)
- Somebody saying 'Hello!' and not getting a reply.
- Cook saying "food is on the table" and not receiving any acknowledgement.

Turntaking and structure

These three situations might lead to:

- Forgiveness vs. punishment
- Confrontation, fight, offence
- Feedback request "Did you hear me?"

Adjacency pairs

Conversation has structure.

These expected pairings of

- question and answer
- greeting and greeting
- information and acknowledgement

are known as

ADJACENCY PAIRS

Adjacency pairs

They are often likely to provide much of the predictable structure of a conversation.

To analyse conversation, therefore, we have to examine how and where we take turns and how these turns are built on to each other to structure the conversation as a whole.

Politeness and negotiation

- What's the magic word?
- Don't tell me what to do.

These two utterances help the child acquire the knowledge needed to operate politely.

There are different reactions to a polite request vs. a straight command.

Politeness and negotiation

Conversation is not just about passing on information or getting things done.

It is also about the way speakers relate to one another and choose to cooperate or not to cooperate with one another.

Content and conditioning

- Don't say that in front of your gran.
- Don't say 'what', say 'pardon'

Little by little, we are shaped to understand not only what is acceptable language and behaviour but also what are acceptable topics.

Content and conditioning

What we say or don't say in front of our "grand's" depends on many different factors:

- the nature of your grandparents
- the situation
- what your grandparents would accept in public and in private
- your type of family
- your gender
- your class
- etc.

Purpose and context

Conversation alters not only according to the context but also to its purpose.

The purpose of a conversation is not always immediately obvious from the surface meaning of the words chosen.

Understanding conversation properly means looking at the purpose behind the words spoken. This is as important as looking at the words themselves.

Purpose and context

Speech Act Theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) tries to explain how things are done when something is said.

Another experiment…

Think about all the conversations you had today.

They need not be about extremely important matters. Even trivial conversational exchanges must be considered.

Another experiment…

Choose some of the conversations that you had and try to decide what their purpose was.

What did you hope to achieve?

For what do you value conversation most?

Another experiment…

We have many reasons to talk.
  (cf. Halliday 1973)
- to satisfy practical needs
- to service relationships with other
- to regulate others' behaviour
- to learn about our world
- to learn about ourselves
- to express our personality
- to entertain ourselves or the others
- to represent new possibilities
- to create imaginary worlds

Purpose and context

Some conversations seem unimportant and trivial. Some of them are predictable (routines and rituals – 'How are you?' 'Fine, and you?')

Some other conversations are less predictable but also occur frequently ('Guess what I did last Saturday…' – introduces storytelling)

Purpose and context

In other cases we evaluate and discover ourselves. Even in discussion of impersonal topics such as sport, TV programmes, etc, a bonding takes place between speakers who keep the channels of communication open with one another.
(negotiations – reflected in the structure of the conversation)

Purpose and context

In other conversations we feel that people are not all of equal status. The function of the conversation can be different for each of the people involved.

(non symmetric communication – parents and children, professors and students)

Purpose and context

Certain talk situations tend to be repeated. We are bound to ask for service at a shop or restaurant more than once in our lifetime. As similar contexts and purposes for talk re-occur, it appears that we have developed a reasonably set method of talking or a conversational genre that covers that particular talk situation.

We have created particular SPEECH EVENTS.

Activity

Look at the following examples of spoken language. Decide what type of conversation or genre you feel the example has to come from. Explain what linguistic feature helped you define the nature of the conversation.

- Guess what I did at the weekend!
- Thank you very much for listening and if there are any questions, we'll just take them now.
- I put it to you that, at the time of the accident, you were doing in excess of the speed limit.
- Good morning. Barnet Leisure Centre. How can we help you?
- Hallo number one, what's your name and where do you come from?
- Right, we're going on, come on, shush please, we're giong on today to look at…
- How do you do?

Lesson Summary

Today we revised the first part of the course.

We discussed about general features of conversation through practical activities.

We pointed out how conversation is more than words. It has a structure (partly conventional), it serves certain purposes which shape conversation itself, also by reason of the context.

Conversation can be classified according to its conventionalised structure and to its purpose.

What next?

In the next lessons, we will concentrate on many different aspects of oral communication and we will contrast and compare them with their written or filmic counterparts.

Just to name a few…

What next?

- Storytelling and its main features
  - Discourse markers and fillers
  - Ellipsis
  - Vague language
  - Predictable structures
  - Vocabulary
  - Context dependent language
  - Repetition and rephrasing
  - Tag Questions

What next?

Structure in conversation
  - Elements of conversation analysis
  - Openings and closing strategies
  - Adjacency pairs
  - Structure and context
  - Elements of pragmatics (speech acts, cooperative principle, speech function)
  - New media where spoken and written language merge

What next?

Negotiation and interaction
  - Speaker support
  - Politeness techniques
  - Hedges
  - Modality
  - Uncooperative conversation
  - Symmetric and asymmetric communication

What next?

Conversational genres
  - Comparing written and oral genres

All these topics will be examined in order to see how the typical features of the spoken language are transposed in the written medium and in movie scripts.

We will try to figure out what losses and gains there are.

The last part of the course will be devoted to the technical tools which allow us to study oral and written texts: corpora.