

Lecture 5: Conversation Analysis (1)

1. Definitions

1.1. Conversation

Of the many types of the communicative act, most study has been devoted to conversation, seen as the most fundamental and pervasive means of conducting human affairs. The numerous characteristics of the conversation made its investigation a complicated matter. Because people interact linguistically in such a wide range of social situations, on such a variety of topics, and with such an unpredictable set of participants, it has proved very difficult to determine the extent to which conversational behaviour is systematic, and to generalize about it.

1.2. Conversation analysis

In sociolinguistics, conversation analysis—also called talk-in-interaction and ethnomethodology—is the study of talk produced in the course of ordinary human interactions. Sociologist Harvey Sacks (1935-1975) is generally credited with founding the discipline.

1.3. Adjacency Pairs

One of the most common structures to be defined through conversation analysis is the adjacency pair, which is a call and response type of sequential utterances spoken by two different people. Here are some examples:

Summons/Answer

- Can I please get some help over here?
- I'll be right there.

Offer/Refusal

- Sales clerk: Do you need someone to carry your packages out?
- Customer: No thanks. I've got it.

Compliment/Acceptance

- That's a great tie you've got on.
- Thanks. It was an anniversary present from my wife.

1.4. The Aim of Conversation Analysis

"CA is the study of recorded, naturally occurring talk-in-interaction. But what is the aim of studying these interactions? Principally, it is to discover how participants understand and respond to one another in their turns at talk, with a central focus on how sequences of action are generated. To put it another way, the objective of CA is to uncover the often tacit reasoning procedures and sociolinguistic competencies

underlying the production and interpretation of talk in organized sequences of interaction."

From "Conversation Analysis" by Ian Hutchby and Robin Wooffitt

2. Conversational Success

For a conversation to be successful, in most social contexts, the participants need to feel they are contributing something to it and are getting something out of it. For this to happen, certain conditions must apply:

*Everyone must have an opportunity to speak: no one should be monopolizing or constantly interrupting.

*The participants need to make their roles clear especially if there are several possibilities (e.g. *'speaking as a mother / linguist / a teacher, a doctor ...etc.'*).

*they need to have a sense of when to speak or stay silent; when to proffer information or hold it back; and when to stay aloof or become involved.

*they need to develop a mutual tolerance, to allow for speaker unclarity and listener inattention; perfect expression and comprehension are rare, and the success of a dialogue largely depends on: *people recognizing their communicative weaknesses through the use of rephrasing: "*let me put it in another way*" and clarification: "*are you with me?*"

There is a great deal of ritual in conversation, especially at the beginning and end, and when topics change. For example, people cannot simply leave a conversation at any random point, unless they wish to be considered *socially inept* or *ill-mannered*. They have to choose their point of departure (such as the moment when a topic changes) or construct a special reason for leaving.

Routines for *concluding a conversation* are particularly complex and cooperation if it is not to end abruptly, or in an embarrassing silence.

The parties may prepare for their departure a long way in advance, such as *by looking at their watches* or *giving a verbal early warning*. A widespread convention is for visitors to say *they must leave* sometime before they actually intend to depart, and for the hosts to ignore the remark. The second mention then permits both parties to act.

3. The Topic of the Conversation

It is also an important variable. In general it should be one with which everyone feels at ease: *'safe'* topics between strangers in English situations usually include the weather, pets, children, and the local context. (e.g. while waiting in a queue) *'unsafe'* topics include religious and political beliefs and problems of health. There are some arbitrary divisions:

*Asking what someone does for a living is generally SAFE. Asking how much they earn is NOT.

Cultural variations can cause problems: *commenting about the cost of the furniture or the taste of a meal maybe acceptable in one society but not in another. It is difficult to generalize about what is normal, polite, or antisocial in conversational practice, as there is so much cultural variation.

*Silence, for example, varies in status. It is an embarrassment in English conversations, unless there are special reasons (such as in moments of grief). However, in some cultures (e.g. Arabs, Danes, the Western Apache) it is quite normal for participants to become silent.

Often, who speaks, and how much is spoken, depends on the *social status* of the participants – for example, those of lower rank maybe expected to stay silent if their seniors wish to speak.

Even the basic convention of “One person speaks at a time” maybe broken in *Antigua*, for example, the phenomenon of several people speaking at once during a whole conversation is a perfectly normal occurrence.

4. Conversation Manoeuvres

Conversational turn-taking, often marked by clear signals of direction:

4.1. Openings

Guess Who? Guess what?

Sorry to trouble you

Lovely day.....!

Got a match?

Can I help you?

Good morning. Excuse me

Did you hear the one about

Can you spare a minute?

Halt! ...Who goes there?

But not: *how much do you earn?

4.2. On-going checks

-By the Speaker:

Do you see?

Can you guess what he said?

Are you with me?

Do I make myself clear?

Don't you think?

Let me put it another way

Don't get me wrong

What I'm trying to say is

-By the Listener:

You mean?

Have I got you right?
Mhm. I don't get you.
Let's get that straight ... !

4.3. Changing the topic

-Introducing a New Topic:

That reminds me
Incidentally ...
That's a good question
By the way ...
Speaking of John ...
Where was I?

-Concluding the Topic:

So it goes, ...
That's life.....
Makes you think, doesn't it?
Let's wait and see ...

-Ending the Topic:

Sorry but I have to go now!
Nice talking to you.
Well, must get back to work.
Gosh! Is that the time?!
I mustn't keep you...

5. Conversational Turns

Probably the most widely recognized conversational feature is that people take turns to speak. But how do people know when it is their turn?

Some rules must be present; otherwise conversations would be continually breaking down into a disorganized jumble of interruptions and simultaneous talk. In many formal situations, such as committee meetings and debates, there are often explicit markers showing that a speaker is about to yield the floor, and indicating who should speak next (e.g. *'I think Mr. Smith will know the answer to that question'*).

This can happen in informal situations too (*'what do you think, John'?*), but there the turn-taking cues are usually more subtle.

People do not simply stop talking when they are ready to yield the floor. They usually signal some way in advance that they are about to conclude.

The clues may be semantic (*'So, anyway,', 'Last but not least*); but more commonly the speech itself can be modified to show that a turn is about to end – typically, by *lowering its pitch, loudness, or speech Body movements and patterns of eye contact* are especially important. While speaking, we look at and away from our listener in about equal proportions; but as we approach the end of a turn, we look at the listener more steadily. Similarly, when talking to a group of people, we often look more steadily at a particular person, to indicate that in our view this should be the next speaker.

Listeners are not passive in all of this. Here too there are several ways of signalling that someone wants to talk next. Most obviously, the first person in a group actually to starts speaking, after the completion of a turn, will usually be allowed to hold the floor.

More subtly, we can signal that we want to speak next by an observable increase in body-tension by leaning forward, or producing an audible intake of breath. Less subtly, we can simply interrupt a strategy which may be tolerated, if the purpose is to clarify what the speaker is saying, but which more usually leads to social sanctions.

6. Exchanges

Because conversational discourse varies so much in length and complexity, analysis generally begins by breaking an interaction down into the smallest possible units, then examining the way these units are used in sequences.

The units have been called "Exchanges" or "interchanges" and their minimal form consists of initiating patterns.

Utterance "I" followed by a response utterance "R" as in:

e.g. What's the time ? → I

Two o'clock → R

Two- part exchanges (sometimes called '*adjacency pairs*') are common place, being used in such contexts as: *questioning, answering, informing/ acknowledging, and complaining/ excusing.*

Three part exchanges are also important, where the response is followed by an element of feedback (F). Such reactions are especially found in teaching situations:

Teacher: Where were the arrows kept? (I)

Pupil: In a special kind of box. (R)

Teacher: Yes, that's right, in a box (F)

What is of particular interest is to work out of the constraints that apply to sequences of this kind. The teacher -feedback sequence would be inappropriate in many everyday situations:

A: Did you have a good journey?

B: Apart from a jam at Northampton..

A: **Yes, that's right, a jam at Northampton.* (Inappropriate)

Unacceptable sequences are easy to invent:

A: Where do you keep the jam?

B: * *It's raining again.* (Inacceptable)

On the other hand, with ingenuity it is often possible to imagine situations where such a sequence could occur.

e.g. if B were staring out of the window . Discourse analysts are always on the lookout for unexpected, but perfectly acceptable, sequences in context, such as:

A: Goodbye.

B: Hello.

(Used, for example, as A is leaving an office, passing B on his way in). Many jokes, too break discourse rules as the source of their effect:

A: yes, I can.

B: can you see into the future?

7. Misunderstandings

An important aim of discourse analysis is to find out why conversations are not always successful. Misunderstanding and mutual recrimination are unfortunately fairly common, participants often operate with different rules and expectations about the way in which the conversation should proceed something that is particularly evident when people of different cultural backgrounds interact. But even within a culture, different ‘rules of interpretation’ may exist.

It has been suggested for example, that there are different rules governing the way in which men and women participate in a conversation. A common source of misunderstanding is the way both parties use *head nods* and *mhm noises* while the other is speaking –something that women do much more frequently than men. Some analysts have suggested that the two sexes mean different things by this behaviour. When a woman does it, she is simply indicating that she is listening and encouraging the speaker to continue. But the male interprets it to mean that she is agreeing with everything he is saying. By contrast when a man does it, he is signalling that he does not necessarily agree, whereas the woman interprets it to mean that he is not always listening. Such interpretations are not always plausible, as it is argued, because they explain two of the most widely reported reactions from participants in cross-sex conversations – the male reaction of ‘*It’s impossible to say what a woman really thinks*’, and the female reaction of ‘*you never listen to a word I say!*’

Sources

[Conversation Analysis Definition and Examples \(thoughtco.com\)](http://www.thoughtco.com/conversation-analysis-definition-and-examples-1126829.html)

Sétif University website