
20 • DISCOURSE AND TEXT

The traditional concern of linguistic analysis has been the construction of sentences (§16); but in recent years there has been an increasing interest in analysing the way sentences work in sequence to produce coherent stretches of language.

Two main approaches have developed. *Discourse analysis* focuses on the structure of naturally occurring spoken language, as found in such 'discourses' as conversations, interviews, commentaries, and speeches. *Text analysis* focuses on the structure of written language, as found in such 'texts' as essays, notices, road signs, and chapters. But this distinction is not clear-cut, and there have been many other uses of these labels. In particular, both 'discourse' and 'text' can be used in a much broader sense to include *all* language units with a definable communicative function, whether spoken or written. Some scholars talk about 'spoken and written discourse'; others about 'spoken and written text'. In Europe, the term *text linguistics* is often used for the study of the linguistic principles governing the structure of all forms of text.

The search for larger linguistic units and structures has been pursued by scholars from many disciplines. Linguists investigate the features of language that bind sentences when they are used in sequence. Ethnographers and sociologists study the structure of social interaction, especially as manifested in the way people enter into dialogue. Anthropologists analyse the structure of myths and folk-tales. Psychologists carry out experiments on the mental processes underlying comprehension. And further contributions have come from those concerned with artificial intelligence, rhetoric, philosophy, and style (§12).

These approaches have a common concern: they stress the need to see language as a dynamic, social, interactive phenomenon – whether between speaker and listener, or writer and reader. It is argued that meaning is conveyed not by single sentences but by more complex exchanges, in which the participants' beliefs and expectations, the knowledge they share about each other and about the world, and the situation in which they interact, play a crucial part.

CONVERSATION

Of the many types of communicative act, most study has been devoted to conversation, seen as the most fundamental and pervasive means of conducting human affairs (p. 52). These very characteristics, however, complicate any investigation. 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.

There is now no doubt that such a system exists. Conversation turns out, upon analysis, to be a highly structured activity, in which people tacitly operate with a set of basic conventions. A comparison has even been drawn with games such as chess: conversations, it seems, can be thought of as having an opening, a middle, and an end game. The participants make their moves and often seem to follow certain rules as the dialogue proceeds. But the analogy ends there. A successful conversation is not a game: it is no more than a mutually satisfying linguistic exchange. Few rules are ever stated explicitly (some exceptions are 'Don't interrupt!', and 'Look at me when I talk to you'). Furthermore, apart from in certain types of argument and debate, there are no winners.

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 / Catholic ...'). They need to have a sense of when to speak or stay silent; when to proffer information or hold it back; 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 (e.g. 'Let me put that another way') and clarification (e.g. '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 is crucial if it is not to end abruptly, or in an embarrassed silence. The parties may prepare for their departure a

CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

In recent years, the phrase 'conversation analysis' has come to be used as the name of a particular method of studying conversational structure, based on the techniques of the American sociological movement of the 1970s known as *ethnomethodology*.

The emphasis in previous sociological research had been deductive and quantitative, focusing on general questions of social structure. The new name was chosen to reflect a fresh direction of study, which would focus on the techniques (or 'methods') used by people themselves (oddly referred to as 'ethnic'), when they are actually engaged in social – and thus linguistic – interaction. The central concern was to determine how individuals experience, make sense of, and report their interactions.

In conversation analysis, the data thus consist of tape recordings of natural conversation, and their associated transcriptions. These are then systematically analysed to determine what properties govern the way in which a conversation proceeds. The approach emphasizes the need for empirical, inductive work, and in this it is sometimes contrasted with 'discourse analysis', which has often been more concerned with formal methods of analysis (such as the nature of the rules governing the structure of texts).

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 some time before they actually intend to depart, and for the hosts to ignore the remark. The second mention then permits both parties to act.

The topic of the conversation 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 room or 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 may be 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. Lapps, 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 may be expected to stay silent if their seniors wish to speak (p. 38). Even the basic convention of 'one person speaks at a time' may be broken. In Antigua, for example, the phenomenon of several people speaking at once during a whole conversation is a perfectly normal occurrence.

CONVERSATIONAL MAXIMS

The success of a conversation depends not only on what speakers say but on their whole approach to the interaction. People adopt a 'cooperative principle' when they communicate: they try to get along with each other by following certain conversational 'maxims' that underlie the efficient use of language. Four basic maxims have been proposed (after H. P. Grice, 1975):

- The *maxim of quality* states that speakers' contributions to a conversation ought to be true. They should not say what they believe to be false, nor should they say anything for which they lack adequate evidence.
- The *maxim of quantity* states that the contribution should be as informative as is required for the purposes of the conversation. One should say neither too little nor too much.
- The *maxim of relevance* states that contributions should clearly relate to the purpose of the exchange.
- The *maxim of manner* states that the contribution should be perspicuous – in particular, that it should be orderly and brief, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity.

Other maxims have also been proposed, such as 'Be polite', 'Behave consistently'. The principle of relevance has recently attracted most attention, as it has been proposed as a fundamental explanatory principle for a theory of human communication (D. Sperber & D. Wilson, 1986).

Listeners will normally assume that speakers are following these criteria. Speakers may of course break (or 'flout') these maxims – for example, they may lie, be sarcastic, try to be different, or clever – but conversation proceeds on the assumption that they are not doing so. Listeners may then draw inferences from what speakers *have* said (the literal meaning of the utterance) concerning what they have *not* said (the implications, or 'implicatures' of the utterance). For example,

A: I need a drink. B: Try The Bell.

If B is adhering to the cooperative principle, several implicatures arise out of this dialogue: for example, The Bell must be a place that sells drinks; it must be open (as far as B knows); it must be nearby. If B is not being cooperative (e.g. if he knows that The Bell is closed, or is the name of a greengrocer's), he is flouting the maxims of quality and relevance.

Deliberate flouting of this kind is uncommon, of course, and only occurs in such special cases as sarcasm, joking, or deliberate unpleasantness. More likely is the inadvertent flouting of conversational maxims – as would happen if B genuinely did not know that The Bell was closed, and accidentally sent A on a wild goose chase. In everyday conversation, misunderstandings often take place as speakers make assumptions about what their listeners know, or need to know, that turn out to be wrong. At such points, the conversation can break down and may need to be 'repaired', with the participants questioning, clarifying, and cross-checking. The repairs are quickly made in the following extract, through the use of such pointers as 'I told you' and 'sorry'.

A: Got the time? B: No, I told you, I lost my watch. A: Oh, sorry, I forgot.

But it is quite common for participants not to realize that there has been a breakdown, and to continue conversing at cross purposes.

GEORGE – DON'T DO THAT

This extract from one of Joyce Grenfell's nursery school monologues shows how the reader can survive using just one side of a dialogue. The task is made easier here by the fact that it is a standard teaching technique to reinforce what a young child has just said by repeating or expanding it (as do parents: see p. 233).

Now then, let's all put on our Thinking Caps, shall we, and think what flowers we are going to choose to be.

Lavinia? – What flower are you?

A bluebell. Good.

Peggy?

A red rose. That's nice.

Neville?

A wild rose. Well done, Neville!

Sidney? – Sidney, pay attention, dear, and don't pummel Rosemary – what flower are you going to choose to be?

A horse isn't a flower, Sidney.

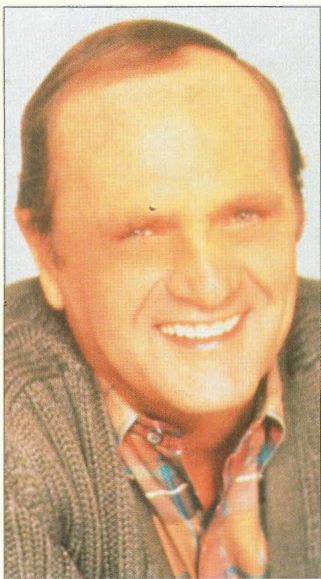
(From J. Grenfell, 1977, p. 30.)

Joyce Grenfell (1910–79)



Bob Newhart

Newhart's comedy routines often rely on the audience's awareness of discourse conventions. His 'driving instructor' sketch, for example, gives us only half of the conversation, from the instructor's viewpoint, leaving the responses of the learner driver to our imagination. Joyce Grenfell's 'teaching young children' sketches were based on the same principle.



CONVERSATIONAL TURNS

Probably the most widely recognized conversational convention 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 ('I think Mr Smith will know the answer to that question'). This can happen in informal situations too ('What do you think, Mary?'), 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 speed. 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 start 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.

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 in their minimal form consist simply of an initiating utterance (I) followed by a response utterance (R), as in:

- I: What's the time?
R: Two o'clock.

Two-part exchanges (sometimes called 'adjacency pairs') are commonplace, 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 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.

Unacceptable sequences are easy to invent:

- A: Where do you keep the jam?
B: *It's raining again.

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 at the time). And 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 the 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?

MISUNDERSTANDINGS

An important aim of discourse analysis is to find out why conversations are not always successful. Misunderstanding and mutual recrimination is 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 (pp. 21, 120). A common source of misunderstanding is the way both parties use head nods and *mm* 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 plausible, 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.' (After D. N. Maltz & R. A. Borker, 1982.)

CONVERSATION MANOEUVRES

Conversational turn-taking is often marked by clear signals of direction

Openings

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?

Ongoing 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 ...

Changing topic

Introducing a new topic:

That reminds me ...

Incidentally ...

That's a good question.

By the way ...

Speaking of John ...

Where was I?

Concluding a topic:

So it goes.

That's life.

Makes you think, doesn't it.
Let's wait and see.

Ending

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.

Gotta run. (especially US)