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DISCOURSE AND CONVERSATION IN LINGUISTIC

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ABSTRACT

Language is given to accentuating diversity among humans. We would do well to explore diversity among forms of discourse and among forms of talk-in-interaction in particular. Among the speech-exchange systems, ordinary conversation has been asserted to be distinctive and fundamental, but questions have been raised about both asserts. The resources for selective amongst speech-exchange systems are located in such general organizations of practice as turn-taking, progression organization, the organization of repair and the overall structural organization of episodes of interaction. As Discourse, an enouncement is not a unit of semiotic signs, but a conceptual construct that allows the semiotic signs to assign meaning, and so communicate specific, repeatable communications to, between, and between objects, subjects, and statements. 'Conversation' as an individual speech-exchange system is real and is not only a remaining grade, and that it is to be unstated as the basic speech-exchange system, in part by allusion to the distinctive turn-taking organization through which it is implemented.

DISCOURSE AND CONVERSATION

The study of *discourse* is the study of units of language and language use consisting of more than a single sentence, but connected by some system of related topics. The study of discourse is sometimes more narrowly construed as the study of connected sequences of sentences produced by a single speaker. In what follows we will construe the term, *discourse* narrowly and when more than one person is involved, we will speak of *conversation* or more generally a *talk-exchange*. There are many forms of discourse and many forms of talk-exchange. Letters, jokes, stories, lectures, sermons, speeches, and so on, are all categories of discourse; arguments, interview, business dealing, instruction, and conversation are categories of talk-exchange.

Conversations are usually structured sequences of expressions by more than a single speaker. This structure is rarely consciously apparent to speakers. However, we need only recall a conversation that has 'gone wrong' in some sense, in order to become aware of the conversations has not been exhaustively described, being presently under intense investigation, we can summarize some of their major properties here. First, any reasonable number of people can participate, and there are principles that govern how and when people can take a turn. Second, there are principles that make certain aspects of the conversation socially obligatory, such as greeting and leave-taking. Third, as we have already seen, there are principles making contributions to conversations relevant to

each other, such as answering questions or justifying refusals.

We will first illustrate some cases where English provides device that are sensitive to communicative contexts and are therefore useful in the study of both discourse in general and conversation in particular. We will then look at some of the salient features of conversational openings, turn, taking, and closing.

LANGUAGE AND CONTEXT

The "context" of an utterance is an expandable. Sometimes the relevant context is linguistic-just the previous and anticipated utterances in the discourse or conversation. But context can extent to the immediate physical and social environment as well; and finally, it can encompass general knowledge. Each of these concentric circles of "context" can play a role in the interpretation of an utterance. Our contributions to conversations both *reflect* and *affect* the linguistic and non-linguistic context of utterance.

Our comments can *reflect* features of the context of utterance in that we often "watch our language" by avoiding certain words or phrases. More subtly, our language also has structural devices, often called *stylistic variants* that allow us to merge more easily into the flow of conversation.

Our comments also can *affect* the context by making it appropriate for the same speaker to go on and say one sort of thing rather than another. For instance, it would be appropriate for the speaker to tell a joke after asking whether the hearer had heard the one about the travelling salesman, or to tell a story after remarking that she had recently had some adventure.

Thus, language structure can both reflect and affect the structure of the discourse by a single speaker. In the sections that follow we will elaborate in the structure of talk-exchanges involving more than one speaker.

OPENINGS

There are many ways of beginning a conversation or other talk-exchange. One is to start out with no preliminaries whatsoever: "Something's wrong with the fax machine." Another is to preface our remarks with an *opening.* For instance, there are a number of attention-getters used at the beginning of a conversation, such as "Hey," "Hey, John," "Excuse me," "Say,...." Once we have the hearer's attention, we might then use a conversational parenthetical such as "You know," "Listen," "Know what?" But probably the most common opening in casual conversations is the *greeting*. Basically, a greeting is an expression of pleasure at meeting someone. But these expressions can vary enormously in complexity and formality.

Greetings tend to be highly ritualized in fro, in what we generally use a small number of them over and over again. They serve mostly to give everyone in the conversation a turn at saying something. However, after a round of greetings it is normally quite proper for someone to take the floor and either begins the substance of the talk-exchange or initiate closing.

CLOSINGS

Just as conversation rarely begin with their central topic, so they rarely come to an abrupt end. Participants don't simply quit talking; they have a highly ritualized way of bringing normal conversations consists of a *pre-closing* sequence, where the participants more or less agree to close, followed by a *closing section,* where they actually do close. These two stages have some characteristic ways of being completed.

Expect for special circumstances, such as forgetting something important, once the closing phase has been reached, the conversation should be brought to a conclusion. A speaker can do this either collectively with one remark or a glance at everybody, or separately with appropriate closing to each person or group of persons.

Normal conversations have a discernible structure. They tend to begin and end in certain ritualistic ways. The change of speakers tends to be orderly and based on principles of turn taking. There tend to be recognizable levels of formality, informality, and familiarity in such interchanges. Moreover, the language seems to make available devices for smoothly integrating one's remarks into the flow of words. It should not be surprising that conversations reflect both social and linguistic principles; they are, after all both social and linguistic events, and as such they vary to some extent from culture to culture.

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