

COURSE: SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS

LECTURE 13: CONVERSATION STRUCTURE
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Content

- ▶ Interaction
- ▶ Conversation
- ▶ Conversation analysis
- ▶ Pauses. Overlaps, backchannels
- ▶ Conversational style
- ▶ Adjacency pairs
- ▶ Preference structure
- ▶ Yule, George. (1996). Pragmatics. UK: Oxford University press.pg 71-78

Topic learning outcomes

- ▶ By the end of the lesson, you should be able to:
 - ▶ Analyze conversations
 - ▶ Explain the structure of conversations
 - ▶ Examine structures of various discourses

Interaction

- ▶ This can refer to a wide range of communicative contexts:
- ▶ Political debate
- ▶ Media interview
- ▶ Classroom discourse
- ▶ Court proceedings
- ▶ Doctor-patient interaction.
- ▶ Note: The kind of talk interaction will be determined by the context

Conversation analysis

- ▶ A methodological approach that studies communication through an analysis of the structure and organization of conversation.
- ▶ Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson
- ▶ It involves the systematic examination of verbal and nonverbal behaviors:
- ▶ Turns
- ▶ turn-taking
- ▶ Pauses
- ▶ and gestures,
- ▶ Helps understand how people communicate with each other

CONVERSATION AND PREFERENCE STRUCTURE

Conversational analysis (CA).

Many metaphors have been used to describe the

How do we manage to conduct a conversation?

Floor: the current right to speak in a conversation.

Turn: the control of the floor a person who is speaking has.

Conversation and preference structure

Turn-taking : the shift between speakers.

Transition Relevance Place (TRP): a possible point where a change of speakers occurs.

Local management system: the social conventions known by the people interacting

Conversation and preference structure

Overlap should be avoided, but also too long pauses
(= **attributable silence**).

TRPs occur at the end of a unit.

You can avoid letting other speakers in by having no open pauses at the end of a syntactic unit, or indicate a longer structure:

Pauses, overlaps and backchannels.

- ▶ Mostly, conversation consists of two, or more participants taking turns and only one participant speaking at any one time.
- ▶ Smooth transitions from one speaker to the next are valued.
- ▶ transitions with long silence between turns or overlap (both speakers trying to speak at the same time) are left to be awkward.

Pauses and overlaps

- ▶ When two people attempt to have a conversation and discover that there is no flow or smooth transition in their communication; then more is being communicated than is said.
- ▶ There is lack of familiarity, and a sense of distance.
- ▶ Causing uneasiness.

Back-channels

Indications by listeners to the speakers that they are listening

Back channel signals include:

Head nods

Smiles

Other facial expressions and gestures.

Back channels

- *m, m-hm, yeah, yes, that's right*
- *sentence completion*
- *brief restatements*
- *(request for clarification)*

Back-channels

- are not turn-claiming
- encourage the current speaker to go on
- signal the listener's active participation
- express agreement, acceptance, under-standing

Back channels

- can occur almost anywhere in the current speaker's turn
- are both speaker and situation specific

Listeners are rarely silent for more than 15 seconds.

Therefore the presence of back channels is significant.

Example of backchannels

- ▶ Caller: If you use your long distance service a lot, then you will..
- ▶ Anne: uh-uh
- ▶ Caller: be interested in the discount I'm talking about because..
- ▶ Anne: yeah
- ▶ Caller: it can only save you money to switch to a cheaper service
- ▶ Anne: ummm
- ▶ What if these back channels are absent?
- ▶ The absence of these back channels is significant.
- ▶ It indicates whether the speaker should go on or not

CONVERSATIONAL STYLE

There are individual and cultural differences in conversational style and turn taking.

High involvement style
vs High considerateness style.

High involvement style : some individuals consider participation is active, speaking rate is relatively fast, almost no pausing between turns.

Conversational style

High considerateness:

speakers use slower rate, expect longer pauses, do not overlap, avoid interruptions or completion of other's turn

The choice will be guided by aspects of distance and familiarity

Adjacency pairs

These may not be identified as different conversational styles but as different personal traits.

In conversations we find **adjacency pairs**, (turns) such as

1. greetings:

Hi!

Hi!

2. Congratulating

Congratulations on your completion of the project.

Thank you.

Adjacency pairs

3. Apology

I am sorry for being late.

It is okay/ You are forgiven.

Adjacency pairs

Questions and answers:

When did Wendy leave ?

Yesterday

Invitation and acceptance:

Would you like to come for a coffee?

Sure! Love to!

Apology and acceptance:

I'm so sorry!

That's OK.

Adjacency pairs

Request for favour and granting:

- *Could I please borrow your pen?*
- *Yes, of course.*

Insertion sequence

- ▶ One adjacency pair within another
- ▶ A: Do you want the early flight?
- ▶ B: what time does it arrive?
- ▶ A: Nine forty-five.
- ▶ B: Yeah, that will be great.
- ▶ *****

Insertion sequence

- ▶ Jane: Could you please mail this letter for me?
- ▶ Fred: Does it have stamp on it?
- ▶ Jane: Yes.
- ▶ Fred: Okay

Elements of a conversation

- ▶ Identify elements of conversation in this extract
- ▶ **Mohammed: Dr. Bale, welcome to the show**
- ▶ **Dr. Bale: Thank you Mohammed.**
- ▶ **Mohammed: Our viewers, today we shall be talking about the war on corruption and I have Dr. Bale, the manager of....**
- ▶ **Dr. Bale: -----(nods)**
- ▶ **Mohammed: Do you think the government has done enough to fight graft?**
- ▶ **Dr. Bale : With the Kitchen-gate scandal, no... it is not doing anything.**
- ▶ **Mohammed: But we can give credit where it is due and appreciate the effort the government has taken.**

- ▶ Dr. Bale : Nothing much.
- ▶ Mohammed: Why do you say that?
- ▶ Dr. Bale : Are you sure you want me to answer that?
- ▶ Mohammed: Yes please.
- ▶ Dr. Bale : Okay. We cannot give credit where nothing positive is reported. For example, there have been media reports on new cases of corruption yet nobody is held responsible.
- ▶ Mohammed; [but.....]
- ▶ Dr. Bale ` [I SAID-----]

A Speech event

- ▶ (A speech event in a setting of your choice- develop a possible conversation structure)
- ▶ Conversations
- ▶ Lectures
- ▶ Presentations
- ▶ Interviews

PREFERENCE STRUCTURES

Adjacency pairs are not simply countless noises in a sequence.

They represent social actions

not all social actions are equal when they occur as second pairs

A first part that contains a request or an offer is made in the expectation that the second part will be an acceptance.

An acceptance is more likely than a refusal

This structural likelihood is called preference.

Preference structures

- ▶ Preference structure divides second parts of adjacency pairs into **preferred** and **non-preferred** social acts.
- ▶ The **preferred** is the structurally expected next act and the **dispreferred** is the structurally unexpected next.

General pattern of preferred and dispreferred

First part	Second part	
	Preferred	Dispreferred.
Assessment	Agree	Disagree
Invitation	Accept	refuse
Offer	Accept	Decline
Proposal	Agree	Disagree
Request	Accept	Refuse

Examples of preferred second part

First part	Second part
Can you help me?	Sure.
Want some coffee?	Yes, please.
Isn't that really great? May be we could go for a walk.	Yes it is That would be great.
What if these first parts were met with silence?	Then there will be uneasiness or no further communication.

Patterns associate with dispreferred second parts

Dispreferred elements	Examples.
Delay/hesitate	Pause: er, em, ah
Preface	Well,oh
Express doubt	I'm not sure, I don't know
Token (yes)	That is great, I would love to but....
Apology	I'm sorry I cannot; what a pity I cannot..
Mention obligation	I must do X; I am expected in Y
Appeal for understanding	You see....; you know....
Make it non personal	Everybody else; out there...
Give an account.....	Too much work, no time left
Use mitigators	Really, mostly, sort of, kind of..
Hedge the negative	I guess not; not possible

- ▶ Generally in pragmatics:
- ▶ The expression of a preferred represents closeness and quick connection.
- ▶ The expression of a dispreferred represents distance and lack of connection.

Summary

- ▶ In this lesson, we have discussed the structure of conversations and we have determined that conversations have specific structures
- ▶ The structures depend on the context and the distance between the participants.

Reference

- ▶ Yule, George. (1996). *Pragmatics*. UK: Oxford University press.