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ON DISCOURSE FUNCTIONS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE OF CONVERSATION

Ludmila Urbanová

It is a well-known fact that the English language of conversation, even if it is the most wide-spread and the least marked means of expression, has not been sufficiently analysed up to the present day. There are several reasons for this, one of them being that it is by no means easy for the researcher to obtain samples of authentic, spontaneous, undisturbed conversation which is not influenced by the presence of a tool for recording and publicity. Another reason, however, seems to be far more significant: the absence of an appropriate method of analysis which would adequately reflect such a dynamic, complex phenomenon sui generis represented by the language of conversation in its most spontaneous, highly colloquial nature (in O'Connor's terms the colloquial and familiar styles; the formal colloquial style which is highly conventionalized is excluded from our analysis).

In the search for a theoretical foundation of our analysis of the English language of conversation two distinctly different methods have been confronted, namely

- (a) the approach represented by Crystal and Davy (1974) labelled as *general stylistic analysis*,
- (b) the approach applied in recent publications under the heading *discourse analysis* based on the theory of illocutionary acts (this approach is the subject of theoretical considerations of Brown and Yule [1983], Fox [1987]).

In the former approach the methods of analysis applied by Crystal and Davy follow from what is called *register analysis*. The text is understood as a final product, the analysis being descriptive, atomistic, based on a quantitative analysis of the frequency of occurrence of individual phenomena under investigation, e.g. the types of sentence structures in the text. This method of analysis was used in the analysis of the scientific prose style.

Crystal and Davy have developed their register analysis further in an approach which is called *general stylistic analysis*. The individual styles are analysed from the point of view of the interrelated language levels (prosodic analysis, morphological and syntactic structures, lexical means), as an interplay of a highly complex nature. This approach, however, has been criticized by Widdowson (1985). He raises his objection that in spite of the above-mentioned profound analysis of the factors constituting a style, this analysis is still far from establishing stylistically distinct markers on the basis of which styles become differentiated. Again, predominantly the findings concerning the frequency of occurrence of various language phenomena present in the individual styles are given (primarily a quantitative approach); the differences between these styles, however, are hardly delimited (the qualitative evaluation based on the functions of styles is not elaborated in detail).

Crystal and Davy claim to avoid a pejorative evaluation of phenomena, especially with regard to the colloquial style, which brings about a great number of "deviations from the norm" (mostly the written norm). The labels used for denoting the criteria for analysis, however, are reflected in terms which imply the negative character and create an image of imperfection of the language of conversation with regard to other styles which are closer to the abstract level of language. Such terms include loose coordination, disjointedness, incomplete sentences, randomness of the subject-matter, the lack of an overall contrived pattern, the absence of any conscious planning, lack of precision in the matter of word selection, syntactic anacoluthon, etc.

On the other hand, however, Crystal and Davy speak about "a much greater flexibility of usage in this variety than in any other" (1974.96). They admit that "considered in its own situation (that is with gestures, facial expressions, and so on included) conversation does not seem disjointed at all" (1974.105). Thus Crystal and Davy realize that the language of conversation cannot be judged in comparison with other styles only with regard to the text as a combination of sentences, but as "language in use", i.e. language in its social interaction. In this respect pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects of language analysis are dominant in the language of conversation. It is exactly this approach, characterized as the *speech act theory*, which is understood as an expression of social relations and personal attitudes, which became the starting point of *discourse analysis*.

The language of conversation should by no means be understood against the background of the written language, in which case its use is largely confined to expressing "factual and propositional information", i.e. the transactional (representative, referential, ideational, descriptive) function. The language of conversation is specifically characterized by its interactional (expressive, emotive, interpersonal, social expressive) function.

Discourse, contrary to the text, is understood as a process, not as a product, the structure of which is constituted on the basis of the inter-

action of a large number of small units — microstructures. These are determined in space and time (the spatiotemporal setting). The meaning is to a great extent conveyed by non-linguistic means (the situational context, paralinguistic means). Voloshinov (1973) characterizes speech as a “social event of verbal interaction”.

The question arises whether the language of conversation, which is closely bound to the situational context, bears traces of a system or whether its structure is loose to such an extent that it lacks any system. Generally the language of conversation can be labelled as a loosely structured system in which the individual elements are more the product of a specific situation than a manifestation of an abstract pattern. The links between the individual elements are frequently compensated for by paralinguistic features, sounds and noises from the environment (buzzing of the phone, knocking at the door), concomitant circumstances and the whole setting of the act of communication. The meaning in conversation is thus an interplay between the verbal, paralinguistic and situational factors. As Crystal (1987:116) puts it: “... meaning in conversation is conveyed not by single sentences but by more complex exchanges”.

From the point of view of discourse functions the language of conversation is based on conveying attitudinal reactions. These attitudes generally entail a high degree of subjectivity, which finds its expression in the indirectness, implicitness and apparent ambiguity of language means. In general certain grammatical structures (sentence structures) express certain meanings (semantic structures) which are performed by the speech acts in the interaction between the speaker and the listener. The following scheme represents what we call direct speech acts, which become manifest by means of a direct correspondence between syntactic class and semantic class. Relationship between syntactic category, semantic category, illocutionary act and illocutionary force is observed with regard to their mutual correlation.

Syntactic category — the type of sentence expressing modality, namely declarative, interrogative, imperative and exclamative sentences.

Semantic category — the meaning carried by the sentence, namely statement, inquiry, directive (jussive) and exclamation.

Illocutionary act — the character of the act of speech in the process of communication, namely stating, questioning, directing and expressing emotion.

Illocutionary force — the force of the illocutionary act imposing a certain standpoint or reaction on the listener, namely proposition, answer, future action and emotive effect.

Crystal has drawn the conclusion that the majority of acts in everyday conversation are indirect (1987:121). The direct versus indirect character of the speech act is based on the direct versus indirect correlation of the above-mentioned phenomena, e.g. the sentence which is syntactically

declarative may under certain circumstances, in a certain spatio-temporal setting, express a question or a directive:

E.g. He will give me his consent — the falling tune implies a statement, the rising tune implies a question, the emphasis on will implies a directive.

In turn, an interrogative sentence may express a directive, e.g. Can you show me your passport?

or a statement, e.g. Do you think it was easy? instead of saying It was very difficult indeed.

Table I — Interaction of Semantics and Syntax

syntactic categories	semantic categories	illocutionary act	illocutionary force
declarative	statement	stating	proposition
interrogative	inquiry	questioning	answer
imperative	directive	directing	future action
exclamative	exclamation	emotion	emotive effect

In this paper we present an analysis of the means of expression reflecting the illocutionary act of questioning (search for information, uncertainty, doubt and query). According to our hypothesis, inquiry or simply the way of asking includes a wide range of sentence patterns in which the direct association between syntactic class and semantic class is not always clear and obvious.

The material under investigation is taken from *A Corpus of English Conversation*, edited by Jan Svartvik and Randolph Quirk at Lund University (*Lund Studies in English* 56, Lund, Sweden 1980).

Within the framework of our empirical investigation two groups of sentence structures have been sampled:

(1) structures representing questions both syntactically and semantically, namely *yes-no* questions, *wh*-questions, alternative questions. These structures represent direct ways of asking;

(2) structures which are syntactically and semantically more varied, and the syntactic-semantic correspondence of which is indirect. These structures represent indirect ways of asking, namely declarative questions, afterthoughts, question-tags, question phrases, *if*-clauses, lexical means within a declarative sentence structure.

Table II — Results of the Investigation

Text	Direct Ways of Asking			Indirect Ways of Asking						Total
	WhQ	Y-NQ	AltQ	DQ	ATh	QT	QPh	if-C	LM	
S.1.1.	21	16	—	3	7	14	10	3	2	76
S.1.2.	6	3	—	6	—	3	2	3	2	25
S.1.2a	2	2	—	3	2	2	4	1	2	18
S.1.2b	5	1	—	—	—	2	3	—	1	12
S.1.3.	17	9	1	4	1	6	10	—	2	50
S.1.4.	23	46	2	6	5	18	13	3	7	123
Total	154			150						304

The table shows that out of 304 sentence structures which have been sampled in four conversation subtexts consisting of 5,000 words each the hypothesis expressed by Crystal and Davy: "Interrogative sentence types are particularly frequent" (1974.112) has not been proved by our analysis, unless we include under interrogative sentence types those belonging to the group representing the indirect way of asking. The proportion between the direct versus indirect way of asking is 154:150 which shows a great share of indirect speech acts.

The illocutionary act of questioning represents the type of social interaction between the speaker and the listener which can be considered as close, direct, intimate; in linguistic terms we will use the term "marked", as opposed to the unmarked type of interaction represented by the illocutionary act of stating, which does not ultimately require an apt, straightforward response. There is a tendency, however, to "soften" the effect of imposing a reaction on part of the interlocutor and make this effect less urgent and harsh within the illocutionary act of questioning.

Direct ways of asking represented by *wh*-questions, *yes-no* questions and alternative questions are sometimes doubled in a combination of a questioning formula and a direct question. The questioning formula can be interpreted as a "preparatory" question the main aim of which is to attract the attention of the listener towards the content of the following question, or as a polite request for an answer.

E.g. may I ask what goes into that paper now

what was the other thing I wanted to ask you is it this year that Nightingale goes.

The language means used by the speaker in the act of questioning reflect the mutual relationship between the two participants engaged in a conversation. Familiarity, intimacy, sincerity and straightforwardness are characteristic features of the direct speech act of questioning.

Indirect means of questioning, on the other hand, are a manifestation of a reserved, polite, uncertain and evasive relationship between the participants of the communicative act. The language means used to express indirectness are more varied than those mentioned above. In our interpretation this phenomenon is due to the fact that the shades of meaning expressed through indirect ways are more numerous and they are rather context-bound, whereas the direct ways of asking are relatively context-free.

Declarative questions are a manifestation of the discrepancy between the semantic class and the syntactic class. While the syntactic form is that of a statement, the illocutionary force of a question is signalled by a rising nuclear tone or a falling-rising nuclear tone. E.g.

you were out [↗]	response	yes, yes, that was it
you are now formulating a plan [↗]	response	no, no
you met her [↗]	response	no, no
that's quite good [↗]	response	yes, it's not bad

Afterthoughts are defined as a "thought or explanation that comes to the mind later" (*Advanced Learner's Dictionary*). Allen explains an afterthought in the following way: "The speaker makes a remark, hesitates, then adds a phrase to make it less definite. This phrase will be heard as a rising intonation" (1965:63). By using an afterthought it is possible to convert the preceding utterance from a statement into a question, e.g.

but they can put it forward for any title they like[↗] apparently[↗]
 but I heard it mentioned by somebody[↗] else I think[↗] Watt I'm not sure[↗]
 well I mentioned it to you if you remember[↗]

Question-tags are formally represented by special phrases appended to statements. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (1985) treats them as a special type of *yes-no* question. In our analysis they are excluded from *yes-no* questions and they are treated as a separate item. The reasons for an interpretation different from the above-mentioned *CGEL* are the following:

(1) The structure of these questions is similar to afterthoughts, consisting of two clearly distinct parts. Each of them is, to some extent, independent, because it carries its own nucleus representing a line of demarcation. The statement carries the falling nucleus, the question-tag carries either the rising or the falling nucleus. From the semantic point of view the certainty of the statement is doubted by the following question-tag (in the case of the rising nucleus the doubt is much stronger).

(2) Question-tags do not function exclusively as questions, they are also used with imperatives and exclamatives, e.g.

Open the door, won't you? What a beautiful sight, isn't it? in the function of a reinforcement.

Indirect questioning by means of question-tags is less straightforward, e.g.

this is what it amounts to, isn't it
 response no, we've got to decide
 it's gone very cold, hasn't it
 response m it's freezing
 cos he went up to Exton on Tuesday evening didn't he
 response yes I think he did

Question phrases of the type *I wonder whether* also express the search for information indirectly. The syntactic way of asking is replaced here by the semantic, indirect way of asking. The construction *I was wondering if you could tell me* is generally interpreted as more polite, showing good manners. In other words this way of asking sounds more distant, more tactful. This effect is even reinforced by the use of the past tense (*I was wondering*) which in fact expresses the act of questioning at present. The occurrence of question phrases is rather frequent in the material under investigation as compared with other ways of asking. The shades of meaning expressed by question phrases are also connected with implications other than politeness:

(a) *the great complexity of the problem under discussion*, e.g.

and I wondered whether graphology paper is in fact whether it tends to be a comparative graphology paper or a historical graphology paper whether it's like Old and Middle English graphology or something like that you see

(b) *a great degree of uncertainty on the part of the speaker*, e.g.

I doubt if Bards post is so much of a status post as to justify moving

(c) *evasiveness*, e.g.

I don't think that anybody suggests for one moment that you are financially in need of anything

(d) *a lack of importance*, e.g.

I don't know whether you noticed

It can be said that this particular way of asking is semantically heavier in the sense that apart from the pure search for information it is enriched by certain implications dependent on the context and the situation. Thus it is preferred as a more sophisticated, context-sensitive way of asking.

If-clauses are not very frequently used as a way of asking in the text under investigation. This fact can be interpreted as an avoidance of subordinate clauses in the language of conversation in general.

E.g. I'm sure that you know he would be awfully grateful if you could see him in your office sometime [response:] well I'd like to have a chat

If-clauses are sometimes accompanied by a question which makes the act of questioning complete, e.g.

if he's not happy there is there any chance that he'd be any happier at Bards.

Lexical means of asking are represented by certain words, such as *right* at the end of the sentence, *perhaps* either in the initial or final position, *possibly* either in the initial or final position. These words have the illocutionary force to convert a statement into a question. Similarly the word phrase *or something* is of the interrogative type.

E.g. you can't say that worth is adjectival right

I think in Socrates I'll have to take longer stretches probably

I think she is possibly nineteenth century

you know the thing that Arthur Delaney started in Kuwait the Afghan teaching unit or something.

The repetition of a word or words from the previous context can also serve the purpose of questioning, e.g.

I've got a problem for you my lad [response:] a problem [response:] yes.

CONCLUSIONS

In the English language of conversation two ways of asking are current — the direct and the indirect ways of asking. The basic difference between them is functional — it is determined by the different attitude of the speaker towards the listener in their interaction in the process of communication. The direct way of asking, which formally shows correspondence between the syntactic class (interrogative sentence types) and semantic class (the semantic category of inquiry), expresses the illocutionary act of questioning as a direct, straightforward communicative act. The indirect way of asking, which formally shows a discrepancy between the syntactic class (sentence types other than interrogative) and semantic class (the semantic category of inquiry) expresses the illocutionary act of questioning as an indirect, contextually and situationally bound act.

The direct way of asking is considered to be marked, since the interrogative sentence types are markers of the illocutionary act of questioning (in fact the markers are expressed by question words, inversion); the indirect way of asking is considered to be unmarked, since the sentence types occurring in the illocutionary act of questioning bear few markers of this act themselves. Due to the contextual and situational clues, which are linguistically signalled by intonation and/or semantically by afterthoughts, question-tags, question phrases, *if*-clauses and special lexical means (expressions of doubt and vagueness), statements are converted into questions. Thus the role of context has proved to be basic in discourse

functions. Linguistic means which become manifest in these functions fall into two basic categories — context-free and context-sensitive (bound).

There is a tendency in the present-day English language of conversation to use indirect speech acts in the illocutionary act of questioning. This fully corresponds with the above-mentioned finding of Crystal (1987:121) that “the majority of acts in everyday conversation are indirect”.

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K NĚKTERÝM OTÁZKÁM FUNKCÍ DISKURSU V JAZYKU ANGLICKÉ KONVERZACE

Autorka článku se zabývá teoretickými otázkami, spojenými s analýzou jazyka anglické konverzace. Porovnává přístup Crystala a Davyho (všeobecnou stylistickou analýzu) a současné trendy při analýze diskurzu, která se orientuje na výzkum řečových aktů. Z hlediska teoretického hodnotí jazyk konverzační jako volně strukturovaný systém, ve kterém důležitou úlohu hrají i nelingvistické (paralingvistické) faktory. Zásadními faktory při analýze a interpretaci jazyka anglické konverzace jsou kontext a situace.

Autorka vychází z analýzy jazykového materiálu textů, publikovaných v souboru *A Corpus of English Conversation* (Lund 1980); předmětem analýzy je ilokuční akt tázání (questioning). Na základě analýzy jazykových prostředků se tento ilokuční akt člení na přímý a nepřímý. V přímém aktu participují tázací věty (zjišťovací, doplňovací a alternativní), v nepřímém aktu se vyskytuje mnohem větší variabilita jazykového ztvárnění (deklarativní otázky, dovětky, přívěsné otázky, otázkové fráze, podmínkové věty a lexikální prostředky v rámci oznamovací věty). Tázací věty jsou příznakové, nepřímé otázky jsou bezpříznakové, jsou vázány na kontext.

Při zkoumání jazyka anglické konverzace se potvrdila hypotéza Crystala (1987), že v běžné konverzaci převažují nepřímé řečové akty.