

Urbanová, Ludmila

## On conversational language

In: Urbanová, Ludmila. *On expressing meaning in English conversation : semantic indeterminacy*. Vyd. 1. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2003, pp. 11-18

ISBN 8021032529

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/123327>

Access Date: 02. 12. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

---

# 1. ON CONVERSATIONAL LANGUAGE

---

## 1.1 Introduction: Aims, Methods and Analysed Material

The search into the substance of meaning in several conversation genres reveals some discourse features which contribute to **appropriateness** and **acceptability** of the language used in the context of communicative situation.

My aim is to present a semantico-pragmatic approach to conversational analysis in which the stress is laid on aspects of **semantic indeterminacy**. Indeterminate meanings in spoken language are processed as phenomena characterized by **indirectness, impersonality, attenuation, accentuation** and **vagueness**, which come into being due to speaker's tentativeness, lack of certainty, politeness and other discourse properties which are intentionally or subconsciously manifested in everyday English conversation.

The method applied in my analysis is interdisciplinary. The interpretation of the **interactive meaning** in three conversation genres, namely **face-to-face conversation, telephone conversation** and **radio interviews**, is grounded in the interface of semantic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic considerations. In my view, conversational analysis is understood as a symbiosis of approaches towards the interpretation of the dialogue structure and its interactive, interpretative meaning.

The material I have used for my investigation is taken from the corpus of spoken texts, partly published under the title *A Corpus of English Conversation* (1980), and partly available in the Department of English section of the Survey of Spoken English at Lund University in Sweden. Basic indications about the character of the individual texts are included in the appendix, which comprises some of the examined texts in the full version.

## 1.2 Spoken Discourse Compared with Written Discourse

Authentic, spontaneous, informal English conversation is traditionally viewed as "the most fundamental and pervasive means of conducting human affairs" (Crystal 1987.116). For decades, however, there was a tendency to describe authentic speaker-hearer interaction as a kind of language that is, to a great extent, amorphous, lacking a distinct structure, boundaries and units. Some linguists even claim that conversational language is unstructured (see Channell 1994). This rather overstated characteristic of the loose structure of spoken language is in contrast with Firth's claim that "Speech is not the 'boundless chaos' Johnson thought it was. ... Conversation is much more of a roughly prescribed ritual than most people think" (1964.28). Halliday advocates the

presence of structure in spoken language stating that "The spoken language is, in fact, no less structured and highly organized than the written" (1990.79).

It can be argued that in spoken discourse the hearer's expectations are not entirely dependent on the speaker's correctness and well-formedness of grammatical structure. It is rather the mutually shared knowledge, the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, the topic under discussion and its development in discourse which determine the decoding of the message. Blakemore (1992) stresses the fact that the interpretation of the utterance does not depend exclusively on linguistic knowledge. She claims that "...understanding utterances is not simply a matter of knowing the meaning of the words uttered and the way in which they are combined. It also involves drawing inferences on the basis of non-linguistic information and the assumption that the speaker has aimed to meet certain general standards of communication" (1992.57). By the *general standards of communication* Blakemore most probably means the general expectations the language user has to meet with regard to his/her interlocutor, the existence of the *ritual* mentioned by Firth, the knowledge of the socio-cultural context in which the communication takes place.

Certain types of utterances, although they are grammatically correct, are dispreferred, because they are incompatible with the principles of human communication. For instance, in certain contexts directives in face-to-face communication are avoided and replaced by more polite ways of expression, such as an inquiry.

**Example 1:**

*A so are you going to leave him a message or shall I say something  
B have you got a pen I'll leave him a message (S.1.8.357-361)*

And vice versa, a grammatically incorrect utterance (such as an anacoluthon) can appear in a situation in which it is accepted as appropriate, because it fulfils the communicative needs required in the particular context.

**Example 2:**

*I suppose it's this effect on either side that it can be I it's like a cube that  
is either it can be convex or it can be concave (S.1.8.933-936)*

The existence of tension between correctness and acceptability frequently results in a negative evaluation of the features of spoken language. The terminology applied by Crystal and Davy (1969) sounds negative, using labels such as "inexplicit", "incomplete", "disjointed", "non-fluent" etc.

In my previous study (1991.134) I have explained the difference between the spoken and written language by their different functions in the process of communication, due to which "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". Conversational language is characterized by its dominant **interactional function**, for which a variety of other labels is commonly used, e.g. expressive, emotive, interpersonal and social expressive function.

Drawing on Vachek (1976.412-413), I claim that spoken language and written language constitute two different norms, which are not interchangeable. In my view, formal and semantic peculiarities of conversation can be best explained with regard to discourse tactics current in spoken discourse. Characterizing spoken language by comparing it with the written language, the linguist does a disservice to the specific features inherent in the spoken mode. It is true, however, that the pressure exerted at present towards what is called "**conversationalisation**" of public discourses which can be observed especially in media talk, together with prevailing **informality** and **pseudo-intimacy** in certain spheres of the written language, such as the language of advertising, radio and television broadcasting, e-mail communication etc., will result in a re-evaluation of the relationship between speech and writing. Despite the increasing merger between the two norms, however, the identification of features which are typical of spoken utterances and those which prevail in writing is still at hand. Spoken utterances are primarily characterized by contracted forms, ellipsis, constant repetitions and restructuring, indistinct text boundaries, frequent pragmatic markers etc. Written language utilizes a set of devices such as text division, explicit cohesion, a higher level of sophistication represented by more elaborate grammatical structures, abstract vocabulary etc.

### ***1.2.1 Functionalist Pragmatics in the Prague School***

In his evaluation of the Prague School approach, Sgall stresses the fact that "semantics has always been understood as belonging to the core of the system of language in Praguian linguistics" (*Linguistic and Literary Studies in Eastern Europe*, vol. 41, 1994.278).

In the *Handbook of Pragmatics*, Sgall evaluates the contribution of the Prague School to the development of pragmatic linguistic thinking (1995.429-435). Sgall maintains that it was not exclusively language as an abstract system which was the centre of attention of Prague School scholars, but it was also the social and cultural dimension of language study which was equally important in the 1930s and 1940s.

The basic theoretical underpinning of the Prague School is oriented towards the **teleological principle**, i.e. "language and its development are conditioned by the function of language in communication" (Sgall 1995.433). The concept is of language being goal-oriented; the socio-cultural functioning of language is of primary importance.

Jakobson's distinction of language functions (1962), based on Bühler's tripartite division (1934), is the key towards the **functional analysis** of language means.

The Prague School approach is a merger of the cognitive, social and cultural study of language and communication. The social and cultural aspects of human communication are stressed by Havránek (as early as 1929) in his conception of functional styles. This conception reflects the stylistic differentiation within the language in use, according to which each style has a different purpose to fulfil. Attention has been paid to the difference between spoken and written language, mainly by Vachek (1976).

The approach which can be described as "diversity in unity" has found acclaim in present-day linguistic thinking. "It is generally accepted nowadays by linguists of all theoretical persuasions that there is, in reality, no such thing as a homogeneous, stylistically and socio-expressively undifferentiated language system" (Lyons 1995.340).

The functional sentence perspective theory, started by Mathesius (in his Czech terminology labelled *aktuální členění větné*), later developed by Firbas and his school (Svoboda, Golková, Urbanová, Chamonikolasová and others), interprets spoken and written language as the interplay of context, semantics, linear modification and prosodic features.

The notion of **communicative intention** which lies at the heart of functionalist pragmatics (Horn 1988.114) is the core concept of Firbas' theory (see Firbas 1992). For Firbas, the speaker's stance and the hearer's role in the disambiguation of the message are crucial in making the meaning of the message. Firbas' theory represents a point of departure for my own theoretical considerations and practical applications in the field of discourse analysis which are included in this treatise.

### 1.3 Semantic Indeterminacy in Authentic Conversation

Semantic indeterminacy can be defined as an expression of **intentional illocutionary opacity**, i.e. obscurity of meaning, in rendering the message reflecting the speaker's attitude.

My interest in this phenomenon arose in the 1980s, when I first gained access to spoken language materials published under the title *A Corpus of English Conversation* by Jan Svartvik and Randolph Quirk. The publication proved to be a great contribution for researchers, because the existence of spoken language corpora of this size has enabled linguists to study spoken English in depth and detail.

A mere observation of spoken language data shows that spoken language tends to be more indeterminate than written language owing to its spontaneity, immediacy and non-fluency. This claim applies to the speaker's characteristic. There is, of course, the hearer's part as well: in order to understand spoken lan-

guage, the hearer should not be confronted with means of expression of a high lexical density and elaborate structure. Indeterminacy facilitates perception and interpretation.

The aim of this monograph is to analyse patterns of semantic indeterminacy operating at the level of the utterance and the word. At the same time, this analysis is a contribution to **probabilistic grammar**, in harmony with Svartvik's observation: "...corpus studies will help to promote descriptively more adequate grammars" (1966.vii).

The existence of a corpus of spoken texts enables the researcher to obtain reliable data on the basis of which it is possible to generalize about the components of lexicogrammar in specific text types.

## 1.4 Meaning in Interaction

In discussing meaning in interaction, it will be useful to start my considerations with the following passage from Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1994.82):

"Then you should say what you mean," the March Hare went on.

"I do," Alice hastily replied, "at least—at least I mean what I say—that's the same thing, you know."

"Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter.

Discussing the principles of Firthian linguistics, Mitchell (1975.99) presents the interpretation of the extract: "One may approve of the Mad Hatter's intellectual misgivings, if not of his manners, when he tells Alice at the Tea Party that saying what she means and meaning what she says are not the same thing a bit—and he might have added that there is a good deal more than that to 'saying' and 'meaning'".

Lyons (1995.243) stresses the importance of utterance meaning: "The only access that one has to sentence meaning, which, as I mentioned earlier, is a theoretical construct, is via utterance meaning; and sentence meaning has no role to play, ultimately, other than the role that is assigned to it in the linguist's model of the production and interpretation of utterances".

In recent literature on pragmatics, speaker meaning has been emphasized by the majority of authors (e.g. Leech (1981), Bach and Harnish (1984), Sadock (1988), Wierzbicka (1991), Levinson (1995), Lyons (1995).

**Speaker meaning** represents the most relevant clue for the ultimate understanding and identification of the meaning of the message.

In the speaker–hearer interaction the hearer is capable of making inferences. Ideally, the speaker's meaning and the hearer's meaning are identical, or approximately the same. It has to be stressed, however, that meaning is created in the very process of interaction through which it is negotiated, and it is

therefore necessary to consider the notion of **interactive meaning** common to speaker and hearer alike. Thomas (1995.22) describes the interactiveness in these words: "...meaning is not something which is inherent in the words alone, nor is it produced by the speaker alone, nor by the hearer alone. Making meaning is a dynamic process, involving the negotiation of meaning between the speaker and hearer, the context of utterance (physical, social and linguistic) and the meaning potential of an utterance."

Schiffirin (1997) argues that in conversation two contexts meet, the prior context and the new context arising at the moment of speaking. These two contexts can be in harmony, or they can create a mismatch in which the intention of the speaker and the interpretation of the hearer can differ due to the "assumption of markedly different contexts".

For Leech (1981.340), "the mental state of intention is fundamental for the recovering of meaning, for the comprehension process and the interpretation of the illocutionary force". Lyons (1995.42) claims: "There are those who have seen utterer's meaning as being, ultimately, the basis for linguistic meaning". In the final chapter of his book, however, Lyons devotes a considerable amount of space to the explanation of **locutionary subjectivity** and the importance of **non-propositional, non-descriptive, social and expressive meaning**.

Lyons defines expressive meaning as "...the kind of meaning by virtue of which speakers express, rather than describe, their beliefs, attitudes and feelings" (1995.44).

Wierzbicka (1991.17) advocates the supremacy of subjective meaning: "Since the meanings conveyed in a natural language are inherently subjective and anthropocentric, they cannot be really divided into 'referential' and 'pragmatic', or 'denotational' and 'attitudinal'... All such meanings are culture-specific, subjective and anthropocentric,... referential and pragmatic at the same time."

The approach to meaning based on truth-conditions has recently been rejected due to the shift of linguists' attention from logical to attitudinal meaning. The logico-semantic interpretation of language is unsatisfactory and untenable with regard to **real language use**. Mey (1993.200) maintains that "...language use, of which conversation is such an egregious instance, is not about cases or facts or truths as such, but about what people think and feel, or think and feel others think and feel about cases, facts or maybe even truths; in short, about the world in which they live, and about their lives in this world".

The **social aspect of human communication** is dominant in the study of language use. According to Lyons (1995.300), "...the actual truth or falsity of the descriptive content of a referring expression is not directly relevant to its success. Normal human interaction is governed by a set of culturally determined conventions, amongst which truthfulness is often very properly moderated by politeness".

It seems to be questionable, however, whether "**culturally determined conventions**" can be described with scientific precision, because conventions of language use are changeable and differ with regard to the social spectrum.

The definition of the **existing language use** is equally problematic. What exactly is the amount of prescription in language description? Who represents the user?

Mey (1993.57) argues that “communication is not a matter of logic or truth, but of cooperation; not what I say, but what I *can* say, given the circumstances, and of what I *must* say, given my partner’s expectations”. In delimiting the scope of utterance meaning, Mey (1993.201) takes the view that “an utterance by itself is never enough of a meaning carrier” and “there is more to utterances than their abstract truth value”.

Similarly, Mitchell (1975.155) evaluates the contribution of Firth to the study of meaning: “Meaning was not *given* for Firth; it was waiting to be discovered and stated,....”

In summary it can be argued that meaning in conversation is created on the spot in the interaction process by the participants, their status and tenor and other constituents of the discourse (the setting, the situation etc.).

## 1.5 Principles Governing Conversational Behaviour

The relationship between the Cooperative Principle (CP) and the Politeness Principle (PP) is thoroughly discussed by Lakoff (1995). The CP itself cannot reflect all the aspects relevant to human communication. The status of **implicature** can extend the applicability of the maxims for phenomena such as politeness.

The question arises whether politeness and informativeness are part of the same system, or systems in competition. It is arguable that the two components are part of the same system and thus complementary. Cooperativeness and politeness enhance each other and are by no means counteractive. “So while politeness may entail more complex and convoluted communications that superficially seem to violate the CP or at least necessitate a significant degree of implicature, in fact precisely because it complicates forms and requires more work on the part of the addressee, it may facilitate understanding and compliance, ultimately functioning in favour of maximum cooperativeness” (Lakoff 1995.196-197).

Meier (1995) expresses reservations with regard to the interpretation of politeness presented by Brown and Levinson (1987), mainly due to the fuzziness between **negative** and **positive** politeness. The argument calls for “a broader view, one which leads to the rejection of equating politeness with specific speech acts, lexical items, or syntactic constructions” (Meier 1995.381).

In my view, politeness is closely related to **appropriateness** and **social harmony**, paying due respect to **social norms**, all of them constituting the notion of politeness.

I am aware of the constraints imposed by the context on the interpretation of politeness. **Politeness is context-sensitive**, and thus it cannot be measured solely as a linguistic issue by linguistic means.



My claim is that the sociolinguistic distinction between **formal and informal politeness** is functionally more relevant than the above-mentioned distinction between **negative and positive politeness**. I assume that the striking formal difference between the lengthy structure *It would be much appreciated if you could kindly join us in this venture*, as compared with the vague expression of the same content in the informal wording *Perhaps you could give me a helping hand*, carries more pragmatic weight than the distinction between negative and positive politeness strategy.

Thomas (1995) discusses various approaches towards the study of politeness. She supports the view that politeness cannot be explained apart from the context in which it is imparted. Politeness is also framed by the context of the utterance and reciprocated between the speaker and the hearer. **The social roles** of the participants in the communicative event are directly relevant in the expression of politeness.

An instance of the total approach to meaning advocated by Firth can be demonstrated in this complex view of politeness: "...such an addressive sentence in English as *silly old bastard* may indicate the speaker's appreciation of a favour rendered by a close friend and impugn neither the addressee's intelligence, his vigour, nor his antecedents; rather would it mark gratitude and affection, the latter in a society in which close friendship or intimacy is shown less demonstratively than in other cultures..." (Mitchell 1975.99-100).

In my opinion, the Politeness Principle complements the Cooperative Principle, which is in harmony with Leech's evaluation of politeness "rescuing the Cooperative Principle" (1983.80).

Politeness phenomena include **tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement and sympathy** (see Thomas 1995).