3. MEANING IN CONVERSATION REVISITED

In the following sections I will try to approach the controversial subject of meaning in conversation from several angles :

(1) the distinction between the sentence and the utterance
(2) the interrelation between cooperation and politeness
(3) the interdependence between the form and its function
(4) the functioning of context and co-text
(5) the interaction between the speaker and the hearer

3.1 Types of Meaning in Spoken Discourse

Levinson (1995) distinguishes between three levels (layers) of meaning, namely **sentence meaning, utterance-type meaning,** and **speaker meaning**.

In functional linguistics, a distinction is made between the sentence and the utterance. The distinction complies with the level of abstraction: the sentence is generally understood as a **prototype,** whereas the utterance is a concrete manifestation of the prototype in speech and writing, depending on the context of the situation. Bar-Hillel (1970.79) sees the utterance in the "depth of the pragmatic context which is necessary for the full understanding of various sentence-tokens".

Sentence meaning is the meaning of sentence constituents understood without any reference to a particular context. As such, it is not a sufficient clue to understanding the nuances of meaning in a particular situation. "By definition, the semantic representation of a sentence, as assigned to it by generative grammar, can take no account of such non-linguistic properties as, for example, the time and place of utterance, the identity of the speaker, the speaker's intentions, and so on" (Sperber and Wilson 1986.9).

The twofold sentence-utterance distinction can be extended in the way outlined by Levinson (1995, see the triple hierarchy introduced above).

Yet another distinction is proposed by Levinson: that of an **utterance type** and an **utterance token.** The utterance type is the stereotype which is generally encoded in a typical speech situation, whereas the utterance token is the nonce, unique speaker meaning expressed in a particular message under particular circumstances.
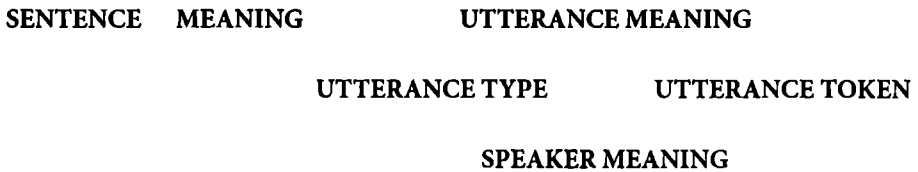
Fowler (1996.43) speaks about the meanings "authorized by the dominant interests of the culture", i.e. conventional coding, and **defamiliarization.** In Fowler's understanding "a piece of language in real use is *more than* a text put together by the basic conventions" (1996.93).

Communicative functions of the text give rise to **extra structures** and **extra meanings**: "In real communication—written as well as spoken—people are do-

ing more than just transmitting neutral propositions to one another in 'sensibly' formed texts. Their language assumes extra structuration reflecting their personal purposes in communication, their social statuses and relationships, and the nature of the setting within which language is used" (Fowler 1996.93-94).

The relationship between the levels of meaning can be represented by the following chart:

Chart 1: Levels of Meaning in Discourse

SENTENCE MEANING   UTTERANCE MEANING

       UTTERANCE TYPE   UTTERANCE TOKEN

       SPEAKER MEANING

In my view, the existence of the utterance type can be supported by the existence of the same code for all users of the given language community, i.e. the process of **"habitualization"**, whilst **the "defamiliarization"** process is closely connected with the individual use necessitated by the search for **interestingness, irony, politeness** etc. and in making the meaning of the utterance "strange", i.e. non-familiar, defamiliarized (see Fowler 1996). The conventional, standardized language is thus an important entity for potential extra meanings. Everyday use of language constantly extends and opposes the existing norms through the idiosyncrasy and creativity of the language user in specific speech situations.

The existence of **two manifestations of utterance**, the **utterance type** and the **utterance token**, is also advocated by Daneš (1964.229). Daneš distinguishes three stages in the process of generalization of the content of the term "sentence":

(1) sentence as a singular and individual speech event (the utterance token);
(2) sentence as one of all possible different minimal communicative units of the given language (the utterance type);
(3) sentence as an abstract structure or configuration (the sentence).

The **utterance token** (in Daneš's terminology **utterance event**) represents the concrete manifestations of an utterance in authentic speech.

The utterance **type** (in Daneš's terminology **utterance**) is an instance of communication bridging the level of manifestation and the level of abstraction. It represents a **speech act**, i.e. the type of utterance such as a constative, directive, commissive or an acknowledgement (see Bach and Harnish 1984), or, according to Searle (1975b) representatives, directives, commissives and expressives. In Austin's terminology (1962) these are expositives, exercitives, commissives and behabitives.

The terminology used by different linguists does not fully correspond. In my understanding it represents the existence of a type of utterance having a particular illocutionary force in a particular speech situation.

The traditional speech act classification is not supported by all linguists. The argument against classification objects that the force only comes into existence in a particular speech situation as a **situated speech event**.

In the Mathesius workshop lecture series (Prague, November 1997), Mey explained the **context of possibilities** which represents "the affordable rather than thinkable and cognizable". In his view, the illocutionary force is derived from the situation itself, the situation including the linguistic manifestation of the speech act.

3.2 The Notion of Semantic Indeterminacy

Subjective meaning which becomes dominant in authentic, spontaneous informal conversation results in **semantic indeterminacy**. The importance of study of this particular phenomenon is stressed by Lyons, who speaks about "genuine indeterminacy in the semantic structure of natural languages" (1995.149). In the same source, Lyons (1995.xvi) sets the task: "Semanticists, more than most, must train themselves to identify and control the ambiguities, the vagueness and the indeterminacy of everyday language".

Indirectness, impersonality, attenuation and **accentuation accompanied by vagueness** are manifestations of semantic indeterminacy and negotiability of meaning in authentic English conversation.

Semantic indeterminacy is understood as an expression of intentional illocutionary opacity (obscurity of meaning) reflecting speaker attitude in the process of interaction. Lyons (1995.49) speaks about "genuine indeterminacy in the semantic structure of natural languages" which is inherently present in the language system. Frawley (1992.20) explains the existence of indeterminacy by the discrepancy between extension and intension: "The referential opacity is not the result of the facts of the world, because the extension is constant, but of how the world is represented, the intension".

Mey (1993.198) draws the conclusion that "...the truth-functional view is inadequate for explaining any kind of discourse... precisely because it reduces the language to a piece of formal machinery and the user (if the user is indeed allowed to be present at the creation of the text in question) to a manipulator of built-in truth tables".

This standpoint is highly tenable in pragmatics: it is not the dyadic relation between the name and referent typical of traditional semantics (answering the question *What does the word mean?*), but the triadic relation between **the name**, **referent** and **language user** which answers the question *What did you mean by using the word(s)?* (see Leech 1982.6). Frege's concept of truth questions the

relationship between the words and their referents (thoughts), because "words cannot be measured for truth, just in case they express a thought which is" (see Travis 1997.87-107).

Travis (1997) draws a distinction between words and thoughts. He claims that the semantics of thoughts is precise, whereas the semantics of words is unclear: "Thoughts are identified precisely by their semantics, whereas words are identified by shape, syntax or spelling, or by the event of their production. The identity of words leaves their content open" (1997.103). Van Dijk (1997.8) stresses the role of the language user in the process of communication: "...meaning is *assigned* to a discourse by language users". He is convinced that "...content is a vague term" (1997.9).

3.3 Speaker Attitude and Speaker Commitment

Attitude factors are discussed by Cummings and Ono (1997.124). Their role in the content of the utterance is specified in the following way: "Unlike information flow factors, attitude factors reflect neither the content of an utterance nor its informational aspects, but rather how the person views or assesses the state of affairs being described—or how they wish to be seen by their interlocutor as viewing it".

A question can be raised whether it is at all feasible to separate the "content" of the message from speaker attitude. My view is that the separation of the matter-of-fact content from the attitudinal aspects is inadequate, if not impossible; in a "proper context" this distinction is virtually impossible: "That is, the world of users is, for pragmatics, the very condition of its existence" (Mey 1994.3264).

Speaker attitude is inseparable from the notion of modality: "The notion of modality, however, is much more vague and leaves open a number of possible definitions, though something along the lines of Lyons' (1977.452) opinion or attitude of the speaker seems promising (Palmer 1986.2). Palmer also provides a definition of modality: "Modality could, that is to say, be defined as the grammaticalization of speaker's (subjective) attitudes and opinions" (ibid.).

Frawley (1992.387) understands modality as "a kind of epistemic (or knowledge-based) **deixis**: "The basic denotation of modality is the opposition of actual and nonactual worlds, or more technically, realis/irrealis". To take stance thus implies the comparison of **an expressed world** with a **reference world**; the remoteness of one world from the other and their compatibility or non-compatibility is central to the notion of modality.

Another distinction which is crucial in understanding modality is that of **knowledge and belief**. Knowledge reflects the speaker's commitment to the truth of the proposition, whereas belief allows for various interpretations of what the speaker is stating. Declarative sentences thus rarely express knowl-

edge, they rather contain the speaker's belief: "It is probable that there is, in most languages (except those with wholly evidential systems...), a declarative that expresses belief, not knowledge. It is relevant that Grice (1975), when he deals with the Cooperative Principle between speaker and hearer, offers, as one of his maxims, the maxim of Quality... These are indications of belief, not knowledge. Hearers do not expect the truth, or what is known to be true, but only what the speaker believes to be true" (Palmer 1993.83-84).

Semantic indeterminacy is thus understood as **epistemic remoteness** expressed via the **speaker's attitude or state of knowledge**. It is a semantic phenomenon which reflects the strength of a speaker's commitment to what he/she is saying. **Semantic indeterminacy** is based on the distance between the **factual** and **non-factual (expressed) world**.

3.4 Pragmatic and Semantic Indeterminacy

Intentional use of semantic indeterminacy is manifested in indirectness, impersonality, attenuation, accentuation and vagueness. All these phenomena modify the illocutionary force of the message.

The entry *indeterminate* in the *Collins Dictionary of the English Language* is defined as follows:

(1) uncertain in extent, amount or nature
(2) not definite, inconclusive
(3) unable to be predicted, calculated, or deduced

Indirectness is a manifestation of indeterminacy modifying the speech act. An act of stating can adopt the illocutionary force of an inquiry, an act of directing can be expressed through an inquiry etc.

Impersonality is a manifestation of indeterminacy with regard to speaker/hearer identity. Speaker/hearer interaction is indeterminate and the roles of the participants are modified. The speaker's individuality is backgrounded, the roles are institutionalized. Person deixis, indefinite pronouns, passive voice and existential predication represent the range from informal, i.e. personal, to partly formal, i.e. semi-personal and formal, i.e. impersonal manner of presentation of the message.

Attenuation is a modification of the illocutionary force resulting in an intentional weakening of the utterance meaning. Most common reasons for attenuation are politeness, detachment, uncertainty, lack of specification etc.

Accentuation is a modification of the illocutionary force resulting in the reinforcement of the utterance meaning. The reason for accentuation is mainly solidarity; in some instances, however, the expression of a negative attitude can be achieved.

Semantic indeterminacy is frequently accompanied by vagueness. **Vagueness** is defined as a lack of explicitness and precision with regard to the choice of lexical items and their functioning in the utterance.

In this treatise my concern in analysing conversation is primarily linguistic, connected with the contribution of various linguistic means to the processing of meaning. My analysis of conversational discourse allows me to put forward the hypothesis that in informal conversation the majority of elicitations are directed towards confirmation-seeking. In confirmation-seeking an important role is played by **indirectness**.

In agreement with Leech (1980) and Lakoff (1982), I believe that the main function of language used in conversation is determined by "the general principle of maintaining a social equilibrium" (Leech 1980.94). This goal is best achieved by such elicitations which develop and establish "rapport" (i.e. close agreement and understanding). In Lakoff's words "rapport supersedes the Cooperative principle" (1982.40).

It has been proved in my investigation that eliciting confirmation is the most frequent discourse tactic creating an atmosphere of understanding and agreement in a spontaneous, reciprocal exchange of views.

The explanation of the predilection for this type of elicitation can be found in the process of interaction itself. When eliciting confirmation, the speaker makes allowances for the hearer's manifestation of his/her individuality and fosters friendly relations by granting the hearer the possibility to express his/her own standpoint. Differences of opinion, as well as different points of view can thus be openly voiced.