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LUDMILA URBANOVÁ

## ON THE LANGUAGE OF AUTHENTIC ENGLISH CONVERSATION

*Dedicated to the late Professor Jan Firbas*

*This paper was originally presented in Czech at the defence of my habilitation dissertation “Semantic Indeterminacy in Authentic English Conversation”, held at the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University Brno on 2nd July 1998. Professor Jan Firbas as my teacher, supervisor and colleague contributed much to the high standard and recognition of research into spoken language. I will always treasure his unceasing motivation and support through which he has influenced my scholarly orientation.*

### **1. Spoken Versus Written Language**

Authentic, spontaneous, informal English conversation is traditionally viewed as “the most fundamental and pervasive means of conducting human affairs” (Crystal 1987.116). At the same time, however, there is 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 (see Crystal & Davy 1969). 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 the 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 smooth 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 above by Firth, the knowledge of the socio-cultural context in which the communication takes place.

Certain types of utterances, although they are grammatically correct, can be dispreferred because they are not in harmony with the principles of human communication (the Co-operative Principle and the Politeness Principle).

For instance, the use of directives in face-to-face communication tends to be 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 (an anacoluthon) can appear in a situation in which it is accepted as appropriate. It fulfils the communicative needs required in that 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 an inadequate evaluation of the features of spoken language labelled negatively as "inexplicit", "incomplete", "disjointed", "non-fluent" etc. (see Crystal & Davy 1969).

In my study "On Discourse Functions in the English Language of Conversation" (1991:134) I explained the difference between spoken and the 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. The language of conversation is predominantly characterized by its interactional (expressive, emotive, interpersonal, social expressive) function."

In harmony with Vachek (1976.412-413) I make the claim that spoken language and written language constitute two different norms which are not interchangeable. Thus formal and semantic peculiarities of conversation can be best explained with regard to discourse tactics current in spoken discourse. Comparison with written language is to the disadvantage of specific features inherent in the spoken mode.

## 2. Speaker Meaning in Authentic Conversation

In face-to-face conversation, the speaker is inclined to express his/her opinions, beliefs and standpoints. Such meanings reflecting a high degree of subjectivity are called **attitudinal**. At the same time, they are **interpretative**, representing a deictic relationship between the reality expressed by the speaker and the extralinguistic reality. Conversation in its informal shape is primarily phatic, expressive and conative. The referential function tends to be backgrounded, its role is dependent on the conversation genre. For instance, in a professional interview when “talking shop”, or in an official, formal telephone conversation the referential function is more dominant than in small talk.

### Example 3: informal face-to-face conversation

*A yes I realize that I wondered just how many other people sort of came in*

*C yes well there are a lot of people who seem to be registered for degrees but who work elsewhere or are doing part-time degrees (S.1.5.756-764)*

Wierzbicka (1991.17) supports the view that the subjective meaning is inseparable from the referential, denotational 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.” On the other hand, Allen (1986.75-76) differentiates between sense, denotation and meaning, the **sense** being “the property of meaning in abstract categories such as sentence, lexeme, morpheme”, **denotation** “the use of sense in speaking about some particular world”, and **utterance meaning** “what hearer H rationally determines that speaker S intends his meaning to convey”.

## 3. The Role of Context in Conversation

In many aspects, conversational language is heavily **contextually embedded**, which means that the contextual clues are crucial for the ultimate interpretation of the spoken message. In different contexts the same message can have very different meanings.

The context is defined, in harmony with Mey (1993.184), as “the entirety of

circumstances (not only linguistic) that surround the production of language". Since this definition is rather broad and vague, further specification of context seems to be necessary. Allen (1986.36) distinguishes between the physical context or setting, the world spoken of and the textual environment or co-text.

Drawing on Firbas (1992), I find it useful to distinguish between the **broad context** which is non-linguistic (the context of general experience and the situational context), the **narrow context** which is represented by linguistic means (the verbal context), as well as **the cognitive context** (communicative intentions of the speaker).

#### 4. Characteristic Features of Conversational Language

The absence of clear-cut boundaries and discernible units in conversation results in a high degree of **oscillation**, **fuzziness** and **clustering** of language means utilized in the exchanges.

English conversation has a **marked prosodic modulation**, since intonation in English has a high functional load. Especially such tunes as the fall-rise, rise-fall and other complex tunes contribute substantially to the expression of **implications**, i.e. meanings expressed by the tune only, superimposing subjective interpretations to the wording of the message.

**Informal conversation** is produced on the spot which makes the task for the speaker very demanding. In Crystal and Davy's terms (1969.115), conversation is a "series of jumps". Halliday (1990.86) introduces the basic grammatical unit in conversation labelled "**clause complex**" and justifies its existence in the following way: "The natural consequence of the spoken language's preference for representing things as processes is that it has to be able to represent not one process after another in isolation but whole configurations of processes related to each other in a number of different ways." There is a tendency towards clustering, recurrence and constant reformulation of grammatical structures in informal conversation.

In semantic terms, meanings in conversation tend to be unclear and open to interpretation. The notion of semantic indeterminacy can be defined as **intentional illocutionary opacity**, i.e. **obscurity of meaning** in reflecting the speaker attitude. Lyons (1995.149) speaks about "genuine indeterminacy in the semantic structure of natural languages".

In informal English conversation, semantic indeterminacy is manifested in notions such as indirectness, impersonality, attenuation and accentuation. Vagueness of expression is also a phenomenon which is closely linked with indeterminacy, although it appears at a different level of linguistic analysis.

#### 5. Semantic Indeterminacy Phenomena in Informal Conversation

Let me discuss the notions of semantic indeterminacy in detail, since they form recurrent patterns in authentic, spontaneous, informal conversation and contribute to the meaning potential in this genre to a great extent.

**Indirectness** is a modification of the illocutionary force of a certain speech act. E.g. an act of stating can adopt the illocutionary force of an inquiry, an act of directing can be worded as an inquiry, or it can take the form of a statement etc.

Indirectness in conversation is frequently rendered through a **declarative question**, the declarative sentence structure being preferred to an interrogative sentence structure. My findings are in contradiction with Crystal and Davy's claim that "Interrogative sentence types are particularly frequent" (1969.112).

In pragmatic terms, the English declarative sentence marked by a tune which conveys implications (especially the fall-rise), appended by an afterthought (*if you like, if necessary*) or a prompter (*you know, you see*) represents a more acceptable way of asking which functions as **ethnographically appropriate** (Hymes 1974.79).

In addition, **question embedding verbs** in phrases of the type *I think, I hope, I suppose* etc. frequently substitute direct questions in informal English conversation.

Indirectness varies as to degrees. Declarative questions are considered to be indirect questions. Question-tags are understood as a semi-direct way of asking, combining a declarative sentence structure with a tag.

My research into the configuration of the question types in different conversation genres shows that the increasing level of formality has a direct bearing on the balance between question types. Spontaneous face-to-face conversation reflecting informality, chattiness and intimacy tends to be markedly indirect, since the degree of mutual background knowledge is comparatively high. The preponderance of indirect questions corresponds with the way "rapport" is established in small talk.

#### Example 4:

*C but I think London is one of the few places where you have to create your own relaxation the place itself doesn't encourage you*

*A not at all no oh (S.1.8.621-626)*

**Impersonality** is a manifestation of indeterminacy with regard to speaker-hearer identity. Through impersonality the speaker-hearer interaction becomes subdued and the roles of the participants are modified. The speaker is backgrounded, the roles are institutionalized. Person deixis, indefinite pronouns, passive voice and existential predication demonstrate the range from personal to semi-personal and impersonal manner of presentation of the message.

#### Example 5:

*and there's too much you know the sense of hollowness at the bottom (S.1.8.514)*

**Attenuation** is an intentional weakening of the illocutionary force of the utterance. Most common reasons for the use of attenuation are negative and

positive politeness, assumptions and queries, unspecified reference, detachment, depersonalization, non-commitment, afterthought, uncertainty, lack of specification etc.

**Example 6:**

*no I think actually I think they are a bit too big you know for my room (S.1.8.81-83)*

**Accentuation** is a modification of the illocutionary force resulting in the reinforcement of utterance meaning. Accentuation in face-to-face conversation most frequently conveys positive attitudes, less frequently it underscores negative emotions, which can even be understood as vulgar on part of the hearer.

Accentuation markers can be divided into **speaker-oriented**, **hearer-oriented** and **discourse organizing**.

Speaker-oriented markers emphasize the speaker's point, hearer-oriented markers involve the hearer in the message. Discourse-organizing markers are primarily attention-catching, they foreground and emphasize certain parts of the message.

**Example 7:**

*that one I definitely thought I'm not going to have because I would find the colours depressing (S.1.8.489-491)*

**Example 8:**

*I was in fact secretary to the registrar (S.1.5.1240)*

**Vagueness** as a semantic phenomenon differs from indirectness, impersonality, attenuation and accentuation, operating at the utterance level, because it operates at the level of the word.

Vagueness is an expression of approximation, tentativeness and lack of precision with which the extralinguistic reality is generally tackled in informal conversation. Vagueness complies with openness and relaxed atmosphere which is characteristic of informal interaction. Its use is justified by such motives as self-defence, self-protection, withholding information, persuasion, politeness (especially informal politeness), informality and chattiness etc.

**Example 9: informal politeness**

*perhaps you could give me a ring back (S.8.3.379)*

**Example 10: persuasion**

*does he want me to come I probably will anyway actually (S.8.3.505-506)*

In conclusion it can be summarized that semantic indeterminacy is an interpretation of the reality based on belief rather than knowledge, it is a verbalization of modality. Palmer (1986:16) defines modality as "...the

grammaticalization of speaker's (subjective) attitudes and opinions". Patterns of semantic indeterminacy are an expression of modality resulting from the comparison of the expressed world, i.e. the subjective expression of the reality, and the real world. In this respect these patterns largely enrich the meaning potential of language, showing sensitivity to the communicative context.

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