
2. FORM AND MEANING IN CONVERSATION

2.1 Indistinct Form and Implicit Meaning

Informal, spontaneous conversation is, from the point of view of its form, a loosely structured system. The basic unit of the utterance is not easy to identify and it frequently remains indiscernible (see the transcribed texts from the London-Lund Corpus in the appendix). An even more demanding task is connected with the interpretation of the message, as the meaning expressed by it is, in Leech's words, "to some degree negotiable" (1980.127). The form of the message, as well as its meaning, are open to interpretation. As Leech points out "...syntactically well-formed sentences and semantically well-behaved truth-conditions are not compatible with pragmatics" (1990.173).

The pragmatic era which started with the publication of Lakoff's article "On Generative Semantics" (1971) followed by another article of his "Presupposition and relative well-formedness" (1971) refutes the Chomskyan criterion of **well-formedness**. Van Dijk (1997.16) justifies the existence of structures which lack formal distinctions: "And yet, instead of simply treating such manifestations of messiness as 'errors' or 'deviations' from general rules, we need to study them in their own right". This standpoint draws on Saussure (1966.6) who advocates the study of language in all its forms: "In each period the linguist must consider not only correct speech and flowery language, but all other forms of expression as well". Lyons (1995.229) admits that his (and others') attitude towards the notion of **grammaticality** and **semantic well-formedness** has undergone substantial changes: "...I would now less readily classify as ungrammatical (or indeed as semantically ill-formed) actual or potential utterances which, though unacceptable in most normal contexts, could be motivated, and then seen as acceptable, with minimal adjustment of our normal ontological assumptions".

Normal **non-fluency** (Crystal and Davy 1969) accompanied by typical **hesitation features** is a striking characteristic of spoken English. Halliday (1990.76) mentions brief silences (unfilled pauses), false starts, repetitions, filled pauses and parenthetical remarks. He characterizes spoken language as "tentative and spur-of-the-moment" (1990.77). This evaluation, however, excludes the claim that spoken language is formless.

Halliday (1990.78) makes a valuable suggestion that both spoken and written language should be interpreted within the framework of three interrelated aspects, namely **function**, **medium** and **form**. The function of the medium of the spoken language is lucidly evaluated by Vachek (1976.413): "The two outstanding features of spoken utterances appear then to be the immediateness and readiness of the reaction they provide".

2.2 Language Functions in Spoken Discourse

Conversation is understood as an **exchange** between at least two interlocutors who share some degree of **mutual knowledge** (I would prefer the term *experience*) determined by their socio-cultural background and whose communicative intention triggers their interaction.

As to the function(s), it is generally agreed that in conversation functions fostering interaction and social contact prevail. Thus the functions of the language used are primarily **phatic**, **conative** and **expressive** rather than referential.

In conversation facts appear, but they become backgrounded and overshadowed by **the attitudinal patterns** of human speech behaviour. Furthermore, it is not only language which is used for communication. Paralinguistic features, mainly gesticulation and facial expressions, also play a crucial role in shaping the message, together with situational aspects of the **spatio-temporal setting**. Due to the preponderance of attitudinal functions in conversation, the degree of subjectivity in the message increases and the degree of facticity decreases.

I am aware of the intricacy of delimiting conversation as speech behaviour, because such behaviour is difficult to generalize. There are, in fact, instances of conversational behaviour ranging from **greetings**, **short exchanges** and **small talk** on the one hand to large **panel discussions** and **interviews** broadcast on the radio and T.V. on the other, i.e. the scale private vs. public.

The conversation texts I have used for analysis and exemplification are both private and public. All of them are samples of **impromptu speech**, i.e. spontaneous and unplanned, or only roughly planned renderings of personal views. In line with the classification based on *English Corpus Linguistics* (1990), the material I investigate is represented by **face-to-face conversation**, **telephone conversation** and **interviews**. Their choice was determined by the primary objective of my research: an attempt at drawing a comparison between indeterminacy phenomena in different conversation genres.

2.3 Conversation as Context-Embedded Interaction

Mey (1993.184) defines the **context** as “the entirety of circumstances (not only linguistic) that surround the production of language”, whereas the **co-text** is interpreted as “that portion of text which (more or less immediately) surrounds it”.

Lyons (1995.241) refers to his previous work (1960.3) in which he draws a distinction between **environment** and **context**, consequently “drawing a distinction between what was in effect the Firthian notion of having meaning (or being meaningful) and the notion of having (such-and-such) a meaning”.

Contexts of situation are understood as “typical, recurrent, and repeatedly observable” and each context is placed “within the wider context of culture” (Firth 1964).

The context as a category does not exist *a priori*; it is created in the process of communication and influences the processing of the message. Sadock (1988.192) maintains that “...most sentences can accomplish quite different things, when uttered in different contexts, and can do so in virtue of the addressee’s recognition of the speaker’s intention to accomplish those effects”.

Travis (1997) speaks about “context-fixing properties” that words have and concludes that “words admit of interpretations, then conceivably they may bear different understandings on different occasions for understanding them” (1997.103). In another remark, Travis stresses the role of context: “...the semantics of words—how they are rightly understood—may be an occasion-sensitive affair” (1997.103-104).

Some linguists claim the context should not be equated with mutual knowledge. Sperber and Wilson (1982.70-71) claim that “...although mutual knowledge would be necessary for an absolute identification, a reasonable identification can be achieved without it”. Mey (1993.206) defends the idea that shared or mutual knowledge “which conversation presupposes is not always given; indeed, only through conversation are we able to build up this knowledge, to supplement it, to refine it”.

My delimitation of the **context** comprises the **social, political, cultural** and other **norms and expectations** and their effect on the understanding of the message *hic and nun*. Van Dijk (1997.17) assumes that “...in addition to individual cognition, discourse especially involves sociocultural cognition”. He views the process of understanding as a “tentative” one “which allows for continuous reinterpretation” (1997.18).

2.4 Delimiting the Basic Unit of Spoken Discourse

Conversation differs from other styles mainly due to its arrangement, which, in the case of authentic spontaneous speech, lacks certain formal and factual distinctions. By a different arrangement I mean especially **the circular rather than linear flow of speech** resulting in reformulation, repetition, overlap, recurrence of the topic etc. Taking into consideration conversation phenomena, e.g. “inexplicitness”, “incompleteness”, “randomness of the subject-matter”, “general lack of planning”, “normal non-fluency” (see Crystal and Davy 1969.102-104), it follows that conversation structure is not easily analysable; its basic unit is frequently obscured for straight identification.

In my present considerations I frequently draw on Halliday (1990.79): “The spoken language is, in fact, no less structured and highly organized than the

written" (see p. 12). Let me add here that the spoken language, however, displays **a different level of complexity** which is structured in different terms.

Halliday (1990.79ff.) uses the term "**lexical sparsity**" for semantic indeterminacy. The degree of lexical density in conversational language being low, the words used do not necessarily denote the objects of the extralinguistic reality. The content of the words has to be matched with the spatial and temporal setting. Through this complexity, the hearer is able to grasp the meaning which the speaker wishes to convey.

Crystal and Davy (1969.110) introduce the phenomenon of **loose coordination** of the utterance structure. In their interpretation, the **clause-complexes** characteristic of syntactic structures in conversation display an intricate grammatical structure due to their spur-of-the-moment existence. In other words, the speaker has little time to polish the grammatical structures he/she spontaneously produces.

Halliday (1990.86) justifies the occurrence of the clause-complex by its ability to reflect the state of affairs as a process: "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". It is a common feature of conversation that it takes place in a "series of jumps" (Crystal and Davy 1969.115). The structure of conversation is not only loose, but also elliptical, characterized by **syntactic condensation** (Nosek 1964).

Fowler (1996.85) argues that "ellipsis is a very important cohesive device in dialogue, a guarantee that speakers are concentrating together on a single topic and on the background knowledge relevant to the topic. In fictional dialogue, ellipsis suggests intimacy, intensity".

Miller (1995.116) poses the title question "Does spoken language have sentences?"; anticipating three different solutions to the problem. The spoken text can be regarded as a collection of sentences, or as just one sentence, or as a collection of clauses. There is yet another solution presented by conversational analysts, namely the division of spoken interaction into four hierarchical levels: **the exchange, the turn, the move and the act** (see Stenström 1990).

I assume that in this division conversation is primarily understood as a manifestation of social contact. The way language works, however, is to some extent disguised by this approach.

The **clause** is considered to be **the basic carrier of meaning**, not only from the point of view of its form, since "the clause is the locus of the densest dependency and distributional properties" (Miller 1995.127), but also from the point of view of its content: the clause conveys the meaning in an easily decipherable way. This view is supported by Halliday (1990.67-68) who claims that "the clause is a functional unit with a triple construction of meaning", namely the representation of the phenomena of experience, the expression of speech function and the bearer of the message.

Lyons (1995:235) speaks in favour of Miller's argument that clauses are the basic units of syntax and claims that "sentences are best defined in terms of clauses, rather than conversely". It can be argued, however, that a certain proportion of conversational structure is **non-clausal**, in which case the clause would still serve as a basic, "raw" structure from which the ultimate meaning of an **ellipsis** or a **syntactic anacoluthon** can be inferred.

Example 3:

how long to actual you know exchanging of keys and contract (S.8.1.170-171)

Another typical feature of authentic conversation is the tendency to use **clusters of utterances** rather than a single speech act occurrence. There is a tendency towards **explanatory chattiness**: a general remark is accompanied by a number of subsequent elicitations making the meaning of the first elicitation more specific.

Example 4:

it was well the course was well thought out there was nothing wrong with it at all it was just his manner (S.1.6.823-826)

I think what I like really you know probably just something I can get lost inside of you know a landscape or something I used to have a large mountainscape in my room which was /m/ useful for that you could drift away out of the environment whereas I think with a portrait or a very positive picture like a stukes I think you bounce back don't you at yourself really (S.1.8.458-473)

I find it necessary to distinguish between **the level of complexity of the syntactic structure** on the one hand and the final **semantic completion** of the message on the other. A highly complex syntactic structure is not necessarily a carrier of the same illocutionary force as a brief, to-the-point elicitation. Contextual clues are the ultimate arbitration. For instance, in an emergency situation the one-word communication "Help" is more adequate and appropriate than a lengthy explanation.

In the functional sentence perspective theory (see Firbas 1997:51-94), it is always the rheme of the utterance which has to be expressed by the speaker and identified by the hearer; otherwise the message would not be imparted.