English Discourse Analysis:
Topic 5: Analysing Casual Conversation

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5. Analysing Casual Conversation

Contents

5.1 What is Casual Conversation?
5.2 Transcribing casual conversation
5.3 Analysing Casual Conversation
Conversation can be:

– Transactional (pragmatic): we talk to others to facilitate the exchange of goods and services (buying things, getting information, etc.)
– Phatic: we talk to people to maintain (or create) friendships.

• Conversation for phatic reasons is called ‘casual conversation’. It is usually not directed at any purpose other than to pass the time, or to make or strengthen friendships.

5. Analysing Casual Conversation
5.1 What is Casual Conversation?

Pragmatic conversation: Has a well-defined and usually often-repeated structure:

S1  yes please
S2  can I have these two like that
S1  yes
S1  one's forty-five
S1  one's twenty-five
S2  and have you got ... the new one of these ...
S1  yes
S1  how many would you like?
S2  four please
S1  two of each?
S2  what have you got?
S1  uh there's two different designs on the .....
Casual conversation: It is a lot harder to see regularities in the structure of the discourse, although there are some patterns:

Lana: Hi, how are you
Gercy: Hi, I'm fine thanks, how are you?
Lana: I'm fine too, So what are you doing?
Gercy: Nothing Lana, What are you doing?
Lana: I'm watching tv. So why don't you do anything?
Gercy: I'm kinda bored, I can't find anything to do
Lana: I have an idea, come round here for lunch...
Gercy: Bye!
Lana: Bye, see you soon.

Greetings
Enquiry about current Activity
Planning joint activity
Farewells

• See page 37-39 of class pack.
• Important points:
  1. Overlaps:
     Fran:  He’s funny == and she’s insane?
     Brad: == All Germans are in==sane.
  2. Nonoverlapping interruptions:
     Fran:  He’s funny and==
     Brad: == Can we go now?
  3. Untranscribable:
     Brad: He said he was ()
  4. Nonverbal accompanying action: [she drops her fork]
5. Analysing Casual Conversation

5.3 Analysing Casual Conversation

Moves, Exchanges, Turns
- Move: each independent speech act in the conversation
- Turn: a sequence of moves by the same speaker
- Exchange: the set of moves which together develop a proposition (or proposal)

| Exchange 1 | S1: I saw John today. |
| Exchange 2 | S2: Not since last year. |
| Exchange 3 | S3: Has he changed much? |

| Move | Exchange 1 | S1: I saw John today. |
| Move | Turn 1 | |
| Move | Exchange 2 | S2: Not since last year. |
| Move | Turn 2 | |
| Move | Exchange 3 | S3: Has he changed much? |
| Move | Turn 3 | |

5.3 Analysing Casual Conversation: moves

- PB: Proposition Base
- PC: Proposition Complete
- PS: Proposition Support
- PR: Proposition Reject
- PD: Deny Knowledge

- INITIATE-TYPE
- MOVE-TYPE
- RESPOND-TYPE
- question
- statement
- answer
- agree
- deny-knowledge
- disagree
- initiate
- respond
- move
5. Analysing Casual Conversation
5.3 Analysing Casual Conversation: exchange

- An ‘exchange’ is a sequence of speech acts (‘moves’) negotiating a single proposition/proposal:

  J: Do you want to go to Disneyland next week? (PB)
  M: Sure, why not. (PC)
  J: Great! (PS)

  J: I am the greatest (PC)
  M: No you are not... (PR)
     ....I am. (PC)

5. Analysing Casual Conversation
5.3 Analysing Casual Conversation: Measuring Power

In conversation, we can measure power in terms of two dimensions:

- **Control of topic**: who has control of the topics being discussed, and thus, we explore who initiates each of the exchanges, and who just responds.

- **Primary Knower**: Concerned with who has the knowledge on the topics being discussed, which can be measured in terms of the number of PC moves made by each speaker (and also assessing PR and PD moves).
5. Analysing Casual Conversation

5.3 Analysing Casual Conversation: Measuring Power

See handout for exercises on measuring initiation and completion to measure personal power.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I/R</th>
<th>P/W</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>P:</td>
<td>Did you get a look at the one in the car?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>R W:</td>
<td>I saw his face, yeah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>P:</td>
<td>What sort of age was he?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>W:</td>
<td>About 45.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>He was wearing a…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>P:</td>
<td>And how tall?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>W:</td>
<td>Six foot one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>P:</td>
<td>Six foot one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hair?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>W:</td>
<td>Dark and curly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>Is this going to take long?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>I've got to collect the kids from school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>P:</td>
<td>Not much longer, no.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td>What about his clothes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>W:</td>
<td>He was a bit scruffy-looking, blue trousers, black…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>P:</td>
<td>Jeans?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>W:</td>
<td>Yeah.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Analysing Casual Conversation

5.3 Analysing Casual Conversation: Turns

- A turn is simply the sequences of moves by a speaker during which the other participant(s) do not speak. Turns are not co-extensive with exchanges, as a turn may begin with a response to one exchange, and continue with the initiation of another, e.g.,

  Exchange 1  
  S1: I saw John today.  
  Have you seen him lately?  

  Exchange 2  
  S2: Not since last year.  
  Has he changed much?  

  Exchange 3  
  S3: Yes, …  

- Sometimes a speaker’s turn will consist of a series of statements (e.g., if they are telling a story, recounting events, etc.). The other speaker will occasionally utter a backchannel move, e.g., ‘ahah’, ‘oh’, ‘hmmm’, which shows they are listening (acting as a supporting move) but without actually taking the floor.
5. Analysing Casual Conversation
5.3 Analysing Casual Conversation: Turns

- Importance of Turns in analysing discourse: longer turns mean you have control of the floor, which is often a sign of power (if you can control the conversation better, you end up telling YOUR stories, rather than listening to others).
- Not always: a person may talk more out of nervousness, while the person with more power lets them rave on.
- OR one participant may enjoy listening (in general or to this speaker) regardless of the differences in power.
- SO, all interpretation of turn length needs to take into account the general context of the conversation, especially the participants.
- Somewhat circular...

5. Analysing Casual Conversation
5.3 Analysing Casual Conversation: Interruptions

- In dialogue, there are expectations about whose turn it is to speak. One speaker can break these expectations in various ways.
- Firstly, the interruption can occur while the other is speaking, e.g.,
  A: Can you tell me ...
  B: Don’t bother me right now.
- Alternatively, the interruption can occur between moves. This could involve a forced taking of the turn (e.g., taking the turn before the other participant was willing to pass it):
  A: I went to the market today, and ...
  B: Did you get some meat?
- Sometime the turn is voluntarily passed, but the new speaker, rather than continuing the exchange begun by the other, starts a new one:
  A: Can you tell me the time?
  B: Did you see John today? (ignoring the question)
5. Analysing Casual Conversation
5.3 Analysing Casual Conversation: Interruptions

• Interruption between social equals common.
• Interrupting a social superior is often rude.
• The decision to interrupt has semiotic power (the very act of interruption carries meaning). Someone who frequently interrupts is stating that they think they are more important, or what they have to say is more important than that of the person interrupted.
• However, to build personal power, one has to use such strategies appropriately. An individual who interrupts where others don’t think the situation warranted interruption will establish a reputation of being rude, someone to be avoided.
• On the other hand, someone who uses the strategy appropriately increases credibility and respect.