USING CONVERSATION TO MEAN:ON THE TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF CONVERSATION ANALYSIS (C.A.)

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ABSTRACT

As Paul Ten have (2007.1) remarked 'Conversation Analysis (or CA) is a rather analytic edearvour,' this paper sees the necessity of the readers to acquaint themselves to the detail of the technical tools traditionally used in analyzing spoken discourse. Much of the goal of CA defends on the knowledge of the structure of conversation and how interactants manage talks exchanges to accomplish their social goals. This is quite significant because the sole aim of the use of language boils down to accomplishing social goals.This paper attempts to highlight some of the techniques of analysing conversation with the aim of getting readers awareness to the fact that beneath the seemingly chaotic and disorderly nature that ordinary conversation displays there is indeed order; and that, study of language in use is a worthwhile aspect of the study of human language.

INTRODUCTION

The study of discourse has two major approaches; DA and CA. Both are concerned with giving an account of how coherence and sequential organization in discourse are produced and understood. CA is however, strictly concerned with how participants in conversation structure the social task of talking in a natural setting.

As put by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1980), CA is a rigorously empirical approach to the study of conversation that avoids premature theory constructions. CA is therefore, a term used to refer to the method of conversation study. In its most natural sense, its principal focus is the ordinary conversation. Objectively, it seeks to uncover the socio-linguistic competence that underlies the production and interpretation of talks in social interaction. It tries to examine the cooperative behavior in conversation such as organization by turns where one party speaks at a time and the periodic exchanges of roles between the participants. It also seeks to do all these within the framework of natural settings and under naturally occurring talks. This is in sharp contrast with linguistic analysis that heavily relies on intuitive judgments. It does focus on what actually be occurs not what one would guess would be odd or accepted if it were to be so. Garfinkel (1967, 1974, and 1986) urges that conversation study is purely ethno-methodological, and ethno-methodology is observable and reportable. He further contends that "talk" is part of everyday activities that are a matter of seeing, saying, observing and reporting. This, implies that talk, though a form of discourse, is a core aspect of conversation and indeed its soul.

A conversation analyst, therefore, is critically concerned with actual spoken dialogue and not written form of discourse. He places emphasis on close observation of the behaviors of participants in talk and on patterns which recur over a wide range of natural data (see McCarthy

1991). It is just as Brown and Yule (1989:20) have explained, arguing that an analysis of conversation is typically based on the linguistic output of someone other than the analyst and this type of material is often described as 'performance data.' Such data they explain is one which may contain features like "*hesitations*," "*slips of the tongue*," "*non-standard form,*" and "*paralinguistic*" rather than the theoretically motivated one, that is loaded with theoretical constructs obtained through unsubstantiated effort Abdul, 2003.

In sum, CA is technically an approach to the analysis of spoken discourse that looks at the way in which people manage their everyday conversational interactions. It examines how spoken discourse is organized and developed as speakers carry out conversational interactions. It examines aspects such as sequence-related utterances (i.e. adjacency pairs), preferences of particular organizations (i.e., preference organizations), turn-taking, feedback repair, conversational openings and closings, discourse markers, conversation tokens, etc. and considers them as key issues in the process. Because C.A. concerns itself purely with natural talks, it works with recordings of spoken data and carries the careful and fine-grained analysis of the data.

SOME TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF C.A

As an entity, a conversation is a system of components whose functional roles interrelate for the realization of the whole. As a system, therefore, conversation has structure, order, and regularity. Some significant mechanisms constituting sequence and structure of conversation are presented here as turn-takings, openings and closings of talks, transition relevant places (TRPs), 'formal break markers,' back channeling and adjacency pairs. Others to be examined are cohesion and coherence in conversational terms, and preference organization.

TURN-TAKING MECHANISM

The methods by which participants in conversation take their turns are of central importance to conversation analysts. People take and manage turns in interactions in a variety of ways. One significant factor is language variation. For instance, the basic rule in English conversation is that one person speaks at a time, after which they may nominate another speaker, or another speaker may take up the turn without being nominated (Sacks, et'al, 1974, 2004).

The TRPs: Transition Relevant Places in Turn-taking

One fascinating thing in the act of conversation is how speakers are able to sense when it is appropriate to take-up the '*turn*' to speak. There are some ways in which we can signal that we have come to the end of a turn. It may be through the completion of a 'syntactic unit, or through the use of falling intonation- the pausing. We may as well end a unit with a signal such as '*mmm*' or '*anyway*' or '*o.k.*' etc. which signals the end of the turn. We can also signal the end of a turn by using body language, i.e., through 'eye contact', 'body position and movement' or simply using 'voice pitch'. But what is a turn? Turn is simply a shift in the direction of the speaking flow which is characteristic of normal conversation Sacks (1995) describes it as the basic unit of conversation. He further explains "*a central feature [of conversation] is that exactly one person*

at least one and no more than one … talk at a time" (1995:11.23). Thus, yielding the right to speak or to the floor (as it is technically put) to the next speaker constitutes a turn. The way in which people participating in talks manage to allocate to each other or to themselves in conversation is what brings about '*turn-taking mechanism*' into the picture. How then do participants in conversation manage to take up or relinquish turns?

There are certain well-defined-junctions in conversation at which turns occur. Such junctions or points TRPs or '*transition relevant places*'. In conversation, a TRP exploited by the speaker holding the floor. The ways by which such processes work in the event of conversational transactions have led to the rules of '*speaker selection*.'

- **Rule 1;** where the speaker holding the floor directly, appoints the next speaker, example in a public debate etc., where he/she allots the right to speak to another conversationalist of his/her choice (now let's hear Bello's point of view). This is what Sacks calls the first general rule of the next speaker selection, '*current speaker selects the next speaker*' (1995.11, 223). Under this rule, the current speaker may proceed more indirectly by throwing the floor wide open to whoever feels like getting into the talk, like – "*who may want to say something next*?", '*any further comment please*' …etc.
- **Rule 2;** the second rule is when the next speaker selects himself (Sacks 1995:11, 224). This, obviously, occurs in a casual conversation where the participants enjoy equal status in conducting the talks. The crucial point here is that this is where the concept of transition relevant places (TRPs) becomes quite manifest.

Areas Marking the TRPs

Points in conversation where TRPs are marked are broadly classified into two; '*natural break markers*' and 'formal break markers'.

(a)   Natural break markers

There exist in every conversation certain natural breaks. A speaker pausing for breath, or runs out of things to say, or simply makes a declaration that he or she has finished his or her contribution are indications that someone may take up the turn. Such areas in conversation are places where a '*natural transition*' to the next speaker occurs.

(b)   Formal break markers

There are areas of transition in turn-taking that occur where there are formal rules of next speaker selection. Such are imposed to regulate the turn-taking, and usually, this involves a formal conversation governed by the rule "current speaker selects next speaker. (Sacks, 1995:11; 223).

In a casual conversation where equality of the right to speak is the same to every participant, a speaker may just ignore an upcoming TRP and hurry past it. Such natural break sometimes in the midst of other speaker's turn results in the speakers talking at the same time with full speed and thus creating chaos in conversation. Other speakers still employ the

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technique of "*marking*" a TRP by producing '*turn threatening*' noises (such as Aaaahhmm) at potential transition points to signal others that they intend to continue past the TRP as soon as they regained their breath. In a situation that involves storytelling, another mechanism regulating the completing of a speaker's turn is created through an understood common agreement, for example you hear comments such as '*let Mr. X come to the end of his story*' …etc.

Back Channeling
Another mechanism related to turn-taking in conversation situation is 'back channeling.' In most occurring conversations there are non-floor holder whose contributions to the conversation are of immense significance in enhancing traffic management. How these back-channelers contribute to the management of the flow of conversation vary in shape and frequency depending on differences in culture and language practices. For examples, the Japanese language is known to be very rich in back-channeling devices known as '*aizichi,*'such as '*hai*' or '*een*' (yes) and '*soo*' (I see) and numerous vocalic and consonantal sounds that they employ to help contribute to the flow of conversation.

Conversations have characteristic openings and closings. Technically, these are known as '*opening and closing rituals*.' People have different and peculiar ways of opening and closing different types of conversational interactions. For example, in different parts of the world, there are varying ways of say opening and closing a telephone conversation. Schegloff (1986) has analyzed a large data set of telephone openings and happened to come up with the following '*canonical opening*' for American private telephone conversations.
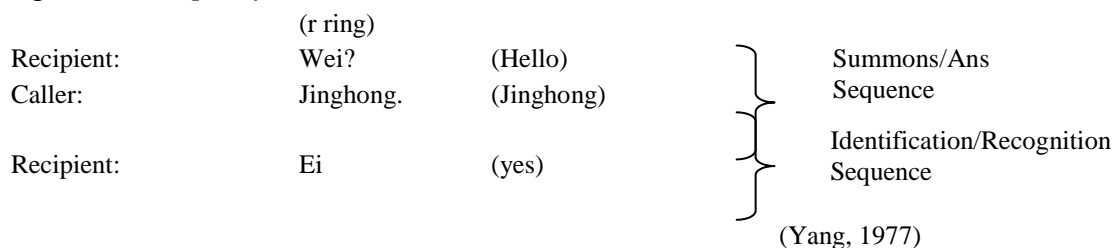(r ring)

Recipient:	Hello!	Summons/Ans Sequence
Caller:	Hi Ida?	
Recipient:	Yeah	Identification/Recognition Sequence
Caller:	Hi, this is Carla	
Recipient:	Hi Cala	
Caller:	How are you	How are you sequence
Recipient:	O'kay	
Caller:	Good =	
Recipient:	= How about you.	
Caller:	Fine. Don wants know…..	Reason for call sequence

(Schegloff, 1986.115)

A similar study conducted by Yang (1997) on telephone opening in Mandarin Chinese reveals that speakers begin their calls with summons/answer and identification/recognition sequences. This, reveals another difference between the American phone calls and Chinese phone calls due to less occurrence of '*how are you*' sequences in the Chinese pattern. Unlike in

the American pattern, the Mandarin Chinese goes from the identification/recognition sequence right to the '*topic of the conversation*', thus:

		(r ring)	
Recipient:	Wei?	(Hello)	Summons/Ans
Caller:	Jinghong.	(Jinghong)	Sequence
			Identification/Recognition
Recipient:	Ei	(yes)	Sequence

(Yang, 1977)

Similar pattern to the American opening appears in the study carried out by O'olughin (1989) in Australia. However, there exists a slight difference, in the Australian data, the caller most frequently self-identify in their first turn after they recognize their recipient rather than in the second turn which is a feature present in the American pattern.

Just as there are characteristic openings there are also characteristic closings. Like openings, closings too have varying patterns across cultures. Schegloff and Sacks (1973) have also examined the nature of a number of conversational closings. Their work has further been advanced by Button (1987). Button has studied telephone closings and concluded that '*telephone closings*' usually go over four turns of talk, made up of pre-closing and closing.'

The pre-closing is often made up of two turn units such as "*bye-bye*" and "*good bye*". Most often speakers mutually negotiate the end of the conversation. Closing may also be preceded by a variety of pre-sequences such as referring back to something making an argument, good wishes, e.g. '*missed you*' a restatement of the reason for calling etc. sometimes closings are shortened or extended by continued repetition of pre-closing and closing remarks such as '*bye-bye*' '*love you*' '*sleep well*' '*you too*' etc. Thus closings are complex, flexible and more diverse interactional units than openings (Button 1987, Thornborrow 2001).

COHESION AND COHERENCE

The two terms directly related to unity in written and spoken language are '*cohesion*' and '*coherence.*' Cohesion is the way words formally hang together in sentences and the like, while coherence is a broad term that captures the content-based connections between the words that make them produce sense. Stubbs expresses this distinction as follows. "*Cohesion has to do with relations between surface linguistic forms….whereas coherence has to do with relations between communicative acts*" (1983: 126-7). This means that cohesion creates local relations between syntactic items (reference, concord, and so on), whereas coherence does connect the general sense involved in what we want to express through our speech activity. In conversation, while the local sequence of turns creates a certain amount of cohesion, it is not that enough to guarantee coherence. So, to be coherent, talks must strictly adhere to the coherence Rule, as defined by Tsui: "*in order for an utterance to from a coherence sequence with the preceding utterance, it must either fulfil the illocutionary intention of the latter or address its pragmatic presuppositions* (1991:11; ef. 123)."

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Adjacency Pairs

Adjacency pairs are a fundamental unit of conversational organization and a key way in which meanings are communicated and interpreted in conversations. They are utterances produced by two successive speakers in a way that the second is identified as related to the first one as an expected follow-up to it. Mey (1993) defines adjacency pairs as 'two subsequent utterances constituting a conversational exchange or turn, that are characterized as to function and content by their type' (1993.vi.157). The following example from a radio call-in programme illustrates the speakers using adjacency pairs in a quite expected way:

1ˢᵗ pair   Announcer: Sharon Stones on the phone. (.) how are you.
     Caller: very good
2ⁿᵈ pair   Announcer: I bet you get hassled about your surname.
3ʳᵈ pair   Caller: yes I <u>do</u>:

(Brian 2006:115)

    Announcer: and what do you want to tell Patrick.
    Caller: umm that I love him very much (.5) and I (.5) and I wish him a very happy birthday.

There are three pairs in the above illustration, and in each of the three pairs of utterances, the first speaker stops and allows the second speaker to produce the expected second part to the pair of utterances. The type of adjacency pair is characteristically given by a common illocutionary intention which Austin refers to as '*force.*' Thus, pairs can be for example 'greetings greetings such as, '*Good morning/Good morning*,' or '*Order/ (verbal) compliance*', such as '*Get out of here!'/'O.k. sir!*,' or request providing e.g. '*may I see him please'/' yes you may*' and so on.

Argument conversation also shows a similar pattern in that if a point of view is expressed by one speaker, a possible follow-up is a '*challenge'* followed by a '*response.*' Here is a typical example of adjacency pair in an argument conversation:

A pair   A: I am gonna have to get Peter to come over too (0.1)   Point Of View

     B: Why? =   Challenge

     A: = so people don't crash the party   Response

(Orr 1996:35)

It is important to note that expected '*follow-ups'* in the use of adjacency pairs vary across languages and cultures. In his study of communication problems in a workplace setting between

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French and English speakers, Be'al (1992) discovers that the French workers often responde to the English everyday greeting '*did you have a good weekend?*' by telling the greeting partner all about their weekend. The English speaking workers fail to understand that a French speaker would not ask this kind of question if they did not want a complete and elaborate answer.

One last significant point about adjacency pair is that a given utterance may play more than one role in a conversation. Particular context and stage of the conversation are important determinants for assigning an utterance the status of a '*pair part*. For instance, the English '*Hello'* can perform the function of '*a summons*' in a telephone call, the function of '*a response'* in the same situation or a way of greeting someone in the street.

Repair

The term 'repair' in conversation is used to refer to the way speakers correct things they have said or someone else has said. The concept of repair also extends to mean the way speakers in conversation check what they have understood. There are two types of conversational repair: '*self-repair,*' and '*other repair*'. Both types are self-explanatory. '*self-repair*' occurs when a person speaking correct themselves while '*other repair*' is when other persons in conversation use certain comments to correct a speaker as they speak. The following two examples are instance of '*self'* and other-repair respectively:

I: Client: because (1.0) he's got a girlfriend – oh (.05)   { Self repair }
                        a woman and ah (0.5)

II: Barrister: the twins Michael and Allan [.] live with
                        The wife (1.0) Michael is employed as an
                        apprentice Butcher. =

        Client: oh not Michael, Allan =   { Other repair }

        Barrister: ALLAN. Ye:s.

        Solicitor: alright.

        Barrister: (0.1) ALLAN is employed as an apprentice but [cher].
                                                (O'Shannessy 1995:56)

Pre-sequences

In conversational interactions, usually at the very beginning, there are certain utterances made by speakers that serve as 'precursors' to other utterances. These are technically called pre-sequences. The classical examples of pre-sequences are the common utterances referred to as attention getters such as the English *'hey!', 'you know something?', 'excuse me!'* etc.

Similar examples of this nature are found in different languages. Some examples in Hausa are: '*Kai!' 'ji nan,' 'Ban gaya maka ba!' 'dattijo,' 'yaro,' yallabai,'* etc. depending on the situation. Utterances of this kind may be used in different contexts to serve different purposes. Pre-sequences are characteristically matched with other appropriate sequences or usual answers. For instance, the usual answer to the following English pre-sequences, '*Hey!',' you know?', 'Excuse me!'*, etc. are "*yes'' ''what*" and the like.

After the initial exchange with pre-sequences has been concluded, then, the speakers move to dealing with the real business of conversation. Pre-sequences are considered as purely formal tools of conversation management but, they serve a more technical purpose of being a bridge-way between the formal and content aspect of conversation.

Pre-sequences are of types: inquires (e.g., the English remarks made in a shopping centre – '*I wonder if you have x?*', '*Do you by any chance have x?*', where x is an item that the enquirer wants to purchase) or attention getters e.g., hey excuse me..., look here…, etc.).

Insertion Sequences

Insertion is a technical term used to create what Erving Goffman (1967) has called '*a remedial exchange*,' a similar concept that Sacks (1995) refers to as repairs.

In insertion sequence, the normal flow of conversation is not disturbed or stopped. The conversationalists would not consider it as an interruption of the current stream of talks but take it as if they were aware that the '*turns'* in their talk are operating at different levels and that the main stream of conversation may continue its course. In short, insertion sequences in conversation are a result of a need to attend to actual or potential up-coming difficulties in the course of conversation process. In the middle of conversational exchange one may for an instance be presented with a '*greeting'*, a '*request for information'* or simply an '*order'* of which none has anything to do with the flow of the exchange. Normally, one does not perceive attending to such other business (greetings, requests, orders, etc.) as interfering with the business at hand. It is often taken care of using a standardized phrase, (valid in all sorts of situations) '*just a moment please!'*. In an actual face-to-face conversation, it is often understood by the participants as a non-disturbing form of interruption that can be handled by a mere digression sequence.

In many cases an insertion is motivated by a need to repair damaged conversation. Repairs in conversation are insertions that are made as a result of minor mishaps coming into conversation from the outside world.

Repairs can be of diverse nature, they may be corrections, offered to a speaker, of vocabulary, pronunciation, questioning the utterance's pre-supposition and/or setting them right etc. in general, self-initiated repairs are preferred to other initiated ones (Schegloff et'al 1977).

In some cases, repairs can be considered as strategies devices for correcting oneself in particular, they can be a way of gaining time for thinking, or a means to prevent somebody else from jumping into conversation at an up-coming TRP.

CONCLUSION

The paper tried to introduce some important techniques and concepts frequently used in analyzing conversation and such concepts and techniques follow the nature of spoken discourse. They significantly focus on both the linguistic and social aspects of conversation. This signifies the inherent and unique difference between conversation as a form of spoken discourse and what is naturally referred to as written discourse and formal talks. With the difference of features between the two genres, the nature and methods of analysis also differ. Bearing this in mind the reader's attention is at this moment drawn to the fact that conversation even in its casual form is a systematic and orderly rule-governed process that by its nature stands different from all forms of written discourses in the way it is analyzed. And as result conversation Analysis (CA) has both linguistic and social significance.

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