

WHEN AND WHERE DISCOURSE IS CONVERSATION

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ABSTRACT

There has been a lot of controversy among scholars surrounding the relationship between discourse and conversation. Some scholars see them as the same thing, while others maintain that the two are different concepts. In the following review, an attempt was made to look at the two terms definitionally and operationally with the object of highlighting where they relate and where they differ. It would be observed that conversation displays some unique characteristics which on the one hand make it stand distinct from other forms of discourse and on the other hand qualify it to be unique.

DISCOURSE

The term discourse is defined in a way depending on the object of the definition. Schiffirin (1988) defines discourse as *'any unit' of language beyond the sentence, including the dialogic and non-dialogic forms in either spoken or written medium*. Discourse, in the view of Widdowson (1979), is far from being simply a patchwork of linguistically ordained sentential meanings, but a dynamic process of meaning creation. To Stubbs (1983), discourse refers to the linguistic analysis of naturally occurring connected spoken or written works. In this view, discourse is also seen as attempt to study the organization of language above the sentence, thus involving the study of the larger linguistic unit such as *"conversational exchanges"* or *'written texts'*. Stubbs further sees discourse as concerned with language in use in social contexts and in particular with interaction or dialogue between speakers.

As for Cook (1989), discourse is a composition of one or more well-formed grammatical sentences. Cook, however, is quick to refute strict grammaticality of discourse. He contends that it can be anything from *'a grunt'* or simply *'explosive'* through to *'short conversation'* and *'scribble notes'*, right up to *'a novel'* or a *'lengthy legal case'*. According to him, to account for discourse, one needs to look for features outside the language (extra-linguistic features) particularly as the situation, the participants involved, their knowledge of the world around them, and what they are doing with language forms. He further comments that spoken discourse, after all, is often considered less orderly, unplanned, more open to intervention except for certain forms of spoken discourse, like *'lessons,'* *'interviews'* etc. which, by their nature are formal and pre-planned.

Discourse, in the view of Taylor (1990), is a sequence of sentences that hang together or cohere as in conversation, story or books. Some types of discourse, he explains, are spoken, such as conversation while others are written, such as stories or texts.

Mchoul (1994.940) indicates that discourse may be viewed as either *'a mass or count noun'*. As a *"mass noun"*, it roughly means the same as the language in use. As a *"count noun"*, it



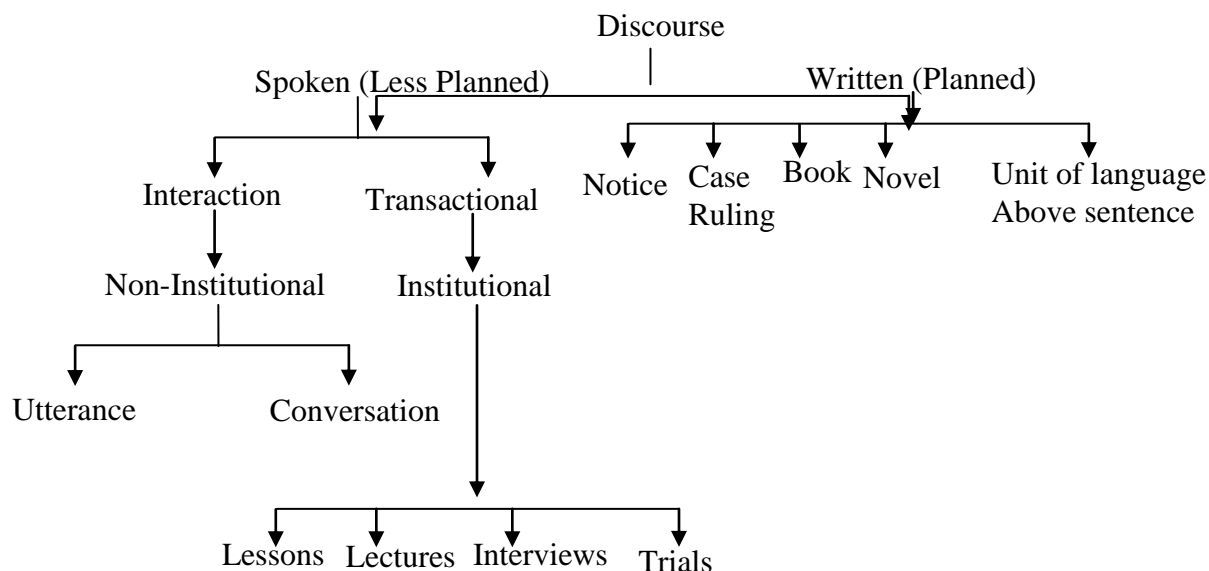
refers to a relatively discrete subset of a whole language used for special, social or institutional purposes, for example, ‘*medical discourse of the middle ages.*’

However, Frawley (1987) sees the various definitions of discourse as restricting, considering the variations that exist between them. Echoing the view of Frawley, Mchoul (1994) shows that there are three approaches to discourse in contemporary scholarship: the first according to him, sees discourse as a formalist endeavor which construes discourse as text. This approach is a most direct descent of Harris’ (1952) and Mitchell’s (1957). It is much akin to the formal linguistic method of analysis, of which ‘*speech acts*’ theorists like Grice (1975) are the principal contributors. The second one is known as the ‘*empirical*’ approach. It consists of largely sociological forms of analysis which treat discourse as human conversation. Its object is the formal description of conversational talks as well as the common sense knowledge as the basis of conversational rules and procedures (Abdul, 2003). Contributors to this approach are: Sinclair and Coulthard (1957), Girfinkel (1967), Haridas (1984), sacks, Schegloff and Jafferson (1972 – 1977). As can be understood here, this approach is mainly concerned with conversations and how they are analyzed. The third approach is known as the critical approach, it views discourse as the sole area of sociological knowledge. As Abdul (2003) puts it ‘... *at any given historical conjecture it is possible to write, speak or think about a given social object (e.g. madness)*’. In this approach discourse is whatever enables writing, speaking or thinking within a given historical moment. Discourse is seen as both linguistic and condition of probability of knowing a specific social object. Main contributors to the approach are Foucault (1952) and Sullivan et’al (1983).

Characteristics of Discourse

Going by the several definitions and their descriptions thus presented, one can construe ‘discourse’ as featuring the following characteristics:

- i) Discourse can either be spoken or written. They may differ in some ways. A thorough treatment of the differences is done in one of the following subsections of this paper.
- ii) Spoken discourse has two main features: social and transactional. The social one includes conversations held in non-institutional settings (casual conversations). Spoken discourse can also occur in institutional settings, and this is considered as ‘*language in use*’ or language in action (e.g. interviews, teacher-pupil talk etc.). Written discourse, on the other hand, includes such entities as novels, texts and lengthy legal document which people write for others to pursue and react to extemporaneously (Abdul, 2003).



[Source: Abdul (2003)
On Conversation and Discourse]

CONVERSATION

Just as with discourse, the conversation has received different definitions by scholars. Schegloff defines it as ‘*shades of the state of talk*’ (1968.1076). thus, to Schegloff, conversation encompasses all kinds of talks including dialogue, chats, as asking for and getting the time of the day, press conferences as well as ‘*exchanged whispers of sweet nothing,*’ (Abdul, 2003).

Such has also been the stand of Speier (1972), who considers conversation as a special kind of a larger class of phenomenon called “*talk.*” Conversation here is viewed as a communicative act of speech between face-to-face participants called ‘*interactants.*’ Talk, however, can only qualify as conversation if, as Cook (1989) has expressed, it is not primarily necessitated by a practical talk, if the number of participants is within manageable range, and if the number of ‘turns,’ and talk is primarily for the participants themselves, (Cook 51).

This consideration forces us to consider the difference between what may be regarded as ‘*formal spoken discourse*’ and ‘*conversation*’. The two are different, though the boundary between them is quite fuzzy. Consider, for example, a seminar speech or a debate which is conducted within a formal setting, to a casual form of talks between people on the street.

Gumperz and Cook Gumperz (1992), view conversation as an activity that processed as it occurs. It means that conversation is not a pre-planned activity but rather unpredictable and multi-channeled. Similarly, Stubbs (1983) also refers to it as both ‘*unplanned and unplannable*’ as well as ‘*unpredictable.*’ He further describes it as ‘*casual and spontaneous*’. A similar view is expressed differently by Brown and Yule (1983), that conversation is phrases and echoes of phrases which appear more intended as contributing to a communicative transaction, rather than instances of transitional or information giving sort of exchange.



A broader view is one given by Levinson (1983) that conversation is that familiar, predominant kind of talk in which two or more people freely alternate in speaking, and which occurs outside specific institutional settings such as religious services, law courts, classroom and the like. Levinson's view is also shared partially by Schiffrin (1988), who considers conversation as any discourse produced by more than one person. Schiffrin himself holds the belief that it is uniquely a spoken dialogue.

Taylor (2001), struck by the spontaneous formulation of speech nature of a conversation, defines it as a speech formulated extemporaneously and interactively among two or more interactants who exchange information, views, and feelings. As for Taylor conversation has two major classifications: information dialogue, characterized by a brief purposeful dialogue between two people e.g., asking someone the direction to a particular place in which they seek and provide a specific piece of information. The latter class (ideal chat) on the other hand, is such topic as discussed between two or more participants at a meeting, say, over a meal, at dinner or at a ceremony with the object of enjoying companionship and incidentally to exchange information. It is most cases a chat about something or nothing. It appears more succinct the way Taylor puts it, that conversation comprises speaker-listener interaction and an on the spot formulation of speech. It is these two rather salient characteristic features of conversational speech that mark conversation as a form of talk that differs from all other kinds of talks, such as those prepared non-interactive edited talks like teacher-pupil exchange in the classroom or some legal procession.

Cheepen and Monaghan (1990) note that conversation is the speech encounter characterized peculiarly by a number of features such as '*overall interactional goal*,' topic shift without the content of '*predetermined schedule*' and equality of participants' status. They (ibid) contend that the focus of attention of the interactions must be inwardly directed towards the creation of the world which the piece of exchange creates and promises. [Cheepen and Monaghan, in Abdul (2003)].

Some Unique Properties of Conversation

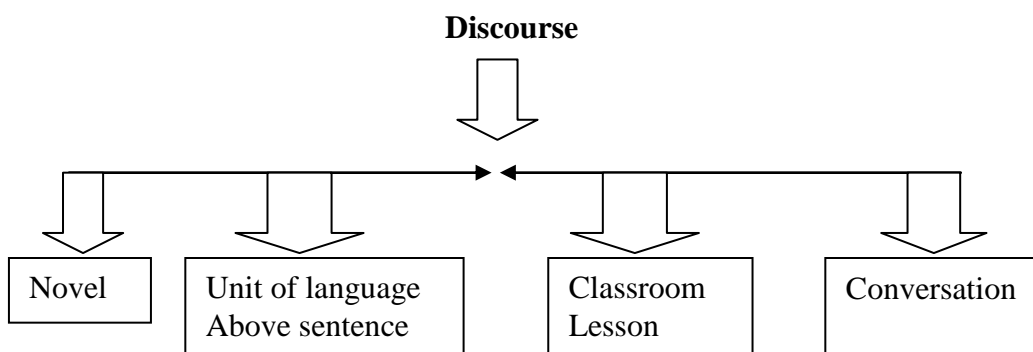
In sum, conversation is a social activity that typically occurs in relaxed, friendly and non-institutional settings. It is a non-planned and non-plannable human affair that has no predictable outcome. It must involve at least two speakers, and it takes place between speakers who are equally placed, so that none infringes on the rights of the other in taking the 'turn' to speak. Conversation naturally occurs in spoken form, and is formulated and carried out on the spot, a rather instantaneous form of talk's exchange. The kind of formal talks that take place in the house of assemblies, courtrooms, etc. are therefore not conversations.

Conversation in Discourse Term

Taking all the different views under a close look, one would consider discourse as a superordinate term to conversation. This is true because, while it is possible to talk about

discourse without mentioning conversation, no discussion of conversation would be complete without referring to discourse, (Abdul, 2003).

The relationship that exists between the terms discourse and conversation appears similar to one that obtains in hyponymy. Thus, the meaning of one includes in that of the other, that is, the notion of discourse includes in the concept of conversation. This makes possible the statement that a conversation is a kind of discourse. See the following illustration:



A Unique form of Spoken discourse Source: Abdul (2003).

CONCLUSION

Conversation forms a unique aspect of discourse. It differs from other aspects in two distinct ways. First, it is solely spoken. This distinguishes it characteristically from all sub-genres of written discourse such as novels, texts, lecture notes etc; second, even among the spoken aspect of discourse, conversation stands distinct from all sorts of talks held within institutional settings. (e.g., formal interviews, teacher-pupil talk, pupil lectures, etc.). Talks holding in such institutional settings do not accord equal status to participants. So, conversation should be seen as an aspect of discourse that occurs within the framework of a non-institutional setting.

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