CONVERSATION --- A PARTICIPANT - STRUCTURED ACTIVITY

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Conversation is obviously a social activity and every social activity requires participants to establish and sustain mutual involvement in the current business and to coordinate their behaviours systematically. Both as speakers and recipients of the actions of others, the participants of a conversation have to be aware of what exactly is happening in the conversation they indulge in. They must keep in view what has gone before and what may come next as well as where they seem to be at the moment. Since conversation is 'a reciprocal undertaking' (Wardhaugh, 1985) and there is an underlying constraint on all conversationalists to be relevant (Grice, 1975), B's response has to correspond to A's utterance. If one talks about peaches and potatoes, the other participant shall not talk about the Theory of Relativity until he is quite sure that it is not being incoherent. Utterances in conversation are mutually related; in fact, mutually structuring. Every 'next-turn' has a superimposed effect on it and a superimposing effect for the 'next-turn'.

> The significance of any speaker's communicative action is doubly contextual in being both context-shaped and context renewing. A speaker's action is context-shaped in that its contribution to an ongoing sequence of actions cannot adequately be understood except by reference to the context - the immediately preceding configuration of actions - in which it participates ... The context renewing ... since every 'current' action will itself form the immediate context for some next action in a sequence, it will inevitably contribute to the framework in terms of which the next action will be understood. In this sense, the context of a

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> next action is repeatedly renewed with every
> current action.
>
> (Heritage, 1984)

That conversation is participant-structured activity becomes clear from the very way it takes place or proceeds. A very common characteristic of conversation is turn-taking. One participant talks, stops, and then another talks and stops, and so on.

> A turn series has the potential of being a
> SEQUENCE or part of a sequence. That
> potential is realized when some next does not
> merely follow its predecessor temporarily, but is
> produced in some fashion by reference to it, to it
> in particular.
>
> (Schegloff, 1979)

Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974; 1978, cited in Levinson, 1983) suggest that the mechanism that governs turn-taking is a set of rules with ordered options which operates on a turn-by-turn basis and hence is a local management system. Turns are syntactic units and can be identified as turn-units in part by prosodic means. The speakers may change at a point which is termed a 'transition relevance place'. Duncan (1973, 1974) suggests that the cues for speaker change can be grammatical, paralinguistic or kinesic or any combination of all three. Kendon (1967) is of the view that one important factor enabling the smooth change over of speaker is gaze. Sacks (cited in Coulthard, 1977) suggests that a current speaker who can exercise three degrees of control over the next turn can, firstly, select the next speaker; in this case, the current speaker may select the type of next utterance by producing the first part of an adjacency pair which constrains the next speaker to produce a relevant answer, e.g.:

Current speaker: Now, ... Richard'll tell us if it is
                    okay to do that.
Richard: I think ... yes.
            (invented)

(Transcription conventions are the same throughout
        used by Wootton, 1981 and Levinson, 1983)

The other available choice for the current speaker is simply to constrain the next utterance, but not to select the next speaker, e.g.

Jim: Any a' you guys read that story about Walter Mitty?

Ken: I did,

Roger: Mm, hmm.

(Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974)

The third choice is to select neither, and to leave it to some self-selecting participant to continue the conversation. However, it is quite a problem for the next speaker to know when the current speaker finishes and when he should begin so that he can avoid awkward moments of silence or an impolite overlap or interruption. Sacks suggests that next speakers are not concerned with actually completed utterances, but with points of possible completion. He observes that turns consist of one or more sentences, and defines a sentence as a unit which has

> … its completion recognized on its completion, and that it is not completely recognizable by participants; also it can be monitored, from its beginning, to see from its beginning what it will take for its completion to be produced, in such a way that on its completion, its completion may be recognized.
>
> (Sacks: *Aspects of Sequential Organization of Conversation.* Quoted in Coulthard, 1977)

Speakers change their roles at the end of sentences. The next speaker will start his action at the end of the sentence during which he was selected, i.e. when the current speaker has reached a possible completion. The participants should be able to understand and analyze an ongoing sentence to catch the right moment to produce immediately a relevant next utterance.

Jefferson, 1973 argues that the receiver of an ongoing utterance:

> … has the technical capacity to select a precise spot to start his own talk 'no later' than the exact appropriate moment.

To elaborate her point, she discusses various participant-structured situations. She shows that speakers can, without a pause, produce a completion to a prior speaker's otherwise complete utterance:

Ben: An' there – there wz at least ten

     Miles of traffic bumper tuh bumper.

Ethel: - because a' that

          (cited in Coulthard, 1977)

Sometimes recipients come in at just the right moment with their own completion of an as yet incomplete sentence:

Louise: No a Soshe is someone who | is a carbon

     copy of their friends

Roger: | drinks Pepsi

       (cited in Coulthard, 1977)

Sometimes a recipient predicts the ending of the sentence and says the same thing at the same time:

Dan: The guy who doesn't run the race doesn't

    win it, but'e doesn | 't lose it.

Roger: | B't lost it.

      (cited in Coulthard, 1977)

About 5 percent of the speech stream is delivered in overlap (Levinson, 1983). It is more recurrent according to some others. However, commonly overlaps are not 'violative interruptions' and do not disturb the flow of conversation. They occur while competing for first starts when next speaker has not been nominated, e.g.:

J: Twelve pounds I think wasn't it =

D: = / / Can you believe it?

L: Twelve pounds on the Weight Watchers' Scale.

    (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1978:16,

       cited in Levinson, 1983)

Some very brief overlaps occur where 'transition relevance place' may have been misprojected for systematic reasons, e.g. where a tag or address term has been appended (Levinson, 1983), e.g.:

A: Uh, you been down here before / / havenche
B: yeah

(Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1978:16)

However, if overlap occurs, one speaker drops out readily in most cases, e.g.:

Dorsen: Yes, well pop in on th' way back'n
            pick it up

Katie: Thank you ve'y much eh ha -
            how are you all?

Doreen: | yes, al | I'll be ti:red | Nah
            | Oh wir | all fi:ne | yes I'm
            jus: sohrta clearing up

(Classroom handout)

Here, overlap occurs at the end of the possible completion point. We see that there is an intrinsic motivation for participants to both listen to and process what is being said during a conversation; a fact which makes conversation a participant-structured activity. The second interlocutor sometimes interpolates or interrupts on purpose to register his/her difference of outlook, e.g.:

Fanny: Well, of course I think we all knew
            that she – that she was si:ck
            (0.5)

Fanny: But eh no -

Betty: but we never thought she was ez sick es
            she was

(Classroom handout on Overlap)

The gap (0.5) suggests that Fanny expected a response from Betty, and started again when Betty delayed. Gaps and silences during conversation have to do with turn-taking rules (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1978), and in case of lapses, interruption or overlap occurs, e.g.

Ava: He'n Jo were like on the outs,
            yih know?
            (0.7)

Ava: So uh,

Bea: They always a (h) re hhh!

                   (Drew: a classroom handout)

Here, the pause (0, 7) suggests that Ava has waited for Bea's response. Bea's is a belated start and there is an overlap. In fact, there is a simultaneous start. Perhaps Bea's response is unexpected; she registers her different attitude.

So, we see that turn-taking and overlaps are not haphazard. They are systematically generated by participants attending closely to what is happening in the conversation. It can safely be asserted that overlaps do not flout the turn-taking system; on the other hand, they may be principled products of that system.

Most often conversation is organized in paired actions. The current turn projects some range of possibilities for next turn and one of them is performed in next turn. Schegloff and Sacks (1973) and Schegloff (1979) refer to this phenomenon as the 'sequential implicativeness' of a turn's talk.

> Next-turn position is the organizedly systematic position for any current turn to be sequentially implicative, to have another turn produced by reference to it, and, thereby, to have its effect on the course of the conversation registered in the talk. The organization of conversation . . . is built for sequential implicativeness next, and participants are oriented to it.
>
> (Schegloff, 1979)

So, many conversational actions happen according to the framework of a pair linkage - a string of at least two turns. Sacks developed an apparatus to analyze these paired actions and termed it 'adjacency pair' (Heritage, 1984). 'Adjacency Pairs' have the following features: They consist of at least two utterances; the utterances are produced successively by different speakers; the utterances are ordered – the first must belong to the class of first pair parts, and the second to the class of second pair parts; the utterances are related; not any second part can follow any first

pair part, but only an appropriate one; the first pair part often selects next speaker and always selects next action. This is how it sets up a transition relevance and expectation to be fulfilled by the next speaker (Coulthard, 1977). So, it becomes quite clear that the first part of a pair predicts and formulates the shape of the second

> . . . given a question regularly enough an answer
> will follow."
>
> (Sacks, 1967)

Labov (1970, 1972) focuses on answers and sketches out a series of interpretive rules to explain how a second utterance is heard as an answer to a preceding one.

There is a class of first pair parts which includes Greetings, Invitations, Questions, Offers, Requests, Warnings, Complaints, etc. Adjacency Pairs are the basic structural units in conversation (Sacks, 1967, cited by Coulthard, 1977; Levinson, 1983). The action of an offer, request, invitation or proposal sets up a sequentially possible next action as an acceptance or a rejection.

However, strict adjacency is not very common in conversation; there frequently occur insertion sequences, e.g.:

A:	May I have a bottle of milk?	(Q_1)
B:	Are you twenty-one?	(Q_2)
A:	No.	(A_2)
B:	No.	(A_1)

> (Merrit, 1976:336, cited in Wotton, 1989
>
> and Levinson, 1983)

This question-answer pair is embedded within another; A_1 in the actual Part 2 to Part 1, which is Q_1. It is suggested that the strict criterion of adjacency should be replaced with the notion of conditional relevance (Levinson, 1983), i.e.:

> . . . what binds the parts of adjacency pairs
> together is not a formation rule of the sort that
> would specify that a question must receive an
> answer if it is to count as a well-formed

discourse, but the setting up of specific expectations which have to be attended to.

(Levinson, 1983)

The concept of preference organization that there is at least one preferred and one dispreferred category of response to a first part in any adjacency pair has supplied an answer to the question of the range of potential seconds to a first part, and added to the structural significance of this concept. The notion of preference here does not refer to interlocutor's psychological behaviour. Rather, it is a structural notion that corresponds to the linguistic concept of markedness (Levinson, 1983). Preferred seconds are unmarked, ready and prompt, e.g. a father's 'yep' to his child's request (Wootton, 1981); dispreferred seconds are delayed, explanatory and slightly hedgy, e.g.:

C: Um I wondered if there is any chance
        of seeing you tomorrow sometime (0.5)
        morning or before the seminar
                (1.0)
R: Ah um (.)   I doubt it
C: Uhm huh
R: The reason is I'm seeing
        Elizabeth

(Levinson, 1983)

Often, refusals of requests are softened and non-grantings are done in formats that avoid stating a refusal component 'no', etc. So, granting the request is displayed by requestees (parents, etc.) as the preferred action in request sequences (Wootton, 1981).

Child: (Well) 'hh can I put, can I
            put this in?
                (.)
Mother: Right

(Wootton, 1981)

Choices between preferred and dispreferred responses are crucial when agreeing or disagreeing with assessments which one is obliged to

produce as 'products of participation'. Assessments are 'occasioned conversational events with sequential constraints' (Pomerantz, 1984). One way of co-participating with a co-conversant who proffers an assessment in by proffering a second assessment in which the referent is the same as that in the first assessment, e.g.:

> A_1 J: T's - tsuh beautiful day out isn't it?
>
> A_2 L: Yeh it's jus' gorgeous
>
> <div align="right">(Pomerantz, 1984)</div>

(A_1 is initial assessment and A_2 is second assessment.)

The initial assessment provides the relevance of the recipient's second assessment when the referent is known to both the parties and the initial assessment has 'a format to invite/ constrain subsequence', e.g. as interrogatives:

> B: Isn't he [a neighbouring dog] cute?
>
> A: O: :h h: :s a: DORable
>
> <div align="right">(Pomerantz, 1984)</div>

Recipients perform their agreements / disagreements in differently organized turns and sequences

> In general, agreement turns / sequences are structured so as to maximize occurrences of stated agreements and disagreement turns / sequences so as to minimize occurrences of stated disagreements.
>
> <div align="right">(Pomerantz, 1984)</div>

There are different types of agreements produced with second assessments and the types are differentiated on sequential grounds. One type of agreement is the 'upgrade' "that incorporates upgraded evaluation terms relative to the prior" (Pomerantz, 1984), e.g.:

> B: She seems like a nice little | Lady
>
> A: | Awfully nice
>
>   little person
>
> <div align="right">(Pomerantz, 1984)</div>

In the 'same evaluation' agreement, a recipient expresses his agreement in the terms used by the prior speaker, e.g.:

K: She's marvelous

J: She is

            (Invented)

A third type of agreement is 'downgrade' in which 'scaled-down or weakened evaluation terms' relative to the prior assessment are used:

F: You are great.

K: Yes, I am a pretty good guy.

            (Invented)

Sometimes a second speaker may wish to disagree with the first speaker, though he knows that agreement is the preferred action. Most

> . . . disagreements are produced with stated disagreement components delayed or withheld from early positioning within turns and sequences.
>
> (Pomerantz, 1984)

When an interlocutor expresses a self-deprecating assessment, it is incumbent on the receiving party to respond. Obviously, agreement is dispreferred here because it would endorse the prior criticism. Most often, speakers withhold the criticisms from early positioning within turn. The criticism turns often have weak-type criticism components, often delivered with contrastive prefaces, e.g.:

E: . . hhh yes I <u>do</u> like it = although I really . .

E: hhh well I don't – I'm not a great
            fan of this type of a:rt . . .

In disagreements, there are commonly no contrastive components before or after them as part of the units. They may include 'partial repeats' that challenge their prior, e.g.:

L: You're not bored (huh)?

(PR)S: Bored? =

(D)S: = No. We're fascinated.

                        (Pomerantz, 1984)

            (PR = partial repeats : D = disagreement)

Disagreements may be represented by 'no', 'hn-hn', 'not', etc. Disagreements with prior self-deprecations may include favourable, complimentary evaluative terms, e.g.:

<blockquote>
B: And I never was a grea(h)t Bri(h)dge
      play(h)er Clai(h)re,

A: Well I think you've always been
      real good,
</blockquote>

<div align="right">(Pomerantz, 1984)</div>

Sometimes an inviter or offerer may take a variety of objects and occurrences as constituting either potential or actual rejection, and he may then try to deal with this situation through the doing of some subsequent version (Davidson, 1984), e.g.:

<blockquote>
P: Don't tchu want me tuh come down'n
      getchu t'morrow en take yih down:
      duh the beauty parlor,
        (0.3)

A: What for = I jus' did my <u>hair</u>
      it looks like Pruh uh Pruhfessional
        (0.4)

P: <u>O</u>h I mean: You wanna go t' the
      store er anything over et the Market
      Basket er anything?
</blockquote>

<div align="right">(Davidson, 1984)</div>

In the above instance, the initial version of the offer is rejected and the inviter produces the subsequent version 'oh I mean . . .'

All the actions of turn-taking participants quite evidently show that conversation is a participant-structured activity.

<blockquote>
Linked actions . . . are the basic building blocks
of intersubjectivity.
</blockquote>

<div align="right">(Heritage, 1984)</div>

The adjacency pair structure is not only a reliable basis for the action, it is also a reliable template for interpretation as well. A recipient's next turn will always show some understanding of the prior turn; it will show

that the recipient interprets a particular action as a genuine complaint or an excuse to converse or just an impulsive act of babbling, e.g.

B: Why don't you come and see me sometime?

A: I'm sorry. I've been terribly tied up lately.

(Heritage, 1984)

In this exchange, obviously, A interprets B's turn as a complaint and responds to it as such. Similarly, using his/her action as a presumptive basis, the first speaker can interpret next speaker's response. Second speaker can judge how accurate his interpretation was in his turn by reference to the next action of first speaker. If the first speaker discovers some sort of misinterpretation on the part of the recipient, he can always resort to repair. Here is an example of 'third position repair':

A: Which one: :s are closed, an' which ones
             are open?

Z: Most of 'em. This, this   this, this (pointing)

A: I on't mean on
             the shelters, I mean on the roads.

(Heritage, 1984)

Here, A repairs Z's analysis of the prior question which referred to the road actually and not to shelters.

The organization of conversation includes the organization of repair (Schegloff *et al.*, 1977) among its generic components. Through these organized sets of practice, the participants can address troubles in speaking, hearing and understanding the talk.

> The presence of such an organization, its generic presence and relevance allows language . . . to be constructed differently than might otherwise have been imagined.
> (Schegloff, cited in Bernstein and Bruner, Eds.)

Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks (1977) draw a distinction between self and other repair and maintain that self-correction is preferred to other correction. They show through examples that repairs and their initiations

can assume various directions, e.g. self-repair can issue from self-initiation or other initiation, etc. For example:

(1)   N: She was givin' me a:ll the people
                    that were gone this year I mean this
                    quarter y' / / know

        J: Yeah

            (self-initiated self-repair; Schegloff *et al.,* 1977)

(2)   Ken: Is Al here today?

        Dan: Yeah

                    (2.0)

        Roger: ⟶ He <u>is</u>? hh eh heh

        Dan: ⟶ Well he was

                    (other-initiated self-repair)

Schegloff (1979) asserts that repair is 'potentially relevant to syntax', and that it affects the shape of the sentences. He cites examples of various effects, e.g. repair can convert a question into an assertion:

        J (husband):   We saw Midnight Cowboy yesterday

                        or   Suh – Friday

        E: eh?

⟶ L (wif):   Did yu s - <u>you</u> saw that, it's really good.

It is important to note that the phenomenon is quite rife in the organization of conversation and is quite contributive to the integration of participants.

Buttons and Casey (1984) show how participants in a conversation engage in structured collaboration so as to generate new topics through these sequences. They identify what they term 'topic initial elicitors', prototypical instances of which include 'What's new?' and 'Anything else to report?' that urge a participant to come out with a new topic.

                (JG : 111 : 15 : 2-3, cited in Button and Casey, 1984)

        M: I'll ring you back. Okay?

        N: H'ri (brusque)

        M: Okay?

N: Bye (brusque)

M: Okay. Iz there anything else you - happen today of any interest?

Pre sequences

"... are built to prefigure the specific kind of action that they potentially precede."
(Levinson, 1983)

e.g. Pre-invitations

(Atkinson & Drew, 1979:253, cited in Levinson, 1983)

A: Watch doin'?

B: Nothin'

A: Wanna drink tea?

There are other kinds of pre-sequences, e.g. pre-requests, pre-announcements and pre-arrangements, e.g.

R: Erm (2.8) what what are you doing today?

C: Er Well I'm supervising at quarter past

       (1.6)

R: Er yuh why don't er (1.5) would you like to come by after that?

C: I can't I'm afraid no

(cited in Levinson, 1983)

Like local organizations, i.e. turn-taking and adjacency pairs, overall organizations which:

... organize the totality of the exchanges within some specific kind of conversation.
(Levinson, 1983)

also show that conversation is a participant-structured activity. Telephone calls have most of the features of overall organization.

They have well sequenced and elaborately structured beginnings (Schegloff, 1968) and well organized endings. The beginnings consist of paired responses, hellos and greetings, etc. The caller normally provides

the first topic of conversation (Schegloff, 1968). Endings show a joint effort of both the parties to 'achieve a coordinated exit' from the conversation. They produce topic-less passing turns and then start talking about closing implicative topics and then pre-closing items. Conversations close in the following typical manner:

R: Why don't we all have lunch

C: Okay so that would be in St. Jude's would it?

R: Yes

C: Okay so : : :

R: One o' clock in the bar

C: Okay

R: Okay?

C: Okay then thanks very much indeed George =

(cited in Levinson, 1983)

The main body of a call is structured by topical constraints. These are linked transitions from topic to topic and unlinked topic jumps which disturb participant structuring of the conversation are 'a measure of a lousy conversation' (Sacks, 1971, cited in Levinson, 1983).

What seems to be preferred is that, if A has been talking about X, B should find a way to talk about Z (if Z is the subject he wants to introduce) such that X and Z can be found to be natural fellow members of some category Y.

(Levinson, 1983)

To sum up, conversation is not an arbitrary array of utterances. It is very unlikely that one happens to meet somebody and just opens one's mouth and let words spell out as they happen to come; one would care for other's expectations and anticipate his response. There is, indeed, structure in speech beyond the internal structure of decontextualised sentences. In conversations, whatever gets done is a joint achievement.

From a participant's perspective, conversation is a collaborative activity, in which one turn/move

progressively leads to a next on the basis of an analysis/understanding of that prior turn.

(Drew, 1990)

So, in view of the above discussion and exemplification, it can very safely be adduced that conversation is a participant-structured activity.

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