

Articles

DYADIC DISCOURSE FUNDAMENTALS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING CONVERSATION

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Abstract

This paper examines four fundamental processes in the exchange structure of dyadic discourse: preparatory expressions, primary intent, clarification and relationship bonding, and how they provide a foundation for the negotiation of interpersonal meaning. The study is based upon the Talk Day corpus of natural spoken language, originally built to do comparative studies in English and Japanese conversation. The distinction between transactional and interpersonal goals of communication in dyadic discourse are presented and their implications for ESL textbooks and teaching conversation. Cross-cultural differences (English, Japanese, Spanish and Chinese) in conversational exchange strategies are also discussed.

Key words: dyadic discourse, exchange structure, transactional and interpersonal discourse.

Introduction

What a person thinks language is very much will determine how s/he will teach or approach learning it. For most persons their image of language is very much derived from their use of the written forms of their language. The kind of English, for example, that we are most conscious of is a result of our reading and writing, such as found in newspapers, magazines, various kinds of books and the occasional use of dictionaries. As a result we tend to think of language as being made up of well-formed sentences and think of words as having clearly defined meanings. How often do we consult a dictionary for its authoritative definitions and pronunciations? The reality of what we are conscious of or rather not aware of in our speech, however, is quite different. Not only students of foreign languages but also native speakers of their own languages often feel anxious and embarrassed by the realities of their actual speech performance. Certainly the pressures upon persons using a second or foreign language to make pre-determined sentences according to some ideal standard and pronounce words clearly avoiding the haphazard, casual slurring and incomplete utterances of native speakers often prevent learners from active interaction with others. Native speakers too need the practice through experiences to perform communicative repertoires that they need in their work and extended social relationships. The confident, effective speaker has had ample occasions to learn and develop speaking skills. We often forget when we are in rehearsal modes since they are done out of awareness more often than not. Spontaneous conversational interaction requires other skills besides those of grammar and vocabulary to accomplish the purposes for speaking. In other words the perfection of grammar and pronunciation does not in and of itself enable us to be successful in our conversations.

Characteristics of Spoken Language

The written forms of language, especially those forms which are published, are the result of a process of planning, organizing, writing, and rewriting or editing. The final product should be free from unnecessary repetition, all sentences should be clearly organized to avoid ambiguity. Since the reader is usually unknown, the writer must make his purposes clear, giving sufficient background and explanation for his intended audience or whoever may read it. In contrast the acts of speaking are usually spontaneous to the situation, very often unplanned and developed in an accumulative process with

immediate feedback allowing for a “negotiated” achievement of the purposes for communicating. Thus natural, unplanned speaking is characterized by repetition (to ensure the listener understands or for emphasis), false starts (when the speaker is searching for what s/he wants to say but which isn't mentally clear), focusing and refocusing on points as the feedback indicates an interest or need for clarification. This is accompanied by the expression of various feelings, getting and keeping the other's attention, and identifying the kind of relationship that exists between the speakers.

Rather than formal complete sentences, natural conversation is developed in utterances (groups of words, phrases marked by pause and intonation). The utterances represent the speaker's attempts to express some aspect of meaning for communicating and the meaning of the words depends very much upon the context of use. While basic phrase structure grammar is used, complete sentences are rare. In contrast a conversation such as the following would not be understandable to outsiders as they do not have a knowledge of the speakers' shared knowledge, the context and motivation for the interaction and the grammar does not help us much in deciphering the intentions of the speakers.

CONVERSATION 1

A: Are you?

B: Not yet.

Yet the participants fully understood each other in that context of situation. Both are lecturers but not at school rather at a conference and the conversation occurred as they passed each other making the above exchange. Still a detailed knowledge of B's behavior (he likes to go for coffee very often) and the potential direction in which he was walking produced the exchange. Conversations, especially casual ones, are very much linked to the immediate context of situation. Conversations between familiar persons are most often like that. It is not necessary to provide detailed information and express fully our intentions when the context of situation and shared knowledge can do so.

Conversational Purposes

When the purposes of utterances in natural unplanned conversation are examined, it has been found that fifty percent are devoted to the maintenance of the cooperative processes in the interaction as the data base of natural

conversation in English and Japanese developed at Chiba University, Japan in the 1980s and early 1990s (Talk Day Data Base) has shown (Berendt & Takahashi 1988, Berendt 1990a, 1990b, 1991b, 1997, 1998, 2004). That is, much of conversation occurs not for the exchange of information but rather the maintenance of the relation. Getting the other's attention to begin, preparing the listener for the speaker's purposes for communicating, keeping or getting the turn of speaking, linking utterances together and providing clarification/justifications for the intent of speaking, and expressions to bond the relationship (such as "you know", persons' names, etc.) are essentials in maintaining a conversation and make up much of the effort expended in talking.

Table 4 lists five broad areas of purposes in speaking. Under the label of SEDB (Spoken English Data from the Talk Day Data Base) the expression of feelings makes up 8.5% of dyadic interaction main purposes. Using utterances to influence others' behavior such as making requests, suggestions, criticisms, apologies, etc. constitutes 20.6 % of conversation, social rites or formalities, such as greetings, invitations, etc. were only 2% and managing the flow of conversation was 50.5% by far the dominant typology. This strongly supports the point that conversational interaction (dyadic discourse) is primarily about the relationship of the speakers. In contrast, the exchange of information, often as question and answer routines, was only 18.4%.

Table 1, however, only gives the broad primary purposes in face to face communication as found in the Talk Day data base Berendt 1991a & b). Even after eliminating all the uses of speech for strategy management, the exchange of information (getting and giving information, descriptive referential types of communicative purposes) is still only a third of conversational interaction. Significantly, half of conversational goals have to do with persuasion or doing something with speech to influence others' behavior.

Table 1: Language Communication Goals Talk Data Base (Primary Purposes in Turns)

Exchange of information	(E) 33.4%	(J) 33.2%
Expression of feelings	(E) 13.8%	(J) 16.5%
Suasive purposes	(E) 52.8%	(J) 50.3%

Note: E=English/ J=Japanese

Conversation as dyadic discourse is thus primarily communication focusing on the relationship of people, establishing and maintaining the interaction. Gillian Brown and George Yule (1983) have noted two fundamental types of discourse according to the purposes for communication. If the conversation focuses on the exchange of information they term it *transactional*, but if the focus is on maintaining the relationships involved they call it *interactional*. The discourse of writing in particular is primarily transactional whereas as illustrated in Table 1 dyadic interaction is largely not. The German language has two convenient terms for this dichotomy: *Buchsprache* meaning “book talk” or essentially the type of communication reflected in that of books, communicating through print media, and *Volksprache* the language centering on people’s relationships or *Volk*. Sentences as used in most writing where the information structure of topic and comment, subject and predicate are essential in clearly showing the relationship of ideas and are the frames for *transactional goals* whether in print or spoken. Writing is about communicating ideas and through descriptive-referential meanings of words with sentences providing frames for the information, often to unknown readers. See Edmondson 1983, Halliday 1973, 1985, Schiffrin 1987, and Stubbs 1983.

Dominant Exchange Structure

How do people in their conversational interaction achieve their communicative purposes? The dominant frame for developing the interactive, people-centered communication in natural dyadic discourse depends on the use of utterances which function in four phases within the basic dyads or conversational exchanges. These four phases represent fundamental processes in how meaning is negotiated through the cooperative goals in conversation. This is quite different from the sentence framed information structure of written, planned communication. As Berendt & Takahashi (1988) have shown in their analysis of syntagmatic pairs of interactive functions, the four phases constitute a dominant patterning or natural strategy in how people realize their communicative intent.

Table 2: Dominant Strategy in Dyadic Exchanges

A: Prep. Exp. + Primary Purpose +(R. B.) + Clarification		
B: Prep. Exp. + Primary Purpose:	{	Informative Agree-Disagree Affective-Emotive
		+ (R. B.) + Clarification

Note: Prep. Exp. = Preparatory Expressions
 R.B. = Relationship Bonding Terms
 () = indicates it is movable

The *preparatory expressions* prepare the listener for what follows, provide frames of expectations for the purposes of communicating, getting the other's attention, keeping the turn. E.g. *I mean, oh, well, uh/um, hey, listen, look, say*, if clauses, etc. Before asking a question we may ask *May I ask you a question?* as a frame for the following question. Preparatory expressions can provide a frame of expectations to prepare the listener for what is coming, such as the actual act of making an inquiry through the use of the interrogative form.

Relationship Bonding focuses on identifying the kind of relationship and linking from the speaker to the other. We often interject in our speech the names of the person being addressed and vary the form with titles and full names. These are termed address terms. Other ways of bonding in conversation by the speaker are seen in the use of tag questions, *you know*, and affective expressions.

The primary purpose in a turn may be questions and answers but more likely will be such speech acts as requests, suggestions, criticisms, apologies, agreement / disagreement, etc. If the preparatory phase has clear framing expressions, then the primary purpose may not be expressed directly. This often happens in Japanese conversation, leaving the other person to infer what is mainly intended but not explicitly said.

The fourth phase is an important follow-up process dependent on the primary intent of the dyadic interaction. *Clarification* may not be necessary in a context of intimate and highly shared knowledge (as in Conversation 1) but more often than not it constitutes some explanation, justification for actions, additional information when the speaker feels an inadequacy or need to support the primary intent in speaking. It is most often given by the speaker in anticipation of the need for more information to further the goals of the interaction.

In situations of miscommunication or conflictual relationships, the phases of *clarification* and *preparation expressions* are at the nexus of the conflict. Inadequate framing/preparation can lead to misunderstanding of the speaker's intention, necessitating greater clarification. The perceived lack or the feeling of inadequate explanation can trigger aggressive "whys". Competitive arguments also reveal similar interdependency of these two processes (Berendt 1999). *Clarification*, however, may also be significantly different across cultures or languages. Table 3 summarizes the pattern differences found in the Talk Day data base for English, Spanish, Japanese and Chinese for clarification. Since the contrast is largely in Patterns A and B, the differences would apparently reflect cultural expectations in the respective languages. E.T. Hall (1976) has described Japanese culture as a High Context culture in which social relations and expectations can be assumed, that is, a high degree of shared knowledge in relationships allow speakers to be indirect, vague or to feel no necessity to state what may be regarded as self-evident. A Low Context culture such as English with its multi-cultural, multi-racial societies requires being more explicit in communication to establish adequacy of intentions. A similar judgment could be made about Spanish and Chinese. Their relatively high frequency in Pattern C suggests a cultural assertiveness in conversations for English and Chinese.

The data in the Talk Day data base on giving clarification or reasons for behavior clearly support Hall's theory in regard to cultural expectations. In English when we make requests, apologies, etc. we almost always add some justification for them.

CONVERSATION 2

A: John hasn't shown up.

B: What d'ya mean? We've got a meeting in ten minutes!

CONVERSATION 3

A: I'm so sorry to be late. There was an accident on Fifth Street.

B: That's quite alright. We still have enough time before the meeting.

Table 3: Clarification Patterns

	ENGLISH	SPANISH	CHINESE	JAPANESE
PATTERN A	4.5%	1.7%	3.7%	24.7%
PATTERN B	83.0%	93.7%	79.7%	63.0%
PATTERN C	9.5%	1.1%	11.6%	3.3%
PATTERN D	3.0%	3.5%	5.0%	9.0%

*Note: Pattern A is explanation in response to inquiries across turns.
 Pattern B is clarification of previous primary functions in a turn.
 Pattern C is explanation without verbal initiators.
 Pattern D is defensive explanation.*

In addition to the contrast in Patterns A and B cross-culturally, an examination of Pattern C suggests that English and Chinese in conversation pre-empt turns or are more assertive in stating opinions than the other two language groups. While the number of incidents of defensiveness in the dialogs was limited (Pattern D), Japanese showed a much higher occurrence which it can also be argued to reflect culturally conditioned expectations in interaction (Berendt & Tanaka 1984, Berendt 2006).

Implications for Teaching

Spoken as well as written language each has its complexities. Natural language speech is a complex, cooperative web of interaction which focuses mainly on the maintenance of a relationship or centers on influencing the relationship. The written language has the strength of elaborating ideas through using more complex grammatical constructions and needs to provide sufficient background information for the (isolated) reader, since the writer does not by and large know who his reader might be.

Many teachers and learners of spoken English often judge their performance in terms of what they expect of good writing: to make perfect, complete sentences and to communicate only information about things. This attitude is the basis for beginning English studies with such sentences as "This is a pen." and "I am a teacher." where the meaning is largely nonsensical. Such language teaching reflects the image that language is primarily the learning of grammatical patterns and word meaning as limited to dictionary

definitions. This can lead to a stilted, false representation of what speaking is all about and how it is accomplished, communication becoming devoid of the expression of human relationships and feelings.

Table 4 shows the communicative purposes in the conversations found in Japanese junior high schools, the entry level for English studies (1990 data). Conversations focusing on the giving and getting of information (transactional purposes) range from 30.6% to 41.5%, all much higher than the Talk Data data (18.4%) (Berendt 1991a & b). This reflects the over use of Q and A type of dialogs for conversational interaction, where the pedagogical values of teaching grammatical patterns and of transmitting information are apparent. The imbalance in learning can also be seen in general in Table 4 by comparing the frequencies in the Spoken English of the Talk Day data. Such imbalances in the textbooks undoubtedly reflect the preconceptions of textbook authors in regard to what they think constitutes spoken interaction and the purposes for which it is used.

Table 4: Interactive Functions in Japanese Jr. High School English Texts and the Talk Day Spoken English Data

	Interactive Macro Groups	Talk Day Data	Textbooks
1.	Social Rites	2.0%	4.2%
2.	Emotional States	8.5%	4.8%
3.	Information Exchange	18.4%	38.8%
4.	Instrumental-Affective Goals	20.6%	15.9%
5.	Strategy Management	50.5%	36.3%

A good example of the problem about what is conversation and our images of language can be seen in the grammar and use of questions. While question forms in grammar are used to get information (e.g. *What time is it? Where is the nearest Seven Eleven? How much does it cost?*), nonetheless, Table 6 illustrates that questions are used for purposes other than getting information in conversation. The various functions of questions are an important learning goal in teaching conversation. Questions are regularly used for such vital communicative purposes as making requests *Could you help me? Would you take this for me?* for making suggestions *Why don't you think about going to London for the week? What about his proposal?* and greetings *How are you?* Tables 5 to 8 further illustrate the cross-over of the interactive uses of the same grammatical patterns for different purposes, such as in making suggestions and

criticisms. The grammar is essentially the same but intonation plays a significant role in how we interpret the communicative purposes. People have the significant power in conversation to link and judge the meaning or intention of a speaker's words from the intonation and context of use. Such communicative ability needs to be better recognized and integrated in the teaching of grammatical forms as well as vocabulary in conversation.

Table 5: English Question Patterns used in making Suggestions

PATTERN	NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES
Why don't you/we...?	35
How/What about...?	14
Can I/we...?	11
Tag questions	10
Single word/phrase	10
Why not...?	8
Won't/Wouldn't...?	7
May I...?	7
Either...or...?	7
Be...?	4
BE not...?	4
...uh/huh?	3
rising tone on statements	3

Table 6: A Comparison of Question Typologies used in English and Japanese Suggestions

ENGLISH	QUESTION TYPOLOGIES	JAPANESE
42.9%	X Questions	5.9%
34.3%	Polar Questions	70.6%
8.6%	Tag Questions	5.9%
8.6%	Single Word/Phrase	17.6%
2.9%	Interrogative Adverbs	0.0%
2.9%	Interjections	0.0%

Table 7: English Question Patterns used in making Criticisms

PATTERN	NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES
What...?	9
Why don't you...?	6
Why do you...?	5
What makes you...?	5
Do...?	4
Who do you think...?	3
How...?	3
Can't you...?	3
Tag questions	3
Why not?	3
BE + not...?	2
Have...?	2
Either...or...?	1
When...?	1

Table 8: A Comparison of Question Typologies used in making English and Japanese Criticisms

ENGLISH	QUESTION TYPOLOGIES	JAPANESE
63.6%	X Questions	62.0%
24.2%	Polar Questions	10.0%
9.1%	Tag Questions	24.0%
3.0%	Interrogative Adverbs	2.0%
0.0%	Single Word/Phrase	2.0%

The interactive use of language as in dyadic discourse requires teachers to teach communicative skills as an essential part of learning to speak well. The four phases in the dominant exchange structure are good bases for developing the skills needed to accomplish meaningful goals in speaking. Thus role playing,

communication games, gambits, drama, simulation games, etc. are all useful as activities for conversational development, keeping in mind the four fundamental phases in our exchanges (preparatory expressions, primary speech acts, clarification, and relationship bonding as in Table 2). The group associated with Gillian Brown (1983, 1984) has pointed out not only the need for second language learners to learn to converse but also native English speaking teenagers.

Preferred styles of conversation can vary significantly in each language-cultural group and such differences of style affect expectations in how conversations should be carried on. Table 3 on the essential process of clarification is such an example. Berendt (1980, 1991b, 2006) has pointed out other significant variations in the basic exchange structure processes, especially in the preparatory expressions and relationship bonding.

Summary

This paper has focused on three primary points in the dominant exchange structure processes: (1) that we need to distinguish communication which is "transactional" or the exchange of information from communication which is "interpersonal" and "interactional" which focuses on the maintenance of the relation and how to affect/influence the course of the relationship; (2) that we recognize the characteristics of natural spoken language as inherent in the communicative processes of speaking and not as deviant forms of writing; and (3) that learning interactive skills based on the dominant exchange structure processes is an essential basis for teaching the language of conversation.

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