

Lecture 3, winter term

# Conversation Analysis

—The Structure of Spoken Language

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# So far, we've addressed

- Central topics of Pragmatic studies
  - Deixis
  - Presupposition
  - Conversational Implicature
    - Face and Politeness
    - Relevance
  - Speech Acts

# Today's lecture

- We'll look at a **larger** linguistic unit, i.e., conversation, and treat **Conversation Analysis as an independent discipline**. **CA** is the study of interactional activities (note that it involves at least two people).
- What is the purpose of CA?
  - We'll show that **oral communication is actually structured**, i.e., it is not random, but quite organized. The **structure** of spoken language is organized in terms of **turns** (话轮), **adjacency pairs**( 毗邻语对 , two turns form a pair) and **sequences** (语列).

## 0. Some “**instinctive**” features of conversation

- The commonest form of language use is possibly conversation, which is just **talk**. As a form of **spoken language**, it is usually **spontaneous**, which means there **usually** is **no conscious plan** to build a **conversation** (Note that in daily conversation, *we usually don't have a well-made plan*, though occasionally we do).
- However, speakers and hearers seem to **work together** at building the various types of conversation. Why? As has been proposed by Grice (1975), people consciously or unconsciously observe **the co-operative principle** (and **the politeness principle**).

# 1. Conversation Analysis (CA) as a discipline

- Sacks, Harvey, Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson. 1974. **A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation**, *Language* 50:696–735. (Note that this is the seminal paper on CA) 三位学者使CA成了一门独立学科
- CA is an approach to the study of **talk in interaction**.
- CA derives from sociology and ethnomethodology(民俗学方法, the sociological study of the rules underlying ordinary social activities).
- They argue that conversation has its own **dynamic structure** (i.e., it is active and constantly changing).
- So, CA looks at ***the ways how speakers organize conversation efficiently***.

# 1.1 Theoretical preliminaries

- What is the most salient characteristics of conversation?
  - **Conversation** is **context-shaped** (语境塑造) in that talk usually occurs in a specific context/situation (什么场合说什么话).
  - **What participants say** *is shaped by the context* (think about the way you join others for a talk) **and for the context** (think about the way the topic of conversation changes): *Each next bit of talk is understood and constructed in the light of what has preceded it* (i.e. what is previously said). This is called **contextualization** (语境化), which is an important procedure for understanding conversational dialogues.

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## 1.1 Theoretical preliminaries

- Usually, conversation progresses (or shifts) **from topic to topic** and **from speaker to speaker**. Therefore, **conversation is context-renewing** (语境更新) .
- People are just taking turns to talk during the course of communication. **Each turn** (话轮) at talk is the response to some previous talk and, by its utterance, provides a context in which the next turn at talk will be heard. **Context is**, therefore, **dynamic** and **is renewed at each point in the talk**.

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## 1.2 Aim and Characteristics

- **The aim of CA:** to reveal the **organizational features** of **naturally occurring conversations**.
  - **CA is empirical(实证的):** its analysis is based on **authentic (naturally occurring) data**;
  - **CA is descriptive (描述性的):** it avoids any prior theoretical assumptions and any theoretical basis;
  - **CA's method is inductive (归纳的):** It searches for **recurring patterns** (or rules) across many records of naturally occurring conversations.



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## 1.3 Research Interests of CA:

- The way people take turns (to keep a conversation going)
- What turn-types (话轮类型) there are
  - In other words, CA studies the **organization** of conversation (i.e., *what its structure is like and how it is structurally organized*).
  - As will be shown and discussed shortly, conversation is mostly organized in **sequences** (序列, 语列, 片段, a set of events, which have a particular order).

## 2. Building the conversation

- As it can be easily seen, conversations in general have been structured with (i) the **willing cooperation of partners**; and (ii) **the basic structural device** used to introduce a topic and to build a conversation is **question-answer** (which is called an **adjacency pair** “毗邻语对”), e.g.,

- *How are you? Fine, thank you. And you? Oops, terribly busy.*

Q

A

Q

A

注：在与其他人交谈时，每个人或许都有点社恐。如何才能有效地与其他人交谈呢？

最好的方式可能是 问--答，日常会话或明星访谈等都一样。

(金星秀—贾玲)

## 2.1 Turn-taking organization (话轮转换组织)

- Basically, **conversation**, which involves at least two parties, has a **turn-taking organization** in the sense that **speakers and hearers take turns** to build a conversation.
- **What turn-taking is:** in a conversation, the proper way should be like this: ***One person speaks and stops (i.e. give the floor to one's hearer(s)), and another person resumes the talk and then stops.***
- So conversation is basically a process by which conversationalists allocate **the floor** (i.e. *the right*) to **participate in an interactional activity**. (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) 注: **floor** 是联合国会议最常用的词之一
  - **Floor** (话语权): the right to begin to talk, e.g. ***to be given/get/have the floor*** to speak during a conversation or discussion

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## 2.1 Turn-taking organization (话轮转换组织)

- When we are engaged in a **conversation**, therefore, we are supposed to **have a strong sense of its turn-taking feature**.
  - In other words, one shouldn't be self-centred in the way he or she is talking endlessly;
  - One shouldn't be self-important, either. That is, one is supposed to **give the floor to the other party (/parties) at a proper point of time**, so as to keep the balance between **the time one spends talking and the time the others spend talking**.

## 2.2 What are the basic units of CA (化大为小的方法)

- **Conversation consists of turns and sequences.** A **sequence** (语列) is a (larger) unit of conversation that consists of two (or more) adjacent turns, i.e., a pair of (or more) utterances occurring together. This is called **Adjacency Pair** (毗邻语对, note that an adjacency pair is just a sequence).
- A **turn** (话轮) is a (period of) time during which a single participant speaks.
- A **turn** can be realized in any linguistic expression, such as a sentence, a phrase or even a word, e.g.,

□ **A: Hello/Hi**      **B: Hi**

## 2.2.1 What are the types of sequences

■ **Adjacency pair** (i.e. a pair of utterances occurring together) is a **type of sequences**, along with:

- ❑ Insertion sequences (插入语列), i.e. it can be inserted with another one.
- ❑ Pre-sequences (前置语列), i.e. it can have a pre-one.

■ **The overall organization of a conversation** can be given a **schematic** (刚要的, 简要的) description of the types and order of **turns** and **sequences**.

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## 2.2.2 Adjacency pairs

- ❑ **Adjacency Pair** (i.e. a pair of utterances occurring together), as a **conversational unit**, contains an exchange of **one turn each** by two speakers.
- ❑ **The turns are functionally related to each other** in such a fashion that the first turn requires **a certain type** of second turn.
- ❑ **The most often used adjacency pair** of conversation, as has just been mentioned above, is ***question-answer***.

## 2.2.2.1 *Types of adjacency pairs* (frequently used)

- **Question – answer** (*What time is it? It's ten-thirty.*)
- **Greeting – greeting** (*Hello; hi*)
- **Offer – acceptance** (*Can I help you? Oh, thank you!*)
- **Request – acceptance** (*May I use your pencil? Sure!*)
- **Complaint – excuse** (*You're so late! Sorry, I got a fever.*)



## 2.2.2.2 *Functions of adjacency pairs* (what are they used for?)

- Adjacency pairs are used for **starting** and **closing** a conversation.
- Adjacency pairs are also used for **moves** in a conversation.
- Components in adjacency pairs can be used to build **longer sequences**.

## 2.2.3 Pre-sequence

- A pair of turns understood as a preliminary to the main course of action.
- It is often used to start a conversation, e.g.,
  - **courtesy phrases** such as *Excuse me, Pardon me, Hello, etc.*
  - **physical devices** such as *patting, raising hands, coughing, etc.*
- Common types of **pre-sequence**:
  - **Summon(呼唤)-answer** (Higgins: ***Mother?*** Mother: *Yes?*)
  - **Pre-announcement** (A: *Did you hear the good news?* B: *What?*)
  - **Pre-invitation** (A: *Will you be free this weekend?*)
  - **Pre-request** (A: *What are you doing now?* B: *Why?* A: *Could you help me with my paper?*)
  - **Pre-closing** (A: *Oops, it's already midnight,...* B: *Do you want to go home?*)

## 2.2.4 Insertion Sequence (插入语列)

- **Conversation is full of sequences** which are often in the form of adjacency pairs.
- Sometimes, a **main sequence** may have an **embedded** (内嵌) **one**, which is called **Insertion Sequence** by conversation analysts.
- An **insertion sequence** is a **sequence of turns that intervenes (i.e. go between)** between the first and the second part of an adjacency pair.


Son: ***Shall I wear the blue shoes, Mom?***

Mom: *You've got the black ones.* (any implicature?)

Son: *They're not comfortable.* (any implicature?)

Mom: ***Yeah, they're the best then, wear the blue ones.***

## 2.2.4 Insertion Sequence (插入语列)

- A conversation like the following one often takes place at a pub \_\_\_\_ (of which country, UK or US?).
    - *A. May I have a bottle of beer?*
    - *B. Are you twenty-one?*
    - *A. No.*
    - *B. No.*
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By raising a question, A is expecting a straight answer, i.e., yes or no.

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## 2.2.4 Insertion Sequence (插入语列)

As you can see, the topic of an **insertion sequence** is related to that of the **main sequence** and the *question* from the main sequence *is answered after* the insertion.

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## Small exercise 1:

*Please identify the Insertion sequences in the following dialogue.*

***A: Are you coming tonight?***

***B: Can I bring a guest?***

***A: Male or female?***

***B: What difference does that make?***

***A: An issue of balance.***

***B: Female.***

***A: Sure.***

***B: Yeah, I'll be there.***

## Small exercise 1:

*Please identify the Insertion sequences in the following dialogue.*

*A: Are you coming tonight? Question*

*B: Can I bring a guest? Q1*

*A: Male or female? Q2*

*B: What difference does that make? Q3*

*A: An issue of balance. A3*

*B: Female. A2*

*A: Sure. A1*

*B: Yeah, I'll be there. Answer*

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## 2.2.5 Breaking adjacency pairs

- As an accepted part of conversational structure, adjacency pairs have **strong in-built expectations**.
  - **Questions** are generally answered, **complaints** are replied to, and **greetings** are exchanged.
  - If the rules are ignored and these patterns are broken, this immediately creates a response.



## Small exercise 2:

- Look at the following exchanges and discuss how they appear to **flout** (disobey,公然违抗) the normal expectations of adjacency pairs. Can you imagine some contexts which would explain these?
  - A: *Hello!*  
B: *Goodbye!*
  - A: *Did you go out with Mary last night?*  
B: *Why are you asking?*  
A: *Why do you think (I'm asking)?*
  - A: *You tea's on the table.*  
B:  
A: *Did you hear what I said?*  
B:  
A: *Answer me, will you?*

## 2.2 “Preference” organization

- Adjacency pairs are often organized in **the first and second part**.
- For any particular first part speech act (e.g. a proposal like “*Shall we dance?*”), conversationalists show a preference for particular second parts in response (acceptance like “*Yes!*”).
- Therefore, we can **distinguish between preferred second parts** (期待的第二部分，即喜欢听到的话) and **dispreferred second parts** (非期待的第二部分) (e.g., rejection like “*No*”).

## 2.3 “Preference” organization

- **Adjacency pairs, therefore, have “preferences”:**
- **Preferred response = granting/agreeing**
  - Son: *Mom, can I have an ice-cream?*
  - Mother: *Yes, you can. (Cf. No, you can’t.)*
- **Dispreferred response = refusing/rejecting**
  - **Acceptance, granting (允准) and agreement** are all referred to as **preferred** responses while **rejecting, refusing** and **disagreeing** are in most cases **dispreferred responses**.
  - Dispreferred responses are often delayed.

## 2.3 “Preference” organization

First part	Second part	
	Preferred	Dispreferred
Assessment	agree	disagree
Invitation	accept	refuse
Offer	accept	decline
Proposal	agree	disagree
Request	accept	refuse

TABLE 8.1 *The general patterns of preferred and dispreferred structures (following Levinson 1983)*

- Wife: *Do you think I'm a good cook?*
- Hubby: *Well, you make good coffee.* (Preferred or dispreferred?)

## *After Ms Dolittle was lost*

- Are there any preferred or dispreferred second parts in the dialogue between Higgins and Pickering?

1. The professor got all preferred responses from a friend☺
2. The professor seemed so self-centred.



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Summary: The holistic picture of *the structure of a conversation* is like this

- ◆ Conversation > sequence > adjacency pair > turn
- ◆ Conversation consists of sequences which are often in the form of adjacency pairs which consists of turns.

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# Summary

- **Conversation**, as a linguistic as well as an **interactional activity**, is taking place between the various participants in it.
  - Speakers and listeners **support** and **evaluate each other** using the known building blocks of adjacency pairs and operating with **pragmatic principles** (e.g. *the co-operative principle and politeness principle*).
  - **The participants are aware of the conversation's structure, enabling a smooth progression from topic to topic and from speaker to speaker.**
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## References:

- Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. and G. Jefferson, 1974, **A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation**, *Language* 50: 696–735.
- 陈新仁, 2021, 《新编语用学教程》, 外研社。
- Levinson, S. *Pragmatics*, Chapter 6. OUP.
- Yule, G. *Pragmatics*, Chapter 8. OUP.



# Homework: WTO

- Watch: 《金星秀》  
《鲁豫有约》



- Think about: Are there any changes in our daily conversation? (due to the influence of new technology, e.g., *Wechat*).
- Other questions?

# Student presentation on 7 Nov 2023

- **Requirements:**
- Choose ***one of the topics of pragmatics*** we've discussed, and tell *a story (better with videos, pictures) and give your own analysis/comments.*
- Time limit: **5** minutes' presentation plus **3** minutes' question time