

### **Conversation as a ‘collaborative achievement’**

To treat conversation as a collaborative achievement is to open up a new perspective to the study of language. Language is not merely for referential purposes or transmission of information. Nor it is an abstract entity that can be studied regardless of its’ social and interactional nature as defined in the Chomskyan dichotomy of competence and performance. Conversation analysts see language as social actions and found empirical evidence to prove the structural orderliness in interaction. They go beyond the philosophy of meanings, and extend the realm of pragmatics to include the understanding of cultural practices and social order as displayed or assumed in conversation. In the following paragraphs I will first discuss how the way conversation analysts see talk as actions is different from philosophers who strike for a theory of meanings, from other disciplines which start from an deductive approach. I will then explain what conversation as collaborative achievement means as it indicates that there must be at least two persons actively involved in a conversation as a collaborative act, and there is one or more purposes of interaction to be achieved in such act.

Philosophers Austin and Searle developed Speech Act Theory (Blum-Kulka: 1997) to account for different types of acts and the conditions parameters they work on. Although the theory only accounts for the types of act and intention of the speaker but not the hearer, and no collaborative or interactional act are considered, it provides a good theoretical abstraction to later development of various sub-fields of pragmatics, in

particular cross-cultural pragmatics (ibid: 43). Grice's co-operative principle attempt to look at the mechanism of discourse coherence. Both speaker and hearer are involved in his analysis, and a conversational exchange in Grice's analysis becomes mutual knowledge once the hearer recognized an intent of the speaker (ibid: 39). Both Speech Act theory and Grice's maxims aim at developing a theory of meaning in a deductive way, they are concerned about meanings in context but many of the social and interactional reasons for a coherent conversation are not sufficiently or realistically accounted for. Such theoretical abstraction is vastly different from the perspective of conversation analysts which emphasizes an inductive methodology and empirical evidence from natural conversation. In conversation analysis the transcript or the record of conversation is the place for analysis and evidence, and generalization or 'rules' are only made inductively from the evidence. For example, Schegloff's generalization of 'answerer speaks first' is a rule with no exception among his summons-answer data. And when there is one case that at a first sight doesn't fit the rule, as in example (2) below, the fact that the summoner takes up a second turn indicates his/her understanding of the convention as he/she expects the other party to speak first, and when such expectation is not met, he/she summon verbally and thus take up the second turn in the sequence.

Conversation is a collaborative act because both speaker and hearer are necessarily involved actively in order for a conversation to be coherent and smooth. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (Duranti: 1997) are concerned about the principles and orderliness of conversation in which participants are able to alternate their speech to avoid overlaps and gaps in turn-taking. A violation of such expectation triggers further analysis, for example,

a pause could be given as a possible transition-relevant point, an opportunity in time for the next speaker to self-select if anyone choose to do so. Participants seem to have a shared knowledge and convention about doing conversation. For example, in (1) the hearer A knows exactly where a transition-relevant point is, and is able to self-select and take the next turn seamlessly.

(1)

B: Well it wasn't me::

A:                      No, but you know who it was.

(Sacks et al. 1987:17, from Duranti: 249)

The discovery of orderly sequences such as adjacency pairs, pre-sequences and summons-answer sequences further displays that conversation is a collaborative act in which it is considered complete only when both parties are involved. In the following example, a violation of the expectation that 'the answerer speaks first' in a summons-answer sequence brings exception to the general distribution rule. The summoner, the police, takes up the next slot when he/she hears no answer to the first summon, i.e. the telephone ring. The pause is only for one second but it is long enough to prompt the police to take up a second turn which is supposedly the other party's turn. But note that in order for the police to take up the second turn he/she must have a knowledge of the convention of summons-answer sequence that he/she shared with the rest of the community. The convention is that summons and answer sequence are expected to be collaboratively completed, and any violation of the convention for even a very short

amount of time could bring an almost automatic response to take up the other party's turn, and in this case to summon again which finally prompts an answer in the third turn.

(2)

(Police makes call)

Receiver is lifted, and there is a one second pause

Police: Hello.

Other: American Red Cross.

Police: Hello, this is Police Headquarters... er, Officer Stratton [etc.]

(Schegoloff, 1986: 1079, from Have 1999: 16)

Clark and Wilkers-Gibbs (1986) in their work on referring set up an experiment to study how speaking and understanding work in conversation. They advocate that referring in conversation is a collaborative process in which both parties have to work together to reach a reference understanding that they mutually accept. The process of establishing a common perspective marks the beginning of the coordination process, and both parties have mutual responsibility to bear toward the understanding of each utterance along the way for current purposes. Clark and Wilkers-Gibbs found a general pattern from the first trail to the last one in the experiment. That when the two participants are establishing a common perspective to begin the task, the reference are given in much more details as in 'the next one looks like a person who's ice skating, except they're sticking two arms out in front'. In comparison to when mutual understanding and acceptance are established, the reference can be reduced to 'the ice skater'. And along the process both parties have

to show mutual acceptance to previous utterance as in example (3): A initiates a reference while B shows acceptance 'okay' and a repair 'kind of standing up?' to make sure that both parties are on the same ground. A in the third turn 'yeah' accepts B's previous utterance, and B in the fourth turn also provides an acceptance 'okay'. In this case, both A and B are taking the roles of 'willing and prepared hearers' and both of them are actively establishing common ground and acceptance that build upon previous utterances.

(3)

A: Um, third one is the guy reading with, holding his book to the left.

B: Okay, kind of standing up?

A: Yeah.

B: Okay.

(Clark and Wilkers-Gibbs 1986: 22)

Viewing conversation as a collaborative achievement takes at least two senses. Conversation can be seen as an achievement as analysts see how assert, request, promise and other illocutionary acts are successfully or not successfully achieved, i.e. the outcome of a conversation. But the physical fact that a conversation or an interaction was carried out to an extent that it is sufficient for current purposes is itself an achievement. For a coherent conversation to be carried out it takes at least two willful parties to actively engaged in a co-operative way, whether for a specific task-oriented conversation or simply for phatic communication. The following transcript is among three girls who try to figure out the name and location of a bar. They did not actually come up with the name

of the bar at the end but the references they all contributed are considered sufficient for current purposes of the conversation and therefore they carry on from then.

(4)

C: ... we walk all the way from Happy Valley to Time Square/ a bar behind Time Square/ what is that call/ err/ the one that we went out (...)

D: I have no idea what it's call/ it's call (...) call ghghghghgh but I

C: but siulong it's not a real name

D: I realize (...)

C: next to Causeway Bay

V: next to what?

C: Causeway Bay/ that one

D: you know behind the/ behind the yun luk that one

V: ya

D: okay the first what/ the first bar

C: is that a first bar

D: really behind (2 syll)

V: there is one road for

C: yes

D: next to (2 syll)

V: oh okay

D: no ye/ we should go there one day

(My own data, code-switched data is reduced except in place names in this example)

Even when a conversation or an interaction breaks down, it still takes both parties to achieve. In lecture Laura Brown mentioned an interaction occurred in her co-op house in which a dinner conversation was purposefully broken down because the invited guest, a potential house mate was considered by the other housemates as an inappropriate candidate after a short period of interaction. The co-operative acts of the others by purposefully not making eye-contacts and avoid giving back-channeling and other willing and prepared hearers' responses to the guest achieved that current purpose for the others, though not for between the guest and the other housemates.

Viewing conversation as a collaborative achievement shifts linguists' perspectives from studying language in context-free framework, or from speaker's intentionality framework to a framework that could account for language use in interaction, which as Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs notes, is the only site of language use for many people or even for whole societies.