1 Characterizing conversation

Introduction

Conversation accounts for the major proportion of most people's daily language use but despite this (or perhaps because of it) it is not that easily defined. Compare, for example, these three dictionary definitions:

- If you have a conversation with someone, you talk with them, usually in an informal situation (*Collins' COBUILD English Dictionary*).
- Informal talk in which people exchange news, feelings, and thoughts (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*).
- An informal talk involving a small group of people or only two; the activity of talking in this way (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*).

While all three definitions highlight the informal and the spoken nature of conversation, only one singles out group size as a defining feature, while another focuses on topic. The distinction between *a conversation* (i.e. conversation as a countable noun) and *conversation* (uncountable) is either ignored or blurred in the first two definitions. Finer distinctions between conversation and, say, *chat*, *small talk*, *discussion* and *gossip*, are not dealt with. And, as we shall see in Chapter 8, the term *conversation* with special reference to language-teaching methodology has been enlisted for a wide variety of uses – ranging from *speaking* and *communication* to *dialogue* and *role play*. In this chapter we shall attempt to characterize conversation, first by contrasting it with other kinds of language, and then by listing its distinguishing features. By way of conclusion, we will offer a working definition of conversation that will serve as the starting point for a more detailed description in subsequent chapters.

1.1 The nature of conversation

In April 1999 a freak storm devastated parts of the city of Sydney. Here is how the storm was reported in *The Sydney Morning Herald* the following day:

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Text 1.1

Hail shatters city

A freak hail storm swept across Sydney last night, causing damage worth hundreds of millions of dollars and triggering a massive rescue and repair effort by emergency services.

Thousands of homes were damaged as roofs caved in and windows and skylights were smashed. Thousands more cars were wrecked or badly damaged in the storm, which struck with no official warning.

The ambulance service said dozens of people were treated for cuts and lacerations after being hit by falling glass or hail stones, which witnesses described variously as being as big as golf balls, lemons, cricket balls and rock melons.

. . . At Paddington, Ms Jan Mourice said all houses on one side of Prospect Street had windows smashed. Mr Lucio Galleto, of Lucio's Restaurant at Paddington, said: 'I had five windows in the restaurant smashed. Water flooded in and patrons' cars have been smashed.'

(*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 April 1999)

On the day after the storm a radio talk show host interviewed a spokesman from the Weather Bureau:

Text 1.2

(1) PC: . . . here on 2BL. Well what went wrong? Why didn't the Weather Bureau tell us what was happening? You have heard earlier this morning reports that the Bureau thought er saw the storm but thought it would go back out to sea. It didn't. Steve Simons, a senior forecaster with the Bureau, joins me on the line this morning. Good morning Steve.

(2) SS: Good morning Philip.

(3) PC: So what went wrong?

(4) SS: What went wrong was that the storm developed down near Wollongong and we had it on the radar and we were tracking it and the track at that stage was showing it going out to sea and then very suddenly it developed into what we call a 'supercell' which is the beginning of a severe thunderstorm and these supercells have a habit of doing some rather crazy things. It changed direction very suddenly – this was down near Otford Bundeena way = =

(5) PC: = =Yes all right so er what was the time interval between you first discovering this storm and then discovering that it was in fact heading for the the city?

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(6) SS: The time that we realised that it was heading for the
            city . . .

                    (Radio 2BL, Philip Clark Breakfast Presenter, 15 April 1999)

A couple of days later four friends were talking about how they were
affected by the storm. Here is the transcript of part of that conversation:

Text 1.3: Hailstorm

(1) Odile: . . . No I think I don't know many people who have
               been affected except you and I. That much.
(2) Rob: You don't know?
(3) Odile: Well you know except for the neighbours.
(4) Rob: Oh a friend of ours in Paddington, they had to move
               out of the flat= =
(5) Grace: = =Mm.
(6) Rob   because the whole= =
(7) Grace: = =roof collapsed.
(8) Rob: The tiles fell through the ceiling= =
(9) Grace: = =Mm
(10) Rob: into the room and they've actually had to move out
               completely.
(11) Odile: Oh really?
(12) Dan: And there was the little old lady over the road who . . .
(13) Rob: Oh yeah. [laughs] She was sitting in her living room
               and a hail stone fell through the skylight, this old
               Italian woman. She had corrugated iron but it fell
               through the skylight. It fell through the ceiling and
               landed in her lap when she was sitting= =
(14) Odile: = =Mm.
(15) Rob: watching television.
(16) Dan: Watching *The X-files* probably.
(17) All: [laugh]
(18) Odile: I'm so glad the kids were not there because you
               know that hole is just above Debbie's head.
(19) Rob: Yeah.
(20) Grace: Oh yeah.
(21) Rob: No, it is amazing more people weren't injured.
(22) Grace: Mm.
(23) Rob: So erm they go back to school tomorrow?
(24) Odile: Not tomorrow= =
(25) Rob: = =Monday.
(26) Odile: It's Sunday.
(27) Rob: Monday.
(28) Grace: Monday.
(29) Odile: Monday.
(30) Rob: Mm.

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(31) Odile: Yeah.
(32) Grace: Is the school OK?
(33) Odile: You mean, general damage?
(34) Grace: Yeah.
(35) Odile: I don't know.
(36) Rob: The school's closed next to us, yeah.
(37) Grace: I was speaking to erm . . .
(38) Odile: Oh my god I hadn't thought about that . . .

(Authors' data)

Each of these three texts deals with the same topic – the storm – but each deals with it in a very different way. These differences derive partly from the different channels of communication involved, partly from the different purposes that motivated each text, and partly from the different kinds of roles and relationships existing in each of the communicative situations. While all three texts encode instances of spoken language (Text 1.1 both reports and directly quotes what witnesses are supposed to have said), only Texts 1.2 and 1.3 exhibit the 'jointly-constructed-in-real-time' nature of talk, and only one of these texts – Text 1.3 – is a *conversation* in the sense that we will be using in this book.

In order to arrive at a workable definition of conversation, then, it will be useful to look at the differences between these three texts in more detail. By highlighting the differences, first between written and spoken English, and then between formal and informal spoken English, the following defining characteristics of conversation, and their implications, will be discussed:

- that (to state the obvious) it is *spoken*, and
- that this speaking takes place *spontaneously*, in *real time*, and
- that it takes place in a *shared context*;
- that it is *interactive*, hence *jointly constructed* and *reciprocal*;
- that its function is primarily *interpersonal*;
- that it is *informal*; and
- since, it is the critical site for the negotiation of social identities, it is *expressive* of our wishes, feelings, attitudes and judgements.

1.1.1 Conversation is spoken

Conversation is spoken (or primarily so, since computer-mediated communication now allows conversation to take place by means of writing – see Section 1.1.8 below). Hence the most obvious difference between Texts 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 lies in the choice of *mode*: Text 1.1 is – and was always – written, whereas Texts 1.2 and 1.3 are written transcriptions of what was originally spoken. The transfer from one mode (speaking) to another (writing) means that most of the prosodic features of the spoken

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language, i.e. sentence stress, intonation, tempo and articulation rate, rhythm and voice quality, are lost in transcription. In order to redress this omission, here is a transcription of Text 1.3 with prosodic features represented, using the system adopted by Crystal and Davy (1975), as outlined in the glossary below:

‖	tone-unit boundary
|	first prominent syllable of the tone-unit
`	falling tone
´	rising tone
-	level tone
^	rising-falling tone
˅	falling-rising tone
'	the next syllable is stressed
↑	the next syllable is stressed and also steps up in pitch
"	extra strong stress
SMALL CAPITALS	the word, or words, containing the nuclear syllable in a tone-unit
·	pauses, from brief to long
- -	
- - -	

Text 1.3 – Phonological transcription

(1) Odile: . . . |no Ì 'think ‖ I don't |know ↑many 'people 'who have been AFFÈCTED ‖ except |you and ↑Ì ‖ |THÀT 'much ‖ - - -

(2) Rob: you |don't KNǑW ‖

(3) Odile: |WÈLL you KNÓW ‖ ex'cept for the ↑NĚIGHBOURS ‖

(4) Rob: oh a ↑friend of 'ours in PĂDDINGTON ‖ |they 'had to 'move 'out of the ↑FLÂT ‖

(5) Grace: |M` M ‖

(6) Rob: be|cause the WHÓLE ‖

(7) Grace: |roof COLLÀPSED ‖

(8) Rob: the ↑tiles 'fell through the CÊILING ‖

(9) Grace: |M`M ‖]

(10) Rob: |into the ↑RÒOM ‖ and they've |actually had to 'move 'out COMPLÈTELY ‖·

(11) Odile: oh |RÈALLY ‖

(12) Dan: and |there was the little old 'lady over the RÓAD who ‖ -

(13) Rob: |oh YÈAH ‖ [*laughs*] |she was 'sitting in her LÎVING 'room ‖ and a |hail stone 'fell through the SKŶLIGHT ‖ this |old ITÂLIAN 'woman ‖ |she had

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		'corrugated ÎRON ‖ but it 'fell through the SKŶLIGHT ‖ it 'fell through the 'ceiling and 'landed in her · ↑LÁP ‖ ǀwhen she was SÌTTING ‖
(14)	Odile:	ǀM-M ‖
(15)	Rob:	ǀwatching TELEVÍSION ‖---
(16)	Dan:	ǀwatching the ↑X-FÌLES ‖ PRÒBABLY ‖
(17)	All:	[*laugh*]
(18)	Odile:	ǀI'm ↑so 'glad the ↑KÌDS were not THÉRE ‖ beǀcause you KNÓW ‖ that ǀHÓLE ‖ is 'just above 'Debbie's HÈAD ‖
(19)	Rob:	ǀYĒAH ‖
(20)	Grace:	ǀoh YÊAH ‖
(21)	Rob:	ǀno it ↑ÌS a'mazing ‖ more ǀpeople weren't ÌNJURED ‖
(22)	Grace:	ǀMM ‖---
(23)	Rob:	ǀSÓ erm ‖ ǀthey go back to 'school TOMÓRROW ‖
(24)	Odile:	not ǀTOMǑRROW ‖
(25)	Rob:	MÒNDAY ‖
(26)	Odile	it's ǀSÙNDAY ‖
(27)	Rob:	ǀMÒNDAY ‖
(28)	Grace:	ǀMÒNDAY ‖
(29)	Odile:	ǀMÒNDAY ‖
(30)	Rob:	ǀMM ‖
(31)	Odile:	ǀYEAH ‖--
(32)	Grace:	is the ǀschool ÓK ‖
(33)	Odile:	ǀyou MÉAN ‖ ǀgeneral DÂMAGE ‖
(34)	Grace:	ǀYÊAH ‖
(35)	Odile:	ǀ Î don't 'know ‖
(36)	Rob:	the ǀSCHÒOL'S 'closed ‖ ǀnext to ÙS ‖ ǀYÈAH ‖
(37)	Grace:	ǀI was SPÈAKING to erm ‖
(38)	Odile:	↑oh my GÒD ‖ I hadn't ↑THÓUGHT about 'that ‖

It would be impossible to convey the full extent of the conversational 'work' that is achieved through prosody, but among the features that are worth noting in the above extract – and which are either completely absent or only notionally represented in written text (e.g. by the use of punctuation) – are the following:

- The use of intonation (i.e. changes in pitch direction), and specifically a rising tone to signal questions, where no other grammatical markers of interrogation are present, as in Rob's utterances (2) and (23);
- The use of high 'key' – i.e. a marked step up in pitch – to indicate the introduction of a new topic: (4) oh a ↑friend of 'ours in PǍDDINGTON ‖;
- The way intonation is used to contrast information that is considered to be shared by the speakers ('given') and that which is being proclaimed as 'new', for example, in Odile's utterance (18):

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|I'm ↑so 'glad the ↑KÌDS were not THÉRE|| be|cause you KNÓW||
that |HÓLE|| is 'just above 'Debbie's HÈAD¶

She uses a falling tone on 'kids' to introduce a new topic (or to 'pro-claim' it, in Brazil's (1997) terminology), and a rising, or 'referring' tone, on 'there' and on 'hole' to refer to what is common ground. The other speakers have already been shown the hole, a fact that is suggested by the deictic expressions 'there' and 'that' which assume a shared perspective, not to mention the explicit reference to shared knowledge in the expression 'you know'. On the other hand, the new information about the proximity of the hole to Debbie's head is 'proclaimed' using a falling tone.

- The use of high key to maintain a speaking turn, contrasted with a fall to low key as the speaker prepares to relinquish the turn, as in Rob's turn 10.
- The use of high key to signal 'high involvement', as in Odile's turn 38.

The extract demonstrates what Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994: 89) call the 'crucial and all-pervasive' role that intonation – and *key* in particular – plays in conversation management, influencing the management of topics and of turns, the identification of information status and the signalling of degree of speaker involvement. One has only to imagine a conversation between two Daleks (the robotic characters in *Dr Who*, who speak in an uninflected monotone) to appreciate the importance of these prosodic features, and how they are implicated both in the interactive nature of conversation, and its interpersonal function.

1.1.2   *Conversation happens in real time*

'I had five windows in the restaurant smashed. Water flooded in and patrons' cars have been smashed.'

Notice how in the newspaper article even the quoted speech follows the conventions of written language, in that each sentence forms a complete entity, consisting of clauses that combine a single subject and its predicate in ways that do not deviate from the norms of written grammar. Moreover, there are no *erms* or *ahs* or false starts and back-trackings. Compare this to:

(4) Rob: Oh a friend of ours in Paddington, they had to move
            out of the flat= =
(5) Grace: = =Mm.
(6) Rob   because the whole= =
(7) Grace: = =roof collapsed.

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Even without the addition of prosodic features, this is clearly transcribed speech. It conveys the sense of being locally planned in real time. Compare this to the news article, where the production process has been elaborated through several stages of drafting, re-drafting, editing and publication. 'The main factor which distinguishes written from spoken language . . . is time' (Crystal and Davy, 1975: 87). The real-time spontaneity of talk accounts for a number of features that distinguish it from writing. The most obvious of these are 'dysfluency' effects, which occur 'when the need to keep talking . . . threatens to run ahead of mental planning' (Biber *et al.*, 1999: 1048). Texts 1.2 and 1.3 include several instances of such dysfluency:

- hesitations: *So* erm *they go back to school tomorrow?*
- word repetition: *it was in fact heading for the* the *city*
- false starts: *No* I think *I don't know many people who . . .*
- repairs: *the Bureau thought er* saw *the storm*
- unfinished utterances: *they had to move out of the flat because the whole* [. . .]
- ungrammaticality (in terms of written norms, at least): *except* you and I

Other devices that 'buy' planning time, and thereby help avert the more distracting effects of dysfluency, include the use of *fillers* (as in: *Well* you know *except for the neighbours*), and the repetition of *sentence frames* (*but it fell through the skylight* it fell through the *ceiling . . .*). Repetition may also take the form of 'borrowing' chunks of the previous speaker's utterance, as in Text 1.2:

> PC: So what went wrong?
> SS: *What went wrong* was that the storm developed down near Wollongong (. . .)

More generally, it is now thought that a great deal of spoken language is borrowed, in the sense that it is retrieved in 'chunk' form, not simply from other speakers' utterances, but from the speaker's own store of pre-fabricated and memorized items (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992; Wray, 1999). One class of such 'second-hand' chunks are *utterance launchers*, examples of which include:

> *and there was the* little old lady over the road who.
> *it is amazing* more people weren't injured
> *I'm so glad* the kids were not there . . .
> *you mean*, general damage?
> *I was speaking to* erm . . .

The ability to achieve fluency by stringing chunks together accounts for one of the basic constructional principles of spoken language, which is

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that talk is built up clause by clause, and phrase by phrase, rather than sentence by sentence, as is the case with written text (see Chapter 3). This explains why utterance boundaries are less clearly defined in spoken language, and why coordination is preferred to subordination (the use of subordinate clauses). Spoken language consists of frequent sequences of short clauses joined by *and*, *but*, *then*, *because*. For example:

> what went wrong was that the storm developed down near
> Wollongong *and* we had it on the radar *and* we were tracking it
> *and* the track at that stage was showing it going out to sea *and*
> then very suddenly it developed into what we call a 'supercell'
> which is the beginning of a severe thunderstorm *and* these
> supercells have a habit of doing some rather crazy things

The 'layering' of phrase on phrase, and of clause on clause, allows for a looser form of utterance construction than in written sentences, with their canonical subject–verb–object structure. Thus, in order to foreground the *theme* of an utterance (i.e. the point of departure of the message), information in the form of a noun phrase can be placed at the *head* of the utterance, in advance of the syntactic subject: a friend of ours in Paddington*, they had to move out*. Likewise, retrospective comments can occupy a *tail* slot that does not exist in written sentences: *I don't know many people who have been affected except you and I.* That much.

Another characteristic of spoken language which is attributable to its spontaneity is the fact that information is relatively loosely packed. One measure of this density is the proportion of content words (such as nouns and verbs) per clause. Spoken texts are not as lexically dense as written texts. So, for example, in Text 1.1 above, of the 142 words in all, 88 are lexical words – that is nouns, verbs, adjectives, and – *ly* adverbs – giving a *lexical density* (Halliday, 1985) figure of 62 per cent. In the spoken Text 1.3, however, the lexical density is just 36.5 per cent. This lower lexical density is partly a consequence of production pressure, but the more thinly spread occurrence of propositional content, as represented in lexical words, also helps make spoken language easier to process by listeners, who, like speakers, are also having to work under the constraints of real-time processing.

The lower lexical density of talk is balanced by the fact that it is often deceptively intricate, as speakers construct 'elaborate edifices' (Halliday, 1985: 330) of loosely linked clauses and phrases (as in the extract about the storm, quoted above). Halliday describes this as 'the ability to "choreograph" very long and intricate patterns of semantic movement while maintaining a continuous flow of discourse that is 'coherent without being constructional' (1985: 202). It is these 'long and intricate

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patterns' that can often tax the processing ability of listeners, especially
non-native-speaker listeners.

1.1.3   Conversation takes place in a shared context

> A freak hailstorm swept across Sydney last night, causing damage
> worth hundreds of millions of dollars and triggering a massive
> rescue and repair effort by emergency services.

In the newspaper text, few assumptions are made about the reader's
present state of knowledge. Even the city (*Sydney*) is named, although
most readers of the paper will be Sydney residents, and many will have
experienced the storm themselves. The writer cannot assume, however,
that this is the case, hence most referents (that is, the people, places
and things that the content words refer to) have to be made explicit.
The only reference that a reader who is removed from the events in
both space and time may have trouble identifying is *last night*. Compare
this to:

(18) Odile:	I'm so glad *the kids* were not there because you know *that hole* is just above *Debbie's* head.
(19) Rob:	Yeah.
(20) Grace:	Oh yeah.
(21) Rob:	No it is amazing more people weren't injured.
(22) Grace:	Mm.
(23) Rob:	So erm *they* go back to school *tomorrow*?
(24) Odile:	Not tomorrow = =
(25) Rob:	= =Monday.
(26) Odile:	It's Sunday.

In the conversation, where the context is both shared and immediate,
Odile can take it for granted that her listeners will be able to identify the
referents of *the kids*, *there* and *that hole*, and that they know who *Debbie*
is. By the same token, Rob can safely assume that *they* in turn 23 will be
taken to refer to *the kids*, and that everyone knows that *tomorrow* is
Monday (although in fact it is Sunday, as the others are quick to point
out). This heavy reliance on the shared knowledge of the participants,
including knowledge of the immediate temporal and spatial context,
accounts for a number of features of talk that distinguish it from most
written text. For example:

- the frequent use of pronouns: for example, there are 25 pronouns
  (including the possessive form *her*) in Text 3, compared to only one in
  Text 1;
- the frequency of deictic items (that is, words that 'point' to features of
  the physical context, such as *this*, *that*, *there*, *now*, *then* etc);

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