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English face-to-face

*Conversation
in contemporary
anglophone culture*

*This book is dedicated
to my students—past, present and future*

Preface

The purpose of this study is to retrieve parts of various original research projects which I have undertaken in the past and reorganize them into a coherent and organic overview of that phenomenon of face-to-face interaction which goes under the common name of "conversation", and which is so constitutive of daily human activity that it can be rightly considered the very locus, not only of individual endeavor, but also, of social action.

The study utilizes a data base of spontaneous conversations in contemporary English, gathered in the course of time from observations, audio recordings and interviews, stemming from my personal research as well as from data collected in the yearly seminars in English linguistics which I have conducted at the University of L'Aquila, Italy. It also draws upon the databases of spoken English made available by linguists in the form of both research reports and on-line corpora. In addition, the study includes some examples extracted from contemporary English language films[1].

The volume is organized into three main chapters, with introduction, conclusions, appendix and references. The introduction presents an overview of the basic premises shared by theoreticians of conversation with regard to the structure of conversation and the methods of conversation analysis. The main chapters select specific topics in current debate to explore in detail. One of the central aims of the study is to bridge the gap between theory and practice by giving in-depth attention to the categories claimed to be characteristic of conversational discourse and relate them to recent insights in communication theory and discourse studies. Within the scope of this study, the volume attempts to be as data-rich as possible. In providing a varied range of examples of

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[1] Although cinematic dialogue has obviously an aesthetic function and is therefore not strictly an illustration of spontaneous conversation, the fact that it represents conversational style makes it a good source for insight into the characteristics of human interactive behavior. Moreover, the enormous wealth of products available from the film industry today can offer researchers the possibility to observe a variety of conversational texts, drawn from a multitude of geographical, social and situational contexts, not normally available to individual linguists.

verbal interaction, it tries to reveal the "facts of language" which characterize, for the English language, the discursive form called "conversation". In other words, since many of the excellent studies on these questions seem to focus either on theoretical issues or exemplifications of single category application, this study is aligned with those which try to offer a description of English conversation as social interaction from a more holistic perspective.

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, intensive research on conversation has been conducted from a wide range of scientific frameworks: theoretical and applied linguistics, psychology and psycholinguistics, sociology and sociolinguistics, anthropology and anthropological linguistics, as well as several other related fields like rhetoric, philology, philosophy and communication arts and sciences. The study of conversation has taken particular advantage of some new directions in linguistic research, mainly speech act theory and ethnomethodological approaches. Although this myriad of perspectives has advanced our knowledge of a textual form previously unknown as an object of linguistic investigation, and has led to the development of new investigative stances (what we now refer to as "discourse analysis" (hereafter DA), or, when applied to face-to-face interaction, as "conversation analysis (hereafter CA), we are nonetheless still left with a problematic field.

Some critics have reacted negatively to this heterogeneity, considering discourse and conversation unfeasible objects of investigation and judging its theories and methods as somehow still scientifically "immature" (see Tannen, 1989:7). Eggins and Slade (1997), for example, argue that CA offers an erroneous picture of conversation representing it as fragmentary and mechanistic, implying that it is not, as linguistic description should be, integrated, systematic and comprehensive. Other scholars, however, see a positive aspect in this heterogeneity. Discourse itself is not homogeneous data, notes Tannen (1989: 6) "but an all-inclusive category". She adds that "discourse analysis will never be monolithic because it does not grow out of a single discipline." (1989.7).

Basically we could argue that the main result which has emerged from recent study in CA is the demonstration that conversation is a specifically-constructed type of discourse, sequentially organized and coherently structured. Thanks to the work of many scholars, like Deborah Tannen and Teun A. van Dijk, but especially on the basis of early work by Harvey Sacks, Gail Jefferson and Emanuel Schegloff,

conversation is now universally recognized to be <u>ordered</u>.[2] This is one of the major contributions accomplished by research in CA in recent decades. Moreover, most conversation analysts have come to agreement on method, having grounded their procedures in the transcription suggestions proposed by early work in CA and thereafter refined as the field continued to develop. We find now in CA a consolidated methodological framework which includes recording, transcribing, annotating conventions for the analysis of spontaneous conversation. We can safely say that CA has designed a research framework of well-founded guidelines that enable linguists to develop comparable and verifiable research hypotheses to submit to scientific investigation.

It is interesting to note furthermore that tools of description and annotation are becoming increasingly more sophisticated as conversational analysts pay greater tribute to earlier linguistic foundations (Grice's conversational rules, Halliday's systemic-functional approach, van Dijk's cognitive pragmatics, R. Lakoff's insights on politeness and dominance, Fairclough's contributions on power and ideology, Tannen's anthropological perspectives) to mention only a few of the many linguistic contributions which continue to inform current thinking on the role of conversation in human behavior. CA has become particularly effective now that it turns its attention to the <u>contextual</u> nature of human interaction, thus drawing heavily on the contributions of psycholinguistics, a discipline which, from the very outset of its foundational premises, posited the centrality of "context" in structuring human language and verbal interaction.

By so doing, CA has succeeded in expanding its range of observation and has put its research practices at the service of related disciplines, especially the social sciences. In fact, scholars from other fields have also exploited the new analytical tools provided by DA and by CA in order to advance their understanding of problems investigated in related but sometimes somewhat distant disciplines, such as child language acquisition (cf. Fine, 1978), deaf studies (cf. Coates and Sutton-Spence, 2001), sociology (cf. Hutchby, 1999), to name only a few of the scientific areas that have appreciated and benefited from the insights of DA and CA.

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[2] It is to be remembered that it was Sachs, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) who first expounded the idea that conversation is "order at all points".

CA describes everyday conversation but now describes it in various social contexts, revealing personal and collective social attitudes, unveiling ideological underpinnings, succeeding even in unmasking and thereby denouncing where appropriate the manipulation of language for purposes of discrimination and repression. The study of "talk" has thus become a rich area of scientific activity and promises to produce further significant and challenging theoretical insights, not only on the nature of discourse and text, but also, and especially, by means of its methodological, empirical and experimental contributions, on the foundational premises of many scientific disciplines.

Interestingly, while utilizing some procedures of quantitative analysis in scientific research, CA relies fundamentally on a specific qualitative-type approach to research. As summarized by Lazaraton (2003:3):

> *CA insists on the analysis of real, recorded data, segmented into turns of talk that are carefully transcribed. Generally speaking, the conversation analyst does not formulate research questions prior to analyzing data; rather, questions emerge from the data. The goal is to build a convincing and comprehensive analysis of a single case, and then to search for other similar cases in order to build a collection of cases that represent some interactional phenomenon. Unlike other qualitative research approaches such as ethnography, the conversation analyst places no a priori importance on the sociological, demographic, or ethnographic details of the participants in the interaction of the setting in which the interaction takes place. Rather, the analyst, if interested in these issues, attempts to detect their manifestations in the discourse as it is constructed, instead of assuming some sort of omnirelevance beforehand. Finally CA studies rarely report coding or counts of data, because the emphasis in CA is on understanding single cases in and of themselves not as part of larger aggregates of data.*

Thus as all types of qualitative research, CA, whose data sources are audio and video recordings of natural conversations, is a situated research practice, comprehending multiple and interconnected interpretive practices, each contributing to making the world of daily human communication visible in a different way. In fact, a pertinent definition of qualitative research as "situated" is given by Denzin and Lincoln (2000: 3-4) and reported in Lazaraton (2003:2):

> *Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the*

world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.