

L. Vlasenko, K. Chala

National University of Food Technologies (Kiev, Ukraine)

DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO THE STUDYING OF COMMUNICATION PROCESS

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. Three dictionary gives us the different definitions of the word communication:

- 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. 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*.

Conversation is informal. Partly because of its spontaneous and interactive nature, and partly because of its interpersonal function, conversation is characterized by an

informal style. An *informal* (or *casual*) style contrasts with the style of more formal spoken genres, such as speeches and recorded announcements, where *formal speech* is defined as 'a careful, impersonal and often public mode of speaking used in certain situations and which may influence pronunciation, choice of words and

sentence structure' (Richards and Schmidt, 2002). Informality in speech is characterized

by lexical choices – such as the use of slang, swearing and colloquial language – and by pronunciation features, such as the use of contractions.

Approaches to the analysis of conversation. Spoken language, and conversation in particular, has only recently started to receive the same kind of detailed linguistic attention as written language. Moreover, many approaches to the analysis of conversation have been partial, focusing on particular features of conversation

through the lens of a single theoretical construct. The approach we will be adopting in subsequent chapters is a more eclectic one, on the grounds that a more comprehensive, and hence potentially more useful, analysis should draw on a variety of theoretical models. Our starting premise, and one of the basic assumptions shared by all the different models to be discussed below, is that conversation is structurally patterned, and displays an orderliness that is neither chaotic nor random but, rather, is tightly organized and coherent. It follows that, if this organization can be described in ways that are accessible to teachers and learners, there are likely to be practical classroom applications. (This does *not* mean, of course, that one such application would simply be to 'deliver' the description to learners without some form of pedagogical mediation.)

Conversation, then, has been analysed from the perspective of a number of different academic disciplines. The most important of these are sociology, sociolinguistics, philosophy and linguistics.

Sociological approaches. Perhaps the most significant contribution to the study of conversation has come, not from linguistics, but from sociology. A fundamental concern of sociologists is to account for the organization of everyday life, including the way that social activities are structured and ordered.

The sociological approach to analysing 'talk-in-interaction' has come to be known as Conversation Analysis (CA), a branch of sociology which posits that it is in and through conversation that most of our routine everyday activities are accomplished. CA is represented primarily in the studies of Sacks, Schegloff and

Jefferson. The objective of CA is to describe and explain the orderliness of conversation by reference to the participants' tacit reasoning procedures and sociolinguistic competencies.

Sociolinguistic approaches. Sociolinguistic approaches have emerged from the theoretical common ground shared by sociology, anthropology and linguistics. These are especially concerned with the analysis of language in its social context, and the way that language use varies according to contextual and cultural factors. Hymes (1972), one of the foremost proponents of what is called the *ethnography of speaking*, proposed a rubric for investigating the contextual factors that impact on any speech event. These factors include, among others, the *setting*, the *participants*, the *ends* (or purpose) of the speech event, its *key* (i.e. its 'tone, manner, or spirit', such as whether it is serious or jokey), and its *genre*, or type.

Philosophical approaches. *Speech Act Theory*, which grew out of the philosophical study of meaning, has been influential in the way it has added to our understanding of how speakers' intentions are expressed in language.

Philosophers such as Austin and Searle (1969) re-conceptualized speech as 'action' and attempted to describe how (a potentially infinite number of) spoken utterances can be classified according to a finite – and relatively limited – set of functions. By ascribing communicative functions to utterances, and by attempting to describe the conditions under which an utterance can fulfil a specific function, speech act theory helped pave the way for a communicative – rather than purely formal – description of spoken language.

Linguistic approaches. Originating more in linguistics than in any other discipline, both the *Birmingham School* of Discourse Analysis and *Systemic Functional Linguistics* have made major contributions to the description and analysis of spoken language.

The *Birmingham School*, influenced by the work of Firth (1957), was established primarily by Coulthard and Sinclair, whose earlier work focused on the analysis of classroom discourse (see, for example, Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975, and Sinclair and Brazil, 1982). They were interested in identifying the 'grammar' of

interaction, and in particular the way a speaker's discourse choices are pre-determined by the immediately preceding utterance, analogous to the way that the choice of a word in a sentence is determined. This 'discourse grammar' was described in terms of a hierarchy, from the largest units (e.g. a lesson) to the smallest, these being the individual *acts* of which a lesson might be composed. These acts are not to be confused with *speech acts*, as mentioned above, rather, they are defined in terms of their interactive function, such as *eliciting*, *informing* and *evaluating*, or their turn-taking function, such as *cueing* and *nominating*.

Intermediate categories in the hierarchy include *exchanges* and it was the structure of exchanges which was the focus of particular interest.

The identification of the three-part exchange structure that characterizes classroom interaction – *initiation*, *response*, *follow-up* – is one of the bestknown findings of this School. But discourse consists of larger units too, such as *transactions*, and these are often identifiable by the discourse markers that *frame* them.

Approaches to the analysis of conversation. The topic, each exchange realized in the form of question-and-answer moves. The fact that exchange structure allows considerable flexibility – more so than, perhaps, sentence grammar allows – is evidenced by the way that the exchanges are interrupted by insertion sequences, as we noted above.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is largely derived from the work of Halliday (see Halliday, 1985; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004; Eggins, 1994). The central concern of SFL is, in a systematic way, to relate language to its social context and, in particular, to the functions it performs in that context. Such a concern leads to a focus on the analysis of actual language in use: of texts considered in relation to the social context, both cultural and situational, in which they occur. Systemic Functional Linguistics stresses the centrality of the study of conversation to the study of language, because conversation is the most important vehicle by means of which social reality is represented and enacted in language.

Moreover, 'to understand the nature of text as social action we are led naturally to consider spontaneous conversation, as being the most accessible to interpretation' (Halliday, 1978: 140).

Systemic Functional Linguistics is a *functional* approach to language description. Functional descriptions seek to explain the internal organization of language in terms of the functions that it has evolved to serve.

As a functional approach, SFL argues that language should be thought of as real instances of meaningful language in use. In turn, because language – in the form of written or spoken *texts* – always occurs in social contexts, SFL argues for the need for a descriptive framework whereby language and context are systematically and functionally related to one another.

It is well known that different contexts predict different kinds of language use. SFL argues that there is a systematic correlation between context and language, and, specifically, that three different aspects of context correlate with the three different kinds of meaning expressed in language. Halliday (1985; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004) identifies the determining context factors as being:

- the *field* of discourse (what is being talked or written about);
- the *tenor* of discourse (the relationship between the participants); and
- the *mode* of discourse (whether, for example, the language is written or spoken).

The significance of field, tenor and mode is that these three contextual dimensions are then encoded into three types of meanings represented in language. The three types of meaning are:

1. *ideational meanings*: meanings about the world. These are a reflection of field;

2. *interpersonal meanings*: meanings about roles and relationships.

These are a reflection of tenor; and

3. *textual meanings*: meanings about the message. These are a reflection of mode.

Literature:

1. Halliday, M.A.K., McIntosh, A. and Stevens, P. 1964. *The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching*. London: Longman.
2. Halliday, M.A.K. and Matthiessen, C. 2004. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. (3rd edition.) London: Hodder and Stoughton.
3. Eggins, S. 1994. *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics*. London: Pinter.
4. Sinclair, J. and Brazil, D. 1982. *Teacher Talk*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
5. Sinclair, J. M. and Coulthard, R. M. 1975. *Towards an Analysis of Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
6. Searle, J. 1969. *Speech Acts: An Essay on the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.