A Pragmatic Phenomenon of Conversation

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Abstract : Pragmatics and sociolinguistics view the speech acts as the smallest unit of analysis in any speech event. The latter is defined as a "socially accepted" and "patterned sequence" in which the participants of specific speech community are involved. speech community is used to a group of participants who intuitively know how to behave in a speech event. Examples of the speech events are conversations, jokes, sermons, interview, prayers or political speeches (penalosa,198:71)

Key words: Pragmatics, Conversation, Sociolinguistics, Speech Community, Turn- Taking, Adjacency Pairs, Insertion Sequences

1.1 Conversation Structure

1.1.1 Introduction

In general, communication is pragmatic. One strives to achieve goals. Speech Act Theory (henceforth, SAT) explains how one uses language to accomplish these goals (Oort,1997: 2, and Doyle, 2002:1)

Bowen (2001:1) states that pragmatics is the area of language functions that embraces the embraces the use of language in social contexts. This involves knowing what, how, and when to say it, in order to be with other people.

Speech acts (henceforth, SAs) have been studied by different philosophers and linguists and the pragmaticians' views seem to be the most important one (Bach and Harnish, 1979:62). What follows, then, is the different approaches towards the study of SAs.

1.1.2 The Content of the Conversation

Coulthard (1985:76-8) states that the content of conversation is concerned with the discourse topics, how they are overtly announced or perhaps presupposed, what kinds of topics leading to other topics. He (Ibid) mentions the following points concerning the topic of conversation:

1. The suitability of topics depends on the person one is talking to.
2. Some topics are 'tellable', some are not. Some are tellable to everyone, some have restricted audience.
3. There may be a topic change. In a conversation, which is progressing well, talk changes from one topic to another. Talking 'topically' and talking about some topic chosen by another speaker is not the same thing. There may be a sequence of turns in which successive speakers talk topically coherent with the last utterance, but in which each speaker talks on a different topic.
4. There may be a case of topic conflict. There may be a competitive talk when two speakers want to develop the topic in different ways. People may fight because they know there will be no further chance to say what they want to say, especially when this chance never occurs again. The speakers may 'skip-connect' relating back to the 'last-but one' utterance (their own). Each time one of them gets a turn he talks about the previous speaker's topic and reasserts his own. Once the competition has been resolved the conversation moves forward again.

1.1.3 A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-taking for Conversation

Sacks, et al. (1974:7-8) suggest that the presence of turns suggests an economy. Turns for something are valued. They define it as the basic unit of the conversation. Yielding the 'floor' for the next speaker or the right to speak constitutes a turn. They explain how people do go about allocating turns to each other or themselves. There are mechanisms for allocating them. These mechanisms affect their relative distribution.

Levinson (1983:296) defines turn - taking as follows: one participant (A) talks and stops. Another participant (B) starts, talks and stops. This results in A-B-A-B-A-B distribution of talk across two participants.

Sacks et al (Ibid) model of organization of turn - taking is summarized as follows:

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1. Speaker change recurs or at least occurs.
2. Overwhelmingly one party talks at a time.
3. Occurrences of more than one speaker at a time are common, but brief.
4. Transitions from one turn to a next with no gap and overlap between them are common.
5. Turn order is not fixed but varied.
6. Turn size is not fixed but varied.
7. Length of conversation is not fixed, specified in advance.
8. What parties say is not fixed, specified in advance.
9. Relative distribution of turns is not fixed, specified in advance.
10. Number of parties can change.
11. Turn-allocation techniques are used for providing the allocation of a next turn to one party, and coordinating transfers so as to minimize gap and overlap. At the transition relevance place (i.e. any possible change-of-turn point) one of the following turn allocational techniques might be used by the participants (Sacks et al, ibid: 13-14):
A. If a current speaker selects next, then the party selected has rights to take next turn to speak.
B. If a current speaker does not select next, then self-selection for next speakership may be instituted.
C. If a current speaker does not select next, then a current speaker may continue unless another one self-selects.
12. Talk can be continuous or discontinuous. Discontinuities occur when at some transition-relevance place, a current speaker having stopped, no speaker starts (or continues). The resulting space of non-talk constitutes itself as more than a gap; as a lapse. So, if nobody chooses to speak, discontinuous talk (lapse), then, arises. If a speaker selects another one for the next turn and the second one does not begin immediately, then the resulting space of nontalk is a pause. Besides, a selected next speaker's significant (or attributable) silence results after the application of the rule (1) (A).
13. Various turn - constructional units are employed. Turns can be one word long, or can be sentential in length.
14. Repair mechanisms for dealing with turn - talking errors and violations are available for use. Examples of repairs are:
A. Questions as "who, me?"; B. The use of interruption markers as 'excuse me'; C. False starts (e.g. 'well'); and D. Repairs which are the current speaker's continuation after the non-occurrence of turn transfer at a transition relevance place. The current speaker may repair after the speaker's turn completion (Sacks, et al, 39). Examples of repairs are questions as "who me?", the use of interruption markers as 'excuse me?', etc.

Thus, Mey (1993:24) distinguishes between: 1. Self-initiated repairs (i.e. the speaker momentarily leaves the current floor, and erects a temporary structure where repair operations can be performed); and 2. Other-initiated repairs which consist of corrections offered to the speaker, e.g., 'you mean of course...'

1.1.3.1   *Adjacency Pairs*

Wales (1989:10) mentions that the adjacency pairs are used by Sacks, et al (1974) to refer to conversational sequences in which an utterance by one speaker depends upon an utterance by another. It is also known as a "tied pair", in SAT, an illocutionary sequel.

Clark and Clark (1977: 228) and Searle and Vanderveken (1985:11) argue that the significant proportion of turn-talking is coordinated by rule (1), when one speaker addresses a second, and the second responds. The two turns together constitute adjacency pairs. Examples include:

1- Question-answer:
   A: What do you want for dinner?
   B: Steak will be fine.
2- Greeting-greeting:
   A: Hi
   B: Hi
3- Offer- acceptance/rejection:
   A: Let's go to the movie tonight.

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B: Okay.
4- Assertion- acknowledgement:
A: Bill did not even come home the last night.
B: Oh, yeah?

Coulthard (1985:70) adds that adjacency pairs are ordered utterances. The first must belong to the class of first pair part and the second to the second pair part. They are related in the sense that not any second pair can follow any first pair part, but only an appropriate one.

Clark and Clark (Ibid) add that adjacency pairs have many functions such as:

1. They serve a function which goes beyond the mere coordination of two turns. Each has a specific purpose. For example, questions are used for eliciting information. When A asks B a question, A is not only asking for information, but also indicating that B could cooperate by answering the question immediately. When B answers the question, he is not only providing the information A wants, but also signals to A his willingness to cooperate.

2. They may help to open conversations, negotiate deals, relate facts, change topics, and close conversations. They are especially important when it is critical to gain the other speaker's cooperation.

1.1.3.2 Preference Organization

Yule (1999:149) maintains that the other feature of conversational structure is 'preference'. He argues that when someone expresses an opinion there is a preference for agreeing rather than disagreeing. The idea of preference comes from the difficulty of refusing, for example, an invitation/ offer, or even expressing disagreement with him/her.

Van Dijk (1975:179) argues that preference is based on desires. If of two events 'p' and 'q', 'p' is more desirable than 'q' one usually says that the agent 'A' prefers 'p' over 'q'.

Levinson (1983: 332-33) says that alternative second parts to first parts of adjacency pairs are not generally of equal status. He states that it is not a matter of speaker's preferred desires, rather it is a matter of 'markedness'. In other words, the preferred seconds are unmarked while the dispreferred seconds are marked. The dispreferred seconds are marked in the sense that they have a kind of structural complexity (which the preferred seconds lack for). The structural complexity of dispreferred seconds is characterized by the following features (Levinson, Ibid):

A. Delays: (i) by pause before delivery, (ii) by the use of a preface, (iii) by displacement over a number of turns via use of repair initiators or insertion sequences.

B. Prefaces: (i) the use of marker announcers of dispreferred like "Uh" and "well", (ii) the production of token agreements before disagreements, (iii) the use of appreciations if relevant (for offers, invitations, suggestions, advice), (iv) the use of apologies if relevant (for requests, invitations, etc.), (v) the use of qualifiers (e.g. I don't know for sure, but ...), and (vi) hesitation in various forms including self-editing.

C. Accounts: these are carefully formulated explanations for why the dispreferred act is being done.

D. Declination component: this is a form which is suitable to the nature of the first part but indirectly mitigated.

Atkinson and Drew (1979:58-59) give the following example:
A: why don't you come up and see me sometimes.
B: hehh. Well that's awfully sweet of you.
((delay)) ((marker)) ((appreciation))
I don't think I can make it this morning.
((refusal or declination))
Uhh uhm. I'm running on ad in the paper and - and uh I have to stay near the phone.
((Account))

1.1.3.3 Presequences and Insertion Sequences

Mey (1993:221) states that presequences are items that combine together the formal and the content aspects of conversation.

Levinson (1983:345-46) argues that the presequences are built
to prefigure the specific kind of action that they precede.

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Pre-closings such as okay, are recognizable as potential initiations of closings. They occupy a specific slot in a specific kind of sequence with distinctive characteristics. They have the characterizations:

1. Turn (1) (position 1) is a question checking whether some precondition obtains for the action to be performed in Turn (3).

   Turn (2) (position 2) is an answer indicating that the precondition obtains, often with a question or request to proceed to Turn (3).

   Turn (3) (position 3) is the prefigured action, conditional on the "go ahead" in Turn (2). Turn (4) (position4) is the response to the action in Turn (3).

2. Distribution Rule: one party, A, addresses Turn (1) and Turn (3) to another party, B, and B addresses Turn (2) and Turn (4) to A.

   Mey (Ibid, 221-222) gives the following examples of presequences:

1. Attention getters: "Hey", "You know something?", "Excuse me" to which the actual answer would be "yes", "What?". The real business is dealt with after concluding this initial exchange.

2. Enquirers: These usually precede a request of some kind, e.g. "do you by any chance have....?", "I wonder if you have..."

3. Pre-announcements, e.g., "What do you know...?"

4. Pre-threats "Watch it."

   Verschueren (1998:47) says that the insertion sequences are inserted between presequences and their responses and the follow up sequences. He gives the following example:

1. Debby: Have you been to Como yet?   Qi
2. Dan : We went last week.   Ai
3. Debby: How did you get there?   Qii
4. Dan We went by bus, and returned by hydrofoil.   Aii
5. Debby: Anything to see there?   Qiii
6. Dan: Depends what you are interested in.
7. Debby: I mean, any historical monuments, and may be some interesting shopping.
8. Dan: It's got a nice Cathedral, and lots of silk.   Aiii
9. Debby: I'd like to go on Saturday. Do you want to join?

   He (Ibid) explains that turns (5) and (8) are question-answer pair. They are interrupted by an insertion sequence consisting of the request for clarification in (6) and the clarification is given in (7). The insertion sequence explores the common ground needed for Dan to give a relevant answer for Debby's question.

Conclusion

The formal aspects of conversation focus on how conversation works, what rules are observed, how sequencing is achieved (gaining and leaving the floor, turn-taking, pausing, interrupting adjacency pairs, and so on) (Verschueren, 1998:43-45).

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