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## ANALYSING CASUAL CONVERSATION

Recent years have seen a constantly increasing interest in the analysis of spoken interaction, both ordinary conversation and institutional talk. One of the main premises of conversation analysis is that people maintain their social relations through verbal interaction. As Diamond<sup>1</sup> points out, the personal attitudes and social relations are communicated in many ways by speakers: by what people say, by how they say it, by the types of utterances speakers make, and by conversational structure.

Conversation is a semantic activity, a process of making meanings. Taking turns in any verbal interaction, participants of conversation negotiate meanings as well as their reactions to the world and attitudes to each other.

Distinction should be made between pragmatic verbal interactions, when people talk to achieve some social purpose, to pass on knowledge, etc., and casual conversation, which is not motivated by any clear pragmatic purpose. Pragmatic talk typically involves differentiation of roles, which are not only functionally distinct but also show status and power distinction. In casual conversation, on the other hand, differences of power and status appear to be suspended by tacit consent of participants. Equality of power and status is generally considered to be a defining characteristic of casual conversation. However, a closer look at the linguistic choices made by interactants often reveals a more complicated picture: relationships between the speakers may be asymmetric though the assumed equal roles of friends veil this disparity. Such hidden differentiation of status makes casual conversation both a challenging and rewarding field of research.

In the present article naturally occurring casual conversation is analysed with the aim to see how language enables us to initiate and sustain everyday talk. It is important to stress that, as Berger and Luckman<sup>2</sup> claim, "the greater part of reality-maintenance in conversation is implicit, not explicit. [I]t takes place against the background of a world that is silently taken for granted". Eggins and Slade<sup>3</sup> point out an intriguing paradox – casual conversation appears effortless and spontaneous, yet participants' behaviour is not random, it reflects and constructs their social world as well as relationships to each other.

A theoretical framework for the present analysis of conversation is that of systemic functional linguistics outlined in the work of Michael Halliday<sup>4</sup> and further developed by Martin<sup>5</sup>, Eggins and Slade<sup>6</sup> and others. One of the basic claims of the systemic

<sup>1</sup> DIAMOND, J. *Status and power in verbal interaction: a study of discourse in a close-knit social network*. Amsterdam, 1996, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> BERGER, P.; LUCKMANN, T. *The social construction of reality, a treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Garden City, N. Y., 1966, p. 173.

<sup>3</sup> EGGINS, S.; SLADE, D. *Analysing casual conversation*. London; New York, 1997, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> HALLIDAY, M. A. K. Language structure and language function. In *New horizons in linguistics*. Penguin, 1970, p. 142; HALLIDAY, M. A. K. *Language as social semiotic*. London, 1978; HALLIDAY, M. A. K. *An introduction to functional grammar*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> MARTIN, J. R. *English text: system and structure*. Amsterdam, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Išnaša 3; EGGINS, S. Researching everyday talk. In *Researching language in schools and communities: functional linguistic perspectives*. London; New York, 1999, p. 131 – 151.

functional approach is that language is viewed as performing three major functions: ideational (to represent experience), interpersonal (to sustain interaction between people using language), and textual (to create connected and coherent discourse). Thus, conversation can be seen as a multilevel matrix of meanings in which speakers are not merely conveying information.

Another important feature of the systemic functional model is the description of language in terms of sets of choices of meaning where a set of options (e. g. singular / plural member, positive / negative polarity, etc.) makes a system. Every choice embodied in an utterance carries meaning in terms of the potential choices not made<sup>7</sup>. Thus, systemic functional linguistics aims to describe meaning potential – the linguistic options that are available for constructing meanings in particular contexts.

One of the main benefits of the systemic functional approach to conversation analysis is that it opens the ways to theorize the links between language and social life since “[t]he particular form taken by the grammatical system of language is closely related to the social and personal needs that language is required to serve”<sup>8</sup>.

The present analysis focuses on the interpersonal function of language and interpersonal meanings created during casual talk. It is claimed that the apparent triviality and absence of pragmatic motivation make interpersonal meaning the driving force of casual conversation.

Two recorded and transcribed naturally occurring conversations are taken as the basis for the analysis. The conversations were recorded in the US in the summer of 2001 and took place between co-workers during lunch breaks. One conversation involves two speakers, a male and a female in their late twenties, and revolves around personal experiences of the male participant in Chicago. For reference convenience this conversation is called *Trip to Chicago*. The second conversation involves two female speakers in their late twenties and is less focused; its topic shifts from clubs to cars and money problems. It is further called *Morning Chat*.

The aim of the analysis is to highlight some typical ways of conveying interpersonal meaning and to explore socially meaningful participant relationships operating in a situation, namely status relations, level of formality, and degree of affective involvement. An attempt is made in the article to show that there are different types of linguistic patterns, which represent and enact social identities of participants in conversation. In particular, attention is concentrated upon grammatical patterns. Since the scope of the article does not allow to include the transcribed texts, the information on linguistic patterns used is summarized in two tables.

Grammatical patterns operate within turns and have to do with the mood of the clauses and modality. Mood refers to patterns of clause type, such as interrogative, imperative and declarative. According to Eggins and Slade<sup>9</sup>, mood choice can be seen as a key resource for enacting and constructing status differences. Reciprocal mood choice indicates functional equality of roles, while non-reciprocal mood choice indicates the linguistic acting out of status differences.

Modality can be treated as an associated subsystem of mood that encompasses a range of different ways in which speakers temper or qualify their messages. For example, instead of presenting declarative as a statement of a certain fact, like *He comes early*, the speaker may say *He has to come early* *He is willing to come early*,

<sup>7</sup> CHRISTIE, F.; UNSWORTH, L. Developing socially responsible language research. In *Researching language in schools and communities: functional linguistic perspectives*. London: New York, 1999, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> HALLIDAY, išnaša 4, p. 142.

<sup>9</sup> EGGINS, išnaša 3, p. 53.

and thus his negotiation of the world involves exploring how things do or do not happen or are not definitely established. The variability and uncertainty of the speaker's worldview becomes part of what is negotiable, and part of his identity<sup>10</sup>. Modality also helps to place some distance between the speaker and the addressee. It may be realized in at least two ways in the clause: through the use of modal verbs and through the use of adjuncts, i.e. elements that are additional to the proposition and adjust probability, certainty and usuality values (e.g. *probably, usually, never*, etc.). In both cases the fact that the speakers judgement is being made is left implicit: it exists as an integral part of the clause.

Summarizing mood and modality dimensions for each speaker in both conversations makes it possible to interpret mood choices and provides analytical evidence for the linguistic construction of status, identity, alignment and involvement.

Tables 1 and 2 below represent a slightly modified version of summarizing grammatical patterns in the functional systemic model. Table 1 shows a difference in the amount of speech produced by the two interactants. The man dominates the talk, producing many more clauses. Both speakers produce a comparatively high percentage of declaratives, but the man's percentage is higher. This suggests that he gets to initiate exchanges by giving information more often. The woman, on the other hand, produces more interrogatives. This fact suggests that she is other-oriented since asking questions is a way of giving up the turn. In Table 1 wh-interrogatives and yes-no interrogatives are given separately because of their different role in conversation. While yes-no interrogatives seek minimal response, wh-interrogatives set up expectations for longer turns. Full wh-interrogatives are usually used to elicit additional circumstantial information. A comparatively high number of the woman's full wh-interrogatives shows that she engages her interactant in talk retaining some status as an initiator for obtaining information and at the same time reinforcing the centrality of the man's contribution.

**Table 1.**

*Mood choices in Conversation 1: Trip to Chicago*

Mood (clause type)	Man	Woman
number of clauses	84	30
incomplete clauses	11	4
declarative		
full	55	12
elliptical	15	4
wh-interrogative		
full	–	6
elliptical	1	2
yes-no interrogative		
full	–	2
elliptical	1	–
imperative	–	–
negative	1	–
adjuncts	3	4

<sup>10</sup> EGGINS, išnaša 3, p. 99.

Both speakers use elliptical clauses, which are typical of all spoken interaction. Elliptical declaratives, given as a responding move, usually omit all but the informationally significant elements of the clause. For example:

(1) Woman: And ... ah ... how was the weather in Chicago?

Man: Humid.

In casual talk speakers do not always finish clauses that they start. Incomplete clauses are given as a separate category in Table 1 because, depending on how much of the clause has been produced, it is not always possible to determine the mood. The table shows that the man's speech contains numerous incomplete clauses. This suggests that he speaks casually and does not have to compete for the floor. The woman, on the contrary, produces few incomplete clauses. Therefore, her speech appears to be more careful and planned.

An additional revealing feature of creating interpersonal meaning is the subject choice. The subject in casual conversation is overwhelmingly a personal pronoun (*I* or *we*) since casual talk is typically egocentric. It appears that the man in *Trip to Chicago* is frequently the subject of his own clauses and he never makes his interlocutor the subject of his clauses. What he wants to talk about is himself. The woman does refer twice to herself as subject but is oriented towards her partner as subject.

The number of modal adjuncts in the conversation is too small to contribute to the assessment of the relationship between the interactants. The ones that are used temper the speakers' judgement towards non-participants. For example:

(2) Man: I have relatives there but I don't know them. They probably don't know me.

Such lack of interpersonal adjuncts may indicate low affective involvement and distance. The speakers do not seek to act upon each other through their speech.

Taken together, the grammatical patterns show some degree of lack of reciprocity in *Trip to Chicago* where the male participant does indeed dominate and is made to dominate the conversation while the female plays a lesser and supporting role. The grammatical choices may not be conscious, yet they are enacting social patterns, which go beyond the behaviour of these participants in this particular conversation. Such choices are consistent with general trends observed by numerous language and gender studies, which show that men's linguistic behaviour in conversation is that of dominance. Women, on the other hand are more likely to use careful speech, ask more questions and express solidarity with other participants (see, for example, Crawford<sup>11</sup>, Talbot<sup>12</sup>).

**Table 2.**

*Mood choices in Conversation 2: Morning Chat*

Mood (clause type)	Woman 1	Woman 2
number of clauses	102	91
incomplete clauses declarative	31	14

<sup>11</sup> CRAWFORD, M. *Talking difference: on gender and language*. London, 1995, p. 22 – 48.

<sup>12</sup> TALBOT, M. *Language and gender*. Cambridge, 1998, p. 55 – 146.

full	53	63
elliptical	14	12
wh-interrogative		
full	–	2
elliptical	1	–
yes-no interrogative		
full	–	–
elliptical	–	–
imperative	1	–
negative	2	–
adjuncts	6	9

As the number of clauses shows, *Morning Chat* is of similar length to *Trip to Chicago*. However, the distribution of clauses is different: in *Morning Chat* both interactants produce an almost equal number of clauses. Woman 1 speaks slightly more, yet she also produces a strikingly large number of incomplete clauses. For example:

(3) Woman 1: Oh, it was fun you know ... it's like ... I mean I'm trying to look for different kinds of clubs where you have...eh...everything is ...eh ... everything's the same.

As is seen from example (3), Female 1 is searching for ways to express her thought and leaves several unfinished clauses. Despite that she is not interrupted but allowed to continue even when she hesitates and stumbles. Numerous incomplete and also elliptical clauses in the speech of both interactants suggest a relaxed mood and lack of intensity of involvement in conversation. Another fact indicating that the conversation is left to drift is a small number of both types of interrogatives. The speakers exchange turns without initiating requests for information from each other. Eggins and Slade<sup>13</sup> have noted that yes-no questions are not common in casual conversations among close friends, where much of the information circulating is already shared. Notably, not a single yes-no interrogative is used in *Morning Chat*.

*Morning Chat* displays one more feature not found in *Trip to Chicago* – cooperative clause-building when the speaker and the listener complete the same clause together. For example:

(4) Woman 1: It's either a bar and everyone's kind of picking up on each other or it's a dance club and everyone's picking up on

Woman 2: everybody ... yeah ...

Woman 1: That's right.

Drawing on the experience of the ethnographic study of conversation such a phenomenon could be viewed as an instance of rapport-talk. Rapport-talk is a way of expressing solidarity and establishing connection where emphasis is placed on matching experiences<sup>14</sup>. The speakers, jointly building a clause, show alignment with each other.

In *Morning Chat* both women frequently make themselves subjects of clauses. In addition, in this conversation generic *you* appears three times. For example:

(5) Woman 2: You have to know where to look for a car these days.

The speakers also use a few third person singular subjects referring to people not present. The fact indicates that their conversation revolves not only about themselves.

<sup>13</sup> EGGINS, išnaša 3, p. 85 – 86.

<sup>14</sup> TANNEN, D. *Gender and discourse*. Oxford, 1994, p. 24.

Finally, the use of modality is greater in the second conversation. The women modalize to show obligation though the expression of obligation typically combines not with the addressee subject but with the generic *you*, as in example (5) above.

Taken together, the grammatical patterns in both conversations under analysis show equality of status and solidarity in *Morning Chat* and some lack of reciprocity and distance in *Trip to Chicago* where one of the speakers dominates the conversation while another plays a more supporting role.

## CONCLUSIONS

The discursive reality of casual conversation and the roles people implicitly take upon themselves even when talking with their equals can be and are reflected through grammatical choices they consciously or unconsciously make during interaction.

The functional systemic approach to language allows to interpret grammatical resources the speakers draw upon as one of the means to create interpersonal meanings.

Reciprocity or difference in the use of grammatical patterns in conversation may be viewed as an important and revealing linguistic feature allowing to build social distance or alignment between the interactants.

A further step in analysing conversational structure might be to supplement the functional systemic model with the findings in language and gender studies, the ethnography of communication, and other approaches to conversation analysis with the aim to build a more comprehensive picture of our everyday talk and its reflection of our social roles and identities.

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## KASDIENINIO POKALBIO ANALIZĖ

### Santrauka

Straipsnyje remiantis funkcinės sisteminės lingvistikos metodika nagrinėjama dviejų kasdieninių pokalbių gramatinė struktūra. Straipsniu siekiama išryškinti kalbos tarpasmeninių santykių realizavimo funkciją. Pagrindinis dėmesys skiriamas nuosakos ir modalumo raiškos ypatybėms.

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