

An Analysis of Spoken Discourse between Two Native Speakers

Yani Zhang

School of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology

Qingdao 266061, China

E-mail: pennyzhyn@hotmail.com

Abstract

In this paper, the author first records, transcribes and then analyses a short extract from an English conversation between two native speakers. It aims to reveal that rules and features undoubtedly exist in people's daily speeches. Though they are quick and evanescent, speeches are more or less organized and structured. For this reason, both language learners and teachers should lay stress on rules and functions of spoken discourse.

Keywords: Spoken discourse, First speaker, Second speaker

Introduction

We communicate everyday to express ourselves and exchange ideas. It is 'the most basic and widespread linguistic means of conducting human affairs' (McArthur cited in Pridham, 2001:1). Speech, which is the primary and universal method of communication, plays a far more important role in our lives than the other way, writing. This is probably because most people speak much more than they write. Besides, almost everyone learns to speak, but not necessarily to write. Therefore, the importance of speaking leads us to think how people communicate with each other by talking.

Many researchers work with spoken discourse to analyse its features and functions. A good example is Sacks et al, who assert that conversational analysis is 'a first step towards achieving a naturalistic observational discipline to deal with details of social interaction in a rigorous, empirical and formal way' (cited in Coulthard, 1994:59). Through spoken discourse analysis, a variety of features and functions, which may not be explicit to everyone, are summarized to explain how people communicate effectively with these hidden rules.

However, some people may still argue that speech, especially informal speech is formless and unstructured probably because it is quick, impermanent and sometimes less formal. If that is the case, then how can we understand each other by talking? In an effort to refute this allegation, the purpose of this essay is to analyse a short extract from a casual conversation of English between two native speakers. First, the precise context of the conversation is considered. Secondly, transcription of the one-minute extract is presented. Finally, analyses concerning ten important perspectives are conducted.

It must be pointed out that with limited listening and cultural comprehension of the English language from the viewpoint of a non-native speaker, an analysis like this will not be able to precisely explore the features of spoken discourse even though valuable help is offered by the two speakers. In addition, because of a simply aural data, the two speakers' facial expression and other subtle non-verbal communication cannot be recorded.

Context of the extract

This ten-minutes' conversation is recorded between two friends who are both native speakers in Great Britain. Steve is from Glasgow, Scotland. Gary comes from Guernsey, one of the Channel Islands near northwest France. In my opinion, they both appear to have no obvious accents, even though Steve may speak an interjection 'eh' very frequently. Gary usually speaks lower and faster. This conversation takes place in a very nice room with wonderful views outside the window. Gary is standing, folding his arms and leaning the wall all the time, while Steve is sitting back in a chair with his arms crossing on the table. Steve has more gestures during the conversation. Both the two speakers know each other quite well. Besides, they share much common knowledge about the culture and customs in Great Britain. Thereby, they communicate less formally and fluently in a fast speed.

The whole conversation mainly concerns the topic of Christmas shopping. At first, they talked about a Christmas

gift for Gary's wife. Then Steve described an attracting painting which was an ideal Christmas gift in a nice bar. Second, they agreed with the disadvantages of shopping that made them feel headache and waste not only money but also life. The third part is the short extract that I am going to analyse. It concerns the shops closed earlier in England than Scotland and the possible reasons for it. Afterwards, Steve explained shopping in Tokyo. Finally, Gary told something about their trip to Wales, followed by his and his wife's jobs.

Transcription of the extract

Cameron argues that 'speech cannot be processed in the same way as writing' because 'it consists of sound waves in the air which begin to fade away as soon as they are produced' (Cameron 2001:31). Thus, it seems impossible to analyse a conversation without a transcription.

The whole conversation lasts ten-minutes. I will choose a short extract of 62 seconds to transcribe so as to further analyse. Regarding the transcription form, I will apply the column form.

First Speaker-- Steve (S)	Second Speaker-- Gary (G)	Comments
...		
1 But but it's very		
2 early I mean the shops		
3 all c↑lose↓		
4 wh↑at 4 o'clock on		questioning himself
5 a Sunday (0.5) ↑		
6 pretty		
7 pretty early eh	Yeah	
8	but I mean I- di-	
9	you know	
10	five years ago	
11	even I mean	
12 (uh...)	sure even when you	(laughter)— S
13	left when you left	
14 yeah	Scotland	
15	people on Sunday	
16	were they shopping↑ (?)	
17 Well actually the law's		
18 a bit different in <u>Scotland</u>	Are they (?)	
19 they don't close		
20 so early the shops		
21	on <u>Sundays</u>	
22 Saturday or Sunday	well	
23	was there Sun-	
24	surely there was Sunday	
25	Trading Laws	
26 Er :: I		holding his chin
27 guess there <u>are</u>		
28 ↓but	or there	
29	used to be (?)	
30 there probably were		
31 but they are a		

32	lot more		
33	relaxed than		
34	in England (0.5)	Oh::	surprised— G
35	so you can		
36	shop quite <u>late</u>		
37	on the Sunday		
38	(0.7) I		
39	don't know why		
40		s↓trange↑(isn't it)	muffled sound
41			
42	(2)		
43	<u>no idea</u> (0.8)		
44	someone		
45	benefits somehow uh↑		
46		well yeah	
47	(1)		
48	maybe Scotland		
49	is more <u>liberal</u>		
50	(0.6) or less		
51	<u>Christian</u>		laughter
52		(0.9) We:ll	
53		(0.3) more	
54		protestant	
55		isn't it (?)	
56	I guess so↓		
57	which I would		
58	[imagine-]	[which] you- yeah	
59		you would think	
60		it would be the opposite	
61	but↓ apparently not		
62	because I was		

...

Key

- ... with additional speech
- ↑↓ rising and falling shifts in intonation
- (0.5) timed pause— 0.5 second
- I- sharp cutoff of a sound
- (Uh...) in doubt or unclear sound
- [which] overlapping speech
- idea emphasis
- (?) question with a rising intonation
- Er:: extension of a sound or syllable

Source: Atkinson & Heritage (1999:158-166)

Analysis from the perspectives of seven features

Having considered the context and transcription of the short extract, I will, in the next section, analyse it from the perspectives of seven features, including turn-taking, different types of interruptions, back-channel support, filled pauses, spoken discourse markers, intonation, repetition and false starts.

i Turn-taking

Among all the rules in spoken discourse, perhaps the most essential and important one is turn-taking because it can tell people when to talk, when to be silent and thus, avoid interruptions. According to Coulthard, turn-taking refers to ‘the roles of speaker and listener change’ collaboratively with remarkably little overlapping and few silences (Coulthard, 1994:59). Yngve states that listeners can concentrate on the syntactic completeness, the speaker’s contribution, or intonation to seek information when a turn is to be taken (Yngve, 1970 cited in McCarthy 1991:127).

According to Graddol et al, turn-taking cues are differentiated from both the listener’s and the speaker’s aspects. On one hand, from the listener’s point of view, turn-anticipation cues are considered. That is to say, listeners can ‘draw upon various kinds of knowledge allowing them to anticipate with different degrees of precision what kind of utterance will be made next’ (Graddol et al, 1994:163). They summarize three kinds of turn-anticipation cues including general script or frame, discourse structures and grammatical structures. On the other hand, from the speaker’s viewpoint, turn-yielding cues are taken into account, which can ‘help the prompt recognition of an end of turn, and help participants synchronize their turn exchanges with precision’ (Graddol et al, 1994:164). Let us consider several examples:

I-a

16 were they shopping↑(?)
 17 Well actually the law’s

I-b

28 ↓but or there
 29 used to be (?)
 30 there probably were

In both I-a and I-b, the first speaker can anticipate his turn by grammatical structures, which are two interrogative sentences given by the second speaker. In other words, the listener Steve can identify his turn by realizing grammatical completion of the speaker. Whereas no general script or frame and discourse structures cues occur in the short extract.

I-c

6 pretty
 7 pretty early eh Yeah
 8 but I mean I- di-

I-d

15 people on Sunday
 16 were they shopping↑ (?)
 17 Well actually the law’s

I-e

54 protestant
 55 isn’t it (?)
 56 I guess so↓

Examples I-c, I-d and I-e indicate turn-yielding cues from the speaker’s viewpoint. Duncan claims that speakers use a range of verbal and non-verbal cues to imply their yielding of the turn, such as syntax, gaze, intonation, loudness, drawl, stereotyped tags and gesture (Duncan, 1972 cited in Graddol et al, 1994:166). In example I-c,

the first speaker signals the end of his turn by using a small interjection “eh”, which means “don’t you agree”. Thus, the second speaker Gary responds “Yeah ...”. Example I-d shows that the second speaker yields his turn by an interrogative question with a rising intonation. A tag question “isn’t it” is applied in I-e to indicate that the second speaker wants to obtain an answer from the listener Steve and thus, his turn-yielding cue is given in stereotyped tags.

To sum up, at most times turn-anticipation cues and turn yielding cues can occur simultaneously. In other words, while the speaker is signaling his yielding of a turn, the listener can anticipate his coming of a turn according to the same cue at the same time. For instance, Line 16 in I-a, Line 28 in I-b, Line 7 in I-c, etc. According to Duncan, ‘the more cues displayed simultaneously, the more likely a rapid and smooth exchange would occur’ (Duncan, 1972 cited in Graddol et al, 1994:167). Some details concerning transition-relevance places will be explained and exemplified in the next sub-heading.

ii Different types of interruptions

Beattie distinguishes three types of interruption including simple interruption, butting-in interruption and silent interruption in addition to overlaps (Beattie, 1983 cited in Graddol et al, 1994:170).

(1) *Simple interruption* Simple interruption occurs when the attempted speaker interrupts successfully, and the first speaker’s utterance has not been completed with simultaneous speech presented (Beattie, 1983 cited in Graddol, 1994:170).

III-c

57 which I would
58 [imagine-] [which] you- yeah
59 you would think

Here the second speaker interrupts successfully and thus, the first speaker’s utterance is broken into an incomplete sentence. The two participants speak “imagine” and “which” at the same time and as a result, an overlap occurs. This example III-c is a typical simple interruption according to Beattie’s classification.

(2) *Overlap* Overlap is a quite common feature in conversation. It is ‘dealt with by one speaker ending his turn quickly, gaps between turns by another speaker beginning his turn or simply indicating that his turn has begun and incorporating the silence into it’ (Coulthard, 1994:60). Sacks et al explain overlaps in two ways: one is when a speaker mistakenly anticipates the arrival of a transition-relevance place; the other is the self-selecting speaker enters a turn rapidly by overlapping with others (Sacks, et al cited in Graddol, 1994:169). However, according to Beattie’s classification, overlap means the attempted speaker interrupts successfully when the first speaker’s utterance has been completed with simultaneous speech occurred (Beattie, 1983 cited in Graddol, 1994:170). Let us discuss these claims using the following example:

III-d

57 which I would
58 [imagine-] [which] you- yeah
59 you would think

In the above short piece, when the overlap between “imagine” and “which” occurs, it is quite obvious that the first speaker’s utterance is not finished. Whereas, according to Beattie’s classification, line 58 cannot be regarded as an overlap because the first speaker should give a complete sentence before the interruption. On account of this, it is hard for me to agree with Beattie on the classification of overlap because in the above example III-d, overlapping has occurred with no doubt.

(3) *Butting-in interruption* A butting-in interruption happens when the attempted speaker does not interrupt successfully but with simultaneous speech between them (Beattie, 1983 cited in Graddol, 1994:170).

III-e

12 (uh...) sure even when you (laughter)— S
13 left when you left
14 yeah Scotland

The short word “uh...” in III-e probably cannot be considered as a typical butting-in interruption. On one hand, it does occur at the same time with the second speaker’s sentence, besides, the first speaker does not interrupt successfully. While on the other hand, it seems that the first speaker has no intention to interrupt at all and hence, it should not be regarded as a butting-in interruption. Therefore, in the one-minute extract, no explicit butting-in

interruption is presented.

(4) *Silent interruption* Silent interruption will happen when the attempted speaker interrupts successfully, and the first speaker's utterance has not been completed yet without simultaneous speech occurred (Beattie, 1983 cited in Graddol, 1994:170). We can make it more explicitly using the following example:

III-f

19 they don't close

20 so early the shops

21 on Sundays

From this short piece, the second speaker interrupts the first one successfully without an overlapping. Besides, the first speaker's utterance is apparently not finished.

Having exemplified three types of interruption as well as overlaps, we can realize that interruption occurs very frequently in such kind of casual conversation between close friends. As state by Graddol et al (1994:172), frequent interruptions may occur in the speech of close friends as a form of collaborative talk. So if we take the whole conversation into account, we will certainly notice much more interruptions.

iii Back-channel support

Back-channel support refers to noises and short verbal responses made by listeners who acknowledge what the speaker is saying and react to it, without wishing to take over the speaking turn. (Anon cited from a handout, 2004). Some examples are mmm, yeah, oh, really, right.

IV-a

13 left when you left

14 yeah Scotland

15 people on Sunday

IV-b

32 lot more

33 relaxed than

34 in England (0.5) Oh:: surprised— G

The small word "yeah" in IV-a is a typical back-channel support with two purposes. One is to imply that the first speaker Steve is following what Gary is saying and reacting to it. The other is indicating that Steve agrees with what Gary has said—"when you left Scotland (five years ago)". Regarding example IV-b, an interjection "oh" is pronounced. 'When used alone, without the syntactic support of a sentence, oh is said to indicate emotional states, e.g. surprise, fear, or pain' (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971 cited in Schiffrin, 1999: 275). Hence, the short word "oh" in line 34 serves as a back-channel support to deliver the feeling of surprising.

iv Filled pauses

Filled pauses refer to those small 'sounds like um, er, ah, like, you know, know what I mean' (Anon, cited from a handout 2004). They can give the speaker time to think what they are going to say next and as a result, many false starts and changes in grammatical structure may occur in informal language. According to Beattie, filled pauses can also protect the speaker from interruption for a short while (Beattie, 1977 cited in Graddol et al, 1994:172). In that case, filled pauses, unlike back-channel support and minimal responses, will occur within the utterance of the same speaker. A representative example is as follows:

VI-a

8 but I mean I- di-

9 you know

10 five years ago

11 even I mean

12 (uh...) sure even when you (laughter)— S

From the above short piece, we can notice many typical filled pauses. The second speaker uses "I mean", "you know", "even", "I mean" and "sure" to gain a little time to think what he is going to say next and to hold his turn. As a result, possible interruption is avoided. The filled pauses occurred in VI-a result in a false start "I-", which

will be explained in sub-heading X, and change of grammatical structure like “di-”.

v Spoken discourse markers

By contrast, spoken discourse markers are generally employed at the beginning of a turn in order to mark boundaries in conversation between one topic or bit of business and the text (Anon, cited in a handout, 2004). Cameron argues that they are often condemned ‘as marks of inarticulacy and sloppiness in speech’ because they are sometimes meaningless and only as fillers (Cameron, 2001:114). That is to say, speakers will use spoken discourse markers to fill out their utterances when they do not really know what they want to say, or have nothing of substance to say. For this reason, spoken discourse markers may share one same purpose with filled pauses, which is to buy time to think what the speaker is going to say next. The difference between the two is that: the former is used at the beginning of a turn, while the latter usually occur during an utterance. A lot more examples are shown in the following:

VII-a

1 But but it’s very

VII-b

16 were they shopping↑ (?)

17 Well actually the law’s

VII-c

22 Saturday or Sunday well

23 was there Sun-

VII-d

45 benefits somehow uh↑

46 well yeah

VII-e

51 Christian laughter

52 (0.9) We:ll

53 (0.3) more

VII-f

26 Er :: I holding his chin

From all the above examples, we can note that both the two participants tend to use ‘well’ many times to mark the beginning of their turns. “Well” seems like a typical boundary for most English speakers to begin their utterances. As for the example in VII-f, I would like to regard the small word “er” as not only a spoken discourse marker but also as a filled pause. The reason is that the sound not only gives the speaker time to think about what he is going to say but also marks his beginning of the turn.

vi Intonation

Speakers often use a variety of intonations to express their feeling, such as surprising, questioning, disappointed or emphasizing. McCarthy describes intonation as follows: ‘at recognizable points in the utterance, the pitch level may rise, fall, or be carefully kept level’ (McCarthy, 1991:105). According to some phonologists, five types of intonations are considered for practical purposes (McCarthy, 1991:105):

1. Fall ↘

IX-a

26 Er :: I holding his chin

27 guess there are

28 ↓but or there

IX-b

56 I guess so↓

The falling intonation in line 28 indicates the transition of meaning and reinforcement of what the speaker is going to say next. In Line 56, the speaker uses a falling tone to emphasize his guess that Scotland is more protestant. Hereby, we can see that people generally use falling tones to emphasize their message.

2. Rise-fall ↗↘

IX-c

3 all c↑lose↓

In Line 3, a rise-fall tone is used probably to express a little surprised and incomprehensible feeling about the condition that the shops close so early in England.

3. Fall-rise ↘↗

IX-d

40

s↓trange↑(isn't it)

muffled sounds

On the contrary, a fall-rise intonation will occur as well. For example, the above word “strange” is pronounced in a fall-rise tone. It appears to show a surprising feeling that people in Scotland are a lot more relaxed than in England, which is new knowledge to the speaker. Thus from IX-c and IX-d, we can see that both rise-fall and fall-rise tones can indicate the speakers’ surprising feeling about something which may not be consistent with their back ground knowledge.

4. Rise ↗

IX-e

4 wh↑at 4 o'clock on

questioning himself

IX-f

16

were they shopping↑(?)

The rising tone examples in IX-e and IX-f are very different. At most times, a rising intonation is used when asking questions like Line 16. But in Line 4, it implies a different meaning, which is questioning the speaker himself instead of asking the other a question. So the first speaker keeps on with his talk as “4 o'clock...”.

5. Level →

IX-g

38 (0.7) I

39 don't know why

When the forenamed four types of intonation are not employed, a level tone will be presented. This happens frequently when somebody is simply describing something without too much personal feeling involved.

vii Repetition and false starts

Cameron argues that it is not surprising that speakers often make false starts and repeat themselves because they ‘have to produce their contributions in real time, with minimal planning’ (Cameron, 2001:34). Repetition can be a way of gaining time to plan the next chunk of utterance. False starts can be adjusting the grammatical structure to the right expression of the meaning.

X-a

1 But but it's very

X-b

12 (uh...)

sure even when you

(laughter)— S

13

left when you left

X-c

8 but I mean I- di-
 9 you know
 10 five years ago

X-d

22 Saturday or Sunday well
 23 was there Sun-
 24 surely there was Sunday
 25 Trading Laws

The example in X-a indicates that the first speaker has not prepared himself well when he begins his turn. This is probably because he intends to change their topic in a hurry from the disadvantages of shopping to the early closing of the shops. Another reason tends to be that the second speaker Gary is laughing at the moment when Steve begins his turn and thus, Steve repeats his first word in order to arouse Gary's attention. The repetition in example X-b occurs maybe because of the first speaker's vague sound "uh" which overlaps Gary's "you left". So on account of this unintentional 'interruption', Gary repeats another "when you left". On the other hand, two obvious false starts "I-" and "di-" occur in Line 8 X-c. The possible reason is that the second speaker has not produced his utterance in real time. So he is adjusting his grammatical structure and meaning to express himself properly. In example X-d, another false start occurs. At first Gary wants to ask Steve if there was Sunday Trading Laws in Scotland, which influence that the shops do not close very early on Saturdays and Sundays. But then, Gary changes his mind while speaking to indicate that there really was Sunday Trading Laws.

Conclusion

Through analysing the seven factors of spoken discourse, we can easily come to the conclusion that there are such a number of rules and functions implied in the one-minute extract, which have made crucial contribution to the two speakers' conversation. For this reason, I strongly believe that casual conversation or informal speech is neither formless nor unstructured. On the contrary, rules and features definitely exist, which can guide people's everyday speaking. So we may either use a variety of verbal communication, such as filled pauses, back-channel support, spoken discourse markers as well as adjacency pairs which do not occur in this extract; or employ non-verbal cues as well, such as gaze, facial expressions, and posture to get what we want to say across.

Speeches, both formal and informal, are more or less organized and structured even though they are quick and evanescent. Besides, they are extremely important for survival and effective functioning in society. Hence, from the viewpoint of learners and teachers, we should attach more importance to the rules and functions of spoken discourse, in order to benefit ourselves from both language learning and teaching.

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