

Conversation: From Description to Pedagogy

DIANA SLADE AND SCOTT THORNBURY

Cambridge University Press 2006

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This is a great book on casual conversation. No sooner had I started to read the Contents and Introduction than I realised I was in for a treat, not only because of the reputation of the authors, Diana Slade and Scott Thornbury, but also because of the direct and refreshing approach of the text. Right from the start, the reader cannot escape the ‘conversational net’ and sit on the fence, because s/he is implicated in what turns out to be a fascinating exploration of talking. Who doesn’t talk their way through the day? For most people, talking is fundamental to daily life. So when Slade and Thornbury state, ‘through talk we establish, maintain and modify our social identities’ (2006:1), it is difficult to disagree. Indeed, the emphasis on the social function of conversation gives this text even greater relevance today for teaching English as an international language in cultural context. The text is suitable for ELT professionals involved in academic degree programs, teacher education, curriculum development and second language instruction. While the text incorporates many tasks and lesson ideas, its main focus is to establish an innovative pedagogical framework for effectively teaching conversation. This alone justifies the extensive and comprehensive examination of the nature and function of English conversation that informs this integrated pedagogical approach.

The examination of casual conversation proceeds as the title indicates from description to pedagogy. However, the discussion is contextualised in the first chapter where the characteristics of conversation are identified and explored by comparing three types of responses to the same event. Immediately the reader is presented with recognisable examples that help to concretise the discussion, which necessarily involves a detailed comparative analysis of transcripts in order to demonstrate the nature and function of conversation. Based on this initial analysis of authentic data, a definition is presented which states that:

Conversation is the informed, interactive talk between two or more people, which happens in real time, is spontaneous, has a largely interpersonal function, and in which participants share symmetrical rights (p. 25).

The authors distinguish casual conversation from other types of speaking, such as prepared speeches, presentations, interviews and some forms of electronic messaging, the differences of which are represented in Table 1.1 on page 26. They also indicate that

the terms ‘conversation’ and ‘casual conversation’ are used interchangeably throughout the text. Following the examination of the characteristics of conversation, an overview of the various analytical approaches is presented. Once again, the information is presented clearly including a typology of the different approaches in Figure 1.1. In this way the reader can fully understand the distinctive features of each approach, such as sociological, sociolinguistic, philosophical and linguistic. Finally, reference is made to the contribution of technology to the research of spoken English, and in particular, corpus linguistics which utilises databases of spoken language for the purpose of analysis and comparison. Indeed, much of the authentic spoken data used throughout the text comes from corpus data, such as OZTALK. The introduction provides the conceptual and theoretical framework for the description of conversation that follows in Chapters 2 to 5.

The next four chapters systematically dissect conversation to see what it consists of and how it works. Beginning with the vocabulary of conversation, it is stated that according to research by McCarthy and Carter almost half of all conversation consists of fifty word types that are used repeatedly. This includes ‘function words’, such as the, with, but, are, and ‘content words’, such as ‘You know’, ‘I think’, ‘Well’ and ‘Yeah’ (47). It is a little disconcerting to discover that our daily conversations consist of so few words that are regularly recycled. The authors go on to examine other lexical features of conversation related to repetition, vagueness, fillers, discourse markers and other inserts, routines and lexical phrases, and appraisal and involvement all of which contribute to meaningful communication. The challenge then is to incorporate these lexical items into instructional materials in ways that develop communicative competence. While this indeed is a challenge the next chapter, on the grammar of conversation, serves as an even greater one because it questions two common assumptions about the grammar of spoken language. The first being, ‘spoken grammar is simply written grammar realised as speech’, and the second, ‘spoken grammar is a less complex, even degenerate, form of its written counterpart’ (p. 73). The authors argue that even though considerable advances have been made in understanding the complexity of spoken language in terms of theory and of practice, little advance has been made in translating this knowledge into useful and appropriate lesson content and method. Quoting Crystal and Davy, they make the point that course book conversations often seem quite unnatural in which ‘people . . . are not allowed to tell long and unfunny jokes, to get irritable or to lose their temper, to gossip . . . to speak with their mouths full, to talk nonsense, or swear (even mildly). . . . In a word, they are not *real*’ (p. 75). In response, Slade and Thornbury delve into the murky depths of real conversations and expose what Halliday refers to as the mobility and intricacy of spoken language which is in a constant state of flux.

Of particular significance is the integral role of context or co-text for conversational competence. Given my own interest in the use of space and action in communicative events, this was a welcome focus of the text. In the section on deixis (85), examples of deictic expressions are provided, such as personal pronouns, demonstratives and adverbials that are used to make reference or point to the immediate context. Given the inextricable link of speech and action in conversation, deixis operates at more than one level, such as lexical choice, grammatical function and discourse. While attention is brought to this vital aspect of conversation, further attention could be given to the central role human actions play in conversation. People use gesture, posture and a whole range of actions to communicate during casual conversation. Indeed, it is often this aspect of conversation that causes misunderstanding when space and action are not used appropriately. Prodromou provides a provocative example of this in terms of conversational pragmatics in a later chapter where he suggests that the lack of socio-cultural understanding could lead to an embarrassing application of the idiom, 'Bottoms up!'. In terms of linguistic and para-linguistic choices, socio-cultural knowledge is clearly essential. A large part of this knowledge resides in understanding the role of action in spoken discourse.

Other aspects addressed by the authors are discourse features and genres in conversation, complementing the chapters on lexis and grammar. They identify key features of conversational discourse such as cohesion, interaction, turn-taking strategies and cultural factors. Similarly, they identify two main genres, story-telling and gossiping, and examine the socio-linguistic structures, stages and functions of these genres in casual conversation. Without a doubt, these analyses of the inextricable interface between self and society through casual conversation are not only exacting but salutary. Repeatedly, the reader is reminded of the fundamental socializing purpose of talking, or as stated by the authors, 'casual conversation aims to sustain and maintain social relationships'.

This claim is reinforced in the two pivotal chapters on first and second language acquisition of conversational competence which precede the final two chapters on teaching conversation. The former two chapters encapsulate the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 acquisition, much of which is not unfamiliar, however the application of this theoretical understanding to the practice of teaching conversation in Chapters 8 and 9 is less common. While the authors acknowledge the significant contribution of many scholars to this field of enquiry since the late nineteenth century, they nevertheless claim that current pedagogy needs to reflect more closely what is now known about the nature and function of casual conversation. They do this by providing a model for teaching conversation referred to as 'indirect teaching *plus*' (p. 295), diagrammatically represented in the form of a triangle as

exposure, instruction and practice. This interactive, rather than sequential, model aims to incorporate into classroom discourse the features of casual conversation that enable second language learners to actually learn the language through the practice of conversation. As big as the challenge might be for ELT educators to appropriate 'conversation-as-process' in the classroom, the learning outcomes for students promise to be worth the effort.

Armed with this volume of excellent research, insight and guidance, exploring the ins-and-outs of conversational competence within and without the classroom might even prove to be fun. This text is a valuable addition to the Cambridge Language Teaching Library series and definitely worth having as a teaching resource at work and at home.

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