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Conversation, Structure of

Introductory article

Herbert H Clark, Stanford University, Stanford, California, USA

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Conversations emerge as people use dialogue to coordinate on joint activities they engage in. People proceed turn by turn as they reach local agreements on the course of each section and subsection, including the opening and closing of the conversation itself.

INTRODUCTION

Conversations are the product of people engaged in joint activities. A joint activity is one in which two or more people have to coordinate with each other to succeed. When two people waltz, play a duet, or wrestle, they coordinate their individual actions largely by gesture, touch, and other techniques. When two people gossip, plan a vacation, or negotiate a contract, they coordinate largely through dialogue. The structure of these conversations emerges as the participants jointly manage their way through the gossip, the planning, or the negotiation.

Conversations, therefore, reflect the joint activities they coordinate. Every joint activity has participants who are distinct from bystanders, onlookers, or overhearers. In most joint activities, each participant has a role, such as clerk or customer, teacher or student, friend calling or friend called, and the roles help determine what the participants do and say. Most joint activities have mutually recognized goals such as exchanging gossip, planning a vacation, or negotiating a contract, and these have subgoals. Some goals are set from the start, but others get established in the course of the conversation. The participants also have private agendas – such as being polite, or finishing quickly – and these, too, constrain what they do and say. Often, people alternate between two or more joint activities – such as gossiping and eating dinner – and the structure of their conversation reflects the alternations.

ACTIONS OF DIALOGUE

It takes coordination to carry out a joint activity. Joint activities have boundaries – distinct beginnings and ends, and transitions from one part to the next – but these boundaries don't exist until the participants agree to them. To enter a planning session, for example, two people must agree on (1) what the joint activity is to be, (2) who is to take part, and (3) in what roles. They must also maintain or change these agreements at each transition point. People accomplish all this with dialogue, locally, turn by turn.

One basic method for reaching these agreements is the *adjacency pair*, as in this spontaneous example from Svartvik and Quirk (see Further Reading):

Ann where is your office,
Burton in the Strand,
Ann oh well, yes,

Adjacency pairs consist of two parts, by different speakers, where part 2 is conditionally relevant given part 1. Part 1 is a *proposal*, and part 2 is expected to be the *uptake* of that proposal. Here, in turn 1, Ann proposes that Burton tell her where his office is, and in turn 2, he takes up the proposal by saying that it is in the Strand. Ann and Burton use the two turns to agree on the content, participants, and roles of Ann's projected joint action. They would have failed to reach that agreement if, for example, Burton had replied 'What do you mean?' (failing to coordinate content) or 'You mean me?' (failing to coordinate participants). Turns 2 and 3 constitute a second adjacency pair, an assertion plus its uptake.

People in conversation use adjacency pairs for many types of joint actions. They use them for exchanges of information (as in Ann and Burton's question plus answer), greetings ('Hi,' 'Hi'), farewells ('Bye,' 'Bye'), offers ('Have a beer,' 'Thanks'), orders ('Sit down,' 'Yes, sir'), and apologies ('Sorry,' 'Oh, that's okay'), among others. They use them for even the simplest exchanges of information ('In the Strand,' 'Oh well, yes').

Adjacency pairs can also be used to *project* larger sections, as in this spontaneous example:

B I like tuh ask you something.
A Shoot.
B Y'know *I*'ad my license suspended fur six munts.
A Uh huh.
B Y'know for a reason which, I rathuh not, mention tuh you, in othuh words, – a *ser*ious reason, en I like tuh know if I w'd talk tuh my senator, or – somebuddy, could *they* help me get it back.

B's first turn is a *pre-question*. With it he proposes to ask A a question, and A agrees. B now has the freedom to take up preliminaries to his question, and it takes the two of them several turns to do that. Only then does he ask his question proper, 'Could they help me get it back?' Pre-questions project not only the eventual question but preliminaries to that question.

Pre-questions and their responses belong to a large family of so-called *pre-sequences*. Here are a few more examples:

Pre-request	Customer	Do you have hot chocolate?
	Waitress	Yes, we do.
Pre-invitation	Man	What are you doin?
	Woman	Nothin. What's up?
Pre-narrative	June	Did I tell you I was going to Scotland?
	Kenneth	No.
Pre-conversation	Caller	(rings telephone)
	Recipient	Miss Pink's office.

Each pre-sequence prepares the way for another joint action. The pre-request sets up a request ('I'll have one'); the pre-invitation sets up an invitation ('Would you like…'); the pre-narrative sets up a narrative; and the pre-conversation sets up an entire telephone conversation.

SECTIONS OF CONVERSATIONS

Conversations tend to emerge as a sequence of topics, or sections. Each section reflects a different phase in the overall joint activity – the next bit of gossip, the next segment of the vacation being

planned, the next issue of the contract being negotiated. The participants must agree on the opening and closing of each section, and that is where pre-sequences are useful.

Sections that consist of narratives (jokes, anecdotes, recountings of events), for example, are often introduced by a pre-narrative and its response. The following is an instance from Svartvik and Quirk (see Further Reading):

Nancy: I acquired an absolutely magnificent sewing-machine, by foul means, did I tell you about that?
Kate: no,
Nancy: well when I was. doing freelance advertising – (proceeds to give a five minute narrative)

Nancy proposes to tell Kate a story ('Did I tell you about that'), and Kate accepts ('No'). That allows Kate to embark on her narrative – an extended section of the conversation. It takes both parties to agree, because the recipient can always decline, as in this example, also from Svartvik and Quirk:

Connie: did I tell you, when we were in this African village, and (- they were all out in the fields, - the)
Irene: (yes you did, yes, - yes)
Connie: babies left alone, -
Irene: yes.

Irene interrupts Connie (the speech in brackets is overlapping) to say that she *has* heard the story, and the two of them then go down a different path. So conversations are opportunistic: the paths people take depend on the opportunities that become available with each agreement. Nancy and Connie use their pre-narratives to find the best way to proceed and, receiving different replies, go in different directions.

People help signal which opportunities they are taking by using *discourse markers*. For example, Nancy used 'well' to signal that she was introducing a change in perspective as she began her story. Other discourse markers indicate such boundaries as the start of a new topic (e.g., 'so', 'then', 'speaking of that'), the start of a digression ('incidentally', 'by the way'), or the return from a digression ('anyway', 'so'). All help in coordinating what happens next.

Opening a conversation takes special coordination as two or more people move from not being in a conversation to being in one. The following is the opening of a conversation between acquaintances, again from Svartvik and Quirk:

Karen: (rings Charlie's telephone)
Charlie: Wintermere speaking? -
Karen: hello?
Charlie: h*el*lo
Karen: Charlie
Charlie: Yes
Karen: actually it's
Charlie: hello Karen
Karen: it's me
Charlie: M
Karen: I (- laughs) I couldn't get back last night, (continues)

First, Karen and Charlie coordinate contact through a proposal to have a conversation (the telephone ring) and its uptake ('Wintermere speaking?'). Next, they mutually establish their identities. Karen tells Charlie that she recognizes him in turn 5, but Karen has to say 'hello?' 'Charlie', and 'actually it's' before he identifies her in turn 8. Only then does Karen introduce the first topic. It took 10 turns for them to coordinate on the participants, roles, and content of the conversation.

Conversations are no easier to close, as illustrated in this ending to a telephone conversation:

June and I'll. I'll ring again, as soon as I can on the tenth, uhh to definite confirm it,
Kay right,
Kay okay,
June right,
June thanks a lot,
Kay r. right,
June bye bye,
Kay bye

Although June and Kay finish a topic in turns 1 and 2, they cannot hang up without agreeing to hang up. So in turn 3, Kay proposes to close the conversation ('Okay'), and although June could introduce a new topic, she agrees to Kay's proposal ('Right'). That opens up the closing in which the two exchange thanks ('Thanks a lot' 'Right') and then good-byes. The two must *agree* to close the conversation before they actually close it.

GROUNDING WHAT IS SAID

People carry out joint activities against their *common ground* – their mutual knowledge, mutual beliefs, and mutual assumptions. They infer their common ground from past conversation, joint perceptual experiences, and joint membership in cultural communities. When Ann asks Burton 'Where is your office?' she *presupposes* certain common ground – for example, that Burton works on computers and has an office in London, but that she doesn't know where. And with the question itself, she *adds to* their common ground that she wants to know. Conversations proceed by orderly

increments to common ground – especially to the common ground relevant to the current joint activities.

So if conversations are to succeed, the participants must *ground* what they say. To ground what is said is to establish the mutual belief that the addressees have understood the speakers well enough for current purposes. One technique for grounding is the adjacency pair itself. When Burton said 'In the Strand', he displayed to Ann how he had interpreted her question. If Ann hadn't been satisfied with that interpretation, she could have corrected it, for example by replying 'No, I meant ...'. By following up Burton's reply with 'Oh well, yes,' she displayed her acceptance of his interpretation. Another technique is the *back-channel response*, *acknowledgment*, or *continuer*. In two-party conversations, addressees are expected to add 'uh huh' or 'mhm' or 'yeah' at or near the ends of certain phrases. With these, they signal that they understand well enough for the speaker to continue.

Grounding is sometimes achieved through *side sequences*, as in this spontaneous example, once more from Svartvik and Quirk:

Roger	well there's no general agreement on it I should think,
Sam	on what?
Roger	on uhm - - on the uhm – the mixed up bits in the play, the
Sam	yes

When Sam didn't understand Roger's 'it', he initiated an embedded adjacency pair in turns 2 and 3, a side sequence, to clear up the problem. Only when he had cleared it up did he acknowledge or agree with 'Yes'. Side sequences are initiated to clear up not only mishearings and misunderstandings but other preconditions to taking up the first part ('Why do you want to know?'). Grounding is sometimes accomplished by overlapping speech. When Irene interrupted Connie's offer 'Did I tell you ...' to say, 'Yes you did, yes, – yes', she was signaling to Connie that she already understood and Connie didn't need to go on.

CONCLUSION

The structure of conversations emerges step by step as people coordinate on each new move in their joint activities. People need to coordinate on the content, participants, and roles of each joint action, and they do that in a sequence of local, opportunistic agreements. It is these techniques that give conversations their structure.

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