

## STRUCTURAL STUDY OF CASUAL CONVERSATIONS

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Language is a means of communicating thoughts. But the transmission of informative messages is not the only function of language. Language is also used for establishing and maintaining contact between people. "There is in all human beings the well-known tendency to congregate, to be together, to enjoy each other's company" (Malinowski 1923: 314). We are all aware of this need for establishing and maintaining social relationships with others. Everyday we express this social function of language when we casually interact with one another.

Casuality may be a part of any encounter, but there are particular face-to-face encounters which are marked by the feature casuality, namely casual encounters. These encounters are everyday encounter situations where two or more participants meet without a highly specified purpose or setting. Examples of such encounters are: visiting, 'dropping by', meeting in the street or in the café, waiting for a bus or a train, travelling together, etc.

As generally in any face-to-face interaction, also in casual encounters both verbal and non-verbal means of communication are used. We do not only communicate through language, we also 'talk' with our whole body. There seems no reason to suppose that in casual encounters the non-verbal communication is less important to the participants. However, this paper deals only with casual encounters and the verbal interaction in them. Once the participants have started the verbal interaction in a casual encounter their obligation is to keep a casual, informal type of interaction flowing. From here onwards I shall refer to the verbal interaction in casual encounters as casual conversations.

If we want to regard casual conversations as an independent register we should give values to the following register variables: subject-matter, situation-type, participant roles, mode, and medium of discourse (Hasan 1973). By doing this we give, so to speak, 'an abstract schema' its 'concrete representation' (Hasan 1977: 6): casual conversations are now described according to the values existing in their actual social setting, the casual conversations.

The following table summarizes the register description of casual conversations:

Table 1. Register: Casual Conversation

variables	values
subject-matter	- the maintenance and the establishment of social relationships; non-technical
situation-type	- a face-to-face encounter involving verbal interaction
participant roles	- 1. <u>social roles</u> : non-hierarchic, i.e. either friend - friend or stranger - stranger 2. <u>textual roles</u> : speaker - hearer 3. <u>participatory roles</u> : initiator - respondent
mode of discourse	- mode of 'sociability'
medium of discourse	- spoken interaction

Let us now consider casual conversations from the functional point of view. Halliday points out (1970, 1973) that there are three macrofunctions working simultaneously in our use of language. Firstly, we use language "to express social and personal relations" (Halliday 1973: 41). Through our speech we can express who we are, what our purposes are when interacting with others, how we react to other people's messages, etc. In other words, we use language interpersonally. This macrofunction expresses the speaker's personal participation as well as his personal commitment and his relationship with others (Halliday 1970, 1973). In casual conversations, when we greet, chat, or take leave, we take into consideration and express this interpersonal function of language in our behaviour and in our organization of discourse. Secondly, casual conversations must also have 'texture'. They must have the properties of 'being a text' and 'being functional' in the environment of casual encounters (Halliday and Hasan 1976). The conversations have to be coherent and situationally relevant. The flow of interaction in casual conversations must have continuity from one sentence to another. It is the task of the textual macrofunction to guarantee that casual conversations are well-organized and that each part of the text relates to the whole conversation and to the situation where the interaction takes place (Halliday 1970, 1973). Finally, casual conversations also provide cognitive and factual information. This is to say, they express the ideational macrofunction of language, as well. This function encodes our experiences in the form of ideational content. It is concerned with the expression of the speaker's

experiences and the world around him, and with the logical relations between the two (Halliday 1973: 99).

## 2. The Structural Components of Casual Conversations

A classical example of a casual conversation is a situation where two Englishmen are sitting in a railway compartment talking about the weather. It does not matter what they say, but it is important that they say something to each other. Complete silence would strain the atmosphere and the participants would feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. A discussion about the weather is just an easy method for strangers to establish a comfortable, mutual relationship with one another without having to say too much (Trudgill 1974: 13).

But how do we actually know how to behave and interact in these situations? Through the 'language acquisition process' and the 'socialization process' native speakers learn to produce proper linguistic behaviour in different situations. For a native speaker the production of casual conversations is more or less axiomatic. But for a foreigner it would be useful to know what he is expected to say during a casual encounter. Do casual conversations follow a certain pattern? What are the different components of such a structural pattern? What are the determinants of a particular structure in casual conversations?

To begin with, we have to know what kind of components are possible in casual conversations and the various ways they are expressed. Because we are dealing with an encounter between at least two people we can assume that some kind of a greeting (G) takes place. The primary function of a greeting is interpersonal and it signifies the recognition of a previously established relationship between the interactants. A greeting is non-verbal or verbal; only the lexically expressed greetings are considered here. Greetings are reciprocal: they require a response. Without the provided answer it is difficult to develop the conversation smoothly to the next component. The next possible component could be an address (ADD): the interactants' recognition of one another. An address usually follows immediately after the greeting (e.g. Hello Mary, Good morning Dr. Drywater). An address is an expression of familiarity. When it is used we know that social distance between the participants is at its minimal or close to the minimal; in other words, the interactants have

interacted previously and their role relationship is closer to a friend-to-friend than a stranger-to-stranger relationship. When the interactants are complete strangers to one another an address is an impossible component in the conversation. Instead, strangers may use an identification (I). The interactants introduce themselves and thus provide a basis for maintaining the relationship and advancing it towards minimal social distance. By using approaches (A) we establish comfortable relationships with others. Approaches include topics which we call 'safe topics, social niceties, breaking the ice, chats, small talk, etc.'. Approaches are a means to get the conversation going. We can distinguish two types of approaches: direct and indirect. Direct approaches (Ad) usually deal with the topics which concern the interactants themselves, their health, their appearance, such as new clothing, hairdos, etc., their family members, their everyday and professional life and so on. Many of the direct approaches are stereotyped (How's life?, How's Business?). But most of them are, however, interpretable only when we take the actual context of situation and the background knowledge of the interactants into consideration. Indirect approaches (Ai) refer to the immediate situation. They deal with e.g. the weather, the current news, the concrete 'set up' of the situation, etc. Approaches function as 'a bridge to conversation' (Feldman 1959: 149) and they strengthen the feeling of togetherness between the interactants. By using approaches appropriately we can avoid silence and boredom in encounters (Hayakawa 1949: 83). Functionally they are also important because they keep the communication channel open for further developments in a conversation. In the centering (C) the interactants become fully involved in a casual conversation. Centering includes cognitive and informative topics. It has at least one topic, but we cannot state the maximum number of the topics that may be included. If we were to define a person's involvement in a casual conversation we could describe it as a curve which rises and then falls at the end of the casual conversation; centering would be the area at the top of this curve. Leave-takings (LT) are an expression of an interactant's desire or need to terminate the casual conversation. He may have nothing more to say or only limited time for the encounter. Leave-takings

sum up the effect of the encounter upon the relationship and show what the participants may expect of one another when they next meet (Goffman 1967: 71).

A goodbye (GB) occurs immediately after the leave-taking. Goodbyes function as 'a bridge to stay in contact' (Feldman 1959: 162) and include a wish or a promise to see the other person again.

Now that we have discussed the possible structural components we can envisage a fully developed casual conversation as a chain in which the links are 'welded' together in the most logical order.

Figure 1. 'Casual Conversation Chain'



The same can be presented graphically:



(The apostrophe between the components signifies that so far the sequence has not been stated to follow any particular order.)

### 3. Social Distance

Social distance refers to the degree of familiarity between the interactants.

Minimum social distance obtains between interactants who have previously interacted fairly regularly in a wide range of differing fields...maximum social distance obtains between interactants who have either never interacted together or only very rarely.

The various degrees of social distance are arranged along a continuum in which the end points are clearly distinct, but the adjacent degrees of social distance are more difficult to differentiate (Hasan 1977: 8). Thus, social distance between two close friends is at its minimum and at its maximum between strangers.

We can now present a hypothesis that social distance affects the choice of different structural components in casual conversations. The starting point in a casual conversation is different when the interactants have known each other previously. Friends use a greeting to start a conversation. For them, to greet one another is an obligation, since a greeting is a sign of recognition of the other interactant. To show further recognition friends use an address. Strangers cannot start a casual conversation with a greeting and an address since they have never interacted before and, accordingly, have no obligation to recog-

Footnotes 1 and 2: The stroke between ADD and I signifies the possible choice according to the social distance between the interactants.

nize one another. Instead of an address strangers may use an identification. Approaches, centering, leave-taking, and saying goodbye are possible in conversations between friends and strangers. Thus, because of the differences at the initial stages of the conversation with different social distance between the interactants, we have to give the conversations between friends and strangers two different structural representations: minimal social distance:

G ' ADD ' A ' C ' LT ' GB

maximal social distance:

I ' A ' C ' LT ' GB

#### 4. Sequence

So far, we have not stated the sequence of the components. Do the components have a specified order or is the order fairly flexible? Let us consider the sequence separately in conversations between friends and strangers. It has been noted that a conversation with minimal social distance starts with a greeting (G) and is followed by an address (ADD). The order between these two components is fixed (only in the case of 'getting someone's attention' ADD may precede G). An approach (A) follows ADD. We have previously subclassified the approaches into direct (Ad) and indirect (Ai) approaches. Ad is concerned with the interactant himself as Ai deals with the immediate situation. Among friends it does not matter whether Ad precedes Ai or vice versa; in other words, the sequence between the two types of approaches is non-fixed when used by friends. As Nash (1971: 43) states, friends use approaches simply to indicate that the interactants approve the established contact and that the transmittance and the exchange of opinions as well as the transaction of business may start. The next possible component is centering (C), during which the interactants become fully involved in a conversation. The most logical place for C is after the approaches but before the leave-taking; the order between the components is fixed. Leave-takings (LT) occurs after C, but before a goodbye (GB). The sequence between LT and GB is fixed.

We can now present the sequence in casual conversations with minimal social distance by marking fixed sequences with a circumflex (^) and non-fixed sequences with an apostrophe ('):

$G \wedge ADD \wedge Ad \wedge Ai \wedge C \wedge IT \wedge GB$

Casual conversations between strangers cannot start with G and ADD, but it is most unlikely that they would start it with an identification either, i.e. with introductions. Strangers are more restricted in starting their conversation as they are on a more formal footing, and they do not know each other's background. Due to this lack of background knowledge they most likely start discussing about something that either exists or happens in the immediate situation, e.g. the weather and the buses being always late. Thus, the first component in a conversation with maximal social distance is Ai. Only after Ai the interactants are allowed to get more personal and use Ad. If a stranger started a conversation with Ad the other interactant might consider him impolite and intrusive. The sequence between Ai and Ad is fixed, since starting the interaction with Ad violates the intimacy laws. Identification (I) may precede Ad, hence giving the interactants a better basis for getting more 'personal', but I may as well occur after Ad. But I may also appear as late as after the centering (C), which develops when the interactants have found a mutually interesting topic. I has, thus, three possible occurrence places: before Ad, between Ad and C, or after C. We can now say that the sequence between Ad, I, and C is non-fixed on one condition: if and only if C does not precede Ad (as strangers do not start conversations with C as the first component). Graphically this is presented as  $\Leftrightarrow Ad \wedge C$ . The most probable occurrence place for I is after C, because by then the interactants 'know' each other and they now have a possibility at hand to start advancing their relationship toward minimal social distance. IT and GB follow again in a fixed sequence after C.

The sequence in the conversations with minimal social distance is as follows:

$Ai \wedge Ad \wedge I \wedge C \wedge IT \wedge GB \Leftrightarrow Ad \wedge C$

##### 5. Minimal and Maximal Casual Conversations

Primarily, casual conversations are "a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words" (Malinowski 1923: 315). This type of language use is phatic (using Malinowski's terminology) or interpersonal (using Halliday's terminology). We use language phatically when talking 'about nothing special' over a cup of tea or a beer. The

purpose of such a use of language is to create a friendly atmosphere, to avoid embarrassing silences and to establish new social relationships and maintain old ones.

We can divide casual conversations into minimal and maximal. The minimal conversations, which are only phatic in content, have the function of establishing and maintaining social relationships between the interactants. An extreme example of a minimal conversation is when two interactants just exchange greetings and then depart. But even this short, minimal conversation fulfills the social function of recognizing the other interactant's presence and gives reassurance that the communication channel will be open when the interactants are to meet again. When, however, the primary focus of attention in a casual conversation is turned to interactants' expressive and cognitive messages the conversation is maximal. Maximal conversations are no longer only phatic; they have more 'informative and meaningful' content due to the expression of the ideational macrofunction in the topics of the centering component.

We can now present the structures of minimal and maximal conversations with their different social distances:

minimal conversation - minimal social distance	$G \wedge ADD \wedge Ad \ ' \ Ai \wedge IT \wedge GB$
maximal conversation - minimal social distance	$G \wedge ADD \wedge Ad \ ' \ Ai \wedge C \wedge IT \wedge GB$
minimal conversation - maximal social distance	$Ai \wedge Ad \ ' \ I \wedge IT \wedge GB$
maximal conversation - maximal social distance	$Ai \wedge Ad \ ' \ I \ ' \ C \wedge IT \wedge GB \leftrightarrow Ad \wedge C$

## 6. Optionality

We should note here that casual conversations are not necessarily always fully developed. Each interactant develops the conversation according to his own reasons for selecting the structural components and, at the same time, keeping in mind the particular situation. Optionality of the components is bound to cause changes in the structures and, therefore, we have to consider which components are optional and which are obligatory.

Let us first consider the minimal conversations between friends. When social distance is at its minimum the interactants are generally obliged



to give a sign of recognition, either by a nod, a wave, or verbally by a greeting. G signifies mutual recognition and shows that nothing in the relationship has changed since the end of the last encounter (Goffman 1967: 41). Thus, G is an obligatory element in the minimal conversations with minimal social distance. Since + visual contact obtains in these conversations (see Hasan 1977), ADD is optional (we can see whom we are interacting with). But ADD naturally increases the degree of familiarity in the conversations. Friends may start a conversation less ceremoniously and 'get straight to the point', since they know each other's personality and background. Therefore, we can consider both type of approaches as optional. Centering is naturally present only in maximal conversations. LT in minimal conversations is often an apology for not having more time for a longer conversation. But LT as well as GB are usually left out in minimal conversations. For example, when the interactants meet in the street they greet each other and exchange an approach, but at the same time they keep walking. By the time LT and GB should occur the interactants are no longer facing one another and it seems unnecessary to include these components into the conversation at that late stage.

Up to the centering the optionality of the components in maximal conversations between friends occurs as in minimal conversations. C is now an obligatory element. LT and GB function in maximal conversations as a sign of appreciation of the encounter. They sum up "the effect of the encounter upon the relationship and show what the participants may expect of one another when they next meet" (Goffman 1967: 41). Now, both LT and GB must be considered obligatory for the simple reason that we 'owe' them to friends after a lengthy discussion. It would be rude and impolite to leave the encounter without including these elements.

In the structures of minimal and maximal casual conversations with minimal social distance the optional elements are put in parenthesis:

minimal conversation	G ^ (ADD) ^ (Ad) ' (Ai) ^ (LT) ^ (GB)
maximal conversation	G ^ (ADD) ^ (Ad) ' (Ai) ^ C ^ LT ^ GB

Strangers start minimal casual conversations with situational Ai. This is an obligatory element, if the interactants are to interact at all. As the purpose of interaction in minimal conversations is more or less always phatic for strangers, they have no real reason to use Ad. In addition, I is optional, since it is improbable that the interactants will

ever run into each other again. In minimal conversations strangers very seldom use *LT* and *GB*.

Maximal conversations between strangers also start with *Ai*. The following *Ad* is now, however, obligatory. This is due to the fact that, to find a mutually interesting topic for *C*, the interactants need to know something about each other's personality and background and this information is elicited by direct approaches. *I* is used according to the degree of 'friendliness and comfortability' experienced by the interactants. *LT* and *GB* must also in maximal conversations be considered obligatory with strangers. Whenever interactants are involved in a lengthier conversation they usually owe each other *LT* and *GB* irrespective of the existing social distance.

Optional elements occur in casual conversations with maximal social distance as follows:

minimal  
conversation

$$A_i \wedge (Ad) \cdot (I) \wedge (LT) \wedge (GB)$$

maximal  
conversation

$$A_i \wedge Ad \cdot (I) \cdot C \wedge LT \wedge GB \leftrightarrow Ad \wedge C$$

In conclusion to the hypothetical structures we can say that a most minimal conversation between friends is just an exchange of greetings and between strangers an indirect approach and a response to it. In maximal conversations none of the components may occur by itself. Maximal conversations always include a centering plus some other component(s).

## 7. Tentative Results of the Analysis of Casual Conversations

So far, the statements of the structural shapes for casual conversations with different social distances have been theoretical only. I shall now present the structures of four natural, surreptitiously recorded casual conversations. Two of the conversations were minimal, but with different social distances, and two were maximal, again with different social distances.

The analysis was carried out by distinguishing the structural components according to their topical content. The more stereotyped components (*G*, *GB*) were easy to distinguish, but with the less stereotyped components (*Ai*, *Ad*, *C*) it became obvious that the components were quite diversified and complex. Most of these components included more than one

topic. The topics again were subclassified into subtopics. The next observation was that the topics as well as the subtopics often overlapped. Overlapping (graphically presented as  $\wedge$ ) occurs, for example, when topic A gradually changes into topic B, so that it is impossible to tell where exactly the boundary of these two topics is. Furthermore, it was found that something that had been mentioned in a previous component could be taken up again and would be expanded into a topic or topics of the new component. This phenomenon is called expansion and we can mark it e.g.

( $\rightarrow$ Ad) C. The reason for the occurrence of expansion is that a word or a statement awakens the other interactant's curiosity, anger, etc. to such a degree that he takes up the matter again in order to look at it from a different point of view, to gain more information or the other interactant's opinions on it, etc. A further feature of the less stereotyped components is that they may re-occur in the structures. An example of this is when, for instance, Ad, which elicits information in the conversations between strangers, occurs again after C:  $Ad \wedge C \wedge Ad$ . This Ad is now a re-occurring component. Naturally, the function of both of these Ad-components is the same, even though the topics of the components may vary.

As a result, the analysis gave much more diversified structures than expected from the hypothesized models. As the structures of the content analysis are highly complex it is more practica to simplify the structures for the componential analysis by leaving out the detailed analysis of the topics and the subtopics. Thus the following structures present only the components that occurred in each conversation:

- Structure I : minimal conversation - minimal social distance  
 $G \wedge Ad \wedge IT \wedge GB$
- Structure II : maximal conversation - minimal social distance  
 $G \wedge Ad \wedge Ai \wedge I \wedge Ad \wedge C \wedge Ad \wedge C \wedge IT \wedge GB$
- Structure III : minimal conversation - maximal social distance  
 $Ai \wedge Ad \wedge Ai \wedge (\rightarrow Ad)Ad \wedge Ad \wedge Ai \wedge (\rightarrow Ai)Ad \wedge IT^1$
- Structure IV : maximal conversation - maximal social distance  
 $Ai \wedge Ad \wedge Ai \wedge C \wedge Ad \wedge Ai \wedge I \wedge Ad \wedge Ai \wedge Ad \wedge Ai \wedge Ai \wedge IT \wedge GB$

Footnote 1.: When two similar components have occurred one after another, there is a pause between them and it justifies the repetition of the components.

When we compare these simplified structures to the hypothesized structures we find fundamental similarities. In structure I the components are chosen according to the possibilities listed. The compulsory element G has been expressed, but ADD has been left out, because + visual contact. One approach, namely Ad, is used and IT and GB, which actually are optional, are chosen for realization in this conversation. Structure II includes the obligatory elements as hypothesized (G, C, IT<sup>n</sup> and GB). The sequence G ^ Ad ^ Ai is also quite permissible. Strangely enough, I has also been included, due to the fact one of the interactants had forgotten the other interactant's name, even though they had met many times previously and were well acquainted through a mutual friend. In structure III the conversation starts with an obligatory Ai. The re-occurrences of Ai and Ad make the structure look complicated. IT has been realized but GB has been realized non verbally, if at all. In structure IV the obligatory elements have again been realized (Ai, Ad, C, IT, and GB). But the structure is again complex due to the re-occurrences of the components.

## 8. Conclusion

The hypothesis of this paper was that particular structures exist in casual conversations according to the overall purposes of the interaction and to the social distance obtaining between the interactants. A tentative analysis of two minimal and two maximal conversations seemed to verify the hypothesized differences in the structures of casual conversations. Minimal conversations seem to carry primarily the interpersonal and textual macrofunctions of language while maximal conversations also include the ideational function of language. Moreover, the analysis showed that friends use different structure in their minimal and maximal casual conversations than strangers. Friends, who can rely on previously acquired information in their conversation, advance more directly to the centering component (C) without many 'introductory' approaches (Ad and Ai). Strangers, however, need to build up their conversation 'from scratch' and, therefore, they employ a great number of approaches, thus eliciting information about the other interactants.

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