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Discourse Interaction and Content — A Test Case

1. Introduction

A nonspecialist conversation about language constitutes the data treated here, and, although this is not a paper about discourse analysis as such, the use of several selected approaches from that general area have helped me in characterising what people have talked about (rather than how they have talked about it), e.g., in the area of folk linguistics (e.g., Niedzielski and Preston, in press). What is specifically further developed here is a content-oriented discourse analysis, with a focus on interactional characteristics.

Most work on conversation shows a striking lack of interest in what is being talked about. Such analyses have had to pay some attention to content, or such things as *topic shift* could not have been studied, but their goal has been to determine the structural properties of such phenomena rather than the topics at hand in a particular conversation. In *content-oriented discourse analysis*, I have taken an applied approach, using discourse and/or conversation analytic techniques to study the nature of a specific example of talk for the purpose of shedding light on its topics.¹

¹ In spite of this principal goal, I am not quite so naive as to believe that discourse analysis has provided handy proven tools with which a conversation may be dis- and remantled, and, since I am a linguist, the reader may catch me speculating on the more general applicability of this or that device or even suggesting modifications to previous approaches. Some may object that recent trends in both discourse analysis and social psychology have promoted and integrated just such content-oriented approaches. I find them, however, at least as a linguist, particularly disappointing, for they seem to offer no more than an approach to discourse which might be taken by any untrained but clever and

Here I take an ethnomethodological approach to discourse as a negotiated, on-going, creative process (e.g., Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974), elaborated on by an appeal to units usually associated with conversation analysis (referred to here, following Schiffrin 1987: 25-26, as those of the *interactional* structure).

2. The Conversational Sample

The participants:

- C: Taiwanese male, age 30, linguistics graduate student
- D: African-American male, age 40, mechanic, design consultant in engineering firm, community college student, grew up in northeastern Ohio, Vietnam veteran, 8 years in Detroit (R's spouse)
- R: African-American female, age 41, teacher's aide, two years of college, grew up in northeastern Ohio, 8 years in Detroit (D's spouse)
- A: African-American female, age 19, community college student, born in northeastern Ohio, 8 years in Detroit (D and R's daughter)

(C attends the same evangelical church as the respondents; he met them on a trip to the United States several years before he began graduate studies, and their relationship is close. The section of the tape before the segment transcribed here contains personal data and a discussion of D's tour of duty in Vietnam and his spiritual conversion and of drugs and violence in Detroit. The tape recording was made at the respondents' home in Detroit in 1987. Only the fieldworker and respondents were present. The respondents know

sensitive reader. Critical linguistics is, perhaps, the principal area I have in mind here (e.g., Kress and Hodge 1979, Fairclough 1989), although attempts by social psychologists to claim that text and conversation are revealing of language attitudes (e.g., Potter and Wetherell 1987) are equally disappointing in their inability to link structure and content in any principled way.

that C is a linguistics graduate student and that this recording is being made as a part of his study program.)

The full text of the conversation follows; transcription style is roughly that devised by Gail Jefferson (e.g., Schenkein 1978: xi-xvi).

1 C: We uh - linguistics, in this field, uh - from the book I s- I mean, I saw from the book that - many linguists quite interest in uh black English. So could you tell me - a little bit about - your dialect?

2 D: Dialects.

3 C: Heh yeah

4 All: ((laugh))

5 D: [Well, uh: - well - see the world?'s getting smaller.=

6 C: ((laughs)) I- I mea- do you have-

7 D: =There's not - even among all the ethnic groups we're- we're getting- getting less and less of dialectual in- inFLUence. (.hhh) Uh I'm- happen - not to be - from the South, uh: uh u- du- There is a certain aMOUNT of black English that's (.hhh) spoken. There's a certain - certain uh: forms and uh certain idioms that uh uh- blacks use that's indigenous to blacks.

8 C: [Could - could you gi- ((clears throat)) give me some.

9 C: Uh huh.

10 D: Uh: I would say uh, - you know uh-

11 R: 'What's happening.'

12 D: Well that's kind of old. That's a- that's- that's back to=

13 R: [That's old but I ()

14 D: =my my day back in the sixties and I guess the early seventies, (.hhh) 'what's happening,' 'what's going down,,' uh:

15 C: Uh huh.

16 D: Uh 'what's up'? Uh: - 'straight' with uh 'that's straight up,,' uh: (Let's see now)

17 R: 'Hey man.'

18 D: Oh well 'man' is kind of old. It's- it's- it's pretty=

19 A: ['Hey girl.' (girl)

- 20 C: ['Man' is like ver- quite- - very popular=
 21 D: =it's pretty common act=
 22 C: =stil- you know, uh huh.
 23 D: [Still popular, ()
 24 R: [Still popular.
 25 C: [Still popular, yeah, 'man'?=
 26 R: =Yeah.
 27 D: But everybody uses that.=
 28 R: ='Bro.'
 29 D: 'Bro' is another one.
 30 C: [What- could you=
 31 R: ='Bro.'
 32 D: 'Bro.'=
 33 R: For 'brother.'
 34 D: 'Brother.'
 35 C: Oh: 'bro' for 'brother'?=
 36 D: ='Brother.'
 37 C: Oh that's quite interesting. How about 'sister.' Heh-
 38 D: ['Sister,' no
 n- no - ()
 39 C: No.
 40 R: ['Mama.'
 41 A: ()
 42 D: [Uh- 'mama' ()
 43 R: [((laughter))
 44 A: [And 'girl'?=
 45 D: Uh:
 46 C: (Pardon me)

- [
 47 R: 'Mama.'
 48 A: 'Girl,' you always say 'girl.'
 [
 49 R: ()
 50 R: I don't know=I don't know too much - about black di(h)- - well, I don't KNOW.
 [
 51 A: Heheh.
 52 D: We don't know THAT much. We don't- see th- to be- to=
 [
 53 C: Huh.
 54 D: =really KNOW the up - the the uh uh - I guess the the the the sayings that are now - USED, you have to be out - aMONG uh people tha- like uh: You would have to be (.hhh) where uh - =
 [
 55 C: Uh huh. You=
 56 D: =you know sports:, you uh you'd be, that would be it- =
] [
 57 C: =mean you can't pick up. Uh huh.
 58 D: =like if I played basketball: (.hhh) down the street I'd have- I'd have access to a lot (.hhh) of uh the current language that's that's going DOWN. (.hhh) Uh: uh I could under(heheh)=
 [
 59 R: 'That's going do(h)wn.'
 [
 60 C: ((laughs))
 61 D: =differently. Uh then uh - you'd have to uh be- I would have to be in the black CHURCH. That would be another kind of=
 [
 62 C: Uh huh.
 63 D: =good place to- (.hhh) to find the current usage. Uh uh and you'd d- you have to be uh - you kno- involved in a- in a lot of black activities which (.hhh) I don't, I am NOT basically in. I- - mostly into uh: uh uh WORK, going to school, church life, (.hhh) that's pretty much it, and just taking care of my (.hhh) basic family, but I don't have the - social life as such that-=
 [
 64 R: But uh more or less uh
 [
 65 C: Uh huh.

- 66 D: =that- that- it- that you know gives us access to this=
[
- 67 R: Access.
- 68 D: =kind of - kind of language.
[
- 69 R: And then again we weren't brought up
- 70 C: Uh huh.
- 71 D: To use
[
- 72 R: So it's h- it's hard for me to rem- think you know (of) black=
[
- 73 D: Course=
- 74 R: =dialect.
- 75 D: =you did cause your - brothers, your brothers used it quite a bit.
- 76 R: Yeah but that's because they w- well usually when they were with other GUYS. Then they- you know they were in that - and you know enVIRONment, where they could pick it up and use it, and they could still do it, but I CAN'T. I can't - you know just - right off the top of my HEAD: just start talking - black dialect.
[
- 77 A: I can heheh.
[
- 78 R: Maybe SHE can, I don't know.
- 79 C: [[Tell me, tell me. Sh- give me just give me some example.
[
- 80 A: [[() ((laughs)) Why. Well yeah when I- well I was forced to at first when uh I moved up to Detroit, because=
[
- 81 C: Uh huh.
- 82 A: =they would make fun of the way I talked, because I talked proper s-, quote unquote. ((laughs))
[
- 83 D: Quote unquote.
[
- 84 C: ((laughs))
[
- 85 R: ((laughs))

- 86 A: [I wa- ((laughs)) so I
was - just forced to use it.
- 87 C: Uh huh.
- 88 A: So- =
- 89 R: =So say something.
- 90 A: [[No: I don- I can't really say any NOW, cause I'm not=
- 91 C: [[Say something yeah.
- 92 D: [[So () say something.
- 93 A: =among people who speak, it just comes o(hh)ut.
- 94 R: Oh yeah. That's another thing. Sometimes - when like=
[Uh [Uh huh.
- 95 C: Uh Uh huh.
- 96 R: =when we're WITH other blacks we could - do it. ((laughs))
[Oh
- 97 C: you can - you can - uh spontaneous - spontaneous - you c- you=
[]
- 98 A: It just comes out.
[
- 99 D: Yeah you can bounce it off if you want.
[
- 100 R: You can bounce off each=
101 C: =you just begin to talk, right?
[]
- 102 R: =spontaneously bounce it off of each other. - Right.
- 103 A: Yeah. ()
[
- 104 D: But it's not any different- in fact many uh, many
uh so-called blue-eyed soul brothers they- they talk the sam- they
talk the same jive, (.hhh) it's uh - you know it's you know you call=
[]
- 105 R: Sa(h)me ji(h)ve.
[
- 106 C: ((laughs))
- 107 D: =each other 'jive turkeys,' an=
108 C: ='Jahvs'?
- 109 D: 'Jive turkey.'
[
- 110 R: 'Jive turkey.'
111 C: [[(Jiv-)

112 D: [['Turkey' is an old term. (.hhh) You kn- it's in the dictionary, it means 'loser.'

113 C: [['Lo(h)ser.'

114 D: [[And uh 'jive' means 'he's uh pretentious' - uh

[
'He's spiff.'

115 R:

116 A: Oh.

117 C: [[How do you spell, - 'jah'

118 R: [[()

119 D: [((spelling)) 'j- j-i-v-e.'

120 C: Uh huh.

121 D: So it means- 'jive turkey' means a 'pretentious loser.'

122 All: ((laugh))

123 A: [()

124 D: [You know, and in a- you know you- you have a l- all right and you have a: - uh 'da-' 'dag,' 'leg,' 'ganey,' I forget how that goes now.

125 R: What.

126 D: () uh that was one of- uh you know people make up=

127 R: [(Oh ())

128 D: =things and they just keep them. And they sou- and it=

129 R: [] They make up things too.

130 D: =sounds good and then they- uh huh

131 C: [Uh huh.

132 R: [] Yeah, lot of them it's made- made up.

133 D: [It's made up.

134 C: [[()

135 D: [[I find a lot of it sticks.

136 R: [On the spur of the moment too.

137 C: Oh. ((laughs))

138 R: [On the spur of the moment.

139 C: [[Uh huh.

140 D: [[And it- and it- and it- and it sticks. So uh: ()

141 R: [((laughs))

142 C: [So anyway

if you are forced, just like the A- uh=

143 R: =A.=

144 C: =A was forced to talk, you will talk. Yeah.

145 ?: [(Well no-)

146 A: [Well not be forced.

147 R: [Not
necessarily forced.

148 C: [Not nec- not- do you- you just- just oh just fit=

149 A: [(But at times)

150 R: [To fit in.

151 C: =in.

152 A: [[Or to be on the same level, you know.

153 R: [[Like () or something.

154 C: Uh huh.

155 A: To understand on the same level.

156 R: [So you don't- [S- sy- she probably did it, be-
so she wouldn't look - you know - outside of the circle, or=

157 C: [Uh huh.

158 A: [()

159 R: =whatever.

160 C: Uh huh.

161 D: I think the same mechanics work - a- among among uh:=

162 R: [Other folk, other

163 D: =uh uh among blacks is works works in any other - in any=

- 164 R: [Uh huh.
- 165 D: =other uh - microcosm or macrocosm.=If you go to a college (.hhh) college environment you find people (.hhh) using fifty-cent words and thirty-five cent words, whereas (.hhh) if you=
- 166 C: [Huh
- 167 D: =go uh go to some auto plant you're probably going to (.hhh) find mostly uh fifteen and twenty cent words.
- 168 C: Uh huh.=
- 169 D: =So I- I- I don- I don't think th- th- th- th- (.hhh) the mechanism is - that much different, it's just uh - i- it's just that w- wher- wherever you go, if you go to Hamtramck, then probably you're going to find that (.hhh) their language is- i- i- i- is more around their culture.
- 170 C: Uh huh.
- 171 D: [And uh: i- if you go to th- you go to the Italian sector you're going to find that (.hhh) their language is based around their culture, and the- and the same thing with your culture, you'll=
- 172 C: [Uh huh.
- 173 D: =find that the language will be based around your culture.
- 174 C: Uh.=
- 175 D: =It's nothing - it's nothing really y- mysterious about it,=
- 176 C: [((laughs))
- 177 D: =and the i- and what's really what's really surprising's=
- 178 C: [Uh huh
- 179 R: [()
- 180 D: =when you have cross cultures and you have people that come into a- (.hhh) another culture, I'm sure you've seen (.hhh) y- =
- 181 C: [Uh huh.
- 182 D: =seen (.hhh) y- uh you ha- well you've seen- seen uh whites come into your culture, and they pick up your cultural ways.
- 183 C: Uh huh.
- 184 D: And you come into our culture, uh into the the the=

- 185 C: [()]
- 186 D: =American culture, you pick up the American way then.=
- 187 C: [Uh huh.
- 188 D: =(hhh) So you j- it's just uh where we are, that's what we pick up. Even when I was in Vietnam I started acting n- very much=
- 189 C: [((laughs))
- 190 D: =like Vietnamese ().
- 191 C: [Really.
- 192 D: And it's not- it's not weird, but it's- I- I think I think we- we're all people, so I mean it's not - NOT THAT TERRIBLY different.=
- 193 R: [Our environment has a lot to do-
- 194 D: =We'd like to THINK it is, but I don't THINK it IS.
- 195 C: Uh huh.
- 196 R: [[Environment has a lot to do with what- the way you act=
- 197 D: [[()
- 198 A: [[()
- 199 C: [Yeah.
- 200 R: =and the way you react. I believe
- 201 C: [Uh huh.
((pause))
- 202 C: (.hhh)(hhh) Yeah, that's true.
- 203 R: [I think so.

3. The Analysis

Even a casual look at these data establishes a larger textual coherence — this is a conversation about African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) and cultural adaptation to language.

I have depended on the reader's good will in accepting my assertion that this conversation begins where I say it does (at 1C), although there was preceding material. Even if there were not a long pause before 1C (and there is), the presence of *I mean* and *so* in 1C

significantly mark this segment as an important boundary. *So* marks main as opposed to subordinate ideas in discourse (Schiffrrin 1987: 191), and C employs it as his signal to getting down to the major business of 1C — requesting information about AAVE. Since *so* is also a marker of result (Schiffrrin 1985), however, C's request may be seen as not only the main part of the request in 1C but also the result of the extensive repairs of 1C (see below).

More importantly, however, and in keeping with this study's main promise to relate conversational structure to content, it is clear that the considerable use of discourse markers, repairs, and justifications in 1C announces (at least from C's point of view) the sensitivity of this topic. It is not simply introduced (as it might have been — "Hey, since you guys are Black, why don't you tell me a little bit about Black English").² *I mean* is a marker which often asks hearers to focus carefully so as to interpret the speaker's meaning correctly (Schiffrrin 1987:310), and C's reframing of the source of his interest in AAVE is considerable (after he is undoubtedly immediately aware of the distance that *We* [as linguists] establishes between him and his respondents): *We* is altered to *linguistics*, and depersonalized as a *field*, itself further altered to one whose information C has from a *book*, which finally contains the information that *many linguists are interested* — a pretty thorough "depersonalizing."

In short, the packing in here of such interactional commonplaces as hesitation, repair (or false starts), discourse markers, and repetition all point to C's rapid reframing, most generally accomplished through a refooting of his own identity. He strives to remain on a personal footing with his respondents (after his disastrously exclusive *We*) by attributing the source of his request to *linguistics* (and his knowledge of it to a *book*). Of course, all this reframing (and refooting) could be simply interpreted as an example of discourse patterning, but that would seem to miss its obvious

² At the time this conversation was recorded, AAVE was referred to by most professional linguists as "Black English."

relation to the topic (or, at least, C's evaluation of the topic at this conversational moment). AAVE (like other race-related issues) is a sensitive topic, and C's conversational introduction of it, involving the unusual variety of interactional devices seen here, is surely an indication of his awareness of that sensitivity.

Perhaps a beginning plan for a content-oriented discourse analysis might be formulated as follows:

We believe that at this stage — a sort of infant stage in the study of text and discourse in general and perhaps an almost prenatal one for the study of the relationship between content and form — the best way to proceed is to look for patterns of established textual elements (that is, linguistic forms) which are not behaving normally (although, of course, one may discover that just such patterning is the norm for the special sort of text under investigation). (Kleiner and Preston 1997:109)

In short, the unusual array of interactional devices in 1C begs for an interpretation of its content motivation. Its form (heavily marked by justification and by such units as *I mean*, repetition, and false starts) patterns with the social sensitivity to a racial topic, one in this case even personally-framed (*your dialect*). C's elaborate discursal performance is appropriate to that sensitivity.

A higher-level interactive description of the structure of the first part of this conversation may be based on C's failure to follow the sequence outlined in the *procedural problem maxim* (Churchill 1978:115):

- A1 Makes request in question form.
- B1 Announces a procedural problem.
- A2 Repairs procedural problem.
- B2 Responds to request in A1.

3C, however, repairs a much simpler procedural problem than the one announced in 2D. D's *Dialects* (especially when its intonational characteristics, which, unfortunately, cannot be reproduced here, are taken into consideration) calls into question basic presuppositions

behind the request at 1C (Do dialects even exist in the modern world? Is there such a thing as Black English? If there is, why do you think I — and my family — speak it?; see Preston 1993 and 1994), but C's repair (*yeah* at 3C) suggests only that D has misheard *Dialect* and seeks clarification of the word. The elaboration at 5D is, therefore, not a response to 1C, because 3C is not a repair of the procedural problem raised at 2D. Although 6C (*I- I mea- do you have-*) is apparently an attempt by C to resolve the procedural problem,³ it comes too late; D begins his own repair (at 5D), and the paradigm structure for procedural repair is not precisely matched.

Again, then, unusual interactional behavior (the failure of a procedural repair pattern) suggests a more careful look at the content which may be related to such discursual disarray. One need not seek far. C is immediately aware of D's difficulty with his request (2 d — *Dialects*), but his "pretense" (*yeah* at 3C) allows him to avoid responsibility (however briefly) for any of the negative interpretations which can be given to his request (which D spells out in his next turn and I have briefly outlined above). That "pretense" avoidance is surely recognized by all and is, no doubt, one of the sources of laughter at 4.

Even before D's repair in 7D is completed, however, C indicates that he agrees with it (or agrees to operate within its redefinition), for he reframes his request to one which simply asks for examples of AAVE but does not suggest that his respondents are speakers of it, and 11R (and perhaps 10D) complies with that revised request.

From a simpler interactional point of view (which overlooks the fact that the request in 1C was modified — perhaps at 6C and certainly at 8C — and not simply clarified), this first large segment might be seen as an elaborate side-sequence. 1C makes a request for

³ C's attempt at 6C to modify his first request shows his sensitivity to the fact that something has gone wrong. This is especially likely since time was spent in the fieldworker training sessions indicating that some technical words (*dialect* among them) have negative senses in the nonspecialist community.

information about AAVE, and everything from there to 10D (or 11R, whichever is the first compliance with the request) is a side sequence taken up with clarification and modification of the request.

If this interpretation is also valid (and I think it is), then there is another connection between the form of these opening moves and the content. Side-sequences commonly involve clarification (A: What time is it? B: Where are we? A: Over Budapest. B: Then it's 3:00 AM.), and D's desire to clarify the status and existence of AAVE (and his and his own family's relationship to it) are the focus of this "large" side sequence. In fact, one might argue that side-sequences are (at least) one of the turn-oriented manifestations of a so-called procedural repair problem. It is appropriate, however, to the content it embodies not only on the basis of the sensitivity of the topic but also with regard to D's desire to make sure that C understands the provenience and status of AAVE and his (and his family's) lack of competence in it. At least the following can be understood from D's initiating move of this larger side-sequence (5D - 7D):

1) We (I and my family) will have trouble responding to your question about Black English dialect since, due to modern communication and travel, dialects hardly exist.

2) They may exist in some out-of-the-way places (e.g., the US South), but, since we are not from there, we will still have little to say about AAVE (as a dialect).

3) There may be some slang words or expressions which are unique to African-American usage (even outside the South), but that would not constitute a "dialect".

It is possible to identify some attempts to clarify (as in side-sequences) as unusual or dispreferred occurrences in discourse and, in this case, to relate the one here to D's desire to clear up the status (general and personal) of this sensitive topic. For folk linguistics, what is learned about D's beliefs about and attitudes towards dialects and AAVE is all the more valuable, for it has been gleaned from a natural, conversational setting in which such beliefs and attitudes are instantiated in actual use rather than elicited through

(however cleverly designed) experimental procedures (with all their attendant problems). The viability of a content-oriented discourse analysis within an interactional framework is the focus here, not the findings themselves, however tempted I may be to comment on them.

Although there is perhaps even more to be said about the opening sequence, R's example (11R) and D's objection (12D) to it establish the dominant interactional pattern of the next part of this conversation:

offer (of an AAVE example, e.g., 11R)
rejection (of the *offer*, e.g., 12D)

Rejections are usually followed by *justifications* (e.g., 12-14D), themselves sometimes followed by *rebuttals* (e.g., 13R, 20-22C). That pattern continues here until, at 48A, an *offer* contains personal comment.

D apparently doubts the authenticity of 11R, and he begins his complaint with the marker *well*. *Well* may signal disagreement in general (e.g., Pomerantz 1984; but see Stubbs 1983: 69), and it is clear that D wants to show that 11R is not an appropriate answer to C's request for an example of AAVE. More importantly, D's *well* marks his dissatisfaction with the conversational coherence which is emerging. Although Schiffrin does not discuss *well* in the position it has here (introducing a dispute, e.g., Preston 1993, 1994), her characterization of its larger framework of use is apt: "*well* anchors the speaker into a conversation precisely at those points where upcoming coherence is not guaranteed" (Schiffrin 1987:126). From a purely local point of view, it might be a small courtesy to let R get by with an example D does not completely approve of, but if I am correct that he is worried throughout that others presuppose African-American distinctiveness when such an assumption is unwarranted, then he may object to this item on the grounds that it supports just such distinctiveness when it should not. That is, although *What's happening* might have been introduced by

African-Americans, it is *old*, and presumably wide-spread. Local coherence is certainly not threatened by offering an example which is not completely satisfactory, but D may fear that later moves in the conversation will break down (i.e., become incoherent) unless this example is challenged. Schiffrin's claim, therefore, that *well* serves nonlocal as well as local objections to coherence breakdown is justified in this example.

Of course, it is possible to suggest an even more specific (relatively short-range) objection that D may have to these examples. Recall that one of his early justifications for the nonexistence of dialects is that the world is *getting smaller*, an obvious reference to communication and transportation. If *old* AAVE examples are acceptable, then this justification is challengeable on the grounds that they did not "travel" quickly. By noting that such phrases as those offered are *old*, D asserts (correctly, by the way) that the putative AAVE expressions offered by R have, in fact, moved well outside AAVE by the time this conversation was recorded.

In short, the consistent pattern of this section (offer and rejection) is yet another one which indicates problem in interaction, and it even more clearly establishes that D's overarching goal is to make sure that C understands AAVE (and African-Americans) properly (i.e., in the terms he outlines in the first segment of the conversation).

The next example of conversational unusualness which points to the details of the content has to do with A's inability to get a turn. As far back as 19A, A has tried the example *girl*, but it has been ignored. R proposes *bro* at 28R, and in 40R when she proposes *mama*, D's repetition of it at 42D has a sarcastic edge to it. He cannot object to *mama* as another more widely-distributed item, for it is much more distinctly African-American, particularly at the time this conversation was recorded. My suggestion is that R and A, by providing more and more authentically AAVE items, are undermining the stance implied by D in 7D, where he indicates that he (and his family) are not knowledgeable about AAVE. This undermining is probably unintentional on R's part, and her rebuttals

simply attempt to overcome D's objections (e.g., in 12D and 18D) that her examples are *old*.

In this brief stretch where A's suggestions are ignored, then, the conversational trouble (A's failure to get a turn) points directly to D's (and R's?) concern that C understand that they are not proficient in AAVE, a stance which could be undermined by A's production of authentic *forms* and *idioms*. Interactional form and content are in a nice harmony again.

By 48A, however, the even more unmistakably African-American item *girl* is not just cited by A but attributed to R. This *accusation* finally brings example-giving (and the ignoring of A's offerings) to a halt and introduces a new interactional section, in which the limitations of D, R, and A as AAVE speakers are more directly addressed. In short, the *offer* (complying with C's request for AAVE examples) followed by *rejection* (with ensuing complex activity) is supplanted by *accusation* followed by *denial*. Since 48A both offers an AAVE example and accuses R of being an AAVE speaker, it is a transitional element, serving as an *offer* in the preceding section and as an *accusation* in the next.

Since 48A is another offer (*girl*) of an AAVE item, the first part of R's following comment (*I don't know*) might appear to question the authenticity of the example. That interpretation is weak, however, for the tone of her dispute (and what follows) shows that, as I have claimed, R takes 48A as an accusation that she (R) is a qualified AAVE speaker. This more reasonable interpretation is strengthened by R's use of *well* in her 50R response. Like D (in 12D), she is objecting to a larger overall incoherence. In this case, she fears that her being identified as an AAVE speaker will lead to such incoherence, for she feels she is not so qualified (or wants to appear to be not so qualified).

The body of what follows is best viewed as an extended justification of R's denial at 50R. D and R describe their own limited facility in AAVE (and how it may be learned generally). D notes his lack of participation in the sorts of activities which would engender it, and R observes that they weren't brought up in the right

environment. This extended justification is another example of a good discursual fit to the topic. In this case, it is clear that D (and R?) are insistent that they lack AAVE proficiency; that an extended justification is unusual in discourse is surely obvious since it has even folk recognition ("Methinks the lady doth protest too much"), however literary the line may have been in its origin (Hamlet III, ii, 242).

When D challenges the notion that the entire family is AAVE-free by claiming that R's brothers were proficient users (73-75D), he creates the possibility for another *accusation--denial* pattern, and R indeed denies his accusation (76R), noting that, although her brothers were proficient AAVE users (at least if the environment was right), she is no good at it herself. Immediately after this, however, A breaks the *accusation-denial-justification* pattern by claiming that she is a proficient user (at 77A), triggering requests by eventually all the other participants for her to provide examples (79C, 89R, 91C, 92D).

Although A claims to know AAVE, C is at first unsuccessful in redirecting the conversation to examples (79C), for A has not yet clarified her status as an AAVE speaker in a way which will satisfy the earlier characterizations of the family's unfamiliarity with AAVE (which, after all, has been the main content of the preceding section). Only after A notes that she was forced to learn AAVE at 80A do D (at 92D) and R (at 89R) join in asking her for examples.

But the requests which follow A's claim of competence at the beginning of this next section at first meet the same fate as C1. What ensues is in large part an extended explanation of why A cannot comply with requests to supply examples of AAVE. This extended explanation, however, has already been foreshadowed in 76R, where R, denying D's claim (75D) that she is good at AAVE, notes that she can't speak *AAVE right off the top of my HEAD*. Unlike the beginning of this conversation, however, the explanation of why this request cannot be fulfilled is debilitating here, for it does not allow a reworking of the request.

The opening move of this segment, then, contains a claim (77A) which implies (certainly to C) an *offer*, which leads to *requests* (e.g., 79C, 89R), followed by a denial (90A) and an extended *justification*, this last participated in by all the respondents.

A's assertion that she can speak AAVE is marked with *heheh*. Schenkein (1972) suggests that, in addition to a variety of subtle interactional duties, *heheh* serves primarily to mark a second turn's recognition of the nonseriousness of a preceding turn or a first turn's signaling of its own nonseriousness (371). A certainly does not mean to regard 76R as nonserious, so we must seek for that meaning in her own contribution. *Heheh* marks A's knowledge that the baldness of her assertion will be challenged. After all, D has already maintained that the family knows very little about AAVE, and R has specifically disclaimed such knowledge. A, it turns out, will show that she was forced to learn, and, although it is not clear at this point that it is a related fact, that she cannot perform unless in the proper environment. *Heheh*, therefore, marks her assertion as an exaggeration, perhaps even a tease, knowing that C will be delighted to hear that she can speak AAVE but knowing as well that she will have to refuse any requests to perform.

Note that one may claim that the local topic is identified here (i.e., at 88A) by the *so*, for, even though 88A is interrupted, there is little doubt that A might have returned to a main idea there. That is, she has shown that she knows AAVE by virtue of being forced to learn it since her peers made fun of her for talking *proper*. Both *make fun* and *talk proper* (82A) are marked with *because*, and this overt marking of minor concerns contrasts sharply with the *so* A uses at 88A. This marking for main idea status, however, does not reduce another function of *so*, namely, the resultative. It is still clear that A wants her hearers to understand that she speaks AAVE because she was forced to, and that firmly relates her 88A to what has come before.

This resultative function of *so* may be strong enough to at least partially overcome its status as a marker of major concerns. The *so*'s of 89R and 92D, which preface requests for A to perform, are more

exclusively markers of result: if A can speak AAVE, then she should be willing to do it. In terms of background and developing information available to the participants, this may be an example of what Schiffrin calls the inferential use of *so*, but she does not deal with it specifically in conjunction with requests (1987: 207). Even if A's *so* at 88A is not resultative, it marks a return to the main idea of the section which opened this segment at 77A.

The discussion of the environmental issue of AAVE performance is strongly marked as concluded by the agreement signals *right* (102R) and *yeah* (103A), which clearly relate to previous matter, and the *but* which begins 104D would seem to indicate a transition.

In summary, this entire section is marked with the dispreferred conversational activity of requests followed by denials — nearly everyone's request for A to speak AAVE and her (and her parents') justifications of her refusals to do so. The extensiveness of this pattern points to the seriousness of the activity going on here — the family's concern that C appreciate the etiology of A's abilities in AAVE.

The *but* of 104D might serve as a nondisruptive continuity marker, but the larger topic of language and the environment which D is about to address provides sufficient evidence that *but* functions here to paraphrase or re-phrase prior (nonadjacent) concerns which are triggered by adjacent ones (Schiffrin 1987: 164). In fact, it is essential to see the *but* of 104D as referring to a prior, larger concern if it is to be properly interpreted in this context.

Imagine that *but* simply suggests a contrasting element to a locally prior element. 98A through 103A have characterized the environmental requirement for AAVE performance as something which allows speakers to *bounce it off of each other*, and these comments hardly seem to provide the notion which D wants to contrast in 104D. If we look back a little farther, however, we see that R has suggested that *when we're WITH other blacks we could — do it*. It is perhaps this suggestion, that African Americans are the participants in this environmentally sensitive language performance,

which has awakened D's objection. Although he has not explicitly stated his position yet, this *but* refers, I believe, to D's more general concern with language and adaptation to the environment (particularly with his objection to the notion that there is anything ethnically exclusive about such adaptation) and not to any specific contrast with what has immediately come before. Referring to that larger concern is dramatic enough to warrant identifying 104D as the beginning of a new topical section, and I rely on *but* as a marker of reference to a nonlocal concern as part of the evidence for that. In short, a contrastive marker (signaling some sort of dispute) tells us that an alternative approach to topical material is about to be taken.

The transition to the part which actually ensues, however, is abruptly provided by R's interruption of 104D, almost certainly fueled by D's earlier implication (at 75D) and A's accusation (at 48A) that R is a proficient AAVE speaker. All this has contributed to a developing game between R and D. As early as 59R, R has caught D embedding AAVE (or, at least, such colloquial items that one could be sure that C might not understand it) in his ongoing talk and has let him know (through laughter) that she has noticed it. He ignores her there, but when she catches him a second time at 105R (by noting that he has said *jive* at 104D), he abruptly changes from his discussion of the environmental appropriateness of language variety and begins (with R's help) to construct a definition of *jive turkey*. The embedding of an AAVE (or slang) item unintelligible to C opens a new section of examples.

The interactional characteristic which signals the end of the aborted segment is not, therefore, simply interruption, for D has been interrupted at a particularly interesting point. His justification for A's inability to provide AAVE examples was being used as a transitional vehicle to return to the larger issues which he has had in mind since the very beginning of the conversation.

That potential is not realized, however, and I must comment on the successful next segment. Since *example-giving* and *glossing* are the principal structural components of this part, we might gloss over it, but that interactional pattern is, however, very different from the

second large segment discussed above, for the respondents agree on the activity here — glossing unfamiliar items rather than disagreeing about their validity as examples of AAVE. The interactional pattern *offer* (of an example)-*request for clarification-compliance* is characteristic of this part. That D's first offer (*jive*) is an inadvertent contribution to this pattern (and fraught with other complex matters) should not deter us from placing it in this segment.

That a new topical section begins here is also supported by the use of discourse markers.

- 104D: they
 talk the same jive, (.hhh) it's uh - you know it's you know you call=
 []
- 105 R: Sa(h)me ji(h)ve.
- 106 C: [
((laughs))
- 107 D: =each other 'jive turkeys,' an=

After R (at 105R) has caught D using *jive*, he signals a shift in direction with two examples of *you know*. His slip has cost him the chance of opening the more interesting part he had in mind, and he will have to deal with his lexical difficulty. *You know* points to the presumed common knowledge of the phrase *jive turkeys* (Schiffrin 1987: 274ff), and we may assume that it is R (who has interrupted him) and perhaps A whom D supposes have this knowledge, for he surely knows C well enough to suspect that the words are outside his competence. In short, although D may admit to the fact that *jive* was ill-chosen for use (considering C's presence), he recovers quickly in establishing a new section which will show that it is not an inappropriate item for mention, and he appeals to R (and A) by suggesting that the phrase is a part of their common knowledge.

Interestingly, this is the first section of the conversation so far in which there is no trouble. Although trouble brought it about (R's delight in catching D using a form which is either AAVE or one C will not understand, or both), it devolves into a nonproblematic, information-giving section (typically more monologic, with the

exception of back-channels), and, as such, does little to buttress our knowledge of the topic itself if the claim that unusual discourse patterns help us find our way into topic meaningfulness more easily is true.

D inadvertently helps bring about the close of this interruptive part by introducing (at 124D) examples which are even more exotic — *dag*, *leg*, and *ganey*. R's response (What at 125R) may remind D that these are not examples he would like to gloss (for they are taboo and probably reflect D's Vietnam days). Whatever the case, D cooperates in the transition at 126D as he initiates a new (but related) topic concerning the creativity of slang items.

The transition here, however, is more complex, for R has not, as she has done earlier, caught D using items which only C cannot understand. After all, that has been the point of the section just concluded (to gloss such items). Her *What?* (at 125R) is apparently not mocking; it is an honest request for clarification. The pattern, however, has been for the respondents to provide examples and the fieldworker to request clarification (in keeping with the general assignment of expertise). I suggest, therefore, that this segment ends not because the interactional pattern is different but because the role played by the participants in the interactional structure shifts so dramatically: R replaces C in seeking clarification. From its interactional pattern, therefore, we may say that the pair 124D - 125R belongs to the earlier part, but, since R is the participant who uncharacteristically seeks clarification, I identify this role shift as a triggering agent in the transition to the next. The first part of 126D (() *uh that was one of- uh*) is still consistent with the earlier pattern, for it would seem to be leading up to D's explanation of the examples he offered in 124D. Instead, he does not continue with the expected gloss and introduces the interactional pattern of the next part midway through 126D (*you know people make up things*).

An alternative interactional analysis, however, might identify the beginning of this segment as a re-emergence of a much earlier pattern: an example is proposed (124D) and objected to (125R), although, in this case, the examples are objected to on the basis of

their comprehensibility (or decorum) — not on the basis of their authenticity as examples of AAVE. Since this pattern does not lead to the interactional activity which follows, I think it less likely.

On the other hand, 124D begins with considerable repetition of markers: *You know, and in a- you know you- you have a l- all right and you have a: - uh...* . Perhaps D is initiating the next part in which slang items in general will be commented on rather than glossed and is marking the transition by providing a series of exotic items. Can the markers used here (*you know, and, all right*) help establish a claim that 124D begins the next topical segment?

And seems to serve here principally as a marker of the speaker's desire to continue to hold the floor rather than as an indication of a new or continuing idea or topic. 124D overlaps both general laughter and an unintelligible contribution of A's (123A), and the rhythm is insistent. Such a management function would not seem to point to a new part.⁴

All right might suggest that the hesitation and searching in 124D is about to be resolved, but it could as well precede (i.e., introduce) information, so I cannot use it to reliably indicate continuity or break.

You know, however, in this case has the intonational pattern (falling) which suggests it serves to introduce some sort of general truth. It does not seek any listener's confirmation that the list of exotic items is shared information (and R's response shows even more certainly that that is not the case). This use of *you know* makes it more likely that the list of examples D provides at 124D are not meant to be questioned or are not offered as more examples suitable for glossing. Perhaps as early as 124D, then, D is offering a transition list of items which leads to his more general comments on creativity and preservation (126, 128, 130D). On the other hand, the

⁴ I do not mean to suggest that *and* has only this management function or even principally a linking or connecting function in "ideational" structure. When it marks contrast and/or boundary, however, it seems to do so in concert with other markers (Schiffrin 1987: 128ff).

previous interpretations are substantiated by a *you know* placed immediately before the first of these general comments in 126D, and I shall not make too strong a claim for the alternative interpretation based only on the earlier presence of this marker.

Wherever it begins, the interactional structure of this next section is strikingly different from that of any earlier part; it is limited to four assertions about slang lexical items (beginning at 126D): 1) they are made up, 2) they sound good, 3) they last, and 4) they arise on the spur of the moment. The topical movement into this section is not strange since the focus has been on slang items, but the transition, resulting as it apparently does from D's list of exotic items, is unusual and may indicate a topic shift based on topic avoidance (i.e., D's realization that he should not gloss *dag*, and so on in the present environment).

Another level of interactional analysis reveals that a prominent feature of this segment is repetition, perhaps here symbolizing the extensive agreement. I regret not taking up in more detail the doubtless polyfunctional status of self- and other-repetition, not only in this part, where it is so prominent, but in the conversation as a whole. Tannen 1989 (especially chapter 3) is an extensive account of the occurrence, structure, and function of repetition.

The *so* near the end of 140D would appear to announce a conclusion to the section on slang, and, perhaps, signal the speaker's willingness to relinquish his turn (Schiffrin 1987: 218). The same marker at the beginning of 142C, the beginning of the next part, is more dramatic and illustrates the use of *so* for topic as well as turn transition; it surely represents, for C, the return of the conversation to some more central theme.

In one sense, the topic movement here is superficially easy to account for — C simply interrupts at 142C by asking if AAVE use (at least for these respondents) is the result of force. That specific content, however, is already well prepared for in A's characterization of why she learned what AAVE she does know (at 80A, 82A, and 86A). C returns to this notion and triggers the discussion here of fitting in. The transition seems more abrupt than it actually is,

however, since R and A so strongly disagree with C's characterization of forced. It is likely, however, that C's construction (perhaps the result of his non-native speaker status) at 142-144C triggers a stronger reaction than he intended. His exact words are *So anyway if you are forced, just like the A- uh [R supplies A's name, which C stumbles over] A was forced to talk, you will talk*. What is missing from this construction is a mitigating or softening device. It appears that C baldly states that if D and R are forced to use AAVE, they *will speak*. Perhaps if C had used *might* or *would* rather than *will*, it might have better allowed the social or adaptive interpretation of *force* rather than the literal one which his interlocutors appear to believe he intends. On the other hand, perhaps the native speakers are not willing to allow this metaphoric use of force in a non-native speaker, although they have no difficulty using it that way themselves. Such lack of acceptance of typically non-native metaphoric, casual, folk, or taboo speech is common among native speakers (Preston 1989:81-82).

Whatever the source of their strong reaction to C's use of *force*, the respondents obviously agree on the importance of social adaptation. By their insisting that the *force* A spoke of in her need to learn AAVE was not literal, the respondents reflect the specific need for social contact outside the family, a tendency noted particularly for African-American communities:

... even the strongest of family people acknowledge, openly or by implication, that both friendship and license are important for the continuing vitality of the group. This is why such value is placed on "keeping company" and why social pressure is often brought on the shy ... person and the loner ... , who are distrusted because of their lack of sociability. (Abrahams 1972: 221)

This is all the more striking, of course, since much of what goes on in this conversation might be seen as the respondents' denial of African-American cultural norms (e.g., 63D).

This transition, however, also involves a redirection at the level of goals and objectives for the participants, for it reveals a reversal.

At first, since his respondents will not simply engage in talk about their dialect, C has jumped on D's suggestion in 7D that there are African-American forms and idioms as the key to his approach to this interview (e.g., at 8C, 37C, 79C, and 91C). His respondents, although they have cooperated from time to time, have been more concerned with characterizing AAVE in its social context and their relationship to it. C has now realized that those discussions are far more valuable to his interests than simple example-giving, and, when D's inadvertent use of *jive* sets off examples and subsequent explanation, C is eager to return the conversation to its earlier topic — the explanation of why examples couldn't be given due to the environment and related issues. This segment may be seen as instigated by C's attempt to move the conversation back to this more productive discussion of attitudes to AAVE, a *redirect* rather than an *interruption* per se.

The interactional pattern here has exactly the same structure as an earlier one: C makes a claim which is interpreted as an *accusation* (although the scope of those accused is surely broader), and R and A rush to provide a *denial* of it, appending justifying and explanatory remarks. These amplifications, however, provide the setting for D to attempt a return to the more general topic of the relationship between language and culture, a shift he tried earlier (at 104D) after a similar extensive explanatory section but failed to accomplish due to his *jive* slip.

The transition to the last segment is finally a good example of the topic shading that D had tried at 104D; he makes a more general claim (161D) about the adjustment of language to culture which follows directly from the discussion of A's fitting in by learning AAVE. Interactionally this entire final section is made up of *claims* and *acceptances*, a striking contrast to the main interactional structure of the previous part in which a *claim* was seen as an *accusation* and followed by a *denial*. This is especially noteworthy from the point of view of expertise since it is the fieldworker's claim which is seen as an accusation (and strongly denied) and the principal respondent's claim which is universally supported.

D's point at 161D is that fitting in (or linguistic adaptation) is not uniquely African-American. Since everyone agrees (197C through the end), there is little more to be said, and the conversation ends, convincingly enough for the fieldworker to turn off the tape recorder, even though no reference is made to time or appointments (and the fieldworker reported that further, casual conversation ensued).

Finally, the beginning of this last section is marked by D's *I think* (at 161D). Although it is possible for *I think* to be a relatively innocuous marker of opinion (a sort of hedge), D does not appear to use it that way. In earlier statements which he may have wanted to soften, his preferred form is *I guess* (14D, 54D). As he begins to refer through various examples to his principal concern, he turns to the agreement-seeking *you know*. Now that he has reached the point where he will overtly refer to the universality of the adjustment of language and culture, he uses *I think* and repeats it (or modifications of it) several times throughout this final part (169D, 192D, 194D). Both repetition and positioning make me believe that *I think* is here being used as a strong marker of belief rather than as a softener.

I have no doubt that many interactionally oriented conversational analysts will find the above hopelessly underanalyzed, and I agree that a great deal more juice might be squeezed out of every segment.⁵ My purpose, however, has been to show how principally interactional characteristics, especially those which signal dispreferred structural patterns, are very good indications of the interlocutors' beliefs about and attitudes towards the topic at hand.

We might simply say that reading the conversational data would have supplied any intelligent reader with the information that D and to a certain extent the rest of his family want to impress C with a

⁵ In defense of this underanalysis, I might point out that I have written about other discursual and textual approaches to this conversation elsewhere, touching on reference tracking, discourse markers, pronominal use, argument structure, and point of view (Preston 1993, 1994).

certain vision of their family, their relation to AAVE, and general concerns about ethnicity and adaptation to the environment. I do not agree, however, that the sort of understanding that this closer, interactional analysis has provided could have been achieved by any such undisciplined reading. In the sort carried out here (and in other modes of conversation analysis made available to modern scholars) we may find the actual embedding of belief and attitude in the ongoing construction of conversational reality. Our understanding of the content is richly enhanced by such an investigation, and I am, for one, frankly surprised that greater attention to conversational detail has not surfaced in other reports on what people have to say as well as how they say it.

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