



Analysing Conversation

An Introduction to Prosody

Beatrice Szczepk Reed



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First published 2011 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978-0-230-22344-8 hardback
ISBN 978-0-230-22345-5 paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

ANALYSING CONVERSATION

Also by Beatrice Szczepk Reed

PROSODIC ORIENTATION IN ENGLISH CONVERSATION

*This book is dedicated to
Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen*

Acknowledgements

In the writing of this book I am greatly indebted to Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen, whose passionate and meticulous study of prosody first inspired me to take up the subject, and whose work I have admired ever since. Furthermore, I would like to express my sincerest thanks to Rebecca Hughes for numerous inspiring conversations about spoken language, and for very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this book.

Very special thanks also to my students, particularly those whose first language is not English, as their insightful comments and questions have inspired me greatly in thinking through many issues concerning the prosody of English conversation.

For their kind support and efficient handling of the entire publishing process I warmly thank Kitty van Boxel and Felicity Noble at Palgrave Macmillan.

For his continuous patience and encouragement in the writing of this book I am deeply grateful to my husband Darren Reed.

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Preliminaries

1


This book is concerned with the prosody of naturally occurring conversation. It explores the ways in which participants in everyday talk use and interpret the 'musical' aspects of speech, that is, pitch, timing, loudness and voice quality, as part of social interaction. This book is not an introduction to phonetics or phonology, although it does make use of some phonetic concepts to describe prosodic phenomena. My central aim is to introduce the non-expert reader to the analysis of the prosody of spontaneous talk. All descriptions, definitions and analyses are presented in combination with examples from everyday conversations. In following this approach I treat prosody as an integral part of human interaction, and interaction as a collaborative achievement by interactants themselves. This perspective on language has been developed by researchers in the fields known as conversation analysis (CA) and interactional linguistics, and the approach to language study adopted here is a conversation analytic/interactional linguistic one.

During the second half of the 20th century, a way of investigating language emerged that took an entirely new perspective on language itself and its role for human communication. From the mid-1960s, the sociologists Harvey Sacks and Emanuel A. Schegloff were among the first to suggest that the primary habitat of language is natural conversation. This position was, and still is, in stark contrast to traditional enquiry into language in the field of linguistics, whose typical object of study is language as a primarily cognitive and monological activity. Sacks and Schegloff postulated that all aspects of interaction, including all features of language, must be studied in the context of their occurrence and from the perspective of the conversational participants themselves. Analytical claims and interpretations regarding any part of human interaction must be based entirely on evidence that shows their reality for those interacting with one another. Again, this marked a significant change from conventional linguistic investigation, where language is typically either studied in isolation from its speakers and from natural contexts, or where language production is experimentally elicited and controlled.

This new approach soon found its way from sociology into linguistics and established itself as 'interactional linguistics'. Students of language in this area

adopted the view that language must be analysed as a human activity, rather than a theoretical system of rules, and interactional linguists began exploring many different aspects of language in this new light. Previously unquestioned linguistic categories were investigated for their relevance for conversational participants themselves; some survived this ‘reality check’, others did not. Alongside the field of syntax, the fields of phonetics and phonology became a particularly fruitful area of interactional linguistic investigation. From the mid-1980s onwards, groundbreaking research by phonologists such as Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen, Margret Selting and John Local brought to light the crucial role played by prosody for natural conversation. While it could be shown that participants orient to prosodic patterns as relevant for a variety of conversational activities, prosody as such emerged as integral to all aspects of spontaneous spoken interaction.

This book introduces the most relevant analytical tools and concepts for a prosodic analysis of naturally occurring talk. For this purpose, the present chapter gives an overview of the most relevant terminology and analytical practice regarding both the analysis of conversation and of prosody. Subsequently, some of the most central findings in recent research on prosody are presented and the transcription system used in this book is introduced. The final section contains an outline of the chapters in the rest of the book.

All examples used in this book can be found on the accompanying website (www.palgrave.com/language/analysingconversation). Each time the headphone icon  appears next to a transcript, the sound file can be listened to on the website. I cannot recommend strongly enough that readers should make use of the opportunity to listen to the extracts, rather than simply read the transcripts, as the prosodic features described here only really come to life when they are heard. As this book takes seriously the importance of working with naturally occurring discourse, the data extracts take centre stage in almost every part of the book.

1.1 Analysing natural conversation

In many areas of linguistics the study of language typically involves isolating areas such as sounds, meaning or grammar and developing theories that are based on internal rules within these areas. Those rules are established through linguists’ theoretical considerations and based on constructed examples. Language in this tradition is treated as a formal system with laws of its own and is often investigated independently of its use in natural contexts. In contrast, for conversation analysis and interactional linguistics it is precisely the real life uses of language that are of interest: language is considered a repertoire of resources for human interaction, and conversation analytic research shows that the employment of those resources is highly ordered. In contrast to the formal analysis typical of theoretical linguistics, practitioners of conversation analysis use a normative approach. They generally do not speak of ‘rules’, but of the normative orderliness of social interaction. For example, one action, such as a first greeting, may make a next action, such as a return greeting, relevant or expectable. However, those expectations are not rules in any strict sense: we

may find them broken by participants themselves, leading to inferences and interactional strategies dealing with the noticeable deviation from an expectable pattern. A next participant may not offer a return greeting, but ask a question instead. In conversation analysis, this would not be considered a ‘mistake’, but an insight into how this participant interprets the interaction at hand; in this case, his or her next action may show that he or she did not interpret the prior utterance as a greeting. We should therefore not think of the organisation of conversation as rule governed, but as normatively ordered – with conversationalists themselves acting out this order at any given moment in time.

Participants employ a shared repertoire of routine conversational practices, some of which seem to be universal, while others depend on the individual ethnic, cultural and/or social group a speaker belongs to. Typically, these practices are accomplished in the form of ‘turns’, that is participants’ contributions to conversations; ‘turn constructional units’ (TCUs), that is utterances which could potentially be complete turns; or their building blocks (‘intonation phrases’, see Chapter 3; or ‘turn constructional phrases’ (TCPs), see Szczepiek Reed (2010a, 2010c)). Discovering this repertoire of conversational practices is one of the main aims in interactional linguistics and conversation analysis. And while we can observe participants using many well-known linguistic units, such as sounds, noun phrases or sentences, in their talk, thinking of these as fixed linguistic categories is not necessarily the best way forward in exploring language in interaction. Instead, thinking of them initially simply as conversational practices will allow us as analysts to free our mind from any preconceptions and investigate what is treated as interactionally relevant by participants themselves. See, for example, the utterance *can I say something* at line 12 in Extract 1.1.

Extract 1.1 SBC033 Guilt

- “ 1 Leann: Apropos something [JENnifer said in MAY;
 2 Laura: [well WAIT -
 3 you know [liz-
 4 Don: [MA,
 5 [you HAVE to hear this;
 6 Leann: [<< falsetto+f> WAIT WAIT - >
 7 Jenn: WHAT -
 8 Bill: [<<f> will you let leann FINish;>
 9 Jenn: [did i -
 10 Leann: [<< falsetto+f> WAIT -
 11 ↑TIME; >
 12 <<falsetto> **can i SAY sOomething** - >
 13 (0.42)
 14 JENnifer and I and dana;
 15 had a HU::GE Argument in mAY;
 16 which creAted a RIFT;
 17 for about a DAY. ”