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Conversation: From Description to Pedagogy

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Introduction

Casual conversation is a fundamental human activity, and one in which most of us engage many times a day. It may take the form of small talk about the weather at the supermarket check-out, or gossip about colleagues around the office coffee machine, or an extended phone conversation with a close friend about the meaning of life. Before getting down to the business at hand, sales reps chat with their clients, doctors chat with their patients, waiters with diners, and teachers with their students. Strangers at a bus stop will start up a conversation to vent their frustration about the service. Taxi drivers famously air their opinions, seldom solicited. Your dentist will chat away even when your responses are reduced to grunts. Fellow passengers on a long-haul flight will exchange pleasantries before settling in to watch the movie. Listeners will phone a radio talk show to sound off about local crime, and teenagers will talk for hours on their cell phones about matters of apparently enormous consequence. Even very young children chat away with their parents, and by the age of three are able to have fairly sustained conversations with their playmates.

Conversational talk crosses age groups, gender, class, culture and ethnicity. Levelt (1989) calls it 'the canonical setting for speech in all human societies'. Indeed, the stylistic features of conversation have extended beyond spoken talk itself and 'crossed over' into other modes and media, such as the popular press and advertising, a process called *conversationalization* by Fairclough (1992). And the advent and rapid expansion of the use of email, text messaging and online chat have further blurred the distinction between spoken and written language, while underscoring the ubiquitous role of conversation in human affairs.

The centrality of conversation to human discourse owes to the fact that it is the primary location for the enactment of social values and relationships. Through talk we establish, maintain and modify our social identities. The role that conversation plays in our formation as social beings starts at an early age. Stubbs (1983: IX) asserts that 'infants learn, as it were, to engage in conversation before they learn language', and Hatch (1978: 404) claims that 'language learning evolves out of learning how to carry on conversations, out of learning how to communicate'. Even as far back as the 1930s, Harold Palmer argued that all language

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use is based on, and is an extension of, conversation, adding that conversation must therefore be the start of any study of language. In Palmer's day, this meant prioritizing the teaching of pronunciation. The nature of spoken language itself was barely understood and for a long time spoken language was taught as if it were simply a less formal version of written language. This is a view that has been rectified only recently, with the advent of corpus linguistics and the consequent amassing of corpora of spoken data. Findings from such data now heavily inform the content of learner dictionaries, such as the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (second edition 2005), and descriptive grammars, such as the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber *et al.*, 1999).

Finally, sociocultural theories of learning, such as those that derive from Vygotsky's research into children's cognitive development, foreground the role of conversation as the medium for *all* learning, and have contributed to the notion that effective teaching is, essentially, a 'long conversation' (Mercer, 1995). Recent research into second-language acquisition also supports the view that the learning of second languages may be successfully mediated through conversational interaction (van Lier, 1996). Such a view not only reinforces the arguments for an approach to language teaching that systematically deals with spoken English, but would seem to vindicate the intuitions of those legions of learners who consistently demand inclusion of more 'conversation' in their language courses.

For all these reasons, an account of how conversation works is therefore essential in the development of a pedagogy for second-language learning. This book aims to meet this need by providing the reader with first an overview of the features that characterize conversation and distinguish it from other spoken and written genres (Chapter 1), followed by a systematic description of conversational English, including its vocabulary (Chapter 2), its grammar (Chapter 3), its discourse structure (Chapter 4), and its characteristic generic patterning (Chapter 5), and then an informed account of its development in both first- and second-language acquisition (Chapters 6 and 7). On this basis, and after a review of teaching approaches to date (Chapter 8), an integrated approach to the teaching of conversation will be outlined, along with practical classroom applications (Chapter 9).

In short, the book aims:

- to introduce practising teachers to the nature and structure of conversation in English, drawing from a range of theoretical models;
- to equip readers with analytical techniques necessary to analyse authentic conversation at the level of vocabulary, grammar, discourse and genre;

- to outline how first-language conversational competence develops, and to relate this research to the development of second-language conversational competence;
- to identify and analyse the kinds of difficulties that learners of English encounter when participating in conversation;
- to outline a range of methodological approaches, procedures and techniques for teaching English conversation and to illustrate these approaches by reference to current materials;
- and, finally, to argue for an interactive, 'integrated' model of instruction, informed by the description of conversation and the learning theories outlined in the preceding chapters.

A note on transcription conventions

Wherever possible the data used as examples in this book come from authentic sources, i.e. from spontaneous and naturally occurring conversations recorded in a variety of contexts. (The few instances of invented data are identified as such.) In transcribing these conversations we have tried to capture their spontaneity and informality, but not at the expense of their readability. This has sometimes meant ignoring the finer details of transcription, such as length of pauses, pitch direction and other paralinguistic phenomena, unless these features have been expressly singled out for discussion. In cases where we cite data that employ different transcription conventions from our own, we have modified these transcriptions so as to bring them into line. Where this has not been possible, an explanation of any variant conventions will be found alongside the data.

The transcription devices that we use are the following:

- **full stops**: these indicate completion, usually realized by falling intonation
- **commas**: these are used to separate phrases or clauses in order to make utterances more readable
- **question marks**: these are used to indicate utterances that, in their context, function as questions, irrespective of their grammatical form or their intonation
- **exclamation marks**: these are used conservatively to indicate the expression of surprise or shock
- **capital letters**: words in capital letters are used conservatively to indicate emphasis
- **quotation marks**: double quotation marks are used to signal that the speaker is directly quoting speech; single quotation marks are used to signal that the speaker is saying what they or someone else thought

- **empty parentheses**: non-transcribable segments of talk are indicated by ( )
- **filled parentheses**: words within parentheses indicate the transcriber's best guess as to a doubtful utterance
- **square brackets**: information about relevant non-verbal behaviour is given within square brackets [ ]
- **dots**: three dots indicate a hesitation within an utterance: . . .
- **dash**: a dash represents a false start:
  Speaker: Did you ever get that – I mean in French what is it?
- **equals sign**: a double equals sign is used to represent overlap phenomena, such as
  o **simultaneous utterances**, i.e. where two speakers are speaking at the same time:
     Speaker 1:   Is it still going, Studebakers?
     Speaker 2:   = =I don't know
     Speaker 3:   = =No it's got a new name
  o **overlapping utterances**: the point where the second speaker begins talking is shown by = = preceding the point in the first speaker's turn:
     Speaker 1:   Can you dance now= =Rod, can you?
     Speaker 2:   = =I can do rock'n' roll and Cha Cha and Rumbas and Sambas and waltzes
  o **contiguous utterances**: i.e. when there is no interval between adjacent utterances produced by different speakers:
     Speaker 1: they had to move out of the flat because the whole= =
     Speaker 2: = =roof collapsed.

1 Characterizing conversation

Introduction

Conversation accounts for the major proportion of most people's daily language use but despite this (or perhaps because of it) it is not that easily defined. Compare, for example, these three dictionary definitions:

- If you have a conversation with someone, you talk with them, usually in an informal situation (*Collins' COBUILD English Dictionary*).
- Informal talk in which people exchange news, feelings, and thoughts (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*).
- An informal talk involving a small group of people or only two; the activity of talking in this way (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*).

While all three definitions highlight the informal and the spoken nature of conversation, only one singles out group size as a defining feature, while another focuses on topic. The distinction between *a conversation* (i.e. conversation as a countable noun) and *conversation* (uncountable) is either ignored or blurred in the first two definitions. Finer distinctions between conversation and, say, *chat*, *small talk*, *discussion* and *gossip*, are not dealt with. And, as we shall see in Chapter 8, the term *conversation* with special reference to language-teaching methodology has been enlisted for a wide variety of uses – ranging from *speaking* and *communication* to *dialogue* and *role play*. In this chapter we shall attempt to characterize conversation, first by contrasting it with other kinds of language, and then by listing its distinguishing features. By way of conclusion, we will offer a working definition of conversation that will serve as the starting point for a more detailed description in subsequent chapters.

1.1 The nature of conversation

In April 1999 a freak storm devastated parts of the city of Sydney. Here is how the storm was reported in *The Sydney Morning Herald* the following day:

(6) SS: The time that we realised that it was heading for the city . . .

(Radio 2BL, Philip Clark Breakfast Presenter, 15 April 1999)

A couple of days later four friends were talking about how they were affected by the storm. Here is the transcript of part of that conversation:

Text 1.3: Hailstorm

(1) Odile: . . . No I think I don't know many people who have been affected except you and I. That much.

(2) Rob: You don't know?

(3) Odile: Well you know except for the neighbours.

(4) Rob: Oh a friend of ours in Paddington, they had to move out of the flat= =

(5) Grace: = =Mm.

(6) Rob   because the whole= =

(7) Grace: = =roof collapsed.

(8) Rob: The tiles fell through the ceiling= =

(9) Grace: = =Mm

(10) Rob: into the room and they've actually had to move out completely.

(11) Odile: Oh really?

(12) Dan: And there was the little old lady over the road who . . .

(13) Rob: Oh yeah. [laughs] She was sitting in her living room and a hail stone fell through the skylight, this old Italian woman. She had corrugated iron but it fell through the skylight. It fell through the ceiling and landed in her lap when she was sitting= =

(14) Odile: = =Mm.

(15) Rob: watching television.

(16) Dan: Watching *The X-files* probably.

(17) All: [laugh]

(18) Odile: I'm so glad the kids were not there because you know that hole is just above Debbie's head.

(19) Rob: Yeah.

(20) Grace: Oh yeah.

(21) Rob: No, it is amazing more people weren't injured.

(22) Grace: Mm.

(23) Rob: So erm they go back to school tomorrow?

(24) Odile: Not tomorrow= =

(25) Rob: = =Monday.

(26) Odile: It's Sunday.

(27) Rob: Monday.

(28) Grace: Monday.

(29) Odile: Monday.

(30) Rob: Mm.

(31) Odile: Yeah.
(32) Grace: Is the school OK?
(33) Odile: You mean, general damage?
(34) Grace: Yeah.
(35) Odile: I don't know.
(36) Rob: The school's closed next to us, yeah.
(37) Grace: I was speaking to erm . . .
(38) Odile: Oh my god I hadn't thought about that . . .

. (Authors' data)

Each of these three texts deals with the same topic – the storm – but each deals with it in a very different way. These differences derive partly from the different channels of communication involved, partly from the different purposes that motivated each text, and partly from the different kinds of roles and relationships existing in each of the communicative situations. While all three texts encode instances of spoken language (Text 1.1 both reports and directly quotes what witnesses are supposed to have said), only Texts 1.2 and 1.3 exhibit the 'jointly-constructed-in-real-time' nature of talk, and only one of these texts – Text 1.3 – is a *conversation* in the sense that we will be using in this book.

In order to arrive at a workable definition of conversation, then, it will be useful to look at the differences between these three texts in more detail. By highlighting the differences, first between written and spoken English, and then between formal and informal spoken English, the following defining characteristics of conversation, and their implications, will be discussed:

- that (to state the obvious) it is *spoken*, and
- that this speaking takes place *spontaneously*, in *real time*, and
- that it takes place in a *shared context*;
- that it is *interactive*, hence *jointly constructed* and *reciprocal*;
- that its function is primarily *interpersonal*;
- that it is *informal*; and
- since, it is the critical site for the negotiation of social identities, it is *expressive* of our wishes, feelings, attitudes and judgements.

1.1.1 Conversation is spoken

Conversation is spoken (or primarily so, since computer-mediated communication now allows conversation to take place by means of writing – see Section 1.1.8 below). Hence the most obvious difference between Texts 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 lies in the choice of *mode*: Text 1.1 is – and was always – written, whereas Texts 1.2 and 1.3 are written transcriptions of what was originally spoken. The transfer from one mode (speaking) to another (writing) means that most of the prosodic features of the spoken language, i.e. sentence stress, intonation, tempo and articulation rate, rhythm and voice quality, are lost in transcription. In order to redress this omission, here is a transcription of Text 1.3 with prosodic features represented, using the system adopted by Crystal and Davy (1975), as outlined in the glossary below:

‖	tone-unit boundary
ǀ	first prominent syllable of the tone-unit
`	falling tone
´	rising tone
-	level tone
^	rising-falling tone
ˇ	falling-rising tone
'	the next syllable is stressed
↑	the next syllable is stressed and also steps up in pitch
"	extra strong stress
SMALL CAPITALS	the word, or words, containing the nuclear syllable in a tone-unit
.	
-	pauses, from brief to long
- -	
- - -	

Text 1.3 – Phonological transcription

(1) Odile: . . . ǀno Ì 'think ‖ I don't ǀknow ↑many 'people 'who have been AFFÈCTED ‖ except ǀyou and ↑Ì ‖ ǀTHÀT 'much ‖ - - -
(2) Rob: you ǀdon't KNÒW ‖
(3) Odile: ǀWÈLL you KNÓW ‖ ex'cept for the ↑NÈIGHBOURS ‖
(4) Rob: oh a ↑friend of 'ours in PÀDDINGTON ‖ ǀthey 'had to 'move 'out of the ↑FLÂT ‖
(5) Grace: ǀM` M ‖
(6) Rob: beǀcause the WHÓLE ‖
(7) Grace: ǀroof COLLÀPSED ‖
(8) Rob: the ↑tiles 'fell through the CÊILING ‖
(9) Grace: ǀM`M ‖]
(10) Rob: ǀinto the ↑TRÒOM ‖ and they've ǀactually had to 'move 'out COMPLÈTELY ‖·
(11) Odile: oh ǀRÈALLY ‖
(12) Dan: and ǀthere was the little old 'lady over the RÓAD who ‖ -
(13) Rob: ǀoh YÈAH ‖ [*laughs*] ǀshe was 'sitting in her LÎVING 'room ‖ and a ǀhail stone 'fell through the SKŶLIGHT ‖ this ǀold ITÂLIAN 'woman ‖ ǀshe had

'corrugated ÎRON ‖ but it 'fell through the
SKÝLIGHT ‖ it 'fell through the 'ceiling and
'landed in her · ↑LÁP ‖ ‖when she was SÌTTING ‖

(14) Odile: ‖M-M ‖
(15) Rob: ‖watching TELEVÍSION ‖---
(16) Dan: ‖watching the ↑X-FÌLES ‖ PRÒBABLY ‖
(17) All: [*laugh*]
(18) Odile: ‖I'm ↑so 'glad the ↑KÌDS were not THÉRE ‖
belcause you KNÓW ‖ that ‖HÓLE ‖ is 'just above
'Debbie's HÈAD ‖
(19) Rob: ‖YÊAH ‖
(20) Grace: ‖oh YÊAH ‖
(21) Rob: ‖no it ↑ÌS a'mazing ‖ more ‖people weren't ÌNJURED ‖
(22) Grace: ‖MM ‖---
(23) Rob: ‖SÓ erm ‖ ‖they go back to 'school TOMÓRROW ‖
(24) Odile: not ‖TOMǑRROW ‖
(25) Rob: MÒNDAY ‖
(26) Odile: it's ‖SÙNDAY ‖
(27) Rob: ‖MÒNDAY ‖
(28) Grace: ‖MÒNDAY ‖
(29) Odile: ‖MÒNDAY ‖
(30) Rob: ‖MM ‖
(31) Odile: ‖YEAH ‖--
(32) Grace: is the ‖school ÓK ‖
(33) Odile: ‖you MÉAN ‖ ‖general DÂMAGE ‖
(34) Grace: ‖YÊAH ‖
(35) Odile: ‖ Î don't 'know ‖
(36) Rob: the ‖SCHÒOL'S 'closed ‖ ‖next to ÙS ‖ ‖YÈAH ‖
(37) Grace: ‖ was SPÈAKING to erm ‖
(38) Odile: ↑oh my GÒD ‖ I hadn't ↑↑THÓUGHT about 'that ‖

It would be impossible to convey the full extent of the conversational 'work' that is achieved through prosody, but among the features that are worth noting in the above extract – and which are either completely absent or only notionally represented in written text (e.g. by the use of punctuation) – are the following:

- The use of intonation (i.e. changes in pitch direction), and specifically a rising tone to signal questions, where no other grammatical markers of interrogation are present, as in Rob's utterances (2) and (23);
- The use of high 'key' – i.e. a marked step up in pitch – to indicate the introduction of a new topic: (4) oh a ↑friend of 'ours in PÁDDINGTON ‖;
- The way intonation is used to contrast information that is considered to be shared by the speakers ('given') and that which is being proclaimed as 'new', for example, in Odile's utterance (18):

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‖I'm ↑so 'glad the ↑KÌDS were not THÉRE‖ belcause you KNÓW‖ that ‖HÓLE‖ is 'just above 'Debbie's HÈAD¶

She uses a falling tone on 'kids' to introduce a new topic (or to 'proclaim' it, in Brazil's (1997) terminology), and a rising, or 'referring' tone, on 'there' and on 'hole' to refer to what is common ground. The other speakers have already been shown the hole, a fact that is suggested by the deictic expressions 'there' and 'that' which assume a shared perspective, not to mention the explicit reference to shared knowledge in the expression 'you know'. On the other hand, the new information about the proximity of the hole to Debbie's head is 'proclaimed' using a falling tone.

- The use of high key to maintain a speaking turn, contrasted with a fall to low key as the speaker prepares to relinquish the turn, as in Rob's turn 10.
- The use of high key to signal 'high involvement', as in Odile's turn 38.

The extract demonstrates what Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994: 89) call the 'crucial and all-pervasive' role that intonation – and *key* in particular – plays in conversation management, influencing the management of topics and of turns, the identification of information status and the signalling of degree of speaker involvement. One has only to imagine a conversation between two Daleks (the robotic characters in *Dr Who*, who speak in an uninflected monotone) to appreciate the importance of these prosodic features, and how they are implicated both in the interactive nature of conversation, and its interpersonal function.

1.1.2 *Conversation happens in real time*

'I had five windows in the restaurant smashed. Water flooded in and patrons' cars have been smashed.'

Notice how in the newspaper article even the quoted speech follows the conventions of written language, in that each sentence forms a complete entity, consisting of clauses that combine a single subject and its predicate in ways that do not deviate from the norms of written grammar. Moreover, there are no *erms* or *ahs* or false starts and back-trackings. Compare this to:

(4) Rob: Oh a friend of ours in Paddington, they had to move
            out of the flat= =
(5) Grace: = =Mm.
(6) Rob: because the whole= =
(7) Grace: = =roof collapsed.

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Even without the addition of prosodic features, this is clearly transcribed speech. It conveys the sense of being locally planned in real time. Compare this to the news article, where the production process has been elaborated through several stages of drafting, re-drafting, editing and publication. 'The main factor which distinguishes written from spoken language . . . is time' (Crystal and Davy, 1975: 87). The real-time spontaneity of talk accounts for a number of features that distinguish it from writing. The most obvious of these are 'dysfluency' effects, which occur 'when the need to keep talking . . . threatens to run ahead of mental planning' (Biber *et al.*, 1999: 1048). Texts 1.2 and 1.3 include several instances of such dysfluency:

- hesitations: *So erm they go back to school tomorrow?*
- word repetition: *it was in fact heading for the the city*
- false starts: *No I think I don't know many people who . . .*
- repairs: *the Bureau thought er saw the storm*
- unfinished utterances: *they had to move out of the flat because the whole* [. . .]
- ungrammaticality (in terms of written norms, at least): *except you and I*

Other devices that 'buy' planning time, and thereby help avert the more distracting effects of dysfluency, include the use of *fillers* (as in: *Well you know except for the neighbours*), and the repetition of *sentence frames* (*but it fell through the skylight* it fell through the *ceiling* . . .). Repetition may also take the form of 'borrowing' chunks of the previous speaker's utterance, as in Text 1.2:

PC: So what went wrong?
SS: *What went wrong* was that the storm developed down near Wollongong (. . .)

More generally, it is now thought that a great deal of spoken language is borrowed, in the sense that it is retrieved in 'chunk' form, not simply from other speakers' utterances, but from the speaker's own store of pre-fabricated and memorized items (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992; Wray, 1999). One class of such 'second-hand' chunks are *utterance launchers*, examples of which include:

and there was the little old lady over the road who.
it is amazing more people weren't injured
I'm so glad the kids were not there . . .
you mean, general damage?
I was speaking to erm . . .

The ability to achieve fluency by stringing chunks together accounts for one of the basic constructional principles of spoken language, which is

that talk is built up clause by clause, and phrase by phrase, rather than sentence by sentence, as is the case with written text (see Chapter 3). This explains why utterance boundaries are less clearly defined in spoken language, and why coordination is preferred to subordination (the use of subordinate clauses). Spoken language consists of frequent sequences of short clauses joined by *and, but, then, because*. For example:

what went wrong was that the storm developed down near Wollongong *and* we had it on the radar *and* we were tracking it *and* the track at that stage was showing it going out to sea *and* then very suddenly it developed into what we call a 'supercell' which is the beginning of a severe thunderstorm *and* these supercells have a habit of doing some rather crazy things

The 'layering' of phrase on phrase, and of clause on clause, allows for a looser form of utterance construction than in written sentences, with their canonical subject–verb–object structure. Thus, in order to foreground the *theme* of an utterance (i.e. the point of departure of the message), information in the form of a noun phrase can be placed at the *head* of the utterance, in advance of the syntactic subject: a friend of ours in Paddington, *they had to move out.* Likewise, retrospective comments can occupy a *tail* slot that does not exist in written sentences: *I don't know many people who have been affected except you and I. That much.*

Another characteristic of spoken language which is attributable to its spontaneity is the fact that information is relatively loosely packed. One measure of this density is the proportion of content words (such as nouns and verbs) per clause. Spoken texts are not as lexically dense as written texts. So, for example, in Text 1.1 above, of the 142 words in all, 88 are lexical words – that is nouns, verbs, adjectives, and – *ly* adverbs – giving a *lexical density* (Halliday, 1985) figure of 62 per cent. In the spoken Text 1.3, however, the lexical density is just 36.5 per cent. This lower lexical density is partly a consequence of production pressure, but the more thinly spread occurrence of propositional content, as represented in lexical words, also helps make spoken language easier to process by listeners, who, like speakers, are also having to work under the constraints of real-time processing.

The lower lexical density of talk is balanced by the fact that it is often deceptively intricate, as speakers construct 'elaborate edifices' (Halliday, 1985: 330) of loosely linked clauses and phrases (as in the extract about the storm, quoted above). Halliday describes this as 'the ability to "choreograph" very long and intricate patterns of semantic movement while maintaining a continuous flow of discourse that is 'coherent without being constructional' (1985: 202). It is these 'long and intricate

patterns' that can often tax the processing ability of listeners, especially non-native-speaker listeners.

1.1.3 Conversation takes place in a shared context

> A freak hailstorm swept across Sydney last night, causing damage worth hundreds of millions of dollars and triggering a massive rescue and repair effort by emergency services.

In the newspaper text, few assumptions are made about the reader's present state of knowledge. Even the city (*Sydney*) is named, although most readers of the paper will be Sydney residents, and many will have experienced the storm themselves. The writer cannot assume, however, that this is the case, hence most referents (that is, the people, places and things that the content words refer to) have to be made explicit. The only reference that a reader who is removed from the events in both space and time may have trouble identifying is *last night*. Compare this to:

(18) Odile: I'm so glad *the kids* were not there because you know *that hole* is just above *Debbie's* head.
(19) Rob: Yeah.
(20) Grace: Oh yeah.
(21) Rob: No it is amazing more people weren't injured.
(22) Grace: Mm.
(23) Rob: So erm *they* go back to school *tomorrow?*
(24) Odile: Not tomorrow = =
(25) Rob: = =Monday.
(26) Odile: It's Sunday.

In the conversation, where the context is both shared and immediate, Odile can take it for granted that her listeners will be able to identify the referents of *the kids*, *there* and *that hole*, and that they know who *Debbie* is. By the same token, Rob can safely assume that *they* in turn 23 will be taken to refer to *the kids*, and that everyone knows that *tomorrow* is Monday (although in fact it is Sunday, as the others are quick to point out). This heavy reliance on the shared knowledge of the participants, including knowledge of the immediate temporal and spatial context, accounts for a number of features of talk that distinguish it from most written text. For example:

- the frequent use of pronouns: for example, there are 25 pronouns (including the possessive form *her*) in Text 3, compared to only one in Text 1;
- the frequency of deictic items (that is, words that 'point' to features of the physical context, such as *this*, *that*, *there*, *now*, *then* etc);

- ellipsis, where what is omitted can be reconstructed from the context, as in:

(2) Rob: You don't know [*many people who have been affected*]?
(3) Odile: Well you know [*I don't know many people who have been affected*] except for the neighbours.

- non-clausal expressions that can stand alone, and whose interpretation relies on situational factors, such as

(19) Rob: *Yeah.*
(20) Grace: *Oh yeah.*
(21) Rob: *No it is amazing more people weren't injured.*
(22) Grace: *Mm.*

In summary, in face-to-face interactions participants share not only the physical context (so that explicit mention of referents is often not necessary) but also the institutional, social and cultural contexts, as well. This sharing of contextual knowledge – resulting in, among other things, a high frequency of pronouns, the use of ellipsis and substitute pro-forms – means that the interpretation of the conversation is dependent on the immediate context. By contrast, in written communication, where writers cannot instantly adapt their message according to their ongoing assessment of their readers' comprehension, greater explicitness is needed to ensure understanding.

1.1.4 Conversation is interactive

Conversation is speech but it is not *a* speech. It is dialogic – or, very often, *multilogic* – in that it is jointly constructed and multi-authored. It evolves through the taking of successive (and sometimes overlapping) turns by the two or more participants, no one participant holding the floor for more time than it is considered appropriate, for example to tell a story (as in Rob's turn 13 in Text 1.3). Conversation is co-constructed reciprocally and contingently: that is to say, speakers respond to, build upon and refer to the previous utterances of other speakers. Thus, Rob's question (in Text 3)

(23) So erm they go back to school tomorrow?

while marking a shift of topic, nevertheless makes reference back to Odile's utterance, several turns back:

(18) I'm so glad the kids were not there

At the same time, Rob's question produces an answer (Odile: (31) Yeah), but only after a side-sequence in which Rob's *tomorrow* is corrected by

other participants (and himself) to *on Monday*. Meanings are jointly constructed and negotiated to form a complex and textured semantic network. As van Lier puts it:

> Progression is fast, unpredictable, and turns are tightly interwoven, each one firmly anchored to the preceding one and holding out expectations (creating possibilities, raising exciting options) for the next one.
>
> (van Lier, 1996: 177)

This dual nature of utterances, whereby they are both retrospective and prospective, is a condition that van Lier calls *contingency*. In order to anchor contingent utterances, and to signal the direction the 'fast, unpredictable' talk is heading, certain words and phrases occur frequently at the beginning of speakers' turns, or at transition points in the flow of talk, such as *yes, yeah, yes all right, no, oh, well, so*, etc. These are known variously as *discourse markers* and *interactional signals* (see Chapter 2). So, in this extract from Text 1.3, such signalling devices are italicized:

(18) Odile: I'm so glad the kids were not there *because you know* that hole is just above Debbie's head.
(19) Rob: *Yeah.*
(20) Grace: *Oh yeah.*
(21) Rob: *No* it is amazing more people weren't injured.
(22) Grace: *Mm.*
(23) Rob: *So* erm they go back to school tomorrow?

Take away the interactional signals and the conversation doesn't seem to hold together nor flow so easily:

Odile: I'm so glad the kids were not there. That hole is just above Debbie's head . . .
Rob: It is amazing more people weren't injured.
  [pause]
Rob: erm they go back to school tomorrow?

Of course, written language employs discourse markers, too, but usually not with anything like the frequency they are used in interactive talk. At the same time, there is a greater variety of discourse markers in written language. The following, for example, would be rare in spoken language but are frequent in certain kinds of texts, such as academic prose: *moreover, therefore, however, whereas, by the same token* etc. Talk has a narrower range of markers, but uses them more frequently: McCarthy (1998) notes that the words *yes, no, so, well, oh* and *right* occur significantly more frequently in collections of spoken data (*spoken corpora*) than in collections of written data (*written corpora*).

The fast and unpredictable nature of conversation means that it is not always plain sailing. Occasionally, ambiguities need to be resolved, as in this exchange:

(32) Grace: Is the school OK?
(33) Odile: You mean, general damage?

Such repair work is possible because of the reciprocal nature of conversation. Speakers are either physically or audibly present and can provide immediate feedback on each other's utterances, by, for example, agreeing (*yeah*), 'back channelling' (*mm*), showing interest (*oh really?*), clarifiying (*you mean. . .?*), or responding to questions. At the same time, speakers are having to constantly adapt their message according to their interlocutors' reactions, both verbal and paralinguistic. Tannen observes that conversation is less a matter of two (or more) people alternating between the roles of speaker and listener, but that it is more a joint production in which 'not only is the audience a co-author, but the speaker is also a co-listener' (1989: 12). She uses the term *involvement* to characterize this quality, and identifies features such as the rhythmic and repetitive nature of much conversation as being indicative of its high-involvement style. We also saw, earlier, how the use of pitch – and high key in particular – contributes to a high-involvement conversational style.

1.1.5 Conversation is interpersonal

So far we have contrasted Text 1.1 – the newspaper story – with the spoken Texts 1.2 and 1.3. But what distinguishes the two spoken texts? Why is one 'conversation' and the other not? To answer this question, we need to identify differences in the channel, the purpose and the tenor of each exchange.

Text 1.2 is spoken but it is mediated both by telephone and by radio: this fact alone does not disqualify the talk as being conversational. Telephone talk, as we shall see, very often falls within the parameters of conversation, despite not being face-to-face communication. Radio talk-back programmes share many of the features of casual conversation, especially when more than two interlocutors are involved. Nevertheless, the purpose of Text 1.2, however informal the language, is essentially informative. The roles of the speakers are established from the outset as interviewer and interviewee, the interviewee having been contacted because of his expertise, and the purpose of the interviewer's questions being to elicit information (and perhaps with the ulterior motive of assigning blame: *What went wrong?*). Hence, the direction of the questioning is entirely one-way: it would not be appropriate for the interviewee to ask questions of the interviewer. The management of the discourse

is very much in the control of the interviewer, therefore. Even when a third speaker joins the talk her questions to the expert are directed through and by the interviewer:

(1) PC: Erm just hang on there for a second because Emilia wants to ask a question about that. Yes Emilia, good morning.

(2) E: Good morning Philip. Look I was at the Ethnic Communities' Council meeting with Angela as well. Some of the stuff that I saw was actually bigger than than a cricket ball, I mean it was like a big huge orange, you know?

(3) PC: Mm.

(4) E: But the interesting thing about it was I mean I've seen hail before and even big hail and normally it comes down fairly compact and it looks white and it's got smooth edges but some of the stuff that was coming down last night it . . . you could see the crystals and it actually had ragged edges, it wasn't even smooth, and I just wondered whether that was a particular type of hailstorm that had come over you know and formed differently to others?

(5) PC: Yeah, all right. Steve? What's the answer to that? I have heard reports that that too not all the hail that fell was in a in a ball.

(6) SS: No hail very often isn't in a ball. It comes down in all sorts of jagged shapes and lumps because very often the various hailstones aggregate together . . .

Thus, even with more than two participants involved, the interview structure, and the roles inherent in this, are still in place: the interviewer (PC) manages the interaction in a way that in casual conversation between friends would seem out of place and extremely assertive. It is hard to imagine, for example, that the conversation between friends could have gone like this:

Rob: So erm they go back to school tomorrow?
Odile: Yeah.
Rob: Erm just hang on there for a second because Grace wants to ask a question about that.
Grace: Is the school OK?
Odile: You mean, general damage? . . .

It is clear that the conversation in Text 1.3 is not managed in the same way as the interview in Text 1.2, where an asymmetrical relationship exists between the interactants. In other words, the right to initiate, to ask questions, to direct the flow of talk is not equally distributed. In

casual conversation, however, such as in Text 1.3, such rights are equally distributed: the relationship between speakers is said to be *symmetrical*. This is not the same as saying that the relationship is one of equality, as van Lier points out:

> Equality refers to factors extrinsic to the talk, such as status, age, role, and other social and societal factors that decide one person has more power or is 'more important' (or more knowledgable, wiser, richer, and so on) than another. Symmetry refers purely to the talk and the interaction itself . . . symmetry refers to the equal distribution of rights and duties *in talk*.

(van Lier, 1996: 175)

In Text 1.3 there are a number of what are called *initiating moves*, as opposed to *responding moves*. Typically, these initiating moves can take the form of questions, as in

(23) Rob: So erm they go back to school tomorrow?

but they can also take the form of statements:

(18) Odile: I'm so glad the kids were not there

Even in the brief segment that has been transcribed (Text 1.3) all four of the speakers (Odile, Rob, Dan and Grace) make initiating moves, suggesting that, even if their contributions are not exactly equal, their right to initiate is equally distributed. The equal distribution of rights in conversation contrasts with the situation in other spoken genres such as interviews (as we have seen), and service encounters (such as those that take place in shops). The function of service encounters is primarily *transactional*: the speakers have a practical goal to achieve, and the success of the exchange depends on the achievement of that goal. Typical transactional exchanges include such events as buying a train ticket, negotiating a loan or returning a damaged item to a store. To a certain extent it could be argued that the radio interview is transactional, too, but, rather than the transaction of goods or services, it is the transaction of information that is the objective. The same argument might apply also to the interaction that characterizes classrooms (including language classrooms), another context in which rights are not equally distributed and where information is being transacted – typically in the form of facts.

The storm conversation in Text 1.3, however, does not have as its objective the trading of either goods and services, nor of information. That is to say, the satisfactory achievement of the goals of the encounter is not product-oriented. These goals can be partly inferred from what participants themselves often say after a conversation: *We had a nice*

chat or *The conversation really flowed*, or, less positively: *No one had very much to say to each other* or *Graham went on and on*.

What is at stake in casual conversation is the social well-being of the participants, the aim being essentially *phatic*, i.e. to signal friendship and to strengthen the bonds within social groups. Rather than being directed at the achievement of some practical goal, the talk is primarily directed at the establishing and servicing of social relationships. For this reason conversation has been labelled *interactional* as opposed to *transactional*. Brown and Yule further refine the distinction between these two purposes:

> We could say that primarily interactional language is primarily *listener-oriented*, whereas primarily transactional language is primarily *message-oriented*.
>
> (1983: 13)

Because it emphasizes the personal element, we will use the term *interpersonal* in preference to *interactional*. This is also consistent with Halliday's use of the term to identify one of language's *metafunctions*: 'Interpersonal meaning is meaning as a form of action: the speaker or writer doing something to the listener or reader by means of language' (1985: 53). The 'something' that a speaker is doing in conversation is social 'work'– the establishing and maintaining of social ties.

It is important to emphasize that talk is seldom purely transactional or purely interpersonal, but that both functions are typically interwoven in spoken language: even the most straightforward transactions are tempered with interpersonal language (such as greetings) and chat amongst friends would be ultimately unrewarding without some kind of information exchange taking place (as in Text 1.3). Nevertheless, the *primary* purpose of a shopping exchange is not social, and nor is the primary purpose of the storm conversation to exchange factual information about storm damage.

1.1.6 Conversation is informal

Partly because of its spontaneous and interactive nature, and partly because of its interpersonal function, conversation is characterized by an informal style. An *informal* (or *casual*) style contrasts with the style of more formal spoken genres, such as speeches and recorded announcements, where *formal speech* is defined as 'a careful, impersonal and often public mode of speaking used in certain situations and which may influence pronunciation, choice of words and sentence structure' (Richards and Schmidt, 2002: 209). Informality in speech is characterized by lexical choices – such as the use of slang, swearing and colloquial lan-

guage – and by pronunciation features, such as the use of contractions. Examples of an informal style in the hailstorm conversation include:

lexical:	Is the school OK? (rather than *undamaged*, for example) Yeah. (instead of the more formal *yes*) Oh *my god* I hadn't thought about that . . . (swearing)
pronunciation:	You *don't* know? (rather than *do not*) The *school's* closed next to us (rather than *school is*)

A feature of conversation's informal style is the frequent use of *vernacular grammar* (Biber *et al.*, 1999), that is, the use of stigmatized forms that are often associated with a particular regional variety. Examples cited by

> He's left now, *ain't* he?
> Oh yeah. Whatever they want they *gets*.
> *Me and Jody* had a contest for the ugliest pictures.
> Don't say I *never* gave you *nothing*.
>
> (Biber *et al.*, 1999: 112–5)

1.1.7 Conversation is expressive of identity

The use of vernacular language, mentioned above, underlines the fact that conversation is a critical site for the negotiation of social identities. It is through informal talk that people establish and maintain their affiliation with a particular social group, and 'vernacular features of grammar can be highly prized because of their role in establishing and maintaining social solidarity among the speakers in selected groups' (Biber *et al.*, 1999: 1121). In fact, it has been claimed (e.g. by Dunbar) that language, in the form of conversation, originally evolved as a kind of 'vocal grooming' in order to facilitate the bonding of large groups. 'In a nutshell . . . language evolved to allow us to gossip' (Dunbar, 1996: 79). Dunbar argues that language fulfils this social (or *interpersonal*) function more effectively than physical grooming because:

> It allows us to reach more individuals at the same time; it allows us to exchange information about our social world so that we can keep track of what's happening among the members of our social network (as well as keeping track of social cheats); it allows us to engage in self-advertising in a way that monkeys and apes cannot; and, last but not least, it allows us to produce the reinforcing effects of grooming . . . from a distance.
>
> (Dunbar, 1996: 192)

Conversation is marked, therefore, by continual expressions of likes, dislikes and emotional states. Interactants express their attitudes about each

other, about others who are not present and about the world. There are also constant expressions of politeness, such as *please, thank you, sorry; would you . . .?; do you mind* etc. There is also a lot of humour in conversation: funny stories are told, jokes are exchanged, and participants tease one another. Consider this transcript below from an authentic conversation between four men during a coffee break at work:

1. A:	It'd be good practice
2. B:	That's a good idea Jim – the best suggestion I've heard you make all this year – then maybe we can understand you Jim – I don't know how Harry understands you
3. A:	Who?
4. B:	Harry
5. A:	Who's Harry?
6. B:	Harry Krishna
7. All:	(laugh)
8. C:	Who's Harry: Harry Krishna
9. All:	(laugh)
10. B:	Didn't you say you were going there?
11. A:	(laughs) I've told you – I'm breaking away from them now
12. D:	He's changed
13. A:	I've changed
14. B:	You're giving it away?
15. C:	He's shaved his 'mo' off
16. B:	He's only getting too lazy to carry his upper lip around
17. C:	Harry Krishna
18. All:	(laugh)

(Authors' data)

Here the men's use of mutual teasing serves to ensure (on the surface) that they have a laugh and enjoy the coffee break. But the purpose of casual talk such as this is also to help construct cohesive relationships between a group of people who are not necessarily friends but see each other on a daily basis.

Text 1.3 also had examples of humour, such as Dan's reference to *The X-files* – a popular television series about the paranormal:

Rob:	. . . it fell through the ceiling and landed in her lap when she was sitting [Odile: Mm] watching television.
Dan:	Watching *The X-files* probably.
All:	[laugh]

Also highly frequent in conversation is the occurrence of *appraisal language* (see Martin, 2000), including evaluative vocabulary (*awful, wonderful, ugly, weird,* etc) and formulaic expressions (*What a joke; He was*

the laughing stock . . . etc). There are a number of other linguistic ways that speakers encode attitude, including swearing (*bloody hell!*); the use of nicknames and familiar address terms (such as *love, mate*) and the use of interjections (*wow, cool*) (see Eggins and Slade, 1997).

To summarize, the fact that the conversation is both interpersonal and expressive of personal and social identity is linguistically encoded in a variety of ways, many of which are exemplified in the storm conversation:

- the use of supportive back-channelling (such as *Mm*);
- the frequency of appraisal language (that is, language that expresses the speaker's attitude to, or evaluation of, what he or she is saying): *completely, probably, I'm so glad, oh my God,* etc;
- many sentences have human agents, and the speaker is often the subject of the sentence: *I'm so glad the kids were not there; I was speaking to erm . . .*;
- the telling of stories (Rob's long turn 13);
- a preference for informal rather than formal or specialized lexis, e.g. *they had to move out of the flat* rather than *they had to vacate their apartment*;
- the use of humour;
- the use of swearing (*bloody hell!*);
- the use of nicknames and familiar address terms (such as *love, mate*)

(Lexical and grammatical features encoding the interpersonal purposes of conversation will be explored in more depth in Chapters 2 and 3.)

1.1.8 Conversation in other modes

So far, we have been working under the assumption that conversation is necessarily spoken. However, this assumption needs to be qualified in the light of the development of computer-mediated communication (CMC), such as that which occurs in internet chat rooms, where, although communication takes place in real-time (it is *synchronous*), it is written. That is to say, chat participants key in utterances at their 'home' terminal that are then almost immediately available for all other participants to read and respond to. Quite often, CMC shares many of the kinds of features of talk between friends that we have identified. Here, for example, is an extract of internet chat. The first 'speaker's' turns are indicated by the time at which they were posted (e.g. [12:40]); the second speaker's are marked >:

Session Start: Sun 26 May 1996 12:40:29

[12:40] How are you?
> good.
> fine here

[12:41] Please tell me more about you :)
> like what
[12:42) Ok, just to refresh memories, I'm 32,
divorced, English, 8 old son . . .
[12:42] test beds for a living :)
> well, I've never really talked to you before so no
refreshing was necessary – this is all new
[12:42] Ok :)
[12:43] What about you?
> I'm 40, single, American, no children
> and I'm an interior designer
[12:43] Whereabouts in America? . . .
> In Palm Beach, Florida
[12:43] I'm in southwest England
> whereabouts?
[12:44] Sounds nice. . . .
[12:44] :)
[12:44] Wellington, Somerset.
> I've been there. It's beautiful country
[12:45] Really? :)
[12:45] It is lovely here
[12:45] I was chatting with Lee yesterday . . .
[12:45] but she always seems to be busy
> yes, she's a friend of mine
[12:46] :)
[12:46] She is nice
[12:46] very sweet . . .
[12:46] but very busy
> she is. We've known each other for lots of years
[12:47] You live close by?
> about an hour from her
[12:47] That's nice :)

This text shares a number of the features of conversation that we have
isolated in our analysis of Text 1.3 (the storm conversation). Speakers
take turns; they respond to previous turns; questions are distributed
between participants; topics are introduced, developed, dropped; there
are opening moves (*how are you?*), and presumably closing ones; there
are evaluative responses (*that's nice*), checking moves (*really?*) and
confirming moves ([*but very busy*] *she is*). And, as a consequence of the
constraints of real-time processing, the language is syntactically rela-
tively simple, elliptical (*sounds nice; about an hour from her*), and often
produced in clause- or phrase-length chunks: *she is nice/very sweet/but
very busy*. Discourse markers and interactional signals are used to mark
shifts in the direction of the talk, and to manage the interaction: *ok,*

well, yes, but . . .. There is humour (*test beds for a living*). Even par-
alinguistic indicators of involvement are signalled using emoticons: ☺,
in order to compensate for the lack of visual or intonational informa-
tion. Hillier characterizes such texts as 'writing to be read *as if heard*'
(2004: 213).

Similar features have been identified in *asynchronous* electronic com-
munications, such as in newsgroups and email exchanges, where there is
a time lapse between the sending of the message and its reception. Text
message exchanges may be either synchronous or asynchronous, but,
either way, they are characterized by a highly informal and interpersonal
style. Thus, the electronic medium has had the effect of dissolving many
of the traditional distinctions between written and spoken interaction:
interactants are less writers than co-participants in an exchange that
resembles live talk. It is too early to say to what extent these proto-genres
will develop their own idiosyncratic features, both linguistic and prag-
matic (but see Crystal, 2001). As interesting and as suggestive as these
developments are, they are outside the scope of this present study. Suffice
it to say that *spoken* conversation remains the interactional type from
which these electronically mediated interactions derive many of their
characteristics.

1.1.9 Defining conversation

To summarize: conversation is (primarily) spoken and it is planned and
produced spontaneously, i.e. in real time, which accounts for many of
the ways it differs linguistically from written language, or from spoken
language that has been previously scripted (as in news broadcasts, for
example). In Halliday's formulation: 'Writing exists, whereas speech
happens' (1985: xxiii). Conversation is the kind of speech that happens
informally, symmetrically and for the purposes of establishing and main-
taining social ties. This distinguishes it from a number of other types of
communication, as shown in Table 1.1, although it is important to stress
that there is considerable variation within categories. There are sections
of news broadcasts that are unscripted, for example; and not all emails
serve a transactional function, nor is all classroom talk dialogic.

On the basis of Table 1.1, we can now offer a more comprehensive
definition of conversation than those with which this chapter began:

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

(Note that, because we have defined conversation as being informal, we
will use the terms *conversation* and *casual conversation* interchangeably.)

Table 1.1. *Characteristics of different communicative events*

	spoken	unscripted, spontaneous	dialogic/ multilogic	synchronous	interpersonal (vs transactional) function	symmetrical relationship
email exchange	×	✓	✓	×	×	✓?
news broadcast	✓	×	×	✓	×	×
interview	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	×
service encounter	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	×
classroom talk	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	×
chat room exchange	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
conversation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

1.2 Approaches to the analysis of conversation

Spoken language, and conversation in particular, has only recently started to receive the same kind of detailed linguistic attention as written language. Moreover, many approaches to the analysis of conversation have been partial, focusing on particular features of conversation through the lens of a single theoretical construct. The approach we will be adopting in subsequent chapters is a more eclectic one, on the grounds that a more comprehensive, and hence potentially more useful, analysis should draw on a variety of theoretical models. Our starting premise, and one of the basic assumptions shared by all the different models to be discussed below, is that conversation is structurally patterned, and displays an orderliness that is neither chaotic nor random but, rather, is tightly organized and coherent. It follows that, if this organization can be described in ways that are accessible to teachers and learners, there are likely to be practical classroom applications. (This does *not* mean, of course, that one such application would simply be to 'deliver' the description to learners without some form of pedagogical mediation.)

Conversation, then, has been analysed from the perspective of a number of different academic disciplines. The most important of these are sociology, sociolinguistics, philosophy and linguistics.

Figure 1.1 below provides a typology of these different approaches to the analysis of conversation.

1.2.1 *Sociological approaches*

Perhaps the most significant contribution to the study of conversation has come, not from linguistics, but from sociology. A fundamental concern of sociologists is to account for the organization of everyday life, including the way that social activities are structured and ordered. The sociological approach to analysing 'talk-in-interaction' has come to be known as Conversation Analysis (CA), a branch of sociology which posits that it is in and through conversation that most of our routine everyday activities are accomplished. CA is represented primarily in the studies of Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (see, for example, 1974). The objective of CA is to describe and explain the orderliness of conversation by reference to the participants' tacit reasoning procedures and sociolinguistic competencies. To take the 'hailstorm' conversation as an example, a researcher within the CA paradigm would be particularly interested in showing how the speakers are oriented to the rules of turntaking and how they accomplish this in an

Figure 1.1 is a tree diagram:

- Sociology ——— Conversational Analysis
- Sociolinguistics ———
  - Ethnography
  - Interactional Sociolinguistics
  - Variation Theory
- Philosophy ———
  - Speech Act Theory
  - Pragmatics
- Linguistics ———
  - Structural-functional
    - Birmingham School
    - Systemic-functional Linguistics
  - Social-semiotic
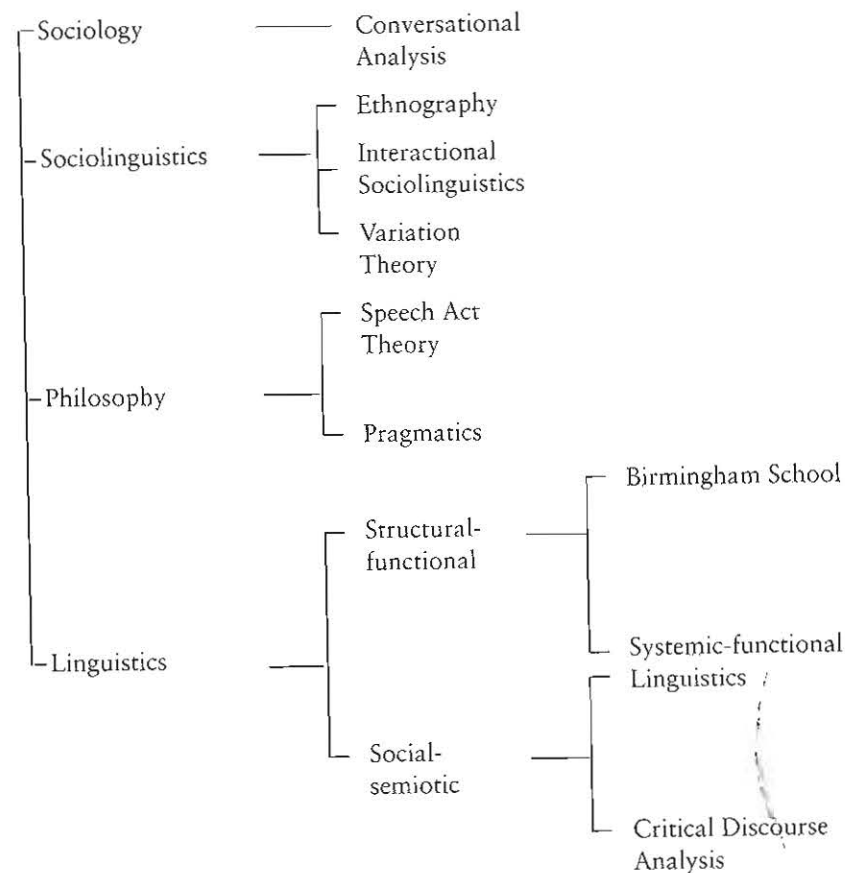   - Critical Discourse Analysis

Figure 1.1 Different approaches to analysing conversation (from Eggins and Slade, 1997)

orderly manner, as when Grace 'takes over' Rob's turn and finishes it for him:

    (6) Rob: because the whole= =
    (7) Grace: = =roof collapsed.

Conversation analysts are also interested in how conversational 'repairs' are achieved, and how these repairs also illustrate the participants' orientation to the basic rules of turntaking, as in this instance when Rob uses the word *tomorrow* to ask about an event that will in fact take place the day after tomorrow:

    (23) Rob: So erm they go back to school tomorrow?
    (24) Odile: Not tomorrow = =
    (25) Rob: = =Monday.
    (26) Odile;   It's Sunday.
    (27) Rob: Monday.
    (28) Grace: Monday.
    (29) Odile: Monday.
    (30) Rob: Mm.
    (31) Odile: Yeah.

The repair sequence is interpolated into another sequence, which is the simple, two-part, question-and-answer sequence of turns 23 and 31. The question and the answer would normally constitute what is called an *adjacency pair*, that is a two-part exchange, the second part of which is functionally dependent on the first – as in greetings, invitations, requests, and so on. In this case, a repair sequence is inserted (i.e. it forms an *insertion sequence*) in the adjacency pair, because the first element of the pair – the question – cannot be answered until the question has been 'repaired'. (Another example of an insertion sequence occurs at turn 33.) Conversational analysts are particularly interested in what such sequences demonstrate about the orderliness of conversation, and how the conversational 'work' is co-operatively managed. (In Chapter 4 we will return to the subject of conversation management.)

1.2.2 Sociolinguistic approaches

Sociolinguistic approaches have emerged from the theoretical common ground shared by sociology, anthropology and linguistics. These are especially concerned with the analysis of language in its social context, and the way that language use varies according to contextual and cultural factors. Hymes (1972a), one of the foremost proponents of what is called the *ethnography of speaking*, proposed a rubric for investigating the contextual factors that impact on any speech event. These factors include, among others, the *setting*, the *participants*, the *ends* (or purpose) of the speech event, its *key* (i.e. its 'tone, manner, or spirit', such as whether it is serious or jokey), and its *genre*, or type. Like an anthropologist, an ethnographer, armed with this rubric, would seek not only to describe the speech event under study, but to explain it, particularly in relation to the culture in which it is embedded. An ethnographer observing – or, better, *participating in* – the hailstorm conversation, for example, might be interested in this comment by Dan, in response to Rob's mentioning that the woman who received the hailstone in her lap was watching television:

    (16) Dan: Watching *The X-files* probably.

The fact that this throwaway line not only effectively ends Rob's narration, but elicits laughter all round, despite the fact that it would seem rather flippant in the light of the seriousness of the situation (after all, the woman could have been killed), suggests that this particular speech event has ends other than the simple relaying of disaster stories, and that these ends are mutually understood. The use of humour (a feature of the speech event's *key*) serves to create a sense of group membership, and this has cultural implications that an ethnographer might be keen to explore. Is this light-hearted key a distinguishing feature of this kind of conversation in this particular culture, irrespective of the seriousness of the topic, for instance? And what cultural assumptions are shared by the mention of a television programme that dramatizes supernatural events?

Sociolinguists would also be interested in the *variation* that the speakers display in, for example, their pronunciation or their choice of words, and would attempt to correlate these linguistic factors with social variables – such as class, ethnicity or gender. The fact that Odile is of French origin, for example, might be reflected not only in her pronunciation, but in her interactional style – and the study of such variation is the province of *interactional sociolinguistics* (see Tannen, 1984, 1989). Proponents of *variation theory* (see, for example, Labov, 1972) are interested in tracking language change and variation as evidenced in such discourse units as spoken narratives. Narratives exhibit relatively stable structures, but allow for a great deal of linguistic variation within these structures, not least because of the tendency of speakers to adopt a vernacular style when narrating, all of which makes them an ideal site for the study of patterns of linguistic variation and change. The narrative that Dan and Rob collaborate in telling (in the hailstorm conversation) displays a number of the generic features of narratives that Labov and Waletzky (1967) identified in their seminal study of the narratives of urban Afro-Americans. These include an *abstract* (or brief announcement of the topic of the story):

> (12) Dan: And there was the little old lady over the road . . .

an *orientation* (to the situational context and the participants):

> (13) Rob: Oh yeah [laughs] she was sitting in her living room . . .

a *complication*:

> . . . and a hailstone fell through the skylight . . .

which is in turn typically followed by some form of *resolution* (although not in the case of the hailstorm story) and a *coda*:

> (16) Dan: Watching *The X-files* probably.

There is also a seam of *evaluative* language running through the story, such as *little old lady*, *this old Italian woman*, which serves to convey the speakers' (amused) attitude to the events they are relating. (Spoken narratives will be described in more detail in Chapter 5.)

1.2.3 Philosophical approaches

Speech Act Theory, which grew out of the philosophical study of meaning, has been influential in the way it has added to our understanding of how speakers' intentions are expressed in language. Philosophers such as Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) re-conceptualized speech as 'action' and attempted to describe how (a potentially infinite number of) spoken utterances can be classified according to a finite – and relatively limited – set of functions. By ascribing communicative functions to utterances, and by attempting to describe the conditions under which an utterance can fulfil a specific function, speech act theory helped pave the way for a communicative – rather than purely formal – description of spoken language. The hailstorm conversation provides at least two examples of utterances that might be interesting to analyse from the perspective of speech act theory, since their function is not transparent in terms of their form. That is, they are declarative sentences in terms of their grammatical form, but are nevertheless interpreted as being questions:

> (2) Rob: You don't know?

and

> (23) Rob: So erm they go back to school tomorrow?

Note that in the transcript the two utterances have been punctuated as if they *were* questions but, of course, in spoken language there are no such things as 'question marks'. Nor is rising intonation necessarily a reliable indicator of a question: many statements (especially in Australian English) are uttered with a rising intonation. And many utterances that are both intended and interpreted as questions are uttered with a falling intonation. According to speech act theory, to count as a question an utterance must fulfil a number of conditions, or rules. These include the condition that the speaker does not know the answer, that the speaker sincerely wants to know the answer, and that the answer is not likely to be forthcoming without the question being asked. But, with regard to the first 'question' (*You don't know?*), the previous speaker (Odile) has already said that she doesn't know, suggesting that Rob's question may have some other function, such as expressing his surprise – or even his disbelief – at her not knowing many people who have been affected by

the hailstorm, i.e. the utterance has an *expressive* function, rather than a purely representative one.

Closely related to speech act theory, and sharing a similar philosophical background, is *pragmatics*. Like speech act theory, pragmatics is concerned with elucidating speaker meaning, especially where speaker meaning seems to be at variance with semantic meaning, that is, the literal meaning of the words and grammatical forms of an utterance. Moreover, pragmatics goes further and seeks to answer the question as to how the speaker's meaning is retrieved by listeners, rather than being interpreted literally or nonsensically. So, for example, Odile's utterance:

> (18) Odile: I'm so glad the kids were not there because you
>   know that hole is just above Debbie's head . . .

would make very little sense to anyone who had not been privy to the conversation up to this point. There is no inherent logical connection between Odile's being glad the kids were not there, and the hole being just above Debbie's head. And even with access to the co-text (the previous utterances) the significance of the hole is not obvious. Nevertheless, the others seem to have no problem interpreting the statement as meaning *the hole where the hailstone came through is just above the place where Debbie's head would have been had she been there*. They are able to make this interpretation partly through recourse to shared contextual knowledge (they have just been shown the hole). But they are also interpreting the utterance through adherence to a mutually accepted set of principles for the conduct of talk, without which coherent conversation would be impossible. These principles were first outlined by Grice (1975), who expressed them in terms of four 'maxims':

1. *Maxim of quantity*: Make your contribution just as informative as required.
2. *Maxim of quality*: Make your contribution one that is true.
3. *Maxim of relation*: Make your contribution relevant.
4. *Maxim of manner*: Avoid obscurity and ambiguity. Be brief and orderly.

Thus, in accordance with the maxim of relation, and given all the possible meanings that Odile's utterance could have had, her listeners were disposed to select the interpretation that was most relevant, that is the one which (according to *relevance theory*, Sperber and Wilson, 1990) required the least processing effort in order to make sense. This assumption of relevance is fundamental to the maintenance of conversational coherence. It accounts, for example, for Odile's outburst:

> (38) Odile: Oh my god I hadn't thought about that . . .

as she suddenly sees the relevance of Rob's comment about the school next door being closed, which in turn relates to Grace's question: *Is the school OK?* – a question that at first Odile couldn't quite see the relevance of. (She asks: *You mean, general damage?*). Only three turns later does she see the point: that her own children's school may also have been closed because of hailstorm damage. Pragmatics, then, offers insights into how speakers and listeners co-operate in order to achieve coherence, making sense of each other's utterances by searching for relevance in the co-text and the context.

1.2.4 *Linguistic approaches*

Originating more in linguistics than in any other discipline, both the *Birmingham School* of Discourse Analysis and *Systemic Functional Linguistics* have made major contributions to the description and analysis of spoken language.

The *Birmingham School*, influenced by the work of Firth (1957), was established primarily by Coulthard and Sinclair, whose earlier work focused on the analysis of classroom discourse (see, for example, Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975, and Sinclair and Brazil, 1982). They were interested in identifying the 'grammar' of interaction, and in particular the way a speaker's discourse choices are pre-determined by the immediately preceding utterance, analogous to the way that the choice of a word in a sentence is determined. This 'discourse grammar' was described in terms of a hierarchy, from the largest units (e.g. a lesson) to the smallest, these being the individual *acts* of which a lesson might be composed. These acts are not to be confused with *speech acts*, as mentioned above, rather, they are defined in terms of their interactive function, such as *eliciting*, *informing* and *evaluating*, or their turn-taking function, such as *cueing* and *nominating*. Intermediate categories in the hierarchy include *exchanges* and it was the structure of exchanges which was the focus of particular interest. The identification of the three-part exchange structure that characterizes classroom interaction – *initiation*, *response*, *follow-up* – is one of the best-known findings of this School (see Chapter 7). But discourse consists of larger units too, such as *transactions*, and these are often identifiable by the discourse markers that *frame* them. In the hailstorm conversation, there is a clear division between two transactions at turns 22 and 23:

> (22) Grace: Mm.
>   [pause]
> (23) Rob: So erm they go back to school tomorrow?

Rob's *so* serves to frame the introduction of a new topic, and the transaction that follows is composed of a number of exchanges about this

topic, each exchange realized in the form of question-and-answer moves. The fact that exchange structure allows considerable flexibility – more so than, perhaps, sentence grammar allows – is evidenced by the way that the exchanges are interrupted by insertion sequences, as we noted above.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is largely derived from the work of Halliday (see Halliday, 1985; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004; Eggins, 1994). The central concern of SFL is, in a systematic way, to relate language to its social context and, in particular, to the functions it performs in that context. Such a concern leads to a focus on the analysis of actual language in use: of texts considered in relation to the social context, both cultural and situational, in which they occur. Systemic Functional Linguistics stresses the centrality of the study of conversation to the study of language, because conversation is the most important vehicle by means of which social reality is represented and enacted in language. Moreover, 'to understand the nature of text as social action we are led naturally to consider spontaneous conversation, as being the most accessible to interpretation' (Halliday, 1978: 140).

Systemic Functional Linguistics is a *functional* approach to language description. Functional descriptions seek to explain the internal organization of language in terms of the functions that it has evolved to serve. As a functional approach, SFL argues that language should be thought of as real instances of meaningful language in use. In turn, because language – in the form of written or spoken *texts* – always occurs in social contexts, SFL argues for the need for a descriptive framework whereby language and context are systematically and functionally related to one another.

It is well known that different contexts predict different kinds of language use. SFL argues that there is a systematic correlation between context and language, and, specifically, that three different aspects of context correlate with the three different kinds of meaning expressed in language. Halliday (1985; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004) identifies the determining context factors as being:

- the *field* of discourse (what is being talked or written about);
- the *tenor* of discourse (the relationship between the participants); and
- the *mode* of discourse (whether, for example, the language is written or spoken).

The significance of field, tenor and mode is that these three contextual dimensions are then encoded into three types of meanings represented in language. The three types of meaning are:

1. *ideational meanings*: meanings about the world. These are a reflection of field;

2. *interpersonal meanings*: meanings about roles and relationships. These are a reflection of tenor; and
3. *textual meanings*: meanings about the message. These are a reflection of mode.

Most significantly, these three types of meaning occur simultaneously in every clause or text. Take as an example, a clause from the hailstorm conversation, Rob's comment:

(21) Rob: No it is amazing more people weren't injured.

simultaneously expresses meanings about the world (*more people weren't injured*) and about the relationship with the participants in the conversation, through the exaggerated expression of attitude (*it is amazing*). This has an interpersonal function in that, not only does it serve to validate Odile's relief that the kids weren't injured, but it captures the general feeling of amazement shared by the participants, and reinforces the sense of solidarity that their talk instantiates. Finally, the discourse marker *No* has a textual function in that it connects Rob's utterance with the preceding talk, signalling an agreement to the negative implication of Odile's comment, i.e. that people weren't injured.

Together the field, tenor and mode of the situation constitute the *register variables* of a situation. Texts whose contexts of situation co-vary in the same way are said to belong to the same *register*. The concept of register is a 'theoretical explanation of the common-sense observation that we use language differently in different situations' (Eggins and Martin, 1997: 234). It is a useful way of explaining and predicting the relationship between features of context and features of text. Thus, the three texts about the hailstorm cited at the beginning of this chapter (the newspaper account, the radio interview and the friendly conversation) all share the same field, in that they are all about the hailstorm. But they differ with regard to their tenor and mode. It is these tenor and mode differences which are reflected in different kinds of grammatical and lexical choices, and which account for such different wordings as the following:

> At Paddington, Ms Jan Mourice said all houses on one side of Prospect Street had windows smashed. [newspaper report]
>
> Steve Simons, a senior forecaster with the Bureau, joins me on the line this morning. [radio interview]
>
> Oh a friend of ours in Paddington, they had to move out of the flat [conversation]

The way that, within specific cultural contexts, register variables influence how particular texts (whether spoken or written) are structured

and have become institutionalized is captured in the concept of *genre* (see Chapter 5). A genre is a recognizable language activity, such as a news report, or a conversational story, whose structure has become formalized over time. Speakers of a language know how to perform these language activities in ways that are appropriate to their cultural contexts. For example, they know how to make stories interesting, entertaining or worth listening to. *Genre theory* provides semantic and grammatical tools for grouping texts with similar social purposes into text-types. For example, the hailstorm conversation contains a story (in turns 12, 13 and 16) that has its own internal structure (an orientation and a complicating event) and which, in turn, is embedded within the larger conversation. As we will see in Chapter 5, in conversation speakers weave in and out of telling stories and gossiping, and these genres are nested within highly interactive talk consisting of shorter exchanges.

Sharing with SFL a concern for the social context of language in use, proponents of *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA), such as Fairclough (1995), view discourse as a form of social practice. They argue that discourse, including conversation, can be properly understood only in relation to the social structures that it both shapes and is shaped by, and in particular the relations of power inherent in these social structures. A job interview and a friendly chat, for example, while sharing many superficial features, manifest very different relations of power, and these differences will determine the kind of language choices that the participants make, including the way turns are taken and distributed. At the same time, the language choices they make are socially *constitutive*, in that they help to sustain and reproduce the existing social structures, as when the job interviewee has to be *invited* to ask questions, rather than simply being allowed to ask them unsolicited. But even conversation, which on the surface would seem to be one of the most egalitarian forms of interaction, can itself be the site for significant interpersonal work as interactants enact and confirm their social identities. This is particularly the case when conversation is used as a way of 'disguising' inequalities of power, as when a boss might say to an employee: 'Let's have a little chat about your future plans . . .'

The hailstorm conversation, if examined through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, would not reveal significant inequalities amongst the participants, perhaps, but their choice of language to talk about – and to position themselves in relation to – parties who are not present may shed some light on unstated but shared ideological values. The fact, for example, that Dan's neighbour is first characterized as *a little old lady*, rather than, say, as *an elderly pensioner*, and then as *this old Italian woman*, construes her not only as an object of mirth, but tends to reinforce cultural stereotypes of age, gender and race, all at the same

time. CDA is particularly effective at unmasking this kind of ideological 'sub-text'.

Finally, the analysis of conversation has been immeasurably enhanced by the advent of two technological innovations: the invention of the tape recorder and the computer. The former allowed the recording and transcription of authentic data, which in turn paved the way for descriptions of spoken English that describe attested use, rather than basing their descriptions on invented examples. The computer enables researchers to compile and consult databases (called *corpora*) of spoken language, and has given rise to the science of *corpus linguistics* (see Chapter 2). Much of the authentic spoken data we use in this book comes from different spoken corpora. For example, the Australian data comes from a spoken-language corpus called OZTALK, a joint Macquarie University and University of Technology, Sydney, project (referred to hereafter as OZTALK).

Among other things, corpora permit the analysis and comparison of word frequency counts across a number of different contexts. For example, a word frequency analysis of the hailstorm text, using a software program, shows that over 85 per cent of the words in the text are in the most frequent 1000 words in English. Words that are not in this frequency band include *hail, corrugated, ceiling, skylight, injured, tiles* and *X-files*. Moreover, 50 per cent of the words in the text are *function words*, such as *a, about, am, and*, etc. Of these, the most frequent is the definite article *the* (12 occurrences, compared to only one of the indefinite article *a*). A *concordance* of the examples of *the* in the text (Table 1.2 overleaf) shows just how many references – to people, places, things, TV programmes – the speakers share. This in turn underlines the way that their conversation both reflects and reinforces the commonality of their different but interconnected worlds.

Summary

This chapter has aimed to provide a working definition of conversation. To do this, we have attempted to answer these questions: *How is conversation different from other related forms of communication?* and *How are these differences realized in terms of language?* In the chapters that follow we will take conversation to mean spontaneous, spoken, dialogic (or multilogic) communication, taking place in real time and in a shared context, whose function is primarily interpersonal, and in which the interactants have symmetrical rights.

We have also looked at some of the different theoretical constructs that have provided tools for analysing and describing conversation, and which will inform our analysis in the chapters that follow. In the next

four chapters, we will take a closer look at the linguistic features of conversation, specifically its vocabulary and grammar, its discourse structure (i.e. the way it is constructed sequentially and reciprocally), and the way its larger structures have become generalized into certain culturally-embedded patterns – or genres. A description of conversation at these different levels clearly has implications for teaching, and these implications will be explored in the second half of the book.

Task

In the transcription of spoken English below, can you identify features that are evidence of (a) spontaneity; (b) its interactive nature (i.e. reciprocity); and (c) its interpersonal function?

Mary:	I discovered that Adam used to be my neighbour yesterday.
Fran:	Oh really?
Mary:	Yes. In the conversation. Over a year, oh, well over a year ago.
Adam:	Yes we used to be neighbours about, about a year ago. About yeah well over a year ago we used to be neighbours in Glebe.
Fran:	But you never actually, did you know people in common?
Mary:	Yes.
Adam:	Yes definitely. We knew the peop . . . person who moved in there afterwards.
Mary:	Well he moved in while I was moving out. He lived with me for about four or five weeks but I was never there. But I couldn't believe it.
Adam:	[laugh] It's incredible.
Mary:	We used to think there were these strange people next door. And Adam used to think there were these strange people next door.
All:	[laugh]
Adam:	And now we KNOW there were strange people next door.
Mary:	No doubts yeah.

(Authors' data)

Table 1.2   Concordance of occurrences of the in the hailstorm text

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                                    THE tiles fell through
                        tiles fell through THE ceiling into
                           ceiling into THE room and they've actually had to move out
ove out completely. Oh really? And there was THE little old lady over
          little old lady over THE road who . . . Oh yes she was sitting in her
er living room and a hail stone fell through THE skylight, this old Italian woman. She had
      She had corrugated iron but it fell through THE skylight it fell through
             skylight it fell through THE ceiling and landed in her lap when she was
   he was sitting watching television. Watching THE X-files probably. Im so glad
                              X-files probably. Im so glad THE kids were not there because you know that
Its Sunday. Monday. Monday. Yes. Is THE school OK? You mean, general damage? I
I OK? You mean, general damage? I dont know. THE schools closed next to us, yes. I was
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