

Conversation analysis, conversational style and preference structure

spoken interaction (governed by two principles: speakers cooperate and take turns)

Some important terms:

floor - turn - turn-taking - floor-holding devices - local management system - transition
relevance place - overlap (overlapping speech) - simultaneous speech - backchannels
(backchannel signals/backchannelling) - pause - attributable silence - conversational style
- high involvement style - high considerateness style - adjacency pair - first part - second
part - insertion sequence - question-answer sequence - preference structure - preferred
and dispreferred social acts - preface - hesitation

Example 1:

Jane: *Dave I'm going to the store.*

(2 seconds)

Jane: *Dave?*

(2 seconds)

Jane: *Dave - is something wrong?*

Dave: *What? What's wrong?*

Jane: *Never mind.*

Examples of floor-holding devices:

2a. *There are three points I'd like to make - first ...*

b. *There's more than one way to do this - one example would be ...*

c. *Did you hear about Cindy's new car? - she got it in ...*

d. *Didn't you know about Melvin? - oh it was last October ...*

Adjacency pairs:

There are many almost automatic patterns in the structure of conversation.

| | FIRST PART | SECOND PART |
|----|--|----------------------------------|
| 3. | A: <i>What's up?</i> | B: <i>Nothing much.</i> |
| | A: <i>How's it going?</i> | B: <i>Jus' hangin' in there.</i> |
| | A: <i>How are things?</i> | B: <i>The usual.</i> |
| | A: <i>How ya doin'?</i> | B: <i>Can't complain.</i> |
| 4. | A: <i>What time is it?</i> | B: <i>About eight-thirty.</i> |
| | A: <i>Thanks.</i> | B: <i>You're welcome.</i> |
| | A: <i>Could you help me with this?</i> | B: <i>Sure.</i> |

Adjacency pairs represent social actions. Not all social actions are equal when they occur as **second parts of some pairs**, some are preferred and some are dispreferred. For example, an acceptance is structurally more likely than a refusal. This structural likelihood is called preference. **Preference structure** divides second parts into **preferred** (the structurally expected next acts) and **dispreferred** (the structurally unexpected next acts). In any adjacency pair, **silence** in the second part is always an indication of a dispreferred response.

5. Insertion sequence

Jean: *Could you mail this letter for me?* (Q1 - Request)

Fred: *Does it have a stamp on?* (Q2)

Jean: *Yeah.* (A2)

Fred: *Okay.* (A1 - Acceptance)

| | | | |
|----|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| 6. | FIRST PART | SECOND PART | |
| | | | PREFERRED DISPREFERRED |
| | Assessment | agree | disagree |
| | Invitation | accept | refuse |
| | Offer | accept | decline |
| | Proposal | agree | disagree |
| | Request | accept | refuse |

| | | |
|-----|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| | FIRST PART | SECOND PART |
| 7a. | <i>Can you help me?</i> | <i>Sure.</i> |
| b. | <i>Want some coffee?</i> | <i>Yes, please.</i> |
| c. | <i>Maybe we could go for a walk.</i> | <i>That'd be great.</i> |

How to do a dispreferred second

1. delay/hesitate
2. preface
3. express doubt
4. token Yes
5. apology
6. mention obligation
7. appeal for understanding
8. make it non-personal
9. give an account
10. use mitigators
11. hedge the negative

Examples

pause; *er*; *em*; *ah*,
well; *oh*
I'm not sure;
I don't know
that's great; *I'd love to*
I'm sorry; *what a pity*
I must do X;
I'm expected in Y
you see; *you know*
everybody else; *out there*
too much work; *no time left*
really; *mostly*; *sort of*; *kinda*
I guess not; *not possible*

From a pragmatic perspective, the expression of a preferred act clearly represents closeness and quick connection, while the expression of a dispreferred represents distance and lack of connection.

Restatement of assessment in order to avoid silence:

8. Sandy: *But I'm sure they'll have good food there.*
(2 seconds)
Sandy: *Hmm - I guess the food isn't great.*
Jack: *Nah - people mostly go for the music.*

Hesitations and prefaces in dispreferred second parts:

9. Becky: *Come over for some coffee later.*
Wally: *Oh - eh - I'd love to - but you see - I - I'm supposed to get this finished - you know.*

The following symbols will be used when analysing texts from *A Corpus of English Conversation* (by Svartvik and Quirk):

- A,B,C speaker identity (surreptitious speaker – doesn't know about recording)
a,b,c speaker identity (non-surreptitious speaker)
* yes * simultaneous talk
(laughs) contextual comment
<<yes>> incomprehensible words
.. _ _ _ . pauses