Conversational Grammar

CHRISTOPH RÜHLEMANN

Introduction

Computerized corpora have facilitated descriptions of the grammar of conversation in unprecedented detail in recent decades. Beside numerous research articles focusing on individual features, two corpus-based grammars have advanced our knowledge of conversational grammar considerably, the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (LGSWE, Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999) and the *Cambridge Grammar of English* (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). Particularly revealing are the analyses in the large entry in the LGSWE entitled "The grammar of conversation" (Biber et al., 1999, pp. 1038–125). Given the growing awareness of the relative differentness of conversational grammar from the grammar of Standard English, some scholars argue "the independence of spoken grammar" (McCarthy, 2001, p. 128) while others assert "the underlying *sameness* of spoken and written grammar" (Leech, 2000, p. 687).

The aim of this entry is to give a brief account of conversational grammar and to outline how its forms can be understood functionally. In so doing I will draw on the situational framework developed in Rühlemann (2007). The last section will present a case study on situational ellipsis. All examples used for illustration are taken from the conversational subcorpus of the British National Corpus (BNC, 2001), a general corpus of roughly 100 million words of British English collected in the 1990s (see Hoffmann, Evert, Smith, Lee, & Berglund Prytz, 2008).

What Is Conversational Grammar?

Following the authors of the LGSWE, I will use the term "conversational grammar" as referring to "grammatical features that are especially characteristic of conversational language, as compared with other registers" (Biber et al., 1999, p. 1038). That is, for a feature to be part of conversational grammar it is required that it either occur virtually only in conversation or be characteristically more frequent in conversation than in other major registers. A feature that is virtually nonexistent in writing but widespread in casual talk is *I says*, a form used in reports of conversations with multiple turns (see Rühlemann, 2007); a related phenomenon is quotative *I goes*, (see Rühlemann, 2008). Consider:

(1) Cos **he says**, **Steve says** to me, is he in? **I says**, no. **He says**, he's not in? **I says**, no. And a bit later on **I says** to him . . . I think he's at Cadets. **He says**, he's not, he's in. **I says**, eh? **He says**, he's in. And he's just walked past me. **I says**, well you could of told me he were in. **He says**, he's gone and done summat.

An example of an item which does occur in writing but is, in relative terms, much more common and more "key" in conversation is the first-person pronoun *I*: it is by far the most frequent word and the second most significant key word in the conversational subcorpus of the BNC (following the contracted form *yeah*) (on the nature and analysis of key words, see Scott, 1997).

Since conversational grammar is so intimately linked to register it will be necessary to characterize the notion of register in some more detail.

What Are Registers?

Registers are defined by Biber et al. as "situationally defined varieties" (1999, p. 5). This definition grasps two key components of register: variation and situation.

Registers are social varieties, such as sermons, sports commentaries, academic writing, news reportage, and conversation, to name a few. What distinguishes them? First, they are distinguishable on the basis of the circumstances—or, in Hallidayan terminology, "type of situation" (Halliday, 1978, p. 29—in which they are typically produced. The circumstances, for example, under which a sports commentator breathlessly reports on the rapidly changing scenes on the pitch are fundamentally different from the circumstances under which a poet produces maybe a two-liner in which every syllable is measured and weighed and every possible overtone is mulled over countless times. Not surprisingly, the circumstances in which language is used impact on *how* language is used: because the situation types are different, the language arising from them will be different too. The notion of register, then, requires a double perspective: an extralinguistic perspective, in which registers are intimately associated with certain situation types, and a linguistic perspective, in which registers are distinguishable on the basis of the linguistic features distinctive of them (see Crystal, 2003, p. 290).

This Janus-face of registers is crucial for describing them: "Any account of language that fails to build in the situation as an essential ingredient is likely to be artificial and unrewarding" (Halliday, 1978, pp. 28–9). How can the relationship between language and situation be described? In addressing this question the notion of adaptation is helpful: the linguistic variation characteristic of a register results from the language users *adapting* their language to constraints set by the particular situation. In the case of conversation, then, conversational grammar can be seen as adapted to the constraints set by the conversational situation. That is, the forms that are characteristic of conversational language are functional with regard to the factors that characterize the conversational situation. If one accepts this premise, the question arises as to what type of situation gives rise to conversation. In what follows I will address this question and give illustrative examples of conversational grammar.

Conversational Situation and Linguistic Adaptation

The question of what determines the conversational situation has attracted some attention in recent research (e.g., Biber et al., 1999; Leech, 2000). Probably the most comprehensive account to date is Rühlemann (2007). He outlines five situational factors for conversation: "shared context," "co-construction," "real-time processing," "discourse management," and "relation management." They are briefly explained in what follows.

Shared context refers to the wealth of nonverbal, perceptual, social, and cultural context that conversationalists share with each other. Because conversationalists interact face to face, they can convey subtle meanings nonverbally, using facial expressions and gestures. Conversationalists share access to visual, auditory, or tactile stimuli; there is no need to spell out every reference; often pronouns such as *that* or *he* will suffice for the hearer to recognize the intended referent. Further, conversationalists typically know each other well; thus, they share a wealth of experiences (what they went through) and discourses (what they talked about). As a result, linguistic "short cuts" such as minute hints, unfinished sentences, pronominal usage "out of the blue"—unintelligible for outsiders—are easily understood. Also, conversationalists tend to underspecify reference and use vague language instead, relying on their partners to fill in the gaps (e.g., O'Keeffe, 2004). In (2), for example, the set marker *or something* (Stenström, Andersen, & Hasund, 2002) is used not only to index the speaker's uncertainty about the intended reference but also to activate in the

listener's mind the category "fruit," which, in its breadth, is more likely to be referentially correct than the narrower reference to "grapefruit."

(2) No she, she had a grapefruit **or something** didn't she?

Co-construction reflects the fact that conversational text is the outcome of joint construction, through sequential organization (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) and role rotation (Goffman, 1981). Unlike lectures or academic presentations, which allow for speaker change only in question-and-answer sessions, the organization of turn taking in conversation provides for constant, rapid speaker change and the concomitant rotation of participant roles. Participants slip in and out of three major roles: speaker (the one holding the floor), recipient (the one/s whom the speaker is addressing) and listener (the one/s supporting the speaker in the backchannel but not claiming the floor; see, for example, Wong and Peters, 2007). Because of this inherent coauthorship in conversation participants can with great ease co-construct single utterances, and respond coherently and with "no gap/no overlap" (Sacks et al., 1974) to utterances, however elaborated, fragmented or elliptical. Speakers use a wide range of techniques to encourage co-construction. Examples of verbal next-speaker selection techniques include use of vocatives (e.g., McCarthy & O'Keeffe, 2003) and question tags (e.g., Tottie & Hoffmann, 2006); nonverbal techniques make use of gaze, intonation, and other bodily cues.

Real-time processing captures the fact that in conversation an essential resource—available in abundance in most writing—is scarce: time. Unlike writers, who can retrace, change, delete, and substitute any words, speakers cannot take back anything they have said. Unlike readers, who can reread passages at their leisure, listeners must understand speech immediately and be able to coherently respond in a split second. Further, what speakers are going to say and how they are going to put it is not premeditated in conversation: speakers plan ahead as they speak. Because time for planning and processing speech is scarce, the principle of economy looms large in conversation: "If one can shorten the text while keeping the message unimpaired, this reduces the amount of time and effort involved both in encoding and in decoding" (Leech, 1983, p. 67). The forms favored by the economy principle include, at the phonological level, all types of contraction: negative contraction such as *n't*, verbal contraction such as use of *'s* both for *is*, *has*, and *does*, and conversational contractions such as *gonna*, *gotta*, *dunno*, *cos*, etc. Syntactically, the economy principle favors types of "generalization" (Rühlemann, 2007), that is, use of single forms fulfilling multiple functions. The effect of generalization is a reduction of production load: instead of using two (or more) distinct forms, which is more costly to process, a single *uni*-form is used. Examples include the invariant tag *innit*, as in (3), use of *BE like* to report not only speech, as in (4), but also thought, emotion, and gesture (Buchstaller, 2002), and the pattern "*there's* + plural NP," as in (5):

(3) So that'll be over a hundred and forty pound **innit**?
(4) **I'm like** oh come on Carla hurry up
(5) Well in many ways yes, they, **there**'s powered **roads**, there's electricity and even water on tap, they never had

The construction in (5) has been shown to be more frequent in conversation than the plural verb–plural NP construction (see Biber et al. 1999, p. 186). Carter (1999, p. 157) argues that *there's* + plural NP is "used standardly in spoken English irrespective of whether the following subject is singular or plural."

Another notably economic construction is the header construction.

(6) **This little shop** . . . **[it]**'s lovely.

Headers involve a NP preceding the core of the clause (*This little shop* in the example), with a co-referential pronoun inside the clause (*it*). They benefit both the speaker, who "separates out crucial bits of information which are then attached more loosely to the clause" (Biber et al., 1999, p. 957), and the recipient, who receive an early statement of the upcoming topic.

Discourse management arises from a convergence of real-time processing and co-construction: because speakers in conversation interact in real time, fully exposed to all sorts of planning and processing constraints, and, at the same time, need be able to co-construct conversation coherently, an interactional dynamism is created, which is probably unparalleled in other registers. This dynamism demands attention: if unattended, conversation might collapse into disorder and incoherence. The crucial task is, then, for conversationalists to "manage" the dynamism in such a way as to establish discourse coherence. This is achieved by adherence to the "processibility principle" (Leech, 1983). This principle "recommends that the text should be presented in a manner which makes it easy for the hearer to decode in time" (Leech, 1983, p. 64). A broad variety of language features serve the processibility principle; they include most notably discourse markers (e.g., Schiffrin, 1987), the "maxim of end-weight" (Leech, 1983, p. 65), which demands that complex constituents be right-branched rather than left-branched, and "turn markers" such as *he says/goes/'s like* and *I went/said/'m like*, which help listeners tell apart the different "voices" that narrators may enact in storytelling.

Relation management, finally, pertains to the interpersonal goal-orientation in conversation: to do conversation is essentially to "establish bonds of communion" (Malinowski, 1923). Prime examples of "bonding language" are certain types of vocatives, including familiarized forms such as *Mike* or *Mikey* for *Michael*, endearments such as *love* or *sweetheart*, as well as the rich variety of pet names used for loved ones (see Leech, 1999; McCarthy & O'Keeffe, 2003). The interpersonal orientation in conversation is also realized by use of evaluative language. Examples include the tail construction, as in (7). Tails involve extraposed noun phrases (*this smog*, in the example below). They commonly co-occur with strongly evaluative language and, thus, predominantly perform a "phatic function" (Aijmer, 1989).

(7) Terrible **this smog** innit?

Evaluative language also includes "affect adjectives" such as *good* or *lovely*, "affect verbs" such as *WANT* or *LOVE*, and the broad class of interjections which "have an exclamatory function, expressive of the speaker's emotion" (Biber et al., 1999, p. 1083). Speakers in conversation also use a broad variety of means to involve listeners in the discourse. Examples, particularly in conversational storytelling, are use of historic present (HP), direct speech reporting (including forms of mimicry) instead of the more detached indirect reports, and "introductory this" as in (8), a use of the proximal demonstrative which serves to quickly involve the listeners in the story, inviting their active cooperation in building up a mental image of the situation being depicted (Biber et al., 1999, p. 274).

(8) And we got **this** mad bloke come in!

In the remainder of this entry I will pick out one conversational grammar feature—situational ellipsis—as a case in point, characterizing it in more detail.

A Case in Point: Situational Ellipsis

Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik (1985) distinguish three types of ellipsis: textual, where the full form is recoverable from the neighboring cotext; structural, where the ellipted form is retrievable through knowledge of grammatical structure; and situational, where the "missing" element can be recovered via recourse to extralinguistic context. The three types are illustrated in (9)–(11) (ellipted forms in square brackets):

(9) textual: (. . .) if you want me to **[lift the edge of your carpet]** I'll, I can lift the edge of your carpet and put it down onto the floor

(10) structural: (. . .) he's telling me the other week, he's, he's still five thousand pounds owing to him, though, work **[that]** he did twelve months ago

(11) situational: **[I]** Couldn't see any sign of nervousness myself (. . .)

Crucially, situational ellipsis tends to be utterance-initial, taking the form of "omission of subject and/or operator" (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 896). The following examples illustrate these structural possibilities. While only the subject is ellipted in (12)–(14), both subject and operator are not encoded in (15)–(17). The only example of operator-only ellipsis is (18):

(12) **[I]** Wouldn't mind.
(13) PS02B: What babe?
PS02F: **[I]** Don't want these black-currant sweeties.
PS02B: Why babe?
PS029: **[You]** Don't like them?
(14) **[It]** Depends how long it takes me.
(15) **[Do you]** See what I mean about that skirt?
(16) **[Have you]** Got that letter?
(17) **[Is there]** Anybody else with a comment?
(18) **[Does]** Anyone want a cup of tea?

As illustrated in the examples, situational ellipsis overlaps to a large extent with "subject ellipsis" (Nariyama, 2004). Omitting the subject is unproblematic in so-called pro-drop languages (e.g., Italian and Spanish) where the subject is morphologically shown by the verbal inflection. For example, the subject of the Italian utterance *ti voglio bene* ("I like you") is unmistakably the speaker because the verb form *voglio* can only be used for first-person singular. This type of subject–verb agreement, however, is largely absent from English (except for third-person singular present tense). The problem, then, is how listeners can ascertain the ellipted referent.

The answer lies in the context, which, in its multiple facets, is shared by conversationalists. Relevance theory, developed by Sperber and Wilson (1995), is helpful in elucidating the ways that listeners go about exploiting the shared context. Participants look for an interpretation that makes the utterance relevant in the expected way, thereby following a path of least effort. That is, listeners test the most accessible interpretation first and move on to the second, third . . . most accessible interpretation only if the first, second . . . does not yield satisfactory implications. In the case of ellipted third-person referents, the most accessible interpretations will be those derived from the linguistic cotext. In (14), for example, the omitted subject is the dummy subject *it*, the most conventional "filler" for

the ellipsis. In (17) and (18), relevant interpretations are arrived at by filling in forms that are structurally suggested by the cotext. In most cases, however, situational ellipsis is centered on first and second person (see Nariyama, 2004, p. 258), as in (11)–(13) and (15)–(16). Here, then, the type of context exploited is the extralinguistic context. The pronouns *I* and *you* are core person deictics by which speakers refer to themselves and their interlocutor(s) respectively. In face-to-face conversation, both addresser and addressee are physically copresent. When references to them are "left out," listeners need not venture far to recover the referents: in questions, the most accessible referents are the listeners themselves; in statements, the most likely referents are the speakers (Nariyama, 2004). Thus, relevance and recoverability are ensured by physical copresence.

In sum, what may be felt as "missing" in the use of situational ellipsis, if looked at from a written perspective, is made highly predictable by linguistic and extralinguistic context. As McCarthy (2001, p. 56) puts it: "Nothing is missing since the subject is there in front of the listener or is simply obvious and/or current/salient in the context."

Conclusions

It is still early days for descriptions of conversational grammar. As future corpora of conversation become larger and even more successful in their struggles to faithfully represent the myriads of conversations going on every day in the English-speaking world, many details of present-day descriptions of conversational grammar may have to be modified and, possibly, interpreted in a different light. The attempt, however, to view conversational grammar as the flip side of the conversational situation and to try to understand how, by using conversational grammar, speakers attempt to come to terms with the constraints set by the situation is a promising one. It helps us appreciate the value of conversational grammar, which lies in its adaptedness. The implications particularly for English-language teaching cannot be overstated. If conversational grammar can no longer be brushed aside as simply nonstandard, it can no longer be designated as a no-go area for language learners. Rather, knowing what makes the language of conversation unique and functional may enable us to actually teach it to our students.

SEE ALSO: Analyzing Speech Corpora; Conversation Analysis and Turn Taking; Functional Grammar; Pragmatics in the Analysis of Discourse and Interaction; Pragmatic Markers; Pragmatics and Grammar

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Suggested Readings

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