

34 The Analysis of Discourse Flow

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0 Introduction

Language is a dynamic process. It is easy to forget that fact when one is working with language that has been frozen on paper or a computer screen, where it has been turned into something that can be examined as if it were a fixed object. So much of linguistic analysis has dealt with language in written form that there is a temptation to think of language itself as having the same static quality (cf. Linell 1982). But language in action is better captured with the metaphor of a flowing stream.

There are, in fact, two streams, one a stream of thoughts, the other of sounds. The two have very different qualities. It is instructive to compare the experience of listening to a familiar language with listening to a language one does not know. In the former case it is the thoughts, not the sounds, of which one is conscious, but in the latter case only the sounds. Sounds are easier for an analyst to deal with, simply because they are publicly observable. Thoughts are experienced within the mind, and for that reason are less tractable to objective research. On the other hand thoughts enjoy a priority over sounds in the sense that the organization and communication of thoughts is what language is all about. The sounds exist in the service of the thoughts, and follow wherever the thoughts may take them. It is the thoughts that drive language forward. A basic challenge for discourse analysis is to identify the forces that give direction to the flow of thoughts.

1 Topics

Important among these forces are what I will be calling *topics*. This word has been used in different ways, and I should make it clear that I am not using it to apply to a constituent of a sentence, as when one speaks of a sentence having a “topic and comment” (e.g. Hockett 1958: 201), or of “topic-prominent” languages (Li and Thompson 1976), or of “topicalization” or “topic continuity” (e.g. Givón 1983). Rather,

I am using it to refer to what is sometimes called a “discourse topic” (Brown and Yule 1983: 71), as in “the topic of this paragraph.” A topic in this sense is a coherent aggregate of thoughts introduced by some participant in a conversation, developed either by that participant or another or by several participants jointly, and then either explicitly closed or allowed to peter out. Topics typically have clear beginnings, although that is not always the case (cf. Tannen 1984: 41–3), and their endings are sometimes well defined, sometimes not. As long as a topic remains open, participants in a conversation experience a drive to develop it. I began chapter 10 of Chafe (1994) with a quote from William James that nicely captures this drive:

In all our voluntary thinking there is some topic or subject about which all the members of the thought revolve. Half the time this topic is a problem, a gap we cannot yet fill with a definite picture, word, or phrase, but which . . . influences us in an intensely active and determinate psychic way. Whatever may be the images and phrases that pass before us, we feel their relation to this aching gap. To fill it up is our thought’s destiny. Some bring us nearer to that consummation. Some the gap negates as quite irrelevant. Each swims in a felt fringe of relations of which the aforesaid gap is the term. (James 1890, vol. 1: 259)

Sensitivity to the topic structure of talk may be a trait that varies with individuals. Casual observation suggests that people are constrained to varying degrees by the need to develop a topic fully before the conversation moves on to another, and that there is variable recognition of the social right to topic development. One wonders if such differences in conversational style can be traced to differences in the degree to which a person experiences James’s aching gap and the need to fill it.

A first step in discourse analysis can be to listen to a recording of a conversation with the goal of identifying topics, segments of discourse during which one or more of the speakers talk about “the same thing.” Topics are identifiable above all from their content, but there are likely to be phonetic cues as well: sometimes, though certainly not always, a longer-than-normal pause before a new topic is introduced; sometimes heightened pitch, loudness, acceleration, or a new voice quality at the outset; sometimes a tapering off in these same prosodic features at the end. One may find topics varying greatly in length. There may be occasional stretches of discourse during which there appears to be no topic at all. But most parts of most conversations lend themselves well to analysis into units of this kind.

There appears to be a basic level of topic-hood, with topics at that level typically included within more inclusive *supertopics*. The latter also have identifiable beginnings and endings, but they lack the internal structure that characterizes basic-level topics and do not generate the same drive for closure, James’s aching gap. Each time a basic-level topic is concluded, any participant in a conversation has the option of abandoning the current supertopic and, by introducing a new basic-level topic, introducing a new supertopic at the same time. With no internal structure of their own, supertopics can be abandoned whenever any included basic-level topic has been completed.

After a particular basic-level topic, or some sequence of them, has been chosen for further study, the next step can be to reduce the flow of language to some written form. The word *reduce* is appropriate. There is no way in which the richness of

natural speech, with all its prosodic complexity, its accompanying gestures and shifts of gaze, and ultimately the entire physical, social, and cognitive context in which it took place – no way in which all these factors can be captured in any presently conceivable written form. Thus, any attempt to transcribe spoken language on paper inevitably leaves much out. The transcriber needs a system that is more or less adequate for the questions addressed, but needs always to keep in mind that any system only selects from the totality of observations that might be relevant (Du Bois et al. 1993; Chafe 1993, 1995).

It is useful in this process to identify a unit of transcription that reflects another level of organization. In addition to basic-level topics, language gives evidence of the organization of thoughts from moment to moment into a focus and a periphery: a limited area of fully active consciousness surrounded by a penumbra of ideas in a semiactive state. Each focus is expressed in sound with a brief prosodic phrase, typically one to two seconds long, whose properties include one or more of the following: a distinctive terminal intonation contour, an initial resetting of the pitch baseline, the presence of silence before and after, a change of tempo at the beginning or end, and boundary changes in voice quality such as whispering or creaky voice. Intonation units are a pervasive feature of natural speech. Not only do they provide a useful way of segmenting speech, they are profitably viewed as expressing constantly changing foci of consciousness, and hence their relevance to understanding the flow of thought (Chafe 1994: 53–81).

2 Topic Navigation

In this perspective a topic can be seen as a conceptual unit that is too large to be accommodated within the limited capacity of fully active consciousness. A topic as a whole can thus be present only in a semiactive state. Once a topic has been introduced, the more limited focus of active consciousness navigates through it, activating first one included idea and then another until the topic is judged to have been adequately covered and closure is judged appropriate. This navigation process is often guided by a *schema*, some familiar pattern that provides a path for a speaker to follow (e.g. Bartlett 1932; Chafe 1986). It may also be driven, alternatively or simultaneously, by the less predictable interaction between conversational participants (Chafe 1994: 120–36).

I will illustrate this process with an excerpt from a long conversation in the course of which three women, whose names will be given here as Kathy, Sally, and Chris, were discussing teaching practices in an elementary school classroom. Kathy was an experienced teacher, Sally was a less experienced teacher, and Chris was a less involved onlooker. We can take up this conversation at a point where its forward movement was momentarily at a standstill. The previous topic had just been closed, and if the conversation was to continue someone had to choose and introduce a new topic. The preceding topics had fallen within the domain of a supertopic I will label Classroom Experiences.

The default option during such a lull in a conversation is for any of the participants to open a new basic-level topic that remains within the current supertopic, in this

case to talk about another classroom experience. That choice would leave the supertopic Classroom Experiences open, a situation that can be represented with an open parenthesis. The introduction of a new basic-level topic would then create its own open parenthesis, included within the other. This situation can be represented as follows, where the supertopic is shown in italics:

(Classroom Experiences (Classroom Experience 1) (Classroom Experience 2) (Classroom Experience 3

There are two open parentheses that demand eventually to be closed.

An alternative would be for any of the participants in the conversation to introduce a basic-level topic that would close the current supertopic with Classroom Experience 2 and establish a new and different one. Imagine, for example, that someone began talking now about a movie she had just seen, introducing a new basic-level topic that would simultaneously open a new supertopic that could be labeled Current Movies. The effect would be:

(Classroom Experiences (Classroom Experience 1) (Classroom Experience 2))
(Current Movies (A movie just seen by X

As it happened, Sally chose the default option, opening another topic that remained within the Classroom Experiences supertopic. What she said was:¹

(1) Sally (0.5) *Whát I was gonna téll you about that rèally frústrates me is that,*

No one but Sally knew where this topic would lead, and for the moment we can give it the label Something Frustrating. Later we will see how the flow of the conversation would make a different label appropriate.

The words *what I was gonna tell you about* suggest that Sally had planned to introduce this topic earlier. Examination of the larger context reveals that she had tried earlier to do just that. She was unsuccessful in that first attempt because Chris interrupted her with a different topic. What she said earlier was (numbered (0) because it lay outside the excerpt with which we will be principally concerned):

(0) Sally . . . *Méanwhile in the príncipal's òffice they're télling me,*

Two other topics intervened before Sally returned to what she had tried to start in (0), a topic that must have remained alive in her semiactive consciousness while the other topics were being developed. It was thus easily available to be reintroduced in (1), which was followed by a second intonation unit whose wording closely resembled that of (0), as we will see.

3 Navigation by Schema

We can now follow this conversation as it unfolded for those engaged in it. At the end we can view a transcript of the conversation as a whole, at the same time con-

sidering what, exactly, such a transcript represents. The Something Frustrating topic was at first developed by Sally as a monologue. There is a ubiquitous schema for narrative topic development whose maximum components can be listed as follows (cf. Chafe 1994: 120–36):

- summary
- initial state
- complication
- climax
- denouement
- final state
- coda.

Labov and Waletzky (1967) suggested a similar schema, but inexplicably omitted the climax. An opening summary may or may not be present. Closer to being obligatory is the presentation of an initial state that gives the topic a spatiotemporal and/or epistemic orientation. The complication section disturbs the initial state with events that lead to a climax, an unexpected event that constitutes the point of the topic, the reason for its telling. The denouement then provides a relaxation toward a final state in which new knowledge provided by the climax has been incorporated. There may or may not be a coda, a metacomment on the topic as a whole.

Sally's statement in (1) summarized the content of what would follow by saying that it would entail something frustrating. Not only did she open a new topic and assume the floor, but at the same time by using the word *frustrates* she foreshadowed its organization, creating an expectation that it would involve something desirable followed by an explanation of why that desirable outcome could not be realized. Deciding just how to proceed required additional mental processing time on Sally's part, an interval during which she uttered a prolonged hesitation sound, followed by 1.3 seconds of silence and then an audible breath before she continued:

(2) Sally (0.2) ùh=,

(3) (1.3) (breath) the (0.1) the péop . . the príncipal and stuff they sày to me,

In (3) she repeated, with only partially different words, her earlier attempt to introduce this topic, shown above as intonation unit (0). Early in (3) she decided to mention the people who had given her advice. Her truncated *the peop* was an attempt at categorizing that idea, but she quickly found a better categorization and produced the interestingly hedged phrase *the príncipal and stuff*, followed by the quote-introducer *they say to me*.

Looking back at (1), we can see that Sally's consciousness was then operating in what I have called the *immediate mode* (Chafe 1994: 195–223). That is, Sally was talking about what was still frustrating her at the very time she was talking. With (3), however, she moved into the *displaced mode* by shifting to things that had been said to her at one or more times in the past, displaced from the here and now of this conversation. Furthermore, the choice of the *generic mode* (*they say to me*, without reference to any particular event) anticipated that the quote to follow would be generic as well.

She was not talking about a particular act of advice-giving, but of events less locally specified. (The context makes it clear that she was not using the historical present here.)

Sally then began the quote, shifting her voice iconically to a higher pitch that lay noticeably above her normal range. The first element in the quote established an affective stance on the part of the principal and the others toward what they were telling her:

(4) Sally (0.9) (tsk) (breath) (begin higher pitch) óh wèll,

The alveolar click (*tsk*) as well as the prosody and wording *oh well* conveyed something of the lack of concern Sally had perceived in the advice: the principal and stuff felt that coping with the third-graders was no big deal.

The next focus established a frame for the recommended action: the idea that Sally should do something specific:

(5) Sally . . . wàt you dò with those thír-d-gràders,

With this utterance Sally created a second level of displacement. Having begun in the immediate mode in (1) (experiencing her current frustration), she used (3) to shift into the displaced world in which she was given advice, and now with (5) she moved into the further displaced world of the recommended action, a more hypothetical world that might be realized at some future time. Thus the sequence of (1), (3), and (5) established a setting that was increasingly displaced from the immediacy of the present conversation:

what frustrates me	(immediate)
the principal and stuff say to me	(past and generic)
what you do with those third-graders	(future and generic)

With this orientation in place, Sally arrived at a point where she could begin expressing the advice that had been given her. Putting it all together and deciding how to express it took a little more time, some of which she filled with two intonation units that shed light on still other aspects of discourse flow:

(6) Sally you knòw,

(7) is you jùst like,

There are two problems that confront anyone engaged in talk. They are created by two kinds of *unconformity*, to borrow a term from geology, where it refers to a discontinuity in rock strata. I use it here to refer to disparate aspects of human experience that must somehow be brought into approximate (but only approximate) conformity if one is to interact with one's fellow humans. First, there is the inevitable unconformity between an individual's experiences – perceptions, actions, and evaluations that are either immediate, remembered, or imagined – and the limited resources a language provides for verbalizing them. Second, there is the unconformity that inevitably exists

between one mind and another. There is, in short, both a *verbalization* problem and an *interaction* problem. The language people produce often gives indications that a speaker recognizes both, and (6) and (7) are examples.

So far as the verbalization problem is concerned, language cannot fully or adequately express an inner experience. The verbalization process allows a speaker to get a useful handle on the experience and share it to some degree with others, but the linguistic organization of ideas is not the same as the experience itself. The ubiquitous *like*, found here in (7), is one way a speaker can show recognition of the unconformity between ideas and their verbal expression – a small and passing way in which Sally showed her recognition that what she was about to say would be only a roughly satisfactory representation of what she was thinking.

So far as the interaction problem is concerned, one mind can never fully know what another mind is experiencing, and language can only imperfectly bridge the gap. Someone engaged in a conversation needs both to clothe an inner experience in language that will more or less adequately express it, and at the same time find language that will more or less satisfactorily take account of what is believed to be present in other minds, to the extent that that is possible. The equally ubiquitous *you know*, the sole content of (6), is one way a speaker can show recognition of the unconformity between his or her own mind and the mind of another, in this case signaling that what she was about to say was, to some degree at least, what her listeners might have expected and not something that would be totally surprising to them. (It can be noted that (6) and (7) were attributed to the people characterized as *the principal and stuff*, not to Sally herself, but of course there is no way to know whether they were anything the principal or anyone else had actually said.)

It was time now to move on to the complication section of the narrative schema, in this case the actions recommended by the principal and stuff:

- (8) Sally (0.8) táke them=,
 (9) and pút them=,
 (10) you knòw with= òne of the smárter fòurth-gràders who's vèry [vér]bal
 and,
 (11) Chris [Uh huh,]
 (12) Sally (0.1) and wèll-beháved.
 (13) (0.5) And you . . hàve them wòrk as a téam you know;
 (14) so that the (0.4) (breath) fòurth-gràder can help the thírð-gràder.

At the end of (14) the prosody conveyed a definitive closure of this section. The climax then came with a bang, its impact heightened by the nearly two seconds of silence that preceded it as well as by the forceful wording:

- (15) Sally (1.7) (loud) But . . that's búllshit.

The immediately following denouement served to justify this evaluation:

- (16) Sally (0.1) Because,
(17) (0.5) *thát* just *tèaches* the *thírd-gràder*=,
(18) with the *lèsser* *intèlligence* that,
(19) (0.9) that he's *wórtless*;
(20) . . . you know that he *càn't* *léarn* [*sùmpn* on his *ów=n*.]

4 Navigation by Interaction

With (20), Sally completed her own development of the topic she had opened in (1). Can we say that the conversation had now returned to a state where it would have been appropriate for any of the participants to introduce a different topic, either staying within the Classroom Experiences supertopic or introducing a new supertopic? The question is whether (20) qualifies as a topic ending. We can only speculate on Sally's goal in opening her topic in the first place, but we might suppose that she was using (1)–(20) as a way of eliciting some reaction, perhaps sympathy and advice, from her interlocutors. In any case Kathy reacted in a way that may not have been what Sally was hoping for. What she said overlapped the end of (20):

- (21) Kathy [*Nó* it's *nót*;
(22) *nó* it's] *nót*,
(23) you *cán* put them in *tèams* like *thàt*;

With these three intonation units Kathy succeeded in reorganizing the structure of the ongoing topic. Until now Sally's topic had been organized around the idea that teams do not work, the idea I labeled Something Frustrating. Kathy now introduced the idea that teams *do* work, thereby organizing the topic into a bipartite structure of thesis and antithesis: into the subtopics Teams Do Not Work and Teams Do Work. Thus, the topic we are studying could now be relabeled as Using Teams. But what followed took a path that no one could have anticipated.

Kathy began by justifying her statement in (23) by trying to modify Sally's conception of the make-up of the teams:

- (24) Kathy but you *dón't* put *óne* with *óne*;
(25) you *pút* like *twó* *fóurth-gràders* with–

Before she finished (25), however, she decided that her intent would come across more clearly if she could establish the relative numbers of third- and fourth-graders

in Sally's class. After nearly a second of silence she briefly thought in (26) of asking for raw numbers, but truncated that attempt also and quickly replaced it with a request for a ratio instead:

(26) Kathy (0.8) Hów many thír-d-gràders d-

(27) What's the . . [1 rátió of thír-d- 1] [2 graders to fóurth-graders. 2]

In the middle of (27) there occurred one of those conversational moments when people talk at cross-purposes, a turbulence in the stream of interactive thought. Sally did not immediately hear Kathy's question about the ratio of third-graders to fourth-graders, and not only Sally but also Chris began to pursue directions of their own, overlapping most of (27):

(28) Sally [1 But they're nó 1]

(29) Chris [2 You mean so they dòn't feel singled 2] [3 óut or whát. 3]

But Sally quickly abandoned whatever she had begun in (28) and responded to Kathy's question in (27) with some precise information:

(30) Sally [3 Nów I have 3] like fíve thír-d-gràders.

(31) I have like (0.3) twénty-two kíd.

These two statements elicited the first of the misunderstandings that drove the remainder of this topic. Sally's answer invited some hasty arithmetic that should have yielded the correct number of fourth-graders, but Kathy made an error:

(32) Kathy (0.2) Ókay,

(33) só you have fífteen fóurth-gràders and fíve thír-d-gràders?

We can only speculate on why Kathy said *fifteen*, but the subsequent conversation suggests that she had been hoping for a whole number ratio like fifteen to five, so that each team could have contained three fourth-graders and one third-grader.

The question in (33) was a confirmative one, anticipating a positive answer, but of course Sally responded with a correction:

(34) Sally (0.6) Nó;

(35) (0.9) uh= nó.

(36) (0.1) I have like (0.2) séven (noise) fóurth-graders.

(37) (0.1) (sotto voce) And fíve thír-d-graders.

During (36) there was an extraneous background noise that masked the last syllable, *teen*, of the word *seventeen*, so that Kathy heard only *seven*. On the basis of ordinary

expectations regarding class size she responded with surprise, communicated especially by her prosody:

(38) Kathy You have twéleve kíd's?

Now it was Sally's turn to be surprised. Thinking she had just explained that the correct numbers were 17 fourth-graders and five third-graders, Kathy's question made no sense:

(39) Sally (0.5) Whát?

But Kathy could only repeat it:

(40) Kathy (0.1) You ónly have twéleve kíd's?

Sally repeated her previous answer, this time free of the noise:

(41) Sally (0.4) Nó.

(42) (0.3) Séventéen;

Kathy stood corrected:

(43) Kathy (0.2) Óh ókay,

Sally wanted to make certain that Kathy knew that 17 was not the total number in the class, but only the size of the subset on which she had focused:

(44) Sally fóurth-grà[ders,]

Amid all this confusion Kathy abandoned her plan to be precise about the numerical composition of the teams. If she had hoped to specify that each team would be composed of three fourth-graders and one third-grader, she now found it pointless to insist on such exactitude and fell back on a less precise recommendation:

(45) Kathy [so] thén what you dó is you sprínkle the fíftth-gràders out évenly.

(46) (0.6) And you máke . . [the fóurth-gràders] (0.1) táke the responsibility for téaching them.

In (45) she made another error, saying *fíftth-graders* instead of *thírd-graders*, probably because Kathy herself had taught a fifth–sixth-grade combination in which it was the fifth-graders who were the less advanced. Sally corrected her with a questioning intonation while Kathy was uttering *fóurth-graders* in (46):

(47) Sally [Thírd-gràders?]

Kathy then went on to supplement what she had said in (46):

- (48) Kathy And yóu engráin in them,
(49) that it's théir responsibility to hèlp those little kíd's.

She added a coda that would drive home the success of the recommended procedure. Sandwiched between her final two intonation units was a protest by Sally, evidently to the effect that she herself had done the same:

- (50) Kathy Thát's what Í did,
(51) Sally I háve been.
(52) Kathy [and it wórks.]

Even before Kathy finished (52), Chris overlapped with a question whose effect was to open a new, though closely related topic:

- (53) Chris [But thén you]
(54) can you sáy it's a [pàrt of your] gráde?

There followed a lengthy discussion of whether and how one should grade the fourth-graders for their mentoring activities. The situation created by (54) was thus as follows:

(Classroom Experiences (Classroom Experience 1) (Classroom Experience 2)
(Using Teams) (Assigning Grades

My intention with this extended example has been to illustrate how the stream of language is propelled forward by the opening of a topic and the creation of a drive for the topic's development until closure is judged appropriate. I have discussed a basic-level topic, ultimately called Using Teams, as an example of the highest level of topic-hood at which there is a coherent trajectory of development. Once open, a topic may be kept moving along a path provided by a schema, or by the interaction of separate minds engaged in the conversation, or by some combination of both. Interactive topic development may be driven by an interlocutor's desire to agree with or contradict something said by another, or to request needed information the other may possess. This example shows especially well how forward movement may be driven by momentary misunderstandings.

5 The Text

By stringing together all the intonation units that were introduced piecemeal above, one can produce a transcript of this entire segment of the conversation. This kind of object is often called a *text*, and it is the traditional object of discourse study:

- 1 Sally (0.5) Whát I was gonna téll you about that rèally frústrates me is that,
 2 (0.2) ùh=,
 3 (1.3) (breath) the (0.1) the péop . . the príncipal and stuff they sày to me,
 4 (0.9) (tsk) (breath) (begin higher pitch) óh wèll,
 5 . . whàt you dò with those thír-d-gràders,
 6 you knòw,
 7 is you júst like,
 8 (0.8) táke them=,
 9 and pút them=,
 10 you knòw with= òne of the smárter fòurth-gràders who's vèry [vér]bal
 and,
 11 Chris [Uh huh,]
 12 Sally (0.1) and wèll-beháved.
 13 (0.5) And you . . hàve them wòrk as a téam you know;
 14 so that the (0.4) (breath) fòurth-gràder can help the thír-d-gràder.
 15 (1.7) But . . that's búllshit.
 16 (0.1) Because,
 17 (0.5) thát just tèaches the thír-d-gràder=,
 18 with the lèsser intèlligence that,
 19 (0.9) that he's wóρθless;
 20 . . you know that he càn't léarn [sùmpm on his ów=n.]
 21 Kathy [Nó it's nó;
 22 nó it's] nó,
 23 you càn put them in tèams like thàt;
 24 but you dòn't put óne with óne;
 25 you pút like twó fòurth-gràders with-
 26 (0.8) Hów many thír-d-gràders d-
 27 What's the . . [1 ràtio of thír-d- 1] [2 graders to fòurth-graders. 2]
 28 Sally [1 But they're nó 1]
 29 Chris [2 You mean so they dòn't feel singled 2] [3 óut or whát. 3]
 30 Sally [3 Nów I have 3] like fíve thír-d-gràders.
 31 I have like (0.3) twénty-two kíd's.
 32 Kathy (0.2) Ókay,
 33 só you have fíftéen fòurth-gràders and fíve thír-d-gràders?
 34 Sally (0.6) Nó;
 35 (0.9) uh= nó.
 36 (0.1) I have like (0.2) séven (noise) fòurth-graders.
 37 (0.1) (sotto voce) And fíve thír-d-graders.
 38 Kathy You have twéelve kíd's?
 39 Sally (0.5) Whát?
 40 Kathy (0.1) You ónly have twéelve kíd's?
 41 Sally (0.4) Nó.
 42 (0.3) Séventéen;
 43 Kathy (0.2) Óh ókay,
 44 Sally fòurth-grà[ders,]
 45 Kathy [so] thén what you dó is you sprínkle the fíft-h-gràders out évenly.

- 46 (0.6) And you máke . . [the fóurth-gràders] (0.1) táke the responsibility
for téaching them.
- 47 Sally [Thírd-gràders?]
- 48 Kathy And yóu engráin in them,
49 that it's théir responsibility to hèlp those little kíds.
50 Thát's what Í did,
51 Sally I háve been.
52 Kathy [and it wórks.]
53 Chris [But thén you]
54 can you sáy it's a [pàrt of your] gráde?

What kind of thing is this? Does it have any validity beyond being a visual representation of a concatenation of utterances that were produced in sequence as the conversation unfolded through time? One possibility, easily discardable, is that it represents something in the minds of one or more of the participants before these things were said. But of course no one could have planned the above, or have predicted that the conversation would proceed in this way. Is it, then, something that remained in the minds of the participants afterwards? Again the answer must be no, though perhaps this time not quite so unqualified a no. Although some of the ideas expressed here were probably retained in some form, varying from one participant to another, for at least a while, the details of how these thoughts were activated and verbalized during the conversation were surely quickly lost. The participants may have remembered for a time that they talked about using teams in the classroom, that Sally did not like the idea, that Kathy did like it, and so on. But the particular sequence of ideas and exactly how they were expressed was surely ephemeral.

It is worth noting that spontaneous conversations differ from "oral literature" in this respect. A person may remember a ritual or story or joke and repeat it later in another setting, though with language and content seldom if ever identical. But people do not repeat casual conversations in the same way. Someone might say, "That was a good conversation," but no one would be likely to exclaim, "Let's say the whole thing again tomorrow." If people do remark occasionally, "I think we've had this conversation before," they are hardly thinking of a verbatim repetition. It is worth reflecting on the fact that the collection and study of texts has in the past been slanted toward narratives and rituals whose value lies in something closer to (though seldom identical with) verbatim repetition. Discourse of that kind is more persistent in memory, and in that respect is a little more like written language. In other words, earlier discourse studies have tended to favor material that has been closer in nature to written text (Chafe 1981).

I do not mean to suggest that a text like the above has no use. What it gives us is a lasting record of evanescent happenings that we can examine visually at our leisure. As a kind of time machine, it is a resource that allows us as analysts to view all at once the dynamic processes by which a sequence of linguistic events was produced. It is a useful tool that can further our understanding of how minds and language proceed through time. By freezing temporal events it helps us identify the forces responsible for creating them. My point is that we should not be misled into interpreting this artificial aid to understanding as something that possesses a transcendent reality.

One may sometimes hear the view that participants in a conversation are engaged in the joint construction of a text. I suggest that it is better to think of a conversation as a uniquely human and extraordinarily important way by which separate minds are able to influence and be influenced by each other, managing to some extent, and always imperfectly, to bridge the gap between them, not by constructing any kind of lasting object but through a constant interplay of constantly changing ideas. The example that has been discussed here suggests a few of the ways in which that can happen.

NOTES

- 1 Conventions followed in this and the following transcriptions of speech include the following. The numbers in parentheses are measurements (to tenths of a second) of periods of silence. The acute and grave accents mark the nuclei of syllables with primary and secondary accents respectively. Periods show a decisively falling pitch contour, often accompanied by creaky voice, whereas semicolons show a less decisive fall. Commas show any other terminal contour, except that the high rising pitch associated with a yes-no question is shown by a question mark. The equals sign shows a prolongation of the preceding sound. Square brackets show overlapping speech, sometimes indexed with numbers when there might be ambiguity. That is, a segment enclosed in [1 . . . 1] overlaps with another segment indexed in the same way, etc.

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