

Lesson Nine

Conversation Theories

Aims

The aims of this lesson are to enable you to

- comment on and evaluate various conversation theories
- apply them or link them to work from previous lessons

Context

The work of various linguistic theorists forms a base for any research you may do, especially at A2 level. Remember that the internet is an excellent resource and will come in particularly useful for finding links to other theories and theorists that are not necessarily mentioned here. Here we look at how and why these theoretical models are flouted by the speakers in the given transcription, according to the roles they have adopted in their conversations.



Gardiner, pp. 58-61.

Language and Society, William Downes. Cambridge University Press, 1984.



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Introduction: Conversation Theory

It is no surprise that spoken discourse has attracted many linguists into constructing theoretical models by which to explain and analyse it. Indeed, much of the work that you have done so far is a matter of theory rather than hard fact; conversation structure itself is not scientifically demonstrable but rather depends on observations leading to conjectural 'explanations'. It is perfectly acceptable, in some cases even recommendable, to hold reservations about some theories or even to reject them outright.

However, the discourse of theoretical argument itself has unwritten structures and rules by which people commonly abide, and so you must always explain the reasons for your objections and give practical examples! Each of the theories outlined here relates to previous lessons in this module. Dealing with each one in turn should involve some revision of those lessons, and hopefully you can start to see how all the many aspects of spoken interaction constantly work with and against each other.

Grice and the Cooperative Principle

H.P. Grice has been hugely influential in discourse analysis, coining what has been termed the cooperative principle. His argument follows the line that conversations are founded on the assumption that speakers share goals and standards, and thus recognise common ways of achieving them, doing this through dialogue with each other. In this respect, he was one of the first scholars to view conversation through pragmatics rather than semantics.

The principle is based around four maxims.

1. **Quantity** – speakers in a conversation should not give too little nor too much information according to the nature of their interaction. If one speaker asks 'What's Anna up to these days?' and the other replies 'Working', the response may be too scant for the first speaker, who wants to know where she works and whether she enjoys it. However, if the second speaker gives the first a rundown of Anna's daily routine from teeth-brushing to sleep, it would clearly be too informative for the parameters and expectations of the conversation.
2. **Quality** – A conversational contribution should always try to be true, where speakers strive to be honest, only giving information if they have evidence to back it up, and not fabricating details.
3. **Relevance** – We have all been in the position where somebody deals a 'conversation-stopper' and we all roll our

eyes to the ceiling; sometimes speakers will revert to topics long since exhausted in the discussion, or voice a non-sequitur. In doing this, they are flouting the maxim of relevance.

4. **Manner** – Speakers should avoid ambiguity, obscurity and gratuitous wordiness. These impede conversation rather than enhance it.

Grice's maxims are helpful but can be misunderstood and misused. Their real value lies not in their application, but in their flouting or rejection; virtually no conversation will observe all four maxims, for it is impossible to be on guard to such a degree without rendering talk forced and uninteresting.

There are many holes in this breakdown of conversational dos and don'ts. Ambiguity might be called for in many situations; for example, in literary discussion. Lying is preferable in some circumstances, for the purposes of tact. And as for relevance, how is such a condition judged? When a speaker asks 'How is Belinda coping with her new job?', the second speaker might say 'She's going to yoga on weekends'.

If the first speaker expects an answer such as 'well' or 'badly', then he or she will have to read between the lines in order to gather that the job is stressful, because Belinda is doing yoga at the weekend. This process of implied meaning is called **implicature** by Grice, but many more conversations operate along these lines than straight referentiality; perhaps this should have been a fifth maxim!



Now read Gardiner, pp. 58-59, and attempt the exam question at the bottom of p. 59.

Politeness

Many conversational theories have come from debates about what constitute 'polite' or 'proper' conversational tactics according to different social situations. We all come across such situations every day, where it may be 'polite' to tell a white lie or humour somebody, or 'proper' to give someone a stern ticking off. Many politeness theories, however, focus on the varying degrees of individual speaker identity detectable in discourse, in order to examine how those with whom we interact adjust aspects of their speech both to impress a particular personal identity upon us, and to acknowledge, respect or judge a facet of ours.

Face Theory

Irving Goffmann (1955) identified the image that we present to the rest of the world as face. This 'image' is not a matter of physical aspect but rather one constructed by the language we use and the way we interact in discourse, and usually it is motivated by our perception of what is socially 'acceptable' in a conversational situation. Because conversations are a cooperative activity, we must observe two rules to 'save face'; they are known as the rule of self-respect and the rule of considerateness. The former is concerned with guarding one's own face while the latter respects the face of other speakers. Generally we are aware of the need for cooperation over self-expression, and so for example tend to suppress any instincts towards other-repair (correcting others' conversational blunders or hesitations) in favour of exercising self-repair.

However, Goffmann also identified that cooperation can be negative. If a speaker acts contemptuously, then there is a strong likelihood that the listener will respond with equal contempt. We measure politeness and considerateness by certain interaction rituals such as apologies, greetings and addresses (e.g. calling someone 'madam' or 'sir' as opposed to 'Mr' or 'Mrs' something, or their first name); equally, we will neglect to attend to these rituals if we have been treated negatively.

These points of tension are known as face-threatening acts, because they arise when a speaker does not take due account of the face another wants to present during interaction. These can range from the mildest of misunderstandings to deliberate subversion of unspoken but mutually agreed conversational rules.

Compliments can potentially be face-threatening, because although they may be meant well, a speaker may want to present a modest face that does not draw attention to his or her achievements; therefore, an ill-judged compliment can be disruptive to a conversation. Sarcasm is also often face-threatening, though to what level depends on precedent – it could be an essential element of dialogue between two individuals or amongst a group that counts it part of its sociolect.

Brown and Levinson (1987) developed the idea of face-threatening through their concept of positive and negative face. The positive face is that which desires approval and comment in order to construct positive self-image, while the negative face is that which desires privacy and freedom from imposition. A positive face might be that of a speaker who looks eager to make a point in a discussion; another speaker will identify their desire and bring them into the conversation. This would constitute an act of positive politeness on the part of the other speaker. A negative face might be that of someone who does not want to join the discussion, and when called

on for opinion replies 'I'm not sure...I couldn't say.' These could be interpreted as signs that the speaker does not want to be approached for comment, and a speaker who respects this is exercising negative politeness. In this sense, calling someone 'madam' or 'sir' becomes a form of negative politeness.

These principles are very much influenced by class, gender and age. It has frequently been observed that those of more modest social standing are much more likely to maintain negative politeness towards class 'superiors' while the upper or upper-middle classes do not necessarily maintain such rules of considerateness; this also applies to youngsters and their elders. Gendered forms of address can prove contentious.

If a woman wants to appear young, she may well give a positive face that encourages compliments and the form 'miss'; but if she wishes to appear mature, serious and competent, she may present a face which encourages the term 'ms'. With its lack of emphasis on age or marital status, the persona of 'ms' could be seen as both a positive and negative face. By addressing somebody on those terms, a speaker is respecting their right to discretion regarding their private life, and thus adopting negative politeness; but 'ms' can also be seen as a compliment, a sign that the woman in question is being taken on her own terms, without reference to 'personal' details, and thus be a form of positive politeness.

Remember not to confuse these terms – negative politeness, despite its name, has a positive effect on conversation because it is a mark of respect!

Activity 1

Face the theory

What do you think of 'face theory'? What are the potential disadvantages of analysing interaction in this way?



Suggested Answer to Activity 1

Face theory has had many detractors, who claim that it is based on the assumption that we all have 'ulterior motives'. The emphasis is not on 'natural' interaction but rather the choosing of a particular conversational stance, and the construction of it throughout that exchange.

It also presupposes a harmony between the face that we construct and that which appears to other speakers; there may well be a discrepancy between the two. Face-threatening acts are thus not always merely produced by a disregard for somebody's face. They can also occur when a speaker misreads a face, thinking it to retain attributes which it does not. The opposite is irony, where a face is presented which neither party believes to be the genuine one, but where both faces play along.

The Politeness Principle

The politeness principle is associated with the work of **Robin Lakoff**, who identified three main maxims that speakers generally observe in order to appear polite. Firstly, they don't impose, acknowledging that a person may not have the time or inclination to listen to them in standard phrases such as 'Sorry to bother you' etc. Secondly, they give a range of options, refusing to force someone into a corner or pose an ultimatum; we will say 'It's up to you' or 'I'm easy, what do you think?' Thirdly, a speaker will make the receiver feel good by flattery such as 'You are a star' or 'What would I have done without you?'

The problem with these maxims is that usage keeps changing and the lines become blurred. Since compliments can sometimes be the result of a misjudging of face, they can be very easily taken as ironic. Much flattery has become little more than gentle sarcasm. Few would say that 'Bless him' represents a genuine feeling that the person in question deserves spiritual affirmation; it is more likely to be meant a little ironically, and can be used to belittle with small nuances of intonation and pitch.



Now read Gardiner, pp. 60-61, and attempt the exam question at the bottom of p. 61.

Theories of Social 'Accommodation'

Some researchers have suggested that politeness extends beyond what we say to how we actually say it. Accommodation theory, most strongly associated with the work of **Howard Giles**, is described on p. 50 of the Gardiner text and posits that speakers of different social standing tend to converge or diverge (though the first is more common), by adopting aspects of the other's speech. A speaker of RP, talking to a Cockney, may move closer to 'Estuary English' to signal his or her support and sympathy (downward convergence), while the Cockney may enunciate more clearly and modify their accent towards Received Pronunciation (upward convergence). When these two processes happen simultaneously, it is termed mutual convergence.

Divergence tends to happen when a group of people want to positively identify themselves against another; this is particularly prominent in subcultures, or between supporters of rival football teams, or between age groups (a rebellious teenager may go against the RP of his or her parents by adopting a more 'street' accent).

You may think of several negative aspects of this theory. It is predicated on seemingly fixed ideas of the nature of 'upper' and 'lower' class speech, and even its name, 'accommodation', suggests that different social groups should make room for each other, rather than fully harmonising. Furthermore, how do we measure a person's 'normal' speech? Every day, our speech alters depending on whom we are speaking to, not just in a downward or upward convergence, but with parents, school-friends, work colleagues or on the telephone.

Theories of Interaction between Genders

The idea of accommodation, if not explicitly adopted by them, has nevertheless proved influential on a number of academics debating conversational gender roles. It was believed for many years that women were expert in negative politeness, using many qualifications rather than directly addressing issues, shielding themselves behind tag questions and hedges. Lakoff's work on gendered interaction did much to concretise these principles, with the strong suggestion that they in some way devalue women's speech.

However, since the 1980s, there has been a rigorous questioning of such compartmentalisation. The work of **Deborah Tannen** has identified the existence of genderlect. This is a term used to describe a dialect unique to one of the genders, just as a sociolect is unique to a particular social group. She argues that interaction between the two sexes is actually interaction between two cultures, and thus a cross-cultural communication.

This theory arose after observing that men tend to seek respect and prestige from conversation; when they interrupt, it is usually a personal fact rather than a supportive overlap. Put briefly, male conversations tend to revolve around issues of power. By contrast, conversations between women seek to build bridges between speakers and to make connections. Women will change topic less frequently, as they are not aware of the opportunities to take control of interaction in the way that men are.

Tannen's work does not privilege one conversational 'culture' over another; on the contrary, it seeks to prove that the two can exist side by side, even in a balanced way. In this sense, it is a more objective study than those of previous theorists. Nevertheless, many people have quibbled with the idea of genderlect, because its focus is still too polarised. Ironically, it does not really take account of sociolect, or indeed other factors that may influence conversation amongst and between genders other than that gender.

For example, African-Caribbean women may interact with each other in a markedly different way to Greek women; Greek women and African-Caribbean women interacting together will produce another set of results. It is also true to say that many all-male conversations will revolve around support rather than one-upmanship.

Tannen's solution to the barriers between the two gender 'cultures' is for the sexes to interact more, for men to adopt a more 'feminine' tone and women to adopt a more 'masculine' one. This ambition towards androgyny nevertheless bears connotations of accommodation theory, and it could be said that her willingness to point to 'solutions' contradicts her idea that both 'male' and 'female' interactive traits have equal value.

Deborah Cameron has suggested that a fully integrated analysis of language is desirable, because linguists often debate these matters without acknowledging anything outside of their field, while writers and thinkers in cultural studies do not have the specialist linguistic knowledge to delve deeply into language patterns. She argues that the difference between genders is neutral, and that only language draws attention to the difference as a social issue. Nevertheless, her work does not always succeed in trying to deconstruct this problem, as she is herself using language to draw our attention to it!

Other linguists you might want to draw upon when considering gender and interaction include Jennifer Coates and Pamela Fishman. Remember when using theories to exercise critical judgement; don't be afraid to pick holes in an argument.

Activity 2

Next time you are in a room with members of all one sex, put some of the theories to the test and see if their assertions ring true. Do men compete for attention more than women, for example?

**Lesson Review**

In this lesson we have looked at different conversation theories.