

A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF NATURAL CONVERSATIONS.

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ABSTRACT

Discourse analysis deals with linguistic analysis of naturally occurring connected spoken or written discourse. In this article we will use multidimensional approaches: descriptive, pragmatic and structural analysis of natural conversations between students who were conversing and discussing a variety of topics that were essential and of interest to their welfare. We have shown that discourse analysis must be organized and the sentence patterns taken into consideration so that all the interlocutors can communicate intelligibly and participate actively.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Discourse analysis deals with linguistic analysis of naturally occurring connected spoken or written discourse (Stubbs 1983 : 1). Since it studies conversational exchanges it is primarily concerned with language use in "social contexts and in particular with interaction or dialogue among speakers". In addition, Stubbs (1983: IX) asserts that discourse analysis sheds light on social process through its interactional perspective. It also advances our understanding of the use of the structure of a language.

There are different definitions of natural conversation for instance: it is a spontaneous, unplanned and casual means of communication. There exist various types of natural conversation with varied distinctions among natural conversation (Stubbs 1983 : 33). Type (a) is language which occurs naturally without any intervention from the linguist, whereas type (b) is language which is elicited by the linguist as part of some experiment. This type includes data which are the linguist's own introspections or intuitions, that is, data which he has elicited from himself. On the other hand, type (c), is language which is spontaneous in the sense of unplanned, and is composed in real time in response to immediate situational demands, and (d) language which is deliberately planned, rehearsed, thought about, altered and edited.

Our concern in this article is type (c) which according to Stubbs characterizes most spoken language including everyday conversation. Other characteristics of unplanned conversation involves frequent repetition, simple active sentences, with unmarked Sentence "S"; Predicator "P"; Complement "C"; Adjunct "A" (SPCA) word order (Ochs 1979 in Stubbs 1983 : 33 – 34). Furthermore, there is the use, of deictic modifiers, for example 'this' rather than the definite article, etcetra. It exhibits prominence on the topic – comment structure. Based on the foregoing, language, action and knowledge are inseparable (Austin 1962 in Stubbs 1983). It therefore follows that utterances, are actions.

Discourse analysis involves how people actually talk to each other in everyday settings viz: streets, homes, shops, classrooms, restaurants, buses etcetra. Since discourse analysis deals with conversation amongst people, this article sets out to answer the following questions:

QUESTIONS

- (a) How is conversation amongst people organized?
- (b) How do people introduce and change topics?
- (c) How do interactors interrupt, ask questions, and give or evade answers.?
- (d) How do speakers show that they understand what the other person is talking about?

In order to answer the questions set out above, this work will be divided into the following subheadings;

- (i) Method of Data Collection
- (ii) Some observations on the data
- (iii) Narrative Organization
- (iv) Interactional roles
- (v) Sentence structure analysis

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

The data was collected by surreptitiously recording the conversation of these speakers. They were conversing on a number of issues that affected their lives as graduate students.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE DATA

Within the conversational context, the first reference to the topic is the question by A2.

A2 How was your family planning workshop?

It is this question that becomes the major topic in conversation 1 whereas for conversation II, the topic is introduced through this statement

A1 This course we are doing.

(more on this as we analyse the conversation further). The introduction of the different topics show the conversational competence of the interlocutors.

Conversational competence involves
 what speakers need to know in order
 to communicate effectively in socially distinct settings
 crystal 1993 : 66

These conversations are among close friends who are on close speaking terms and on the same age range as adults.

As already defined, conversation is a joint production amongst a group of people. Because of their conversational competence, they are able to shift their style of language to suit the context. Similarly, the selection and presentation of information is such that allows for easy flow of the conversation. That is, an interlocutor is capable of correcting oneself or another (Stubbs 1983 : 121) as shown below:

A12 One day, Britain woke up to say
 say that Falkland belongs to Britain.
 ... what happened? They went into war.
 Before one week Britain vanquished
 Argentina.

B12 But you said Britain vanquished
 Argentina, that is they left now

A13 ehn – vanquished means destroy, demolish.

B13 That's not the proper word,
 That means they disappear,
 that is vanish.

A (cuts in) but I say vanquish

B (continues) Vanquish means disappear

A14 No I say vanquish. At the end of
 a war like the civil war there is no
 vanquish. Nobody won, nobody
 became victorious ... like Argentina was vanquished that means
 Britain defeated Argentina ...

Furthermore, with shared background information the next speaker can predict, modify his/her utterance for example:

A6 A woman is here who needs
 counselling on family planning.
 How much will you charge for
 the consultation?

B5 It's going to be free

Conversation I

C1 Well ehn – the way the course is going

A2 It's not been an enjoyable
 experience, I'm telling you ...
 mhm hmhm. If I'm to assess it,
 I don't think I will give a pass
 mark, how about the strike?

Conversation II

From the examples cited, the speakers respond based on what the first person has said. This observation affirms Stubbs (1983) assertion that such utterances which complete what another speaker has said "proves that she has understood". In the same vein, it is "a proof of communication, a proof that the speakers are on the same wave length". It also serves as a feedback to keep the conversation going and it is a means in which the speaker and the hearer claim to prove their understanding (Stubbs 1983 : 22).

However, the responses between the interlocutors do not only act as feedback but also an endorsement of the preceding utterances. They help to give valid contributions to the discourse. Besides, the feedback shows the conversationalist is in touch with the rhythm of the talk. Similarly, the use of "Oh-oh -o" as found in conversation 1, "Na wa - o-o"; "Thank God -o-o" in conversation II all help to maintain the rhythm of the conversation.

NARRATIVE ORGANIZATION

In order to elucidate on research question 1;
How is conversation amongst people organized?

Every conversation like every story has a beginning, middle and end. For instance in conversation I, the introduction of the topic –

How was your family planning workshop?

I or conversation II:

Well ehn – the way the course is going ...

These question and statement provide the start or beginning of the conversation. In order to expatiate on the topic, another statement is introduced for example in conversation I;

A6 A woman is here who needs
counselling on family planning

B6 We are checking population.
This is a way to check population...

A8 Oh – oh – o, I think war is the
best way of checking population.
Draft them to Bakassi ... At the end
of the day how many of them will
come back?

From the foregoing, another topic has been introduced through the choice of the word – "draft" which has to do with war. This topic is introduced, after an exclamation "oh – oh – o" Besides the beginning, the middle and the change of topic, the end of a conversation exhibits one of these characteristics, that is, repetition of whole phrases. Stubbs (1983 : 24) states "repetition of whole phrases is also a marker of endings. From the analysis under study, the following illustrations buttress Stubbs assertion.

A14 No I say vanquish. At
the end of a war like the
civil war there is no vanquish.
Nobody won, nobody became
victorious, nobody was defeated.
Like Argentina was vanquished that
means Britain defeated Argentina
and that was the end of the story.

Conversation 1

A11 Those of you on study leave you
can't go like that without getting
your certificate.

B5 ...

A12 At the end of the course you are
required to produce the certificates
not just one, I'll show the Ph.D one,
the computer one.

Conversation II

Whereas we would agree with Stubbs that one of the of the major ways of ending a story is through repetition, we want to state that the use of repetition could also serve for emphasis for example".

- A12 At the end of the course you
are required to produce the
certificates not just one.

Another element in narrative organization has to do with the use and choice of nouns for example names like "Bakassi, France, Falkland and Argentina" refer to the physical environment of the story (A8, A10 and A12 – see Appendix). Furthermore, another feature in the narrative organization is the concept of code-mixing and code-switching. As Okon (2002), Essien (1995, 2002) and Ogunsiiji (2001) state, these phenomena are common features in discourse among Nigerians and speakers of any language.

INTERACTIONAL ROLES

Stubbs (1983 : 29) opines that interactional role "is a means of formalizing a mechanism by which one speaker retains the conversational initiative," so it is very essential in discourse that involves more than one person. In addition, Nta (1996: 42) and Ekpe (2001 : 97) agree in their different works on the significance of interaction in conversation/discourse whether among children or adults. Interaction here involves variations on recursive two-part question-answer (QA) exchanges or three-part-question-answer-feedback exchanges (Sinclair & Coulthard 1975 in Stubbs 1983 : 29). A few examples from our data illustrate the above concept here.

- A1 Are you there?
B1 Mmh – m – m
A2 How was your family planning workshop?
B2 Well fine

From this short exchange, we can observe the following processes viz: initiation by A, response by B and a follow-up by A (see conversation I). Questions are asked and responses are given. This aspect of discourse analysis provides what can be described as turn-taking. Turn-taking is through a local organizing device known as Adjacency pairs (Montgomery 1986 : 104) also discussed in Okon (2002) and Nta (1986 : 38 – 40).

Furthermore, Coulthard and Ashby (1975 in Stubbs 1983 : 29) illustrate another three-part exchange structure as follows: initiation, response and follow-up in a doctor-patient talk. This pattern is also applicable in Ekpe (2001) found in "female-female interaction in the medical context" The essence of the use of an exchange structure shows types of "acknowledgement, endorsement, claims and proofs of understanding." We would like to observe that the use of interactional role amongst the interlocutors answers the question asked in (Section 1.1 (a) (b) and (d).

A look at conversation II shows a process of exchange – initiation, response, follow-up and introduction of a new topic. An example below proves this:

- A1 ... This course we are doing
C1 Well eh – the way the course is going ...
A2 It's not been an enjoyable experience.
I'm telling you ... mhm – mhm – m – m – m
... How about the strike (NASU)

B1 The thing is spreading o – o – o

Based on the foregoing the interactional process allows for the introduction of a new topic for example". How about the strike?

These are illustrations from conversations I and II to introduce new topics and to carry on the process of interaction among interlocutors This section also answers the question in (Section 1.1 (b). The observations in any "multi-party discourse" are primarily expected to provide "audience appreciation" and to support the speaker. In the same vein, lack of these key, "conversational support" can result in a breakdown in communication (Stubbs 1983 : 30).

SENTENCE STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

In discourse analysis, the discourse cannot occur without reference to sentence structure. There are different types of sentence structure. Though the emphasis in this paper is not on types of grammar, we would like to state that for this work, we are using the systemic grammar structure. As Osisanwo (1999 : 17) essays, sentences can be arranged on a rankscale of ascending magnitude or a descending magnitude. Each of these comprise five units. In the interest of this article, the rankscale of descending magnitude is preferred. The five units of this order consist of: sentence, clause, group, word and morpheme. In addition, he further states that the sentence structure can further be subjected to about four groups within its structure. An example of a sentence analysis by Osisanwo (1999: 29 – 30) illustrates the above idea.

8. A S V C A
 // By this time / we / should have finished the show / here //

9. O S
 // This course / we / are doing. //

Conversation II

These sentence structures discussed above are not the only sentence patterns. Similarly, there is the use of questions. Questions, "typically" are used to elicit information or a response" (Crystal, 1993 : 287) (cf subsection 1.3.) For this section, our interest is at the grammatical level. Syntactically, a question is an inversion of the subject and the first verb in the verb phrase. As Crystal opines, there are different types of question types viz: Yes – No question for example "Is he going?" (wh – question). Another example "Where is he?" These are not the only types of questions but a few examples from our conversation will buttress the use of questions as an integral aspect of discourse analysis.

10. Are you there? (Yes/no question)
11. How much will you charge for the consultation? (Wh – question)
12. How many of them will come back? (wh – question)
13. Are you going to register? (wh – question)

Conversation I

From the examples given above, we would like to state that sentence pattern analysis is the kernel of discourse analysis. It does not serve just one function but plays multidimensional roles.

CONCLUSION

Discourse analysis is an act of communication and as shown above, it is impossible to discuss any utterance "without shared knowledge and assumptions between speakers and hearers" (Stubbs 1983 : 1). As illustrated in our analysis, speakers A – C had shared knowledge of the different topics under discussion and each interlocutor contributed meaningfully to the discussion. An analysis of discourse shows the "commonest use of language as a pervasive phenomenon of everyday life" Stubbs (1983 : 10). As observed, discourse analysis is "structured" and "polysystem" in nature. Evidently, we have tried to provide answers to the research questions in order to stress the significance of discourse analysis in every-day communication.

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APPENDIX
CONVERSATION 1

- A. 1 Are you there?
 B. 1 mmh – mmh –
 A. 2 How was your family planning workshop?
 B. 2 Well – fine
 A. 3 ehm – Your panadol is here
 You hear me
 Why do you make shy?
 Come inside jo !
 C. 1 I feel like lying outside
 B. 3 Who is that?
 A. 4 Water de here we jeun
 C. 2 O se jare
 A. 5 E go finish this one?
 B. 4 I no go finish am
 A. 6 A woman is here who needs counselling on family planning
 How much will you charge for the consultation?
 B. 5 It's going to be free
 A. 7 How is that? People no dey do free work now?
 B. 6 We are checking population. This is a way to check
 population, you don't charge money.
 A. 8 Oh – oh – o, I think war is the best way of checking
 population. Draft them to Bakassi, Draft all those people to Bakassi. At the end of the day how many
 of them will come back?
 B. 7 That's not the best way
 That's not the best way
 Because the fewer ones will be overtasked
 Because the fewer ones will be overtasked
 A. 9 At the end of the day you start afresh.
 E - - finish. Are you going to clean all ...
 Are you going to clean all the yammayamma
 (Question to C). Are you going to register?
 B. 8 That's not the best. Even the few ones that are left will be
 overworked.
 A. 10 Overworked?
 B9 & C3 Yes Yes
 B. 10 And it is France that is fighting us

A 11 US will be here. France has many oil companies. They are so many. Elf is one of them

B 11 They are gluttons. They want to take our oil.

A 12 What of Falkland? What happened at the end?
At the end of the day you'll know who is stronger. We will fight and you'll know that I'm stronger. You can't talk again.

Like the – like the, what do you call it ...?

Falkland. One day, Britain woke up to say that Falkland belongs to Britain.

Argentina said No: It's our our land.

What happened? They went into war.

Before one week Britain vanquished

Argentina. That was the end of the story.

Who owns the land now? Britain.

C 4 Laughs

(Argument)

B 12 But you said Britain vanquished Argentina, that is they left now

A 13 ehn – vanquished means destroy, demolish

B 13 That's not the proper word. That means they disappear, - that is vanish (A cuts in) but I say vanquish (B continues) vanquish means disappear.

A 14 No I say vanquish. At the end of a war like the civil war there is no vanquish. Nobody won, nobody became victorious, nobody was defeated. Like Argentina was vanquished that means Britain defeated Argentina and that was the end of the story.

CONVERSATION II

A 1 I'm hungry I have not had eba – pocket don dry – dry- by this time we should have finished the show here. This course we are doing.

C 1 Well ehn – the way the course is going...?

A 2 It's not been an enjoyable experience. I'm telling you ... Mhmhmm. If I'm to assess it I don't think I will give a pass mark. How about the strike? – (NASU)

B 1 The thing is spreading o – o – o -. When are you leaving after the exams? When are you having your result?

A 3 Should be immediately. It's immediately

C 2 not immediately – o – o – o – They gave us up to the end of May to submit our project.

A 4 Alright, by May ending

C 3 (Not audible)

B 2 Then you'll get it in May

A 5 Get what- they said at the end I should show the certificate I obtained.

- - - - LAUGHTER - - - -

C 4 My brother

A 6 Yes

C 5 ehn - - the same thing with me

A 7 I think I have it here. Do I have it here?

B 3 Will you still linger on waiting for the results ehn - ehn -

A 8 No, who go do that, they will give me a statement of result

B 4 Testimonial?

A 9 No - No

C 6 Yes ehn You know I have a problem with the university on my salary Noise - (not audible)

B 5 Is it going to be like this that this man will keep on playing over my testimonial.

Let him give me my testimonial before I go

A 10 Who?

B 5 That's the thing I'm going to present to my state. I mean, our H. O. D.

A 11 Those of you on study-leave you can't go like that without getting your certificate

I'm due for promotion, I don't know whether they have

released the result. We attended the promotion interview. (A reads the letter granting study-leave).

B 5 (not audible)

A 12 At the end of the course you are required to produce the certificates not just one. I'll show the Ph.D. one, the computer one.

B 5 No -

C 7 Na wa - o - o

- General laughter

A 13 Thank God - o - o

KEYS

- (1) A) Speakers
B)
C)
- (2) 1 - 14 - Turn-taking by speakers

