A Dual Approach to Classroom Discourse:  
Killing One Bird with Two Stones?

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For the applied linguist seeking to establish the roles of teachers and students in a particular classroom context, the independent insights into the same data of two rival perspectives can be an advantage. However, leading exponents of both Conversational Analysis and Structural Discourse Analysis have often been dismissive of each others’ approaches. Levinson (1983: 294) has made scathing criticisms of structural discourse models, arguing that conversation “is not a structural product in the same way that a sentence is; it is rather the outcome of the interaction of two or more independent and goal-directed individuals, with often divergent interests”. Levinson also maintains that “actual analyses offered within theories of this kind are quite often superficial and disappointing, involving an intuitive mapping of unmotivated categories onto a restricted range of data”. Levinson does not attempt to suggest ways of improving the structural approach of transatlantic rivals preferring to conclude that such models are “fundamentally inappropriate to the subject matter” and “irremediably inadequate” (1983: 289).

Structural discourse analysts have been equally dismissive of the approach of conversational analysts. For example, Edmondson (1981: 50) states that “from the perspective of discourse analysis, it is a valid criticism of the work of the ethnomethodologists to remark that the units and sequences they present and discuss are ill-defined, such that the recognition of an utterance as a token of a particular discourse unit is largely a matter of intuition”. Coulthard and Brazil (1992: 53) also suggest that conversational analysts “do not attempt to define their descriptive categories”. This criticism refers to the sequential units of discourse; in particular, to categories such as “sequence” and “turn”. They conclude (op. cit. 55) that “conversational analysts working with no overall descriptive framework run the risk of creating data-specific categories for each new piece of text to the last syllable of recorded conversation”.

While the sequential units of conversational analysis may appear ill-defined from the perspective of structural discourse analysis, the meticulous examination of the techniques of turn distribution has no reason to depend on the precise definition of sequential units of interaction. A “turn” might encompass two “elements of exchange structure” from a structural perspective, and might even cross an exchange boundary, but this does not invalidate the description of the mechanisms of local turn distribution, which, by definition, has to focus on the rules used by participants for handling the techniques in operation only at points of speaker transition. The perspective of conversation analysts in so far as it relates to the techniques of turn distribution is independent of the concerns of structural discourse analysis.
An applied linguistic study cannot resolve the theoretical issues that separate two linguistic fields of inquiry. But this brief paper will argue that the application of both approaches to the same data corpora does more than just provide different angles on that data. It also provides special insights that neither field could provide independently. In this sense, even the less rigorous analysis of an applied linguistic study can make a limited contribution to the debate between the two fields. When research is carried out across cultural contexts, it is all the more important to avoid imposing a single framework of analysis that prejudgets which categories are important.

**Turn-Taking**

Classroom analysis based on the analysis of turn-taking (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson: 1974) emphasizes the structure of participation and the management of turns in classroom interaction. Schiffrin (1994: 239) sees the conversational analysis approach as revealing “the way participants in talk construct systematic solutions to recurrent organizational problems of conversation”. The teaching approach in any particular classroom context is closely related to the way turns are distributed. The norms of speaker-selection reflected in the behaviour observed in the classroom are then of great value in describing both the social and pedagogical roles of teachers and students.

Sharrock and Anderson (1986: 72) make the strong claim that turn-distribution is independent of social context. Their claim is based on an assumption that universal rules of turn-taking underlie all conversation.

> Given that conversation is something that can take place between people of all kinds, the rules which regulate turn-taking must be independent of the social composition of conversation.

While this is a tantalizing claim with potentially far-reaching consequences, it is also a claim that is impossible to verify. The lesser claim that turn-distribution can be analyzed independently of social context will be adopted here, which need not necessarily mean that there exists a universal set of turn-taking rules regardless of context.

For this brief paper, the insights of conversational analysis into the locally managed techniques of speaker selection have been exploited rather selectively. Of particular relevance are the notions of nomination and self-selection. Self-selection is a term used in the analysis of turn-taking to indicate that a speaker was not nominated to speak by another participant, but selected him or herself. Sacks et al. (1974: 704) outline the recursive rules underlying techniques the participants use in structuring turn transition, such as “a. current speaker select next, technique” (nomination). They go on to define the obligations and rights of speakers when this technique is observed to be in use.

> [..] then the party so-selected has rights, and is obliged, to take next turn to speak [..]

They then state that “if the turn-so-far is so constructed as not to involve the use of a, current speaker select next, technique, then current speaker may, but need not, continue, unless another
self-selects”.

To participate in classroom interaction, students need to be sensitive to the techniques in operation for the distribution of turns. By focusing on this aspect of interaction, analysts claim to be focusing on what participants need to do to take part in interaction. The view that the analysis reflects the way participants themselves experience conversation is difficult to justify with hard evidence. Sharrock and Anderson (1986: 68) suggest that conversation analysts are “more concerned with utterances than with speakers and hearers”. The participants’ own insights are not normally available to the analyst. Sharrock and Anderson (op. cit.: 64) state that “the best way to achieve a direct inspection of ordinary talk is to tape record it, and then one can examine it pretty closely, repeatedly and in some detail”. This indicates that the analyst uses detailed retrospective analysis of the way participants manage the distribution of turns rather than techniques of elicitation using the participants themselves to analyze their own talk. The approach of conversation analysis is not essentially different from that of structural discourse analysis in this respect.

The important moments in conversations when the speaker can change, what Sacks et al (1978: 12) refer to as “transition relevance points”, are identified by the analyst retrospectively. It is also the analyst who discovers the rules speakers are said to use to manage transition. If we consider the application of such rules to be automatic, operating at a subconscious level, it is difficult to imagine how they could be reliably elicited from participants. The important point for applied educational research is that the identification of key elements of analysis does not depend on intuitive judgment. Points of transition from one speaker to another, nomination, bidding for nomination and self-selection, can all be seen to occur through impartial analysis and their occurrence is open to falsification by either another observer, or in the case of a recorded lesson, by comparing the data transcript to the recording itself.

**Exchange Structure and the Distribution of Non-Response Elements**

A second approach to classroom discourse is structural discourse analysis. (See Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; Coulthard 1977; Burton 1980; Berry 1980 & 1981; Coulthard & Montgomery (eds.) 1981; Sinclair & Brazil 1982; Stubbs 1983; Coulthard (ed.) 1987 & 1992; McCarthy 1991; Willis, D. 1992, Hoey 1991 & 1993; Tsui 1994.) A much fuller critical account of this approach to classroom discourse has already been provided (Nunn 1996, 1999, 2001). Just as the analysis of turn-taking rules provides independent non-pedagogical information about the roles of teachers and students, a structural model of exchange structure can also claim to provide a similar independent perspective. By analyzing a lesson retrospectively, it is possible to identify response and non-response contributions and to determine with some accuracy their relative distribution.

The retrospectively determined structure can be viewed as only one outcome from a system of choices. After the initiation “I”, there is always a choice until the exchange terminating contribution, “T”, has been accepted as such. At the rank of exchange structure, the preferred
“choice” might be a response “R”, but there is always the option of negotiating the discourse role, with a “negotiation” “N”. The reader is referred to Nunn (1996, 2001) for a detailed discussion. In brief, a “negotiation”, “N”, is a proposed fourth element of exchange structure. A “negotiation” is a choice available to extend an exchange and can occur at any point before the exchange termination. It reflects the “here-and-now” process that participants are engaged in as they continually adjust to the other participants’ contributions. In structural terms, it delays the closure of a flexible, extendible exchange. These choices are available at each point within an exchange at which there is a change of speaker. An examination of the distribution of elements of structure between teacher and students, just like an examination of turn-taking, can indicate the extent to which students have opportunities to structure the discourse and to what extent the developing pattern of discourse during interaction is structured by the teacher. When students only have access to response elements, they appear to have little influence over the flow of discourse.

Complementarity
The two independent approaches outlined above appear to be complementary. For example, it is normally possible to conclude that non-response elements of exchange structure in a lesson are only available to participants who have the right to self-select. If two approaches always achieve identical results we might assume that there is little point in using both methods simultaneously. The independence of the two approaches can be demonstrated in the rare instances when a nominated participant produces a non-response contribution. In the lesson extract below, from a lesson in a school in the Arabian Gulf taught by a British teacher trainer, the student appears to seize the initiative from the teacher. His contribution appears to “take over” the control of the exchange immediately after an initiation. The teacher was eliciting patterned responses to practise past tense interrogatives using a set of flashcards. The drill-like exercise was contextualized using a story about a fishing trip. The student ignored the cue to make a modelled “response” on the card (HOW/FEEL How did you feel when you caught a fish?) to ask his own question. This raises an interesting question for structural discourse analysts. His question might be seen as a response “R” on one level, but as a successful negotiation “N” to take over control of the discourse on another level.

Turn-taking analysis provides another independent insight into this exchange. In this particular instance, the student uses his floor-right provided by the nomination to take over temporary control of the discourse. What is significant here, in terms of turn-taking is that the student’s contribution did not require self-selection. Normally any contribution that is not a response element from a structural perspective would require self-selection. The question is then to determine the extent to which a response contribution by a nominated student may be exploited in a given context to do more than provide a pre-determined response. This student exploited his selection to gain more extensive floor-rights, successfully taking over the eliciting role. We could argue, given the rarity of this kind of behaviour, that he did not gain any meaningful control of the discourse, even temporarily, until the teacher accepted his question by responding to it. The student then had the floor, which he used to negotiate further information
by selecting the teacher. He temporarily transformed a drill-like exercise into authentic communication. In post-lesson discussion the teacher regretted not exploiting this incident further.

This example does indicate that the resourceful student does have subtle means available to influence the direction of teacher-fronted interaction. From a structural angle, he appears to exploit his right to respond by transforming his contribution into something more than a response. From a turn-taking angle, the student is able to exploit his floor right as the nominated speaker, temporarily reversing the roles. The issue would then be to determine whether such incidents, if they are deemed to be desirable - which was the retrospective view of this particular teacher trainer - could not be provoked. Unusual incidents in the discourse like this one are of particular importance to the discourse analyst as they stretch models of analysis to their limits and provide rare moments of insight into the potentiality of teacher-fronted classroom dynamics. In such cases, the contrastive, but complementary insights of both approaches allow more subtle distinctions to be made than the exclusive use of either.

**Conclusion**

Students in much formal teacher-fronted classroom interaction normally only have access to nominated responses and cannot initiate exchanges. Neither can they negotiate or follow-up either another student’s or the teacher’s previous contribution. All these elements are normally associated with the right to self-select, which is not easily available to students in formal classroom contexts. The example analyzed above, however, shows how a resourceful student may exploit the limited floor rights associated with an “obligation” to provide a pre-programmed
response and transform a response into an elicitation without self-selecting.

No single approach is likely to be fully adequate for analyzing something as complex as classroom discourse. The attraction of using both discourse and turn-taking analysis to analyze the same data is that both provide a pre-pedagogical level of analysis. While either can be used to describe essentials of classroom behaviour without any reference to pedagogical fashions or trends, together they provide insights which neither approach could provide alone.

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