
Conversation in Context: A Corpus-Driven Approach

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Continuum 2007, 246 pp., £74.18

ISBN 0826497136

Christoph Ruehlemann's book navigates a clear and engaging course through what McCarthy colourfully describes in the preface (p.ix) as 'the murky waters of "performance" data, where grammar, lexis, phonology and paralinguistics collide . . .'. The voyage is never less than interesting and often fascinating. Two main aims are set out for the book in the Introduction:

- 1 To contribute to EFL teaching by narrowing the gap between 'school' English and 'authentic conversation'.
- 2 To test what the author calls 'the adaptedness hypothesis': '... the hypothesis that a situation-based description of conversation can show how conversational language is adapted to certain needs arising from specific types of constraints on speakers in conversational situation' (p. 2).

While the author returns to the first aim with some zeal in the conclusion, it is clearly the second aim which drives the book and dictates its structure. In the Introduction, the author sets out a convincing case for a register-sensitive approach to language description and stresses the central importance of conversation as a register both in language use and

language analysis. It might seem that the importance of conversation does not need to be stressed to EFL practitioners, but there is some truth in my view in Hugh Dellar's (personal communication) parody of EFL coursebooks which take learners directly from transactional dialogues to earnest debates about capital punishment without experiencing social conversation in between. The second chapter deals concisely with the research methodology and the details of the spoken component of the British National Corpus (BNC) on which the research is based.

Chapter 3 lays the foundation for 'the adaptedness hypothesis'. The author describes in detail the five conditions under which conversation takes place:

- shared context
- co-construction
- discourse management
- real-time processing
- relation management.

Here I would express one of my few quibbles with the book: the author refers consistently to these conditions as 'constraints', but as his own examples later show, shared context and co-construction offer opportunities to speakers as well as constraints. Ruehleemann's key argument, however, is that it is in the light of these conditions (or constraints) that conversational grammar is best understood from a functional point of view. Ruehleemann makes two important points at this stage which are consistently and clearly reinforced in the remainder of the book:

- 1 The five conditions are interdependent so it is likely that a particular feature of conversational grammar will be explicable in relation to more than one of the conditions.
- 2 Relation management needs are the dominant goal of conversation.

The five subsequent chapters deal with each of the conditions above in turn, highlighting selected features of conversational grammar which seem particularly well adapted to that particular condition.

Chapter 4, then, deals with shared context phenomena. Ruehleemann points to deictic forms (references to person, time, or place which are relative to the situation in which the utterance takes place) as an example of shared context phenomena and notes the high frequency of the deictic personal pronouns 'I' and 'You' in conversation. This in itself is unsurprising. What is of more interest is Ruehleemann's argument that among the reasons for the frequency of 'I' and 'You' in conversation are their frequency in discourse markers such as 'I mean' and

'You know' and the frequent repetition of 'I' in utterance-initial position. In other words, in line with the adaptedness hypothesis, the frequency can be related to shared context and also to discourse management needs and real-time processing needs. The analysis of laughter in conversation in this chapter reinforces the motif of the multifunctionality of features of conversation and produces some of the intriguing descriptive insights which are an attractive feature of the book: 'The typical "laughter" in British conversation . . . seems to be a young, female, white-collar worker' (p. 86).

In Chapter 5, Ruehleemann turns to co-construction phenomena. Among the examples he gives are co-constructed tags and co-constructed utterances. I have seen co-constructed tags described elsewhere as reply questions, so an example might be useful:

A: I've just read a brilliant review by Ivor Timmis.

B: Have you?

Co-constructed utterances meanwhile involve the expansion or completion of one speaker's utterance by another as in:

A: I've just read a brilliant piece by Ivor Timmis.

B: Which is a rarity.

Here again, Ruehleemann is concerned to stress the multifunctional aspect of such devices, arguing that co-constructed tags 'play a dual role as turn-yielders, responding to the co-constructive need to encourage speaker change, and as backchannels, encouraging the main speaker to carry on' (p. 93). Co-constructed utterances have the dual function of strengthening discourse coherence and establishing 'bonds of communion'.

Discourse management phenomena are the focus of Chapter 6. Reported speech (or 'discourse presentation' in Ruehleemann's terms) in conversation is one of the features to come under the microscope here. Ruehleemann's first observation is that discourse presentation in conversation is normally carried out in direct mode. In terms of the adaptedness hypothesis, discourse presentation is then related to real-time processing needs—it obviates the need for the grammatical changes required by indirect mode—and to relational needs: it allows for a vivid reconstruction of the scene. It is no surprise to find 'like', so ubiquitous both as a discourse marker and a quotative, come under analysis in this chapter. The analysis of 'like' is a good example of the non-judgemental approach which characterizes the book. Ruehleemann is at pains to explain *why* certain forms are common in

conversation, in this case noting the 'remarkable versatility ... for the lemma like as a whole' (p. 150) and arguing that this versatility applies to 'be + like' too (for example, 'I was like, "Oh my God!"').

Chapter 7 brings real-time processing phenomena into focus. Ruehleemann highlights initially the dual role of silent and filled pauses: they help us to cope with real-time pressures but can also be 'deployed in the service of turn and information management' (p. 161). He then goes on to argue that there are two basic strategies for 'reducing processing cost': phonological reduction and grammatical reduction. The frequent use of 'there is' + plural noun phrase is one example cited of this kind of reductionism, but Ruehleemann really goes to town on the case of 'I says' to report speech. This analysis is particularly interesting as the non-judgemental approach of the author leads to interesting and objective descriptive insights of a form which is non-standard and socially marked. Ruehleemann notes (p. 172) that '... I says is used as a reporting clause in presentations of *extended* exchanges involving frequent switches between the presenter's and a displaced speaker's utterances. Upon closer inspection of contexts, it becomes clear that many of these extended exchanges tend to reveal a point-counterpoint nature, that is, utterances are typically short and speaker standpoints often diverge'. The use of 'I says' allows the speaker, then, to maintain the vividness of the present form when reporting the conversation without the need to change the vowel sound or the verb ending when switching between third person and first person. While the analysis is most interesting, it leaves unasked and unanswered the question of why, if the form is so well adapted to the conditions of speech, it is *not* common to most speakers.

Relation management phenomena, which are the focus of Chapter 8, provide more of the quirky insights which leaven the text. In a discussion of familiarizers and endearments in the BNC (p. 186), we learn that 'almost half of all occurrences of *baby* were not *said* in conversation but *sung* as the speakers

were singing along to popular music'. Two narrative devices are closely analysed in this chapter: the use of historic present and introductory 'this' in oral narratives as in, for example, 'This man walks into a pub ...'. The use of introductory 'this' for a referent not previously mentioned in the conversation is particularly interesting in terms of 'the adaptedness hypothesis'. Not only does it draw the listener into the story but it also signals the key players in the ensuing narrative. The chapter also includes an interesting analysis of third person 'don't' as in 'he don't like it'. Here again, the non-judgemental approach permits an objective analysis and the author concludes that the form is particularly common with volitional verbs 'like' and 'want'.

In the conclusion, Ruehleemann argues that the balance of probabilities is strongly in favour of his adaptedness hypothesis and expresses the hope that the descriptive approach he has adopted can help free the EFL world from the misconception that speech is an inferior form of writing and an inferior form to writing. The conclusion is reasonable and the hope is well founded. What is beyond doubt is that the book will be of value to anyone with an interest in spoken language. Ruehleemann synthesizes a huge amount of descriptive work on spoken language in a coherent, accessible, and often engaging manner; he also gives valuable guidance to areas which have potential for further research. Personally, this book reinvigorated my long-standing interest in the teaching and description of spoken language.

The reviewer

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doi:10.1093/elt/ccp013