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### **Conversation: Quantity**

Research on language in its social context has long recognized that individuals, social groups, and speech communities produce different amounts of conversation, and that different amounts of talk are normatively associated with different contexts in all speech communities. Indeed, learning norms regulating the quantity of talk appropriate to various contexts is one of the most salient aspects of a child's acquisition of communicative competence (see *Ethnography of Speaking*). However, a precise characterization of how much conversationalists talk in particular contexts is a difficult task, simply because an integrative definition of 'amount of conversation' must take into consideration not just quantity of linguistic form, but also the amount of referential, social, and affective meaning communicated by form.

#### **1. The Patterning of Quantity of Conversation**

The importance of quantitative norms of conversational behavior is best demonstrated by illustrations of extreme cases. At one end of the spectrum from near-silence to

extreme prolixity, there are contexts in which the virtual absence of talk is normative, as in certain religious and other highly 'formal' social events in many cultures (see *Silence*). There are also societies, such as the Paliyans of south India, where people become almost silent after reaching a certain age (Gardner 1966); and members of some speech communities (e.g., among certain Native North Americans) view taciturn behavior, verbal reticence, and communicative restraint as valued qualities (Hymes 1977: 35-41). The other extreme of the spectrum is illustrated by praise or insult performances by Wolof griots, which are frequently characterized by an astonishingly high rate of verbal output (Irvine 1990), and day-to-day conversation among certain ethnic and cultural groups, such as Jewish east-coast Americans, in which participants are expected to maintain a high level of verbosity (Tannen 1981).

While examples of these extreme cases are well documented, little work has focused on the parameters involved in the definition of 'amount of conversation' and on the communicative and social meaning of its various manifestations. The relative neglect of these questions stems in large part from the multifaceted nature of conversational quantity. The notion subsumes several parametrical dimensions, which are here described in turn.

## 2. Structural Factors

Quantity of talk can first be described in terms of the number of particular linguistic units produced per unit of time. Which linguistic unit should be considered basic in evaluating quantity of talk is, however, problematic. If one considers the word as a basic unit (setting aside structural problems inherent in defining the word in many languages), how should conversational repairs, false starts, and cut-offs, which are common in many conversational contexts, be dealt with? A turn at speaking full of such dysfluencies obviously has a different quality from a planned turn with few or no dysfluencies, even though the two turns may have an equal number of words. Another possibility is to count syllables (see *Syllable*), a solution which Irvine (1990: 137) adopts in comparing the verbal output of various Wolof social categories in contexts where the social status of the individual is foregrounded. These measures are adequate for comparisons of language use within the same speech community, but they are problematic in comparisons across communities, since syllables differ in quality, length, and importance as units of analysis across languages. Thus, measuring quantity of talk in terms of number of units per unit of time is sometimes useful in that it is most readily quantifiable, but is never sufficient.

A second parameter at play is the length of utterances in words or syllables, a measure which developmental psycholinguists have traditionally used in analyses of child language (see *Language Acquisition in the Child; Language Acquisition: Categorization and Early Concepts*). A string of utterances of a few words each produces a different communicative effect from a single utterance with many words. But analytic problems arise again, which are frequently ignored in child-language studies. As Peters (1977) shows, the early utterances of certain children are best described as intonational contours superposed over unanalyzable phonological strings. Yet these children are able to commu-

nicate as much information as children who approach language acquisition in a more analytic fashion. In adult conversation, the problems associated with identifying utterances are well known (Roy 1981).

## 3. Semantic and Social Factors

One is then led to consider a set of parameters in a definition of amount of talk which are not readily quantifiable. A third factor concerns the number of participants responsible for the production of talk. At one extreme, certain speech communities, communicative contexts, and social groups favor conversations in which single participants are allowed to speak at great length without being interrupted (see *Sociolinguistics; Conversation Analysis*). Such is the case of talk in 'formal' contexts in many cultures (Irvine 1979). At the other extreme, there are cultures where multivocality in the creation of both linguistic form and meaning is the norm. Examples are Antigua, where the fine-tuned collusive work that participants put into composing conversational texts gives them a contrapuntal quality (Reisman 1974). This may be achieved through competition for the conversational floor or through collaboration (Brenneis 1987), or a combination of the two, as social competition may underlie the coproduction of a single linguistic form. Frequently witnessed in contexts and speech communities where multivocality is given a positive value is a greater tolerance for interruptions, conversational overlaps, where two or more speakers speak at the same time, and shorter pauses between turns (see *Conversation Analysis*). Multivocality gives conversations very different characteristics from univocal conversation; for example, Brenneis (1987) shows how the multiplicity of voices that characterizes Fiji Indian gossip helps diffuse the responsibility for what gets said among many participants.

Fourth, the quantitative and qualitative relationships between form and meaning may differ from context to context. Western Apache elders may, by simply invoking a place name, conjure in the minds of their audiences a complex network of associations; the invocation, which requires very little linguistic form, can have devastating effects, as is the case when the place thus named is linked to events with moral implications for the actions of those present (Basso 1984). In contrast, there are contexts in which conversationalists elaborate linguistic form for what may seem at first glance gratuitous purposes (see *Context*). More often than not, elaboration of form serves important social functions. For example, gossips on Nukulaelae Atoll frequently withhold important pieces of information, such as the identity of a person, from their gossip narratives, thus manipulating their audiences into asking for the missing information, sometimes over the space of several turns, as information is revealed in small doses, requiring further questioning (Besnier 1989). The resulting interactions, which require more form than straightforward narratives, allow narrators to monopolize the attention of their interlocutors, and contribute to the collusive nature of the gossip interaction.

Related to the previous parameter is the degree to which the linguistic form of talk is predictable, formalized, ritualized, or conventionalized (the differences between these different qualities remain largely unexplored). A highly ritualized greeting dialogue of the type found in South American societies (Urban 1986) conveys little linguistic

meaning, in the strictest sense of the term, between participants. Such is also the case of proverbs and 'traditional sayings,' with which members of many speech communities pepper their conversations (Briggs 1985). Again, the value of such conversational strategies is to be found in the realm of social and affective meaning. Participation in a highly ritualized exchange signals one's willingness to participate in the maintenance of a cultural ideology; by invoking proverbs, speakers place themselves in a particular relationship to the received wisdom of their culture.

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#### 4. The Social Nature of Conversational Quantity

Evaluating the amount of talk produced by individuals across contexts and speech communities is thus a complex task, which quantification alone cannot handle. A focus on linguistic form alone cannot provide an adequate description of what 'speaking a lot' or 'speaking little' means. Conversation (and talk in general) is an intrinsically social phenomenon, and a characterization of the amount of conversation that takes place between members of a speech community must take into consideration the amount and quality of referential, social, and affective meaning that linguistic form entails. Indeed, as McDermott (1988) and others have shown, the amount of talk that individuals produce in many contexts is subject to institutional regulation, and norms regulating the amount of talk reproduce broader social processes like status asymmetries.

*See also:* Silence.

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