5.0 Conversation as a speech act

Conversation is a speech act that is very distinct from other speech acts like reading aloud (includes radio speech, recitation etc.) and monologue (extempore speeches, radio commentaries on sports, lectures etc.). These are very specialized speech acts as they are well organised in the sense that the intonation patterns are clear and systematic. Each sentence type has a set pattern of intonation. The tempo is maintained. It is consistent and usually unvarying. There is a link between the pauses and the grammatical meaning of the sentence. In these speech acts silence may not have any significance. It only breaks the tenor of the speech but it does not serve any purpose. Since reading aloud and monologue are well-organised there is not much scope for errors, false starts, stammers etc. In these speech acts everything has to be expressed explicitly. The process is one way, i.e., there is no interaction. Since these speech acts are artificial, organised and fabricated they are also generally grammatically correct. Further since the situation does not demand any adjustment or negotiation there is no opportunity for grammatical errors with stilted syntax. But all people do not get the need or the opportunity to use these speech acts. As such it is not the real spoken language.
The other speech act which supports the major arguments in this thesis is the conversational act. Unlike the speech acts mentioned above, the conversational act is spontaneous and approximates more naturally to spoken discourse. As such it is bound to be incomplete or structured as adjustments are made as and when the need arises depending on the competence of the speaker. This thesis is based on the conversational analysis of Sacks and Jefferson (cf. Chapter I) as this was found to be more suitable for my analysis. Based on the above mentioned theoretical considerations, twenty samples of conversation were examined.

Conversations have well organized openings and closings. Openings like a greeting or a 'hello' initiate the conversation. So also the ending is done with an 'OK then' or a 'bye' said with a falling or a falling-rising tone. Certain turn-taking norms operate in conversation. The speaker, when he wants to give up his turn, slows down or uses a falling tone which conveys finality and the other person takes it up. In the process of conversation the following categories were formulated.

5.1. Features of discourse

Substitution of words:

The inappropriate use of words either because the speaker is not aware of the particular word he wants to use, or knowing it, he cannot recollect it at that particular
point of time, is common in conversation. It was found that sometimes the substituted words had phonetic similarity to the intended words.

e.g. "immature for immaterial" (speaker no.4)

Gap fillers:

The speaker uses gap fillers like this thing, and all, all this, so, I mean, sort of, like that, that's all, you see, etc., when he does not get the word he wants to use or to allow him enough time to think what he wants to say next. Gap fillers also comprise sounds like 'ahah' 'mmm' and sometimes there is just silence before he goes on to the next sentence.

Code-mixing:

The use of another language, while speaking English, is a common feature of conversation.

e.g. "chaltha, madam" (speaker no.2)

(Hindi equivalent to 'it doesn't matter')

Reduplication:

For the sake of emphasis or expressing intensity of feeling, particular words were stressed by doubling them.

e.g. Q:"How is your company?"

A:"Company! Work work only."

(speaker no.2)
Repetition:

In order to emphasize, a word or a sentence may be repeated. This could also be a gap filling technique before the speaker moves on to what he wants to say next.

e.g. "I brought up and studied everything in Mysore. I studied in Mysore only everything."

(speaker no.9)

This tendency to repeat either a full sentence or a part of a sentence is done either by a speaker himself or by the other person involved in conversation, who repeats what the speaker has said. This may be because the listener wants to assure himself as to what he heard is correct.

e.g. For the question by the researcher, speaker...answered like this.

Researcher: "What did you choose for practising?"
(What branch of law?)
Speaker: "Civil law."
Researcher: "Civil law?"
Speaker: "Civil law."

(speaker no.4)

This kind of repetition might also involve a change of syntax.

Parenthesis:

Another familiar feature of discourse is the embedding of sentences in order to make the meaning clear. The speaker
might start a sentence and by way of making it clear, start another one and may or may not get back to the original sentence.

e.g. "My native place is Kavali in Nellore district and after my marriage - I was working in Sulurpet in Nellore district before my marriage - and after my marriage..." (speaker no.3)

Undue pauses:

Pauses in discourse occur at any point in the sentence without any connection to the grammatical meaning of the sentence. Though Paul Drew talks of pauses as being a part of the design of doing disagreements, such evidence did not figure in the data. Pauses occurred wherever the speaker was at a loss for words.

e.g. "It is well-known ... fact, that in India..." (speaker no.13)

Varied tempo:

The pace at which a conversation is carried out also varies and thus the tempo is not sustained. The words gush out at one place and at other places they come out haltingly as the speakers ponder over what to say next.

Butting or help from the listener:

Even before the completion of a sentence, for the listener to interrupt is a common feature of discourse. This is closely connected with presupposition, wherein the listener
anticipates as to what follows and cuts short the speaker by giving the information. There is an overlapping of sentences, if the speaker does not stop talking once the listener starts.

e.g. Talking about criminals' behaviour in the court, the researcher said -

    Researcher: "As if they are not at all guilty of..."
    Speaker : "...not at all offenders."

(speaker no.4)

Even before the speaker can say - "not at all guilty of offence", the listener gives the information. This happens because of the context which enables the person to presuppose the speaker's intention. Sometimes this may not be the case, but as the speaker fumbles for a word, the listener intervenes and gives the right word or sentence to the speaker, or the listener may correct something the speaker has said.

e.g. Talking about her reason for leaving the job after the childbirth she said -

    Speaker: "I don't want him to miss mother or something like that. Then I can't give more attention..."

    Researcher: "Yes, that's true."
    Speaker: "That means the child will miss me also. Then it won't. I mean...what to say..."
Researcher: "It'll crave for your love and affection."
Speaker: "Ya, correct, correct."

5.2. **Discourse grammar**

Listed above are some of the common features of discourse. The following are the irregularities noticed in the grammar of discourse.

Regarding pronouns, the absence of genetive pronouns results in ambiguity in the case of the person or thing referred to.

*eg.* Talking about his children one speaker said -

"The other is at home. Mother takes care"

(speaker no.2)

(The ambiguity therefore is whether the 'mother' refers to the child's mother or the speaker's mother.)

Another difficulty is the resumptive pronoun where the noun instead of being followed by a predicate is followed by a pronoun, which refers back to the noun.

*eg.* "The French, they wanted to do trade." (speaker no.16)

The common errors made in the use of prepositions is that they are sometimes dropped in places where they are required or used in places where they are not needed.
e.g. "They start (x) May and June." (speaker no.1)
"I am teaching in organic chemistry for the degree students." (speaker no.5)

Concord or agreement between different parts of a sentence is a problem too. The number of noun and pronoun is not correlating and as such for a singular noun a plural pronoun is used and vice versa.

e.g. "The first solution is to go to the individual person and make them understand about the problem." (speaker no.11)

In discourse, speakers tend to overlook the fact that the number and person of the subject decide the verb and this results in ungrammatical sentences.

e.g. "The many laws has been passed to put an end to the militant problems." (speaker no.13)

The wrong use of articles is due to the fact that not many speakers are aware of the different contexts in which 'a', 'an' and 'the' are used, nor can they distinguish the difference in pronunciation for the definite article 'the' with regard to the segment following it. (vowel or consonant). In some cases the article is dropped, yet in other cases it is inserted.

e.g. "Quite (x) interesting course" (article is dropped) (speaker no.1)
"I am a E.C. member" ('a' for 'an') (speaker no.4)
"[qi] court" (use of 'the') (speaker no.4)

"The many laws has been passed to put an end...."
(speaker no.3)

The mingling of tenses is a feature that dominates discourse grammar. Sometimes the past tense and present tense are mixed or else it is the present and the future tenses that are merged. Also the conventions that guide the use of tenses are not followed.

For set habits and conventions the simple present is used. But talking about a routine habit one speaker uses the future tense instead of the present tense.

e.g. "I will get down in Bamboo Bazar. From there I will walk. Otherwise if I am having some other work I will go to Sivajinagar, from there I will catch." (speaker no.9)

The 'ing' form of verbs is inappropriately used.

e.g. "I'll always be loving to tell about Jesus Christ."
"I am having colleagues."
(speaker no.6)
(speaker no.9)

In discourse more stress is laid on content words and the function words are sometimes omitted. In some sentences 'it' is dropped.

e.g. "Whereas in the case of love marriages as they come in contact with each other (x) becomes easy for them to adjust." (speaker no.12)
In some sentences the noun or object is missing. This is because, in discourse the speaker takes into consideration the listener's ability to comprehend from the context.

e.g. "I will get down in Bamboo Bazar. From there I will walk, otherwise if I having some other work I will go to Shivajinagar from there I will catch." (speaker no.9)

In this example, there is no reference to any vehicle previous to that sentence. But since the speaker knows that the listener is aware that Shivajinagar is a bus stand in Bangalore, and that the purpose of going there is to catch a bus, the object is dropped.

In some cases, the sentences are clipped and only the content words are present.

For an enquiry by the researcher -
"You are doing your apprenticeship now?"
the answer is -
"Ya, one leading lawyer Konappa Shastry."

(speaker no.4)

Use of direct form in a sentence in indirect speech happens rarely in discourse.

e.g. "Now also my mother-in-law is telling that you should do computer course and learn..." (speaker no.10)
The question tags have no relationship to the subject and verb in the preceding sentence.

e.g. "He starts shouting at his wife or something, the wife also will get wild. Isn't it?" (for, won't she?) (speaker no.12)

We also have instances of convoluted syntax where the structure of the sentence is inverted or confused.

e.g. "...because we get...in a way...four to six months...throughout the rain." (speaker no.20)

5.3 **Wrong usage of grammatical items and vocabulary in discourse**

Certain words demand the use of specific prepositions but this is overlooked.

The mix up of 'since' and 'for' is quite a common feature.

e.g. "Since four years I am working here." (speaker no.13)

('Since' is used with point of time and not period of time)

Ignorance of coining adjectives, adverbs, and past tenses leads to wrong usage in discourse.

e.g. "The crash programme have not appreciable raised the standard of the masses". (wrong usage of adverb) (speaker no.13)
"They are mostly engaged in agriculture work." (wrong usage of adjective) (speaker no.13)

"...the rural areas have meted the attention of not only the ...." (speaker no.13)

(Instead of met which is the past tense of meet, the speaker coined it as meted.)

Due to the low language competence, modals, which are vital to the formation of sentences, get deleted.

e.g. "We have hope that we (x) win." (speaker no.15)

In addition to the wrong use of grammatical items, the choice of vocabulary is also slipshod and the appropriate words are not used in a particular context. This does not take place in other speech acts as the choice of words is thought out prior to rendering them. This degree in the slip in words varies. Sometimes the word expressed is not in anyway connected with the word intended but due to the proximity of phonemes in the two words, one word is said for another, i.e., the selection is not arbitrary but is based on phonemic similarity and semantic similarity.

e.g. affects for effects (speaker no.11)

Sometimes the difference in meaning in words is not as obvious as the above mentioned examples, but it may be subtle. It may not be phonemically connected but semantically close to the intended word.
"It is not very necessary to go out, job and earn money...." (speaker no.10)
(intended word is 'work')

Due to the slip of the tongue double negatives also make their appearance in discourse, as a result of which wrong message is conveyed to the speaker.

"The lack of illiteracy means the villagers and their adamant attitudes have stood in the way."
(speaker no.13)

In lengthy sentences, not being conscious of the use of a connective in one clause, a connective is used in the following clause resulting in double connectives.

"As our children are studying in a English medium school, there are no English medium schools in Siripuram, its a village, so we decided to reside in Guntur." (speaker no.3)

The words like that demand a separate mention because more than half the speakers used it excessively. But the sense in which it was used is varying. It was used to mean 'etc.', 'from that point of view', 'that's how it is', etc. It was also a major gap filler which allowed the speaker's time to collect their thoughts and word them.

"I have to type, take the dictation from the principals, from here, like that."
(speaker no.9)
In discourse the tendency to make mistakes is very much present, but there is scope for improvisation and the speaker, if he is aware of the mistake immediately corrects it. This rectifying of faults is termed 'repair' by Jefferson. There are errors which are corrected by the listener too. These are called 'echoing'.

**e.g.** "Crub was corrected to curb by the speaker himself. Such amending is called 'self-initiated repairs'.

The speaker said, "the all go custom..." He then corrected it to 'the age-old custom'. This is an ordering error.

(speaker no.11)

Many sounds like clicks, snapping of fingers, carry meaning in discourses whereas they do not make their appearance in other speech acts.