Conversation: From Description to Pedagogy
Conversation: From Description to Pedagogy

Scott Thornbury and Diana Slade
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK
www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521891165

© Cambridge University Press 2006

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2006
Reprinted 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Thornbury, Scott, 1950–
   Conversation : from description to pedagogy / Scott Thornbury and
   Diana Slade.
      p. cm. – (Cambridge language teaching library)
   Includes bibliographical references and index.
   (hardback : alk. paper)
   1. Conversation analysis. 2. Discourse analysis. 3. Language and
   languages–Study and teaching. 4. Communicative competence. I. Title.
   II. Series.
P95.45.T49 2006
371.10292–dc22  2006023282

ISBN 978-0-521-81426-3 hardback

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external
websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to
press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make
no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain
appropriate.
Contents

Thanks and acknowledgements viii

Introduction 1

1 Characterizing conversation 5
   Introduction 5
   1.1 The nature of conversation 5
   1.2 Approaches to the analysis of conversation 27
   Summary 37

2 The vocabulary of conversation 40
   Introduction 40
   2.1 Lexical size 42
   2.2 Lexical density and lexical variety 43
   2.3 Lexical frequency 45
   2.4 Lexical repetition 49
   2.5 Vague language 54
   2.6 Fillers 56
   2.7 Discourse markers and other inserts 57
   2.8 Routines and lexical phrases 62
   2.9 Appraisal and involvement 65
   2.10 Implications 69

3 The grammar of conversation 73
   Introduction 73
   3.1 Complexity 75
   3.2 Heads and tails 80
   3.3 Grammatical incompleteness 83
   3.4 Ellipsis 83
   3.5 Deixis 85
   3.6 Questions 86
   3.7 Tense and aspect 90
   3.8 Modality 94
   3.9 Reporting 98
   3.10 What do learners need to know? 100
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><strong>The discourse features of conversation</strong></td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.1 Cohesion in conversation</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.2 Interaction in conversation</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.3 Topic management: Topic development, topic change and topic choice</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.4 Discourse strategies</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><strong>Genres in conservation: Storytelling and gossiping</strong></td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.1 Chat and Chunks in conversation</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.2 Genre theory</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.3 Storytelling genres</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.4 Lexico-grammatical features of storytelling genres</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.5 Storytelling genres: Summary</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.6 Gossip</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.7 Lexico-grammatical features of gossip</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.8 Gossip genre</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.9 Classroom implications</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><strong>Acquiring L1 conversational competence</strong></td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.1 Conversational competence</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.2 Turntaking</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.3 Child-directed speech</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.4 Formulaic language</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.5 Repetition</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.6 Scaffolding</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.7 Syntax: Vertical constructions</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.8 Cohesion</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.9 Coherence</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.10 Functions, genres and speech acts</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.11 Pragmatics</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.12 Educated discourse: Talk at school</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.13 Sociocultural theory and ‘instructional conversation’</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><strong>Acquiring L2 conversational competence</strong></td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.1 Fluency</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.2 Formulaic language</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.3 Communication strategies</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Contents

7.4 Pragmatic competence 223
7.5 Transfer 224
7.6 Acquisition vs learning 230
7.7 Classroom talk 238

8 Teaching conversation: A history 247
   Introduction 247
   8.1 Pre-reform and reform 247
   8.2 Direct method: Learning-through-conversation 249
   8.3 Audiolingualism: Drills, dialogues and the conversation class 251
   8.4 Situational English: Conversation in context 252
   8.5 Oral English: Conversation as speaking practice 254
   8.6 CLT: Conversation as communication 255
   8.7 Task-based learning: Conversation as a task 266

9 Teaching conversation: Approach, design, procedure and process 274
   Introduction 274
   9.1 Approach 275
   9.2 Design 281
   9.3 Procedure 295
   9.4 Process 307
   Conclusion 318

Task key 326
References 342
Author index 358
Subject index 361
The idea of co-authoring a book on conversation emerged, appropriately enough, out of a conversation. Through conversation, we discovered a mutual interest in conversation – and in its description and its teaching. The combination of our two specialisms – linguistic description, on the one hand, and teacher education, on the other – seemed to represent a plausible, even original, vantage point from which current research into spoken language could be surveyed and evaluated. That initial conversation has been prolonged and nourished over many years, albeit mostly at a distance, and against the backdrop of our separate, and often demanding, professional and personal lives. Credit for encouraging us to keep talking the talk, and for helping turn the talk into a book, must go to Mickey Bonin, previously of Cambridge University Press, for whose enthusiasm, support and extraordinary patience, we owe an incalculable debt. We would also like to thank the publishing team at CUP, and Jane Walsh in particular, as well as our indefatigable editor, Sylvia Goulding. Special thanks are due, too, to Jane Evison for her careful reading of the manuscript and for her insightful suggestions: these were an invaluable aid in the preparation of the final draft.

Diana Slade would also like to thank the following: Christian Matthiessen, who has been a constant source of support and inspiration about spoken language; Susie Eggins, the co-author of her previous book on conversation, for the many insights that she gained from her; and Helen Joyce, who read and commented in detail on drafts of some of the chapters: Helen has always been very generous with her time and made many helpful suggestions. She would also like to thank four other colleagues for their support and the many discussions on aspects of applied linguistics: Hermine Scheeres, Tim McNamara, Erich Steiner and Solange Vereza. And she thanks her colleagues both within and outside the University of Technology, Sydney, and her friends, for their endless patience and for putting up with conversations about this book for far too many years.

Both authors are grateful to the UTS and Macquarie University’s OZTALK team for their permission to use the spoken language corpora, and especially to Penny Biggins, for her painstaking work on the transcriptions.
Thanks and acknowledgements

Scott Thornbury thanks his colleagues at International House, Barcelona, as well as the many students and trainees who have unwittingly helped both shape his thinking and pilot many of the activities. Particular thanks are due to Jessica Mackay and Patrick Obregon for permission to use transcripts of their classes.

On a more personal note, the writing of this book would not have been possible without the unconditional support of Piet, Philip, Olivia, Georgia, and Gwen: we thank you all.

The authors and publishers are grateful to the following for permission to use copyright material. While every effort has been made, it has not been possible to identify the sources to all of the material used and in such cases the publishers would welcome information from the copyright owners. Apologies are expressed for any omissions.

The publishers are grateful to the following for permission to reproduce copyright material.


For the text on p.170: Short extract from Episode 2, Scene 1. The Royle Family: The Complete Scripts. Written by Caroline Aherne, Craig Cash and Henry Normal. Published by Andre Deutsch, © 2002.

Thanks and acknowledgements


For the text on p.261: ‘Closing a conversation’ and for the text on p.322: ‘Changing the topic’, from *Beach Street: An English Course for Adults (Student’s Book 2)*, © NSW Adult Migrant English Service, 1998.


For the text on p.306: Common European of Reference for Language: learning, teaching assessment, © Council of Europe.
To the memory of John Slade