Introduction

Casual conversation is a fundamental human activity, and one in which most of us engage many times a day. It may take the form of small talk about the weather at the supermarket check-out, or gossip about colleagues around the office coffee machine, or an extended phone conversation with a close friend about the meaning of life. Before getting down to the business at hand, sales reps chat with their clients, doctors chat with their patients, waiters with diners, and teachers with their students. Strangers at a bus stop will start up a conversation to vent their frustration about the service. Taxi drivers famously air their opinions, seldom solicited. Your dentist will chat away even when your responses are reduced to grunts. Fellow passengers on a long-haul flight will exchange pleasantries before settling in to watch the movie. Listeners will phone a radio talk show to sound off about local crime, and teenagers will talk for hours on their cell phones about matters of apparently enormous consequence. Even very young children chat away with their parents, and by the age of three are able to have fairly sustained conversations with their playmates.

Conversational talk crosses age groups, gender, class, culture and ethnicity. Levelt (1989) calls it 'the canonical setting for speech in all human societies'. Indeed, the stylistic features of conversation have extended beyond spoken talk itself and 'crossed over' into other modes and media, such as the popular press and advertising, a process called *conversationalization* by Fairclough (1992). And the advent and rapid expansion of the use of email, text messaging and online chat have further blurred the distinction between spoken and written language, while underscoring the ubiquitous role of conversation in human affairs.

The centrality of conversation to human discourse owes to the fact that it is the primary location for the enactment of social values and relationships. Through talk we establish, maintain and modify our social identities. The role that conversation plays in our formation as social beings starts at an early age. Stubbs (1983: IX) asserts that 'infants learn, as it were, to engage in conversation before they learn language', and Hatch (1978: 404) claims that 'language learning evolves out of learning how to carry on conversations, out of learning how to communicate'. Even as far back as the 1930s, Harold Palmer argued that all language

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use is based on, and is an extension of, conversation, adding that conversation must therefore be the start of any study of language. In Palmer's day, this meant prioritizing the teaching of pronunciation. The nature of spoken language itself was barely understood and for a long time spoken language was taught as if it were simply a less formal version of written language. This is a view that has been rectified only recently, with the advent of corpus linguistics and the consequent amassing of corpora of spoken data. Findings from such data now heavily inform the content of learner dictionaries, such as the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (second edition 2005), and descriptive grammars, such as the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber *et al.*, 1999).

Finally, sociocultural theories of learning, such as those that derive from Vygotsky's research into children's cognitive development, foreground the role of conversation as the medium for *all* learning, and have contributed to the notion that effective teaching is, essentially, a 'long conversation' (Mercer, 1995). Recent research into second-language acquisition also supports the view that the learning of second languages may be successfully mediated through conversational interaction (van Lier, 1996). Such a view not only reinforces the arguments for an approach to language teaching that systematically deals with spoken English, but would seem to vindicate the intuitions of those legions of learners who consistently demand inclusion of more 'conversation' in their language courses.

For all these reasons, an account of how conversation works is therefore essential in the development of a pedagogy for second-language learning. This book aims to meet this need by providing the reader with first an overview of the features that characterize conversation and distinguish it from other spoken and written genres (Chapter 1), followed by a systematic description of conversational English, including its vocabulary (Chapter 2), its grammar (Chapter 3), its discourse structure (Chapter 4), and its characteristic generic patterning (Chapter 5), and then an informed account of its development in both first- and second-language acquisition (Chapters 6 and 7). On this basis, and after a review of teaching approaches to date (Chapter 8), an integrated approach to the teaching of conversation will be outlined, along with practical classroom applications (Chapter 9).

In short, the book aims:

- to introduce practising teachers to the nature and structure of conversation in English, drawing from a range of theoretical models;
- to equip readers with analytical techniques necessary to analyse authentic conversation at the level of vocabulary, grammar, discourse and genre;

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- to outline how first-language conversational competence develops, and to relate this research to the development of second-language conversational competence;
- to identify and analyse the kinds of difficulties that learners of English encounter when participating in conversation;
- to outline a range of methodological approaches, procedures and techniques for teaching English conversation and to illustrate these approaches by reference to current materials;
- and, finally, to argue for an interactive, 'integrated' model of instruction, informed by the description of conversation and the learning theories outlined in the preceding chapters.

A note on transcription conventions

Wherever possible the data used as examples in this book come from authentic sources, i.e. from spontaneous and naturally occurring conversations recorded in a variety of contexts. (The few instances of invented data are identified as such.) In transcribing these conversations we have tried to capture their spontaneity and informality, but not at the expense of their readability. This has sometimes meant ignoring the finer details of transcription, such as length of pauses, pitch direction and other paralinguistic phenomena, unless these features have been expressly singled out for discussion. In cases where we cite data that employ different transcription conventions from our own, we have modified these transcriptions so as to bring them into line. Where this has not been possible, an explanation of any variant conventions will be found alongside the data.

The transcription devices that we use are the following:

- **full stops**: these indicate completion, usually realized by falling intonation
- **commas**: these are used to separate phrases or clauses in order to make utterances more readable
- **question marks**: these are used to indicate utterances that, in their context, function as questions, irrespective of their grammatical form or their intonation
- **exclamation marks**: these are used conservatively to indicate the expression of surprise or shock
- **capital letters**: words in capital letters are used conservatively to indicate emphasis
- **quotation marks**: double quotation marks are used to signal that the speaker is directly quoting speech; single quotation marks are used to signal that the speaker is saying what they or someone else thought

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- **empty parentheses**: non-transcribable segments of talk are indicated by ( )
- **filled parentheses**: words within parentheses indicate the transcriber's best guess as to a doubtful utterance
- **square brackets**: information about relevant non-verbal behaviour is given within square brackets [ ]
- **dots**: three dots indicate a hesitation within an utterance: . . .
- **dash**: a dash represents a false start:
  Speaker: Did you ever get that – I mean in French what is it?
- **equals sign**: a double equals sign is used to represent overlap phenomena, such as
  - **simultaneous utterances,** i.e. where two speakers are speaking at the same time:
    Speaker 1:   Is it still going, Studebakers?
    Speaker 2:   = =I don't know
    Speaker 3:   = =No it's got a new name
  - **overlapping utterances**: the point where the second speaker begins talking is shown by = = preceding the point in the first speaker's turn:
    Speaker 1:   Can you dance now= =Rod, can you?
    Speaker 2:   = =I can do rock'n' roll and Cha Cha and Rumbas and Sambas and waltzes
  - **contiguous utterances**: i.e. when there is no interval between adjacent utterances produced by different speakers:
    Speaker 1: they had to move out of the flat because the whole= =
    Speaker 2: = =roof collapsed.

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1 Characterizing conversation

Introduction

Conversation accounts for the major proportion of most people's daily language use but despite this (or perhaps because of it) it is not that easily defined. Compare, for example, these three dictionary definitions:

- If you have a conversation with someone, you talk with them, usually in an informal situation (*Collins' COBUILD English Dictionary*).
- Informal talk in which people exchange news, feelings, and thoughts (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*).
- An informal talk involving a small group of people or only two; the activity of talking in this way (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*).

While all three definitions highlight the informal and the spoken nature of conversation, only one singles out group size as a defining feature, while another focuses on topic. The distinction between *a conversation* (i.e. conversation as a countable noun) and *conversation* (uncountable) is either ignored or blurred in the first two definitions. Finer distinctions between conversation and, say, *chat*, *small talk*, *discussion* and *gossip*, are not dealt with. And, as we shall see in Chapter 8, the term *conversation* with special reference to language-teaching methodology has been enlisted for a wide variety of uses – ranging from *speaking* and *communication* to *dialogue* and *role play*. In this chapter we shall attempt to characterize conversation, first by contrasting it with other kinds of language, and then by listing its distinguishing features. By way of conclusion, we will offer a working definition of conversation that will serve as the starting point for a more detailed description in subsequent chapters.

1.1 The nature of conversation

In April 1999 a freak storm devastated parts of the city of Sydney. Here is how the storm was reported in *The Sydney Morning Herald* the following day:

Characterizing conversation

Text 1.1

> Hail shatters city
>
> A freak hail storm swept across Sydney last night, causing damage worth hundreds of millions of dollars and triggering a massive rescue and repair effort by emergency services.
>
> Thousands of homes were damaged as roofs caved in and windows and skylights were smashed. Thousands more cars were wrecked or badly damaged in the storm, which struck with no official warning.
>
> The ambulance service said dozens of people were treated for cuts and lacerations after being hit by falling glass or hail stones, which witnesses described variously as being as big as golf balls, lemons, cricket balls and rock melons.
>
> . . . At Paddington, Ms Jan Mourice said all houses on one side of Prospect Street had windows smashed. Mr Lucio Galleto, of Lucio's Restaurant at Paddington, said: 'I had five windows in the restaurant smashed. Water flooded in and patrons' cars have been smashed.'
>
> (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 April 1999)

On the day after the storm a radio talk show host interviewed a spokesman from the Weather Bureau:

Text 1.2

(1) PC: . . . here on 2BL. Well what went wrong? Why didn't the Weather Bureau tell us what was happening? You have heard earlier this morning reports that the Bureau thought er saw the storm but thought it would go back out to sea. It didn't. Steve Simons, a senior forecaster with the Bureau, joins me on the line this morning. Good morning Steve.

(2) SS: Good morning Philip.

(3) PC: So what went wrong?

(4) SS: What went wrong was that the storm developed down near Wollongong and we had it on the radar and we were tracking it and the track at that stage was showing it going out to sea and then very suddenly it developed into what we call a 'supercell' which is the beginning of a severe thunderstorm and these supercells have a habit of doing some rather crazy things. It changed direction very suddenly – this was down near Otford Bundeena way = =

(5) PC: = =Yes all right so er what was the time interval between you first discovering this storm and then discovering that it was in fact heading for the the city?

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(6) SS: The time that we realised that it was heading for the
city . . .

(Radio 2BL, Philip Clark Breakfast Presenter, 15 April 1999)

A couple of days later four friends were talking about how they were
affected by the storm. Here is the transcript of part of that conversation:

Text 1.3: Hailstorm

(1) Odile: . . . No I think I don't know many people who have
been affected except you and I. That much.
(2) Rob: You don't know?
(3) Odile: Well you know except for the neighbours.
(4) Rob: Oh a friend of ours in Paddington, they had to move
out of the flat= =
(5) Grace: = =Mm.
(6) Rob   because the whole= =
(7) Grace: = =roof collapsed.
(8) Rob: The tiles fell through the ceiling= =
(9) Grace: = =Mm
(10) Rob: into the room and they've actually had to move out
completely.
(11) Odile: Oh really?
(12) Dan: And there was the little old lady over the road who . . .
(13) Rob: Oh yeah. [laughs] She was sitting in her living room
and a hail stone fell through the skylight, this old
Italian woman. She had corrugated iron but it fell
through the skylight. It fell through the ceiling and
landed in her lap when she was sitting= =
(14) Odile: = =Mm.
(15) Rob: watching television.
(16) Dan: Watching *The X-files* probably.
(17) All: [laugh]
(18) Odile: I'm so glad the kids were not there because you
know that hole is just above Debbie's head.
(19) Rob: Yeah.
(20) Grace: Oh yeah.
(21) Rob: No, it is amazing more people weren't injured.
(22) Grace: Mm.
(23) Rob: So erm they go back to school tomorrow?
(24) Odile: Not tomorrow= =
(25) Rob: = =Monday.
(26) Odile: It's Sunday.
(27) Rob: Monday.
(28) Grace: Monday.
(29) Odile: Monday.
(30) Rob: Mm.

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(31) Odile: Yeah.
(32) Grace: Is the school OK?
(33) Odile: You mean, general damage?
(34) Grace: Yeah.
(35) Odile: I don't know.
(36) Rob: The school's closed next to us, yeah.
(37) Grace: I was speaking to erm . . .
(38) Odile: Oh my god I hadn't thought about that . . .

(Authors' data)

Each of these three texts deals with the same topic – the storm – but each deals with it in a very different way. These differences derive partly from the different channels of communication involved, partly from the different purposes that motivated each text, and partly from the different kinds of roles and relationships existing in each of the communicative situations. While all three texts encode instances of spoken language (Text 1.1 both reports and directly quotes what witnesses are supposed to have said), only Texts 1.2 and 1.3 exhibit the 'jointly-constructed-in-real-time' nature of talk, and only one of these texts – Text 1.3 – is a *conversation* in the sense that we will be using in this book.

In order to arrive at a workable definition of conversation, then, it will be useful to look at the differences between these three texts in more detail. By highlighting the differences, first between written and spoken English, and then between formal and informal spoken English, the following defining characteristics of conversation, and their implications, will be discussed:

- that (to state the obvious) it is *spoken*, and
- that this speaking takes place *spontaneously*, in *real time*, and
- that it takes place in a *shared context*;
- that it is *interactive*, hence *jointly constructed* and *reciprocal*;
- that its function is primarily *interpersonal*;
- that it is *informal*; and
- since, it is the critical site for the negotiation of social identities, it is *expressive* of our wishes, feelings, attitudes and judgements.

1.1.1 Conversation is spoken

Conversation is spoken (or primarily so, since computer-mediated communication now allows conversation to take place by means of writing – see Section 1.1.8 below). Hence the most obvious difference between Texts 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 lies in the choice of *mode*: Text 1.1 is – and was always – written, whereas Texts 1.2 and 1.3 are written transcriptions of what was originally spoken. The transfer from one mode (speaking) to another (writing) means that most of the prosodic features of the spoken

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The nature of conversation

language, i.e. sentence stress, intonation, tempo and articulation rate, rhythm and voice quality, are lost in transcription. In order to redress this omission, here is a transcription of Text 1.3 with prosodic features represented, using the system adopted by Crystal and Davy (1975), as outlined in the glossary below:

|| tone-unit boundary
| first prominent syllable of the tone-unit
`   falling tone
´   rising tone
-      level tone
^   rising-falling tone
˘   falling-rising tone
'   the next syllable is stressed
↑   the next syllable is stressed and also steps up in pitch
"   extra strong stress
SMALL CAPITALS   the word, or words, containing the nuclear syllable in a tone-unit
.
-      pauses, from brief to long
- -
- - -

Text 1.3 – Phonological transcription

(1) Odile: . . . |no Ì 'think || I don't |know ↑many 'people 'who have been AFFÈCTED || except |you and ↑Ì || |THÀT 'much || - - -

(2) Rob: you |don't KNŎW ||

(3) Odile: |WÈLL you KNÓW || ex'cept for the ↑NĚIGHBOURS ||

(4) Rob: oh a ↑friend of 'ours in PĂDDINGTON || |they 'had to 'move 'out of the ↑FLÂT ||

(5) Grace: |M` M ||

(6) Rob: be|cause the WHÓLE ||

(7) Grace: |roof COLLÀPSED ||

(8) Rob: the ↑tiles 'fell through the CÊILING ||

(9) Grace: |M`M ||]

(10) Rob: |into the ↑RÒOM || and they've |actually had to 'move 'out COMPLÈTELY ||·

(11) Odile: oh |RÈALLY ||

(12) Dan: and |there was the little old 'lady over the RÓAD who || -

(13) Rob: |oh YÈAH || [*laughs*] |she was 'sitting in her LÎVING 'room || and a |hail stone 'fell through the SKŶLIGHT || this |old ITÂLIAN 'woman || |she had

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	'corrugated ÎRON ‖ but it 'fell through the SKŶLIGHT ‖ it 'fell through the 'ceiling and 'landed in her · ↑LÁP ‖ ǀwhen she was SÌTTING ‖
(14) Odile:	ǀM-M ‖
(15) Rob:	ǀwatching TELEVÍSION ‖---
(16) Dan:	ǀwatching the ↑X-FÌLES ‖ PRÒBABLY ‖
(17) All:	[*laugh*]
(18) Odile:	ǀI'm ↑so 'glad the ↑KÌDS were not THÉRE ‖ beǀcause you KNÓW ‖ that ǀHÓLE ‖ is 'just above 'Debbie's HÈAD ‖
(19) Rob:	ǀYĒAH ‖
(20) Grace:	ǀoh YÊAH ‖
(21) Rob:	ǀno it ↑ÌS a'mazing ‖ more ǀpeople weren't ÌNJURED ‖
(22) Grace:	ǀMM ‖---
(23) Rob:	ǀSÓ erm ‖ ǀthey go back to 'school TOMÓRROW ‖
(24) Odile:	not ǀTOMÓRROW ‖
(25) Rob:	MÒNDAY ‖
(26) Odile	it's ǀSÙNDAY ‖
(27) Rob:	ǀMÒNDAY ‖
(28) Grace:	ǀMÒNDAY ‖
(29) Odile:	ǀMÒNDAY ‖
(30) Rob:	ǀMM ‖
(31) Odile:	ǀYEAH ‖--
(32) Grace:	is the ǀschool ÓK ‖
(33) Odile:	ǀyou MÉAN ‖ ǀgeneral DÂMAGE ‖
(34) Grace:	ǀYÊAH ‖
(35) Odile:	ǀ Î don't 'know ‖
(36) Rob:	the ǀSCHÒOL'S 'closed ‖ ǀnext to ÙS ‖ ǀYÈAH ‖
(37) Grace:	ǀI was SPÈAKING to erm ‖
(38) Odile:	↑oh my GÒD ‖ I hadn't ↑THÓUGHT about 'that ‖

It would be impossible to convey the full extent of the conversational 'work' that is achieved through prosody, but among the features that are worth noting in the above extract – and which are either completely absent or only notionally represented in written text (e.g. by the use of punctuation) – are the following:

- The use of intonation (i.e. changes in pitch direction), and specifically a rising tone to signal questions, where no other grammatical markers of interrogation are present, as in Rob's utterances (2) and (23);
- The use of high 'key' – i.e. a marked step up in pitch – to indicate the introduction of a new topic: (4) oh a ↑friend of 'ours in PĂDDINGTON ‖;
- The way intonation is used to contrast information that is considered to be shared by the speakers ('given') and that which is being proclaimed as 'new', for example, in Odile's utterance (18):

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