Interdisciplinary approaches to sociolinguistic meaning

Combining Phonetics and Conversation Analysis

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Current work

• Ideas from Firthian Prosodic Analysis: polysystemic approach; non-phonemic; phonetic detail; ‘context of situation’

• Conversation Analysis: a kind of grammar for talk

• ‘Intensifying emphasis’ in naturally-occurring conversation

• Clicks and ejectives in spoken (British) English
What are the comparables?

In general linguists are not as concerned with features distinguishing one utterance from another... If linguists applied the same strict criteria to distinguishing one utterance from another that they would apply to distinguishing one word from one another, there would be no debate about whether intonation, meaningful gestures, or other gradient phenomena would have to be incorporated into an analysis of the meaning expressed.

Polysystems and structures:
Different structures permit different systems of contrast (cf. Itô & Mester 1996)

Word-initial onsets in English

“ð” w h j j

Function words

p b t d k g
θ f s
m n
l r
etc.
What can details tell us?

All those people; in those boxes

[-l̩ː] [-n̩ː]

All thin people; in thin boxes

*[-l̩ː] *[-n̩ː]

They can tell us something about where we are in structure: recognising [+voice, place: DENTAL] delimits the search space to function words.
Intensifying emphasis
Some characteristics

• A cluster of phonetic, lexical and other features

• **Tempo**: the intensified items sound “slow”; the preceding talk sounds “fast”

• ‘**Fortition**’ of consonantal articulations: audible releases of nasals/laterals; long closure for plosives; tight articulatory setting

• (Often): **Gap before**; creaky voice/glottal stop around the gap
A few examples

- I’d walk in there and like five people would say hello to me
- you’d be nuts if you went in
- well the traffic
- Joel then turned up the day after I arrived and drove us (.) mad
An example

CH4145.658-672: I did, the baby Jack—is huge

[?] silence: 230 ms

beats: 0.5s intervals

* * * * * sharp, delayed onset

I did the baby Jack is huge
A common sequence

1. A turn/Turns preceding the intensified turn

2. Turn with intensification, often consisting of more than one Turn Constructional Unit. Story launch; projects a longer turn; projects recognisable ending; projects story as ‘extraordinary’

3. Minimal response from recipient; usually does not treat (2) as being about anything ‘extraordinary’

4. Expansion; account for intensification (epistemic access)

5. (Appreciation, which does treat intensification+expansion as ‘extraordinary’)
B: well anyhow did you get to meet your nephew at your %uh
A: I did the b[aby &Ja]ck is huge
B: [at the wedding]
A: he's four months and he's like eighteen pou[nds
B: {{laugh}}
A: [the kid is a- de- but it]'s all breast milk
B: [that's huge that's like the size of a two year
A: (old isn't it (laughed))
Voiceless plosives
in this sequential context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Closure duration</th>
<th>VOT</th>
<th>total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>drove us <strong>crazy</strong></td>
<td>215</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it was <strong>painful</strong></td>
<td>66</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>well the <strong>traffic</strong></td>
<td>80</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he was like <strong>totally</strong> enamoured</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we had a <strong>party</strong> here</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it was <strong>quite</strong> a party</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Voiced plosives
in this sequential context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Closure duration</th>
<th>Voicing after closure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a <strong>big</strong> change of leadership</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it’s <strong>definitely</strong> like</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m like <strong>dying</strong> to go there</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>big</strong> fat salary</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we had a <strong>bash</strong></td>
<td>327</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Polysystemic analysis:
Variability/social meaning handled as phonetic exponents of system/structure

Socially relevant categories are treated as phonologically relevant systems with their own phonological and phonetic constraints:
• social roles and identities;
• social actions;
• issues such as shared knowledge, claims to knowledge, etc.
Summary (1)

Conversation Analysis

• shows how turns at talk relate to one another
• provides one sort of grammar for turns at talk in conversation
Summary (2)

This makes it possible to do a number of things in principled ways, including:

• establish comparability between turns;
• provide a unified linguistic account of phenomena, which considers phonetics, lexis, syntax, sequence etc;
• provide an understanding of how talk unfolds moment-by-moment (i.e. a dynamic view of talk, not a static one);
Benefits of cross-disciplinary work
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Some benefits

This method has been useful for:

• improving understanding of phonetic detail
• relating social actions to linguistic form

It has implications for (current work):

• psycholinguistic models (e.g. Hawkins 2003)
• speech processing/speech
Challenges of cross-disciplinary work
Some stops

- Terminology
- Compromising the integrity and/or rigour of the method
- ... but this is sometimes also how new ideas and paradigms come about
- People with open minds are more likely to succeed
Future directions?
Acknowledgments
and a shameful plug

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More information?

- [http://sites.google.com/site/raolyork/](http://sites.google.com/site/raolyork/)
- [http://www.sound2sense.eu/](http://www.sound2sense.eu/)