

V COLOQUIO ARGENTINO DE LA IADA
Cohesión y Coherencia en la Interacción Verbal Oral

La Plata, Argentina | 12 y 13 de octubre de 2010

PRESENTACIÓN

COHERENCE AT EPISODE BOUNDARIES IN COOPERATIVE DIALOGUES

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RESUMEN

The findings informed in this paper are part of an ongoing project about coherence and cohesion in casual conversation, under development at University of La Plata. In this study we analyze the 'communicative labour' done by speakers to contribute to the global coherence of the text. We focus on the strategies used by actors to co-construct coherence at episode boundaries (Linell, 1998; Korolija, 1998). The corpus comprises 52 audio or video-recorded dyadic and polyadic conversations among university students aged between 18 and 28, from different universities in Argentina. We agree with Linell (1998) and Korolija (1998) that participants in this kind of interaction –and analysts– assume that both parties cooperate in the process of building coherence. We adopt the concept of episode (Linell, 1998; Korolija, 1998), since it is appropriate for the fragmentation and analysis of the colloquial conversations under study, which consist of both 'chunks' and 'chat' segments (Eggins & Slade, 1997). The analysis reveals that speakers deploy a variety of strategies –which they combine according to their evaluation of shared knowledge– to offer cues to listeners that will help them establish the inter-episode relationships necessary to make sense of the text.

INTRODUCTION

The findings informed in this paper are part of an ongoing project about coherence and cohesion in casual conversation, under development at University of La Plata, Argentina. In this study we focus on the strategies used by actors to co-construct coherence at episode boundaries. We adopt the concept of 'episode' from Linell (1998), and Korolija (1998). We make a first approach to our corpus from this perspective, in order to describe the mechanisms Argentine speakers use to contribute to the building of inter-episode coherence.

Coherence as an interactional construct

Goodwin defines coherence in spontaneous text as a "multiparty activity that helps to negotiate understanding within human interaction" (Goodwin, 1995: 117). It includes not only relationships between linguistic items, but also the fit

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between the action and the content of an utterance, and the social situation within which it is embedded (Goodwin, 1995: 118).

Coates (1995) distinguishes two approaches for textual analysis: the 'cohesion' approach and the 'coherence' approach. The former focuses on the text as product, and does not take into account contextual features, whereas the latter studies the text as process, and considers that texts are dynamic expressions of meaning negotiated by participants in a particular situation.

Conversations are 'about' something, and coherence derives from (pragmatic) 'aboutness' (Bayer, 1980: 215; Bublitz, 1988: 271, quoted by Korolija, 1998). In institutional conversations, actors know what to expect, since topics may be pre-determined by the character of the interaction (interview, doctor-patient consultation, service encounter). In colloquial conversation, on the other hand, there is no pre-determination of topics, and topic progression tends to be negotiated on the spot, yielding a kind of 'chained' structure.

As Bublitz (1988, quoted by Korolija 1998) points out, freedom of topic choice in colloquial conversation has led researchers studying coherence to believe that the result will be conversations that will exhibit lack of order, and therefore lack of coherence. Yet, as long as actors are not discontent with the result of the interaction, texts must be considered coherent, and a coherence theory should be appropriate to describe them (Coates, 1995).

Usually, successful topic management is considered essential for coherent conversation (e.g. Mentis, 1994, in Korolija, 1998). However, although some coherent conversations are organized exclusively in terms of talk (e.g. gossip, telephone conversation or talk shows, in other activities talk may be only incidental, or simply absent. In face to face interaction when talk accompanies manual work, for example people repairing a car, or trying to set a mobile phone, topical fragments develop less frequently than in interactions when participants are, for example, sharing coffee. As Korolija points out, topicality is common, but not universal in conversation. However, both topical and non topical segments are essential for the order and organization, and hence the coherence of the conversation, and of the activity as a whole. (Korolija, 1998). As a result of this, Linell (1998) takes an interactional outlook on coherence, and understands that it is organized in episodes, not in topics. He defines an episode as "a bounded sequence, a discourse event with a beginning and an end surrounding a spate of talk, which is usually focused on the treatment of some 'problem', 'issue' or 'topic'". However, he considers that in talk, topics and tasks are closely related' (Linell, 1998: 182). According to Linell, topical episodes are characterized not only by what they are 'about', but also by 'how' participants frame their discourse and organize the interaction (Linell, 1998: 182).

Korolija (1998: 38) describes an episode as an "action sequence internally bound together by a topical trajectory and/or a common activity". She holds that episodes have internal coherence, they constitute an unbroken chain of ac-

tion performed and/or narrated, and asserts that episode boundaries are marked by both semantic and formal features.

Linell (1998: 182) holds that there is usually coherence within topical episodes, but there are also links and bridges between episodes.

We understand that the segmentation of conversations into episodes is useful because it allows the study of coherence in casual conversation not only in generic fragments (chunks), but also in non-generic stretches of 'chat' (Eggins & Slade, 1997).

CORPUS

The corpus comprises 52 casual conversations among university students aged between 18 and 28. The analysis presented here is carried out on a conversation that we consider representative, because it shows elements present in most of the interactions. The decision to illustrate the exposition with one sample conversation arose from the need to show how episodes are topically and interactionally linked to form a coherent whole.

ANALYSIS

Coherence at episode boundaries

As we said before, in this paper we focus our attention on how coherence is achieved at episode boundaries in co-operative dialogues.

In order to do this, we study the episode development of a multiparty encounter among three female university students who gather together to have dinner, and analyze how actors co-construct coherence across episodes.

We agree with Schegloff's considerations (1995), that conversations are connected in a meaningful way because coherence is a co-construction. In a co-constructionist stance (Linell, 1998; Korolija, 1998; Korolija & Linell, 1996), it is assumed that in conversation there is a division of communicative labour. Coherence is achieved by actors in real time by their responsive contributions to the conversation, which involve what is said, (i.e. text), the contexts activated by the actions performed, and sense-making. (Korolija, 1998: 112). For Korolija and Linell (1996: 799) "Sense-making consists in the actor's (or analyst's) building of coherent links between chunks of discourse and some kind of context(s), that is, things accessible to the conversationalist in prior co-text, in the concrete, surrounding situation or in some kind of background knowledge".

As a rule, actors in a verbal encounter assume that their co-participants will cooperate in the building of coherence, which is why they try to assign relevance to what their interlocutors say. On the other hand, when they produce an episode initiation, they may deploy different strategies that will contribute to

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the coherence of the piece. However, the making of meaning in interaction is not only a matter of cooperation between actors, but also of cooperation between the 'worlds' of these actors (Mey, 1993). A theory of coherence in conversation must also, to some extent, be a theory of contexts; Korolija says that I quote: "contexts are silent partners in the making of meaning".

At episode boundaries, speakers actualize contextual resources that are accessible to them but have so far remained only potential. (Korolija, 1998). But participants not always have a shared understanding of the contextual resources potentially available. In the co-construction of interaction, actors make a permanent assessment of the common ground with their interlocutors in order to select what to say and how to say it, and they give cues to listeners as to how to interpret what they say.

Since there may be different degrees of disjunction at episode boundaries, actors evaluate how difficult it may be for their interlocutors to accommodate the new information into their world views, and they use a number of strategies (markers, phrases, 'preliminaries' (Schegloff, 1980) prosodic features) to 'warn' their interlocutors about what to expect.

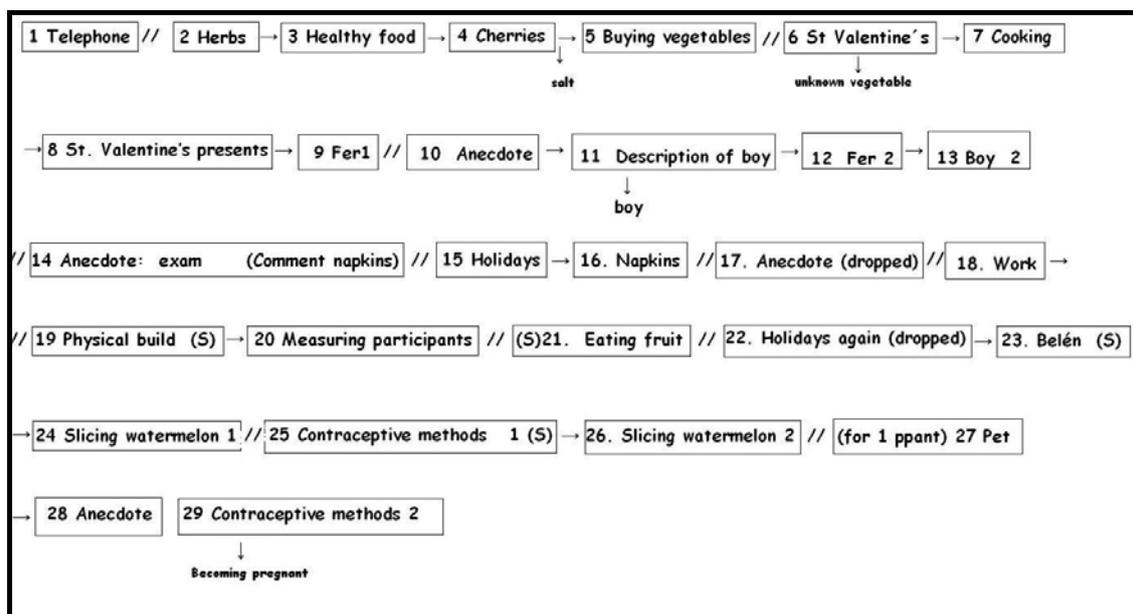
As regards prosody, Nakajima and Allen (1993) hold that in natural conversations, when topics change, the speaker starts speaking with raised pitch level, but when the topic continues the speaker uses the same pitch level.

According to Brazil (1997), and Granato (2005) actors can choose from a three tier system (high, mid and low) in terms of the relative key at the onset of a tone unit. High key selection has contrastive value, mid key additive value (and constitutes the unmarked choice) and the selection of low key has equative value, that is, with the meaning 'as to be expected' (Brazil, 1997). Granato (2005) makes similar findings in institutional conversations in Spanish spoken in the so-called River-Plate area in Argentina.

The conversation we analyze (06EIIIM17) comprises 29 episodes. Most of them are organized in terms of talk, and in a couple of them talk is only incidental (comparing participants' height, or slicing a watermelon). Although the topic selected at the beginning (Herbs) has nothing to do with the content of the last episode (Contraceptive methods), the interaction as a whole shows macro-episodic coherence (Picture 1).

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Picture 1

References

- smooth transition
- // greater processing effort required
- ↓ marks embedded episode.

THE ANALYSIS

As can be seen in Picture1, the transition between some episodes (→) requires little processing effort. This occurs, for example, when the new episode is grounded on the co-text. In the following example, the mention of Fer (a common friend) by Luz in Episode 7 makes her co-textually available. Valeria uses this resource to start a new episode about new referents and new situations. She introduces the question *¿En qué anda Fer?* (*What is Fer up to?*) on a Mid Key, – which carries the local meaning ‘this will not surprise you’– projecting that she assumes that her listeners will easily incorporate this topic into the conversation.

Episode 8. St. Valetine’s Presents

1. (Risas de todas)
(Laugh from all participants).
2. **Lu:** No, a mí me hizo darle bola **Fer**, porque me mandó un mensaje.
No, Fer made me pay attention to it, because she sent me a message.
3. **Va:** A mí también me mandó.
4. **She sent one to me too.**
5. **Lu:** Bahh, a los dos, pero era para los dos... Me dice, estaba viniendo de Trenquelauquen.

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6. **Well, to both, it was for both... She tells me, she was coming back from Trenquelaúquen.**
7. **Va:** Sí, a mí también me dij, me mandó.
8. **Yes, she also told me, she also sent me a message.**
9. **Lu:** Claro, yo la había visto el día anterior y..
10. **Yes, I had seen her the day before and...**

Episode 9. Fer

11. **Va:** ¿En qué anda **Fer?**
What is Fer up to?
12. **Lu:** Trabajando, ahora se va para Trenque.
Working, now she is going to Trenque.

When episodes are linked topically, (e.g. Episode 2 and Episode 3) actors seem to have no problems in accommodating the new topic into their world views. Episode 2 is about growing herbs at home. Valeria seems to associate that with 'cooking', and this with eating habits, and starts Episode 3 by saying "*nosotros acá comemos re-bien*" (*we eat very well here*), on a Mid Key, which triggers contributions from all the other participants saying how healthily they eat. This seems to indicate that it was easy for her interlocutors to make the same associations as Valeria.

Episode boundary is not marked either lexico-grammatically or prosodically when talk emerges from something in the immediate, surrounding concrete situation, or from activities done at the moment of speaking. An example of this is Episode 24, when participants are trying to slice a watermelon. In the previous episode, Episode 23, they are talking about a common friend, Belén. Then Valeria starts talking about the watermelon that is on the table and they are about to eat. She produces the question

[¿Quién la, quién la,] quién la corta? Yo no sé [cómo].
Who, who is going to slice it? I don't know how to

on Mid Key, because participants can immediately link the referent 'la' (*it*) with the watermelon.

However, there are situations in which the contexts actualized by speakers are not easily accessible to their co-participants. In these cases, speakers make use of resources both for linking the episodes and for warning listeners that they will need to make a greater effort to relate the new episode to prior ones. It is important to remember that coherence is not an inherent property of texts, but is provided to texts by actors (or analysts) (Givón 1995). When the conversa-

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tion starts, (Episode 1) Cecilia is speaking with her husband on the phone. Apparently, the next episode (Herbs) started simultaneously with Cecilia's conversation. Valeria realizes that Cecilia will not be able to understand what is going on, and provides the necessary information, reporting what they were talking about, so that Cecilia can make sense of what is said.

Va: Yo le decía a Luz que como tiene casa que se, yo [me compré unas plantitas.]

I was telling Luz that, since she lives in a house, she can... I bought some little plants

In some cases, the development of the conversation makes it necessary to start a new episode.

At the end of episode 4, there are signs that the last topic has faded (there is reiteration of information *-son mucho más ricos-* (they are much tastier) topicless contributions *-Ch ch... La tengo con "sh, sh"...*- low volume and pauses).

Episode 4. Cherry Tomatoes

13. Va: Viste qué ricos son.

Have you seen how tasty they are

14. Ce: Me encantan... Yo el otro día en Norte compré cherry a uno con noventa el kilo.

I love them ... the other day at Norte I bought cherry at 1.9. a kilo.

15. Va: ¡En serio! ¡Qué barato!

Really! How cheap!

16. Ce: Estaban más baratos que los tomates normales, entonces llevamos cherries.

They were cheaper than common tomatoes, so we took cherries.

17. Va: [Ahh, claro...]

Ah, of course

18. Lu: [En la ver]dulería que yo compro está a dos pesos el kilo los tomates común y un peso con cincuenta el cherry. Mucho, a mi me gusta mucho más el cherry.

[at the greengrocer's where I usually buy, common tomatoes cost two pesos a kilo, and one peso fifty the cherry. Much, I like cherry much more.

19. Va: Son mucho más ricos.

They are much tastier

20. Lu: Ch ch... La tengo con "sh, sh"...

Ch... ch.... I keep on saying sh sh

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One of the speakers, Valeria, who is one of the most frequent contributors, perceives this and decides to change the topic. She starts the Episode with a 'preliminary': "*el otro día*" (*the other day*) and proceeds to tell her friends that for St. Valentine's Day she prepared a special dish for her boyfriend.

The strategy of introducing narrative fragments by means of preliminaries such as *el otro día, sabes lo que me pasó*, etc. (*the other day, you know what happened to me*) is very frequent in the corpus. The key level on which they are produced depends on how related/unrelated the narrative is to the previous episode.

Since Valeria's recount about the dish that she prepared (Eggin & Slade, 1997) is related to the previous conversation -it continues talking about food and cooking- she produces it on a Mid Key.

When speakers consider that the narrative they want to introduce cannot be easily accommodated onto the common ground, i.e. that they are bringing up the topic without any grounding on prior discourse, they may prepare their listeners for what is to follow. In the conversation under study, for example, after Episode 9 has been closed, Luz realizes that her friends will have difficulty in assigning coherence to the new episode she wants to introduce. She then decides to mark the episode lexically as locally unmotivated. She announces that she is going to tell an anecdote about something *very strange* that has happened to her.

Lu: A mí me ha pasado algo tan extraño...

Something so strange has happened to me...

Apparently, she considers that this is enough to anticipate a contrastive topic, she seems to evaluate that no further signals need to be given, and she produces it on a Mid Key.

Something similar happens between Episodes 13 and 14. At the end of Episode 13 (Boy 2), there is laughter from all the participants, and then a pause. The topic seems to have faded. Since long pauses are not tolerated in our culture, Valeria immediately claims the floor to fill the gap, and starts Episode 14 (Exam). But what she is going to say is not related at all to what they are talking about. As the announcement that she is going to narrate something "*Sabés que el otro día*" (*you know that the other da'*) is produced on a Mid Key, which makes listeners expect topic continuation, she feels the need to make the listeners aware of the fact that there is no relationship between this anecdote and prior talk "*no tiene mucho que ver, pero*" (*it doesn't have much to do with it, but*). In this way, listeners know what to expect, and will not be surprised by a topic introduced "out of the blue".

Later, when Valeria has finished telling her anecdote, Cecilia introduces a completely unrelated topic, asking her friends what they did during their holi-

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days. She evaluates that listeners need to be made aware of this, and marks the episode initiation doubly: she selects High Key, to project topic change, with the local meaning “this may surprise you”, and she uses the vocative ‘*chicas*’, (*girls*), to call everybody’s attention.

¿Qué

21. Ce: [hicieron...] ¿Qué hicieron en las vacaciones, chicas?

What

[did you...] what did you do on your holidays, girls?

The use of ‘che’

Special attention needs to be given to the use of ‘che’ –a very informal argentinian vocative- as episode initiator. Its main function seems to be to call interlocutors’ attention. It is frequently used to introduce a new topic/action. In this case, it is generally associated with High Key:

In Episode 19 Cecilia and Valeria are comparing who is taller. After they finish, Valeria, the host, says:

Che

Va: , ¿qué fruta traigo? Tengo manzana, tengo sandía...

Che

, What fruit shall I bring? I’ve got, apples, I’ve got watermelon...

Valeria uses ‘che’ to attract everybody’s attention, and although her utterance is related to the situation - they have finished the main course and the host offers something for dessert- the speaker seems to feel that there is a fracture in topic development, and marks this prosodically with High Key.

Similarly, when Luz is telling her friends about the boy she met in the street, she mentions that they talked about different things, and then, abruptly, the boy invited her to go out. She quotes him using High Key on ‘che’. This projects that the boy was introducing something completely unexpected. As analysts, however, we do not have access to the original conversation between Luz and the boy, but it could be assumed that a new episode was started at that point.

Luz: bueno, y mm... y bueno y que esto que lo otro y me dice:

Che

“ , ¿no querés salir un día de estos?”.

Well, and mmm and well, and this, and that, and he tells me:

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Che

“ , wouldn't you like to go out one of these days?

'Che' on a High Key can also be used to introduce a topic which, although present in the common ground, needs reactivating or refreshing.

At the end of Episode 6, Valeria evaluates the dish she prepared for her boyfriend as 'delicious' and 'extremely easy', finishing her contribution with low termination. In this way, she yields the floor (Brazil 1997 Granato 2005). Luz, then, introduces the question about how she prepared the dish using 'che' on a high key. Apparently, the friends had been talking about it before, and now she reminds Valeria of this.

Che,

22. Lu: , ¿cómo la hiciste al final que me [dijiste...]

Che,

, How did you prepare it in the end, that [you told me...]

23. Va: [no...]

[no...]

24. Lu: ... que ibas a hacer receta?

... that you were going to use a recipe?

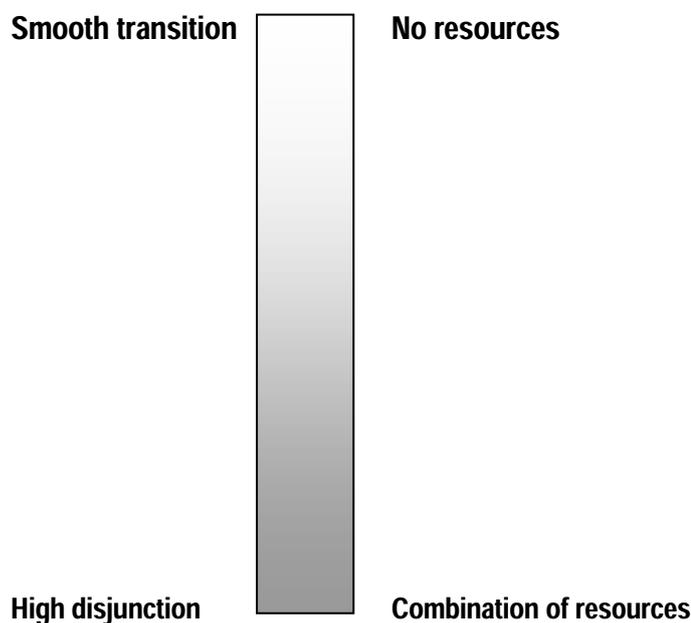
FINAL REMARKS

Participants in co-operative dialogues are aware of the fact that, while some episodes 'follow' naturally from the previous one, there may be different degrees of disjunction between episodes, given the level of accessibility actors have to the potential contexts actualized in the verbal encounter. Since both parties expect a coherent development of the conversation, they take pains, as speakers, to provide cues to the listeners as to how to interpret their contributions, and as recipients, to try to find coherent links at episode boundaries. In order to help listeners in the process, speakers make use of a combination of resources (textual markers, phrases, prosodic features) according to their evaluation of the magnitude of the 'fracture', in terms of how easily the new topic may be accommodated into the common ground.

The highest degree of 'unexpectedness' is usually signalled by using more than one resource, e.g. vocative+prosody, phrase+prosody, vocative+ phrase; when the transition is smoother because recipients can appeal to co-textual or contextual features (including background knowledge) to bridge the gap, speakers tend to deploy fewer or no resources to mark boundaries. However, the degrees of disjunction are not fixed, they can be better represented as on a continuum.

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Picture 2

As we have said in the Introduction, the mechanisms employed to sustain coherence at episode boundaries in this sample conversation, can be found in most of the conversations of the corpus. This constitutes only the first approach to the subject. There are many future research questions, which include an exhaustive analysis of the vocative 'che'.

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