

THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF COHERENCE AT EPISODE BOUNDARIES IN COOPERATIVE DIALOGUES

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ABSTRACT: The findings informed in this paper are part of an ongoing project on coherence and cohesion in casual conversation, in progress at University of La Plata. In this study we analyze the ‘communicative labour’ done by speakers at transition points between episodes 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 60 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.

KEY WORDS: coherence, co-construction, colloquial conversation, episode.

*LA CO-CONSTRUCCIÓN DE LA COHERENCIA EN LAS FRONTERAS DEL EPISODIO EN DIÁLOGOS
COOPERATIVOS*

RESUMEN: Como parte de un estudio más amplio sobre la coherencia y la cohesión en conversaciones informales entre estudiantes universitarios, que se está llevando a cabo en la Universidad Nacional de La Plata, en este trabajo estudiamos el ‘trabajo comunicativo’ que efectúan los hablantes en los puntos de transición entre episodios para contribuir a la coherencia global del texto. El corpus está formado por 60 conversaciones diádicas y poliádicas entre estudiantes universitarios cuyas edades oscilan entre los 18 y los 28 años de edad, pertenecientes a distintas universidades de Argentina. Entendemos que los participantes en este tipo de interacción realizan un proceso de co-construcción de la coherencia, y asumen que ambas partes cooperan

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en este proceso. Adoptamos la noción de episodio (Linell 1998, Korolija 1998) ya que dicho constructo resulta adecuado para la segmentación y el análisis de las conversaciones coloquiales estudiadas, compuestas tanto por fragmentos genéricos como por segmentos de habla no estructurada (Eggins y Slade 1997). El estudio revela que los hablantes emplean una variedad de recursos –que combinan según su evaluación del mundo compartido– para ofrecer pistas a los receptores que les permitan establecer las relaciones inter-episodio necesarias para otorgar sentido al texto.

PALABRAS CLAVE: coherencia: co-construcción, conversación coloquial, episodio.

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1. 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. We start from the assumption that participants in this kind of interaction carry out a process of co-construction of coherence, and assume that both parties cooperate in this process. In this study we focus on the ‘communicative labour’ done by participants at transition points between episodes to contribute to the overall coherence of the text. We adopt the notion of ‘episode’ from Linell (1998) and Korolija (1998), since we consider it is appropriate for the segmentation of casual conversation, constituted by both ‘chunks’ and ‘chat’ fragments (Eggins and Slade 1997). In order to analyze the strategies used by Argentine speakers to co-construct coherence at episode boundaries, we study a conversation which we consider is a representative token of the corpus of the project. The interaction is a multiparty encounter among three females who gather together to have dinner.

First, we identify and classify the episodes that appear in the text. Then, we determine the degrees of disjunction between episodes and study the resources speakers use to give ‘cues’ to their interlocutors on how to interpret the text. Finally, we draw some conclusions that may help characterize the Spanish used by young people in colloquial interactions in Argentina.

1.1. Corpus

The corpus E.C.Ar (*Español Coloquial de Argentina*) –on which the present work is based– is formed by 60 dyadic and polyadic casual conversations between university students from different universities in Argentina, aged 18-28.

The first part of the corpus, collected between 2000 and 2003 consists of semi-spontaneous conversations. The students were asked to talk in an institutional setting (Faculty of Humanities, University of La Plata) about topics that worried them (mostly about university) and give their opinion about how to solve the problems they found. This part of the corpus is audio recorded, but the researcher was not present

during the recording. The second part, collected between 2006 and 2010 consists of spontaneous conversations. Some of them have been audio and video recorded. The subjects of the research were asked to meet outside university, and talk about anything they wanted to. Many of them gather together to have a meal, for example. In some cases, the students know each other, in others it is their first meeting. The whole corpus amounts to about 20 hours of recorded conversations, which were transcribed using an adaptation from Halliday, M. (1985/1994).

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

Coherence is connected to Topicality (Brown and Yule 1983). The latter pertains to matters of sustained importance, not to things that receive only momentary attention (Givón 1995). A topic is both the project and product of coherence-building.

Usually, successful topic management is considered essential for coherent conversation (e.g. Mentis 1994, in Korolija 1998). However, actors both say and do things, (Bublitz 1988 in Korolija) and coherence is a matter not only of talk but of the overall activity and the whole situation attended to. 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 conversation 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’” (op. cit. 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 (op. cit. 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 action performed and/or narrated, and asserts that episode boundaries are marked by both semantic and formal features. She identifies some factors that can help the analyst to recognize episode boundaries:

- (a) a sequence, i.e. the prior episode, seems to have faded out and the actors start to talk on a different prosodic level (often involving a combination of shifts in voice quality, loudness, intonation levels, contour, tempo, etc.)
- (b) new referents in new constellations and situations are being introduced, which may mean that episode-internal devices such as pronouns (anaphoric expressions) are not carried on.
- (c) a new participation structure is developing, i.e. the actors involved change roles (e.g. initiator, main speaker, main addressee, story protagonist etc.) from the prior chunk of talk to the new one.

Thus, episode boundaries are often formally marked on the textual surface with the initiation and/or termination of an episode.

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

1.3. Coherence at episode boundaries

We agree with Schegloff's considerations (1995a), that conversations are connected in a meaningful way because coherence is a co-construction. In a co-constructionist stance (Linell 1998, Korolija 1998, Korolija and 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 (1976: 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'

Korolija holds that there are three kinds of major context types that recur:

- (a) prior discourse (co-text) (includes content or forms of verbal-non verbal interaction)
- (b) situation
- (c) abstract background knowledge. (This element is also dynamic. Actors make parts of this knowledge relevant, or bring it into shared attention (van Dijk and Kintsch 1983: 316)

The author adds that if utterances invoke either of these contexts, the episode initiation is coherent.

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 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 “contexts are silent partners in the making of meaning”. (Korolija 1998: 46).

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. Chun (2002) asserts that utterances are pitched at, above or below the level which for each speaker can be regarded as the baseline or norm (individual pitch range).

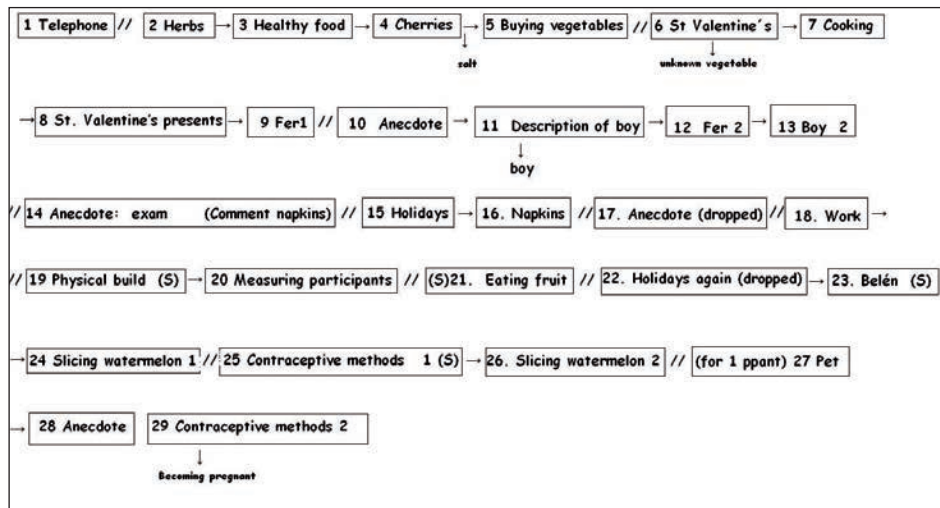
According to Brazil (1997, for English, and Granato (2005) for Spanish, speakers must select relative pitch level (high, mid or low) for each tone unit. When the selection is made on the first prominent syllable of the tone unit, it is called *key*. If it is produced on the tonic syllable –the last prominent syllable of the tone unit– it is called *termination*.

Key selections are relevant in the domain of discourse because they signal the relationship between the propositional content of an utterance and that which precedes or follows it. The three keys represent three options available to speakers when planning a tone unit: the speaker can choose to keep it neutral (by using mid key) or can mark it ‘contrasting’ (high key) or ‘equivalent’ (low key). Chun (2002: 35) holds that, “in addition, at the beginning of utterances.... high key can be used to start a new topic or to change the subject, both of which entail a type of contrast”.

Termination choices (on the last prominent syllable of the tone unit) are important in terms of the interactive functions of intonation. By using this resource, speakers try to influence the behaviour of the next speaker. An actor who uses high termination expects his interlocutor to use high key in the next tone unit, and when he uses mid termination, he expects mid key in the next contribution. This matching of pitch levels is called ‘pitch concord’ (Brazil 1997). However, the choice of pitch level is a prerogative of each speaker, who can choose to keep the concord or to break it according to his own communicative needs.

2. THE ANALYSIS

The conversation we analyze (06EIIIM17) comprises 29 episodes. It develops as the participants are having dinner, so there is both talk and action simultaneously. However, most of the episodes are organized in terms of talk, and only 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).



Picture 1

References: → smooth transition

// greater processing effort required

↓ marks embedded episode.

As regards inter-episode coherence, we can see in Picture 1 that there are different degrees of connection/disjunction. The transition between some episodes is smooth, thus requiring little or no action on the part of the speaker to provide cues to the interlocutor, while in others the change of topic is abrupt, and so participants have to appeal to different strategies to bridge the gap. In those situations in which the contexts actualized by speakers are not easily accessible to their co-participants, 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).

At the beginning of the conversation, there are two parallel scenarios: Cecilia speaking on the phone, and her friends urging her to finish, showing that they are hungry and want her to hang up. Both situations converge when Cecilia finally stops talking to her husband and explains that he is very busy because he has to hand in a very difficult practical work that day, thus linking her action to the here and now of the interaction.

Episode 2 starts when Luz says that she has got some herbs at home (line 29). Her contribution seems to be grounded in the co-text. Apparently, Valeria has been advising Luz to have plants at home while Cecilia was talking on the phone. Valeria realizes that Cecilia has not been listening, and anchors the new episode explicitly by explaining what they are talking about, (line 30) to make the conversation coherent for Cecilia.

(1)

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
 (l. 16)

Conversely, when episodes are linked topically, actors seem to have no problems in accommodating the new topic into their world views even if there are no explicit cues. As they expect coherent contributions, they always try to find connections between topics and between topics and actions.

The transition between episodes 2, 3 and 4 requires little processing effort (→). 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 –thus indicating topic continuation– which triggers contributions from all the other participants saying how healthily they eat. This seems to indicate that it was easy for them to make the same associations as Valeria. In Episode 4, since the conversation takes place while the participants are eating, the passing of plates with food and the comments about the food are relevant and expected.

No cues seem to be necessary either 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 8 makes her co-textually available. Valeria uses this resource to start a new episode about new referents and new situations. At the beginning of Episode 9, 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 because *Fer* was mentioned in the previous episode.

(2)

Episode 8. St. Valetine’s Presents

(Risas de todas).

(Laugh from all participants).

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.

Va: A mí también me mandó.
She sent one to me too.

Lu: Bahh, a los dos, pero era para los dos... Me dice, estaba viniendo de *Trenquelauquen*.
Well, to both, it was for both... She tells me, she was coming back from Trenquelauquen.

Va: Sí, a mí también me dijo, me mandó.
Yes, she also told me, she also sent me a message.

Lu: Claro, yo la había visto el día anterior y..
Yes, I had seen her the day before and...

(ls. 159 - 164)

Episode 9. Fer

Va: ¿En qué anda *Fer*?
What is Fer up to?

Lu: Trabajando, ahora se va para Trenque.
Working, now she is going to Trenque.

(ls. 165-166)

Similarly, speakers seem not to deem it necessary to mark episode boundaries 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 abruptly starts talking about the watermelon that is on the table and they are about to eat. She produces the question

(3)

Episode 24

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

(l. 528)

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

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

At the end of episode 5 (Buying Vegetables), 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).

(4)

Episode 4 Cherry Tomatoes

Va: Viste qué ricos son.
Have you noticed how tasty they are!

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.

Va: ¡En serio! ¡Qué barato!
Really! How cheap!

Ce: Estaban más baratos que los tomates normales, entonces llevamos cherries.
They were cheaper than common tomatoes, so we took cherries.

Va: [Ahh, claro...]
Ah, of course

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

Va: Son mucho más ricos.
They are much tastier

Lu: Ch ch... La tengo con "sh, sh"...
Ch... ch.... I keep on saying sh sh

(ls. 93 a 101)

One of the speakers, Valeria, who is one of the most frequent contributors, perceives this and decides to start a new episode (St. Valentine's presents). She uses a 'preliminary': *el otro día* '(the other day)' to warn her friends that she is changing the topic, and she is going to narrate something. Then she 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* (Eggins and Slade 1997) about the dish that she prepared is related to the previous episodes topically –it continues talking about food and cooking– she produces it on a Mid Key, because she considers that it is 'to be expected'.

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, after Episode 9 has been closed, for example, 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 new episode lexically as locally unmotivated. She announces that she is going to tell an anecdote about something *very strange* that has happened to her.

(5)

Episode 10

Lu: A mí me ha pasado algo tan extraño...
Something so strange has happened to me...

(l. 175)

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 day*’) 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 holidays. 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.

(6)

Episode 15

¿Qué
Ce: [hicieron...] ¿Qué hicieron en las vacaciones, chicas?
What
[did you ...] what did you do on your holidays, girls?

(l. 312)

2.1. 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 20 Cecilia and Valeria are comparing who is taller. After they finish, Valeria, the host, says:

(7)

Episode 21

Che,
Va: ¿qué fruta traigo? Tengo manzana, tengo sandía...
Che
What fruit shall I bring? I’ve got, apples, I’ve got watermelon...

(l. 505)

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, in episode 10, 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.

(8)

Episode 10

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 tell

Che,

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

(l. 188)

‘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 7, 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.

(9)

Episode 7

Che,

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

Che,

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

Va: [no...]

[no...]

Lu: ...que ibas a hacer receta?

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

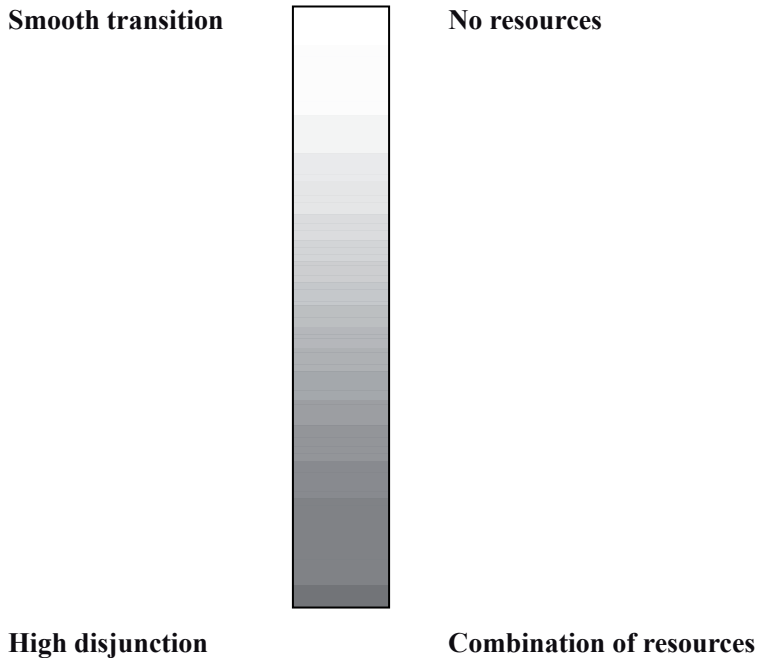
(l. 111)

4. 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.



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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