

The Conversational Duet

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The Conversational Duet
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Example I:

Both she and her daughter then leaned towards Martha, smiling with warm friendship, and proceeded to tell her how happy they were that Dougie was married at last, how wonderful, how suitable, how...As one woman arrived at the end of a breathless phrase, searching for the superlatives that could not express what she felt, the other took it up; it was a duet of self-immolation.
--A Proper Marriage, Doris Lessing

This paper will demonstrate that the above excerpt describes an important conversational phenomenon overlooked until now in the theoretical literature--one which both forces us to reexamine many of our existing premises and constitutes a rich object of study in itself.

Existing analyses of natural conversation, whether by linguists or our counterparts in other disciplines, pivot on the assumption that there are just two ways to participate in a conversation--as speaker or as auditor. Underlying this is the further assumption that the roles of speaker and auditor can be occupied by only one individual at a time.

But, as the Lessing excerpt suggests, there is a third alternative, intermediate between speaking and auditing. In conversations between three or more persons, two of them may undertake jointly to carry out the communicative task to a third in such a way that a written version of their resultant in-sequence text would be indistinguishable from that of a single speaker. Example I is a fictionalized portrayal of this naturally-occurring phenomenon.

The unique text is the rhetorical consequence of a particular set of conditions and intentions being enacted by the speakers. These too are accurately portrayed by Lessing:

- a) The partners (mother and daughter) have mutual knowledge of the topic at hand (Dougie and his marriage), equivalent authority to express that knowledge (it is first-hand on both their parts, presumably), and a sense of camaraderie between them.
- b) They share a like communicative goal (to express delight about the marriage).
- c) They are addressing in tandem not each other but a mutual audience (Martha).

d) They intend it to be understood that each of their contributions counts on both their behalfs. When these conditions and intentions are in effect the form of each speaker's individual contribution does not pattern with that of the single speaker or auditor. Only when taken as a unified event is the sequence interpretable, or amenable to traditional analysis. Therefore, Lessing's term for it is not a mere figure of speech. Such an event is appropriately labelled a "conversational duet".

Duetting allows one to do things one cannot do as speaker or auditor. Generalizations about conversational processes which depend on a speaker-auditor model permeate every facet of conversational analysis. Let us take the various vantage points as discrete arenas in order to consider the implications of the duet for the field.

Non-verbal behavior

Speakers and their auditors face each other. Duet partners (who most often are seated side-by-side) maintain parallel body posture and gaze direction. Even while one is speaking the other is not turned toward him, but toward their mutual audience. (Note that in Example I the mother and daughter are described as both leaning toward Martha.)

Conversation is by definition complementary. The duet is a structure of symmetry within the overall complementarity, and the extra-linguistic behavior naturally reflects this.

Turn-taking¹

Example II: (J=Jeff; R=Ruth; O=All other participants)

- 1 R: We went uh almost everywhere except that it
- 2 was foggy for half the time we were over
- 3 there
- 4 O: Yeah you don't seem too enthusiastic about it
- 5 R: [it was a good trip yeah it was yeah]
- 6 J: [Well it was a great trip except that] it was a
- 7 foggy day and we...

In speaker-auditor transactions there is ambiguity as to who has the right to next-turn only if the previous speaker has not allocated this right to a specific person. Turn-initial overlaps such the one in lines 5-6 are the consequence of spontaneous coincidental attempts by auditors to acquire a non-allocated turn.

Here, O seems to have selected Ruth, but Jeff overlaps with her as though next-speaker rights had not

been allocated. And he does get the floor. Ruth shows no evidence of being disconcerted. Nor does O.

The explanation for this lies in the fact that Jeff and Ruth have been dueting. Selection of either partner to a duet as next-speaker gives both of them the right to talk. Which one will act remains undetermined. Turn-initial overlaps therefore abound.

Among single-speakers, until a turn is allocated, every party to the conversation is equally the potential next-speaker. For dueters, whenever one partner speaks, the other can and often does speak next. He does not have to listen for whether he will be selected, as single speakers do. His is not a new turn, but a continuation of the floor-holding by the duet, in effect. A turn-taking subsystem is always potentially activated whereby the duet partners alternate with each other a number of times before a third party gets to intervene.²

The direction of turns is also affected by the involvement of a duet:

Example III:

- 1 J: And uh we uh talked about the tourists there
- 2 and we left and went to the Palace of the Le-
- 3 gion of Honor, right?
- 4 R: Again for a view of [the Golden Gate
- 5 J: [For a view of the Gol-
- 6 den Gate Bridge and there was no view
- 7 O: Aaahhh

Strictly-speaking, Jeff broke the duet in line 3 to request verification of what he just said. Ruth's response, line 4, though in compliance, is not directed back to its requester (Jeff), as in a speaker-auditor interaction, but to a third party.

In speaker-auditor transactions, questions based on a previous speaker's utterance are assumed to be directed to that speaker. Dueters' are not:

Example IV:

- J: And uh then we went to Fort Point which was
interesting because we had a tour
R: Have you ever been there?

Ruth's question cannot be addressed to Jeff, because he just gave the information it asks for. Pragmatics approaches would also have difficulty with this example. They have thus far analyzed the appropriateness of sequences of sentences in a discourse according to two categories: "next sentence" and "next sentence where there has been a change of speakers" (Fillmore 1972).

Ruth's question, in this framework, would be appropriate only to the former. But it is the latter, when "speaker" is defined as an individual.

The above facts are not mere amendments to the existing model of turn-taking. They demonstrate that we are not talking about a system which is "context-free". In invoking the duet we have needed to go beyond the surface features of any one turn to the number of participants involved and the conversational relationships set up in the preceding discourse. The structure that exists in conversation is underlying structure, needing to be interpreted on the basis of a number of features of the whole discourse. (See Gumperz 1977, 1979)

Interruptions

It has been shown that the perception of being interrupted is not accounted for by an independently-observable definition of interruptions (Bennett 1978, Mishra forthcoming). It is also true that auditors sometimes "interrupt" the speaker to complete his sentence as a display of understanding and rapport (Tannen 1979). But a dueter-interrupter, as in Example III/5-6, continues the turn lexically and prosodically just as the partner undoubtedly would have, to the same audience she was addressing. (Note that a third party responds, line 7, and not Ruth, the interruptee.)

In a duet, competition for the floor is not competition to express a separate point of view, nor a mark of good listening behavior. It is merely competition for who will be the spokesperson for a mutual view, and that is an issue of far less consequence than the one implied in speaker-auditor transactions. As a matter of fact, it often happens that after being overlapped, a dueter will "recycle" his partner's overlapped portion rather than his own, as below:

Example V:

O: But actually shouldn't that have given you a greater sense of camaraderie?

R: [It was fun]

J: [Oh it did] It was a lot of fun

Dueters are engaged in an essentially cooperative enterprise. This fact overrides many behaviors which outside of a duet would have considerably more impact, among which is being interrupted.

Form of turns

Example VI:

- J: Because we had already planned everything we
 had an itinerary planned we couldn't change
 R: There were five cars with directions

As in Example V, duet turns are typically characterized by the absence of a transition that would address the relation of the turn to a prior one and display the speaker's understanding of it ("Yeah", "Oh", prosodic contrasts, etc.). Understanding between duet partners is presupposed; it does not need to be displayed.

Nor do explicit interruption markers occur (e.g., "Wait a minute"), or initial appositionals ("Well", "Y'know", etc.) Dueters will often echo or paraphrase a partner without apparent reason, as self-editing single speakers are wont to do. The effect of "single-speaker unity" that characterizes the text is in large part attributable to these features.

Role of speaker

In order to accommodate the duet, the fact of speaking needs to be distinguished from the role of speaker. While it is true that for the most part only one person speaks at a time, that does not preclude there being more than one speaker at a time. All the above "deviations" follow logically when it is understood that dueters are sharing a single conversational role. That is, they are co-speaking. One-to-one conversation can be understood as the exchange of "solo" performances--each role is occupied by a single person. But in group conversations two (or more) persons may participate as though they were one, by dueting. There are actually three ways to participate in a conversation--as speaker, as auditor, or as dueter, calling on features from both.

Backchannels

Backchannels (Yngve 1970) are those short interventions which serve to spur the speaker on. It is assumed that they are the domain of an auditor. But dueters' subturns, because they too reflect support and understanding of the partner's talk, function as backchannels, to the extent of diminishing the need for any input from the third party. Married couples (the foremost candidates for dueting) often duet blithely on in their own private code, with apparent obliviousness to the fact that no one else is understanding them or supplying feedback.

Syntax

The duet governs formulation and interpretation of utterances on all levels, including the syntactic:

Example VII: (H=Husband; W=Wife)

Host: You can come over for lunch you really can
 H: Nope can't do it I'm gonna go birding
 W: I might come over for lunch though if you
 can get John to drive tomorrow.

The absence of a subject in the husband's first sentence would ordinarily be disambiguated by the "I" in the next. But the ambiguity occurs in the context of an ongoing duet, so the sentence is assumed to have a deleted "we", making his going birding reason for both not to be able to come for lunch, in the eyes of his wife (or in her projection of the eyes of the host).

Socio-psychologically oriented discourse analysis

The duet can also be a valuable instrument in the inquiry into the correlation between language behavior and aspects of personality. In one case in my data, the parents of a schizophrenic son use the duet form to obfuscate their communication, while all along conveying the impression that they are being perfectly clear. How both parents relate as a team to their son obviously affects his development.

Whether one duets at all may carry significance (and may be ethnically or geographically determined to some degree), as does the particular way a couple duets. In the Jeff-Ruth examples above, Jeff does the major work and Ruth merely supplements for the most part. What other variations are possible? Is a degree of disagreement obscured by the use of the duet? There are well- and ill-formed duets: one partner using "I", the other "we", while in all other respects dueting seems to violate a cooccurrence rule of sorts. What do the differences reflect about the dueters and the relationship between them? Are some circumstances more conducive to dueting than other? These are all potentially fertile areas of further study.

The duet is an interpretation, based on the cooccurrence of signals on these many channels of the communication (See Gumperz 1978). It in turn should constitute one variable in an interpretive approach to the broader questions of conversational meaning.

Notes

¹The following sections draw largely from Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson 1974. Also drawn on are Sacks 1972, Schegloff 1972, and Sacks and Schegloff 1974.

Examples I-VI are from a videotape of a conversation between ESL teachers about class trips.

²For this reason it would be more apt to call duetters' turns "subturns" and only their whole in-sequence participation a "turn".

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