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Proceedings of the 4th Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society (1978), pp. 576-587

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The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society is published online via [eLanguage](#), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.

SOME CONVERSATIONAL CONVENTIONS OF BLACK ENGLISH

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This paper discusses conversational conventions of Black English. We are concerned with notions of conversational control and conversational cooperation which are signalled through contextualization cues. These cues act to signal the way in which conversational contribution is to be interpreted. Contextualization cues, which can be verbal or nonverbal, co-occur in clusters and only have meaning within the context, not in isolation (Gumperz 1977). Our work examines miscommunication in inter-ethnic situations concentrating on cues specific to Black English. We have found that breakdowns in conversations involving Blacks and Whites are often attributable to differing interpretations of culture-specific contextualization cues. This analysis of conversational conventions of Black English centers on prosodic cues and formulaic speech used by some Black English speakers.

Conversational conventions are those organizational filters which the listener uses when making the relationship between speaker's intent and meaning. They act as sifts in processing forms of conversational information. Conversational agenda, a necessary presupposition for all conversations, establishes the direction of conversation by which the speaker presents his point of view. It is negotiated between speaker and listener(s) because its agreement is necessary to insure conversational flow. The speaker's rhetorical strategies are crucial at the level of conversational control and conversational cooperation. Conversational control employs strategies which direct and maintain control over the flow of conversation, allows for verbal and nonverbal interaction as well as establishing lines of argumentation which adhere to the conversational agenda. Conversational cooperation requires that the speaker actively elicit the cooperation of the listener(s) in order to successfully maintain the floor and his conversational agenda. At this stage conversational topics and meaning are negotiated and listener's ability to appropriately follow conversational cues is essential to insure conversational control and conversational cooperation. We have found that often in shared familiar surroundings such as the home, with family and friends, conversational conventions are not problematic. However, once conversation moves to broader spheres negotiation of agenda, a matter of conversational conventions, is signalled through formulaic speech, word choice, prosodic cues, phonology, and other speech options. Our work discusses the relationship between linguistic cues and agenda.

Essential to our analysis is an understanding of the function of conversation inference (by this we mean the speaker's

intended meaning). This takes place at two levels, the first examines the message as an interpretative frame, looking for speaker's contextualization cues, which aid as conversational directives. Contextualization cues are dependent upon cultural knowledge. We have found that in order to reach the correct interpretation of some formulaic speech found in Black English requires that the listener have specific cultural knowledge encoded in the formulaic speech.

To illustrate that conversational conventions rely on shared cultural knowledge let us take the following example. In a typical classroom setting the teacher asks D, a question. However, before D can answer C loudly whispers, "if you answer this question correctly you will win a 23 inch color T.V." In order to obtain the proper interpretation of this statement as a joke, C will make a prosodic shift in his voice. This prosodic shift draws upon information specific to the game show frame. The listener must be able to draw upon information of what constitutes a game show, what are its social conventions, and the speaking habits of game show announcers. It is clear that without shared cultural knowledge (i.e., T.V. game shows) the meaning of C's comment would be misinterpreted.

Our work discusses some of the conversational conventions which draw upon cultural knowledge specific to the Black cultural tradition in America. We focus on the interpretation of some conversational conventions shared by some Black English speakers who through prosodic cues and formulaic speech indicate the preferred interpretation of speaker's intent.

Examples of conversational conventions are obtained by analyzing breakdowns in communication occurring in conversations between Blacks and Whites. We hypothesize what features constitute "culture specific contextualization cues", by identifying these same contextualization cues in the analysis of conversations among Black English speakers who share the same cultural background. Our work reveals the interpatational tendencies that a given cue will signal to a listener sharing the same conversational conventions.

Our data consists of two types of contextualization cues which mark conversation, prosodic cues and formulaic speech. In conversational context these cues often appear to be idiosyncratic and rely heavily on style for effect. But what we have found is that at the level of function these cues signal to the listener who shares the same cultural knowledge the appropriate response.

Prosodic features in Black English are characterized with rhythmical stress placement and marked intonation patterns. Our data substantiates three distinct styles of prosodic cues. The first is a shift in pitch register. The second type is the "quotational style", which is marked by a change in voice quality in which the speaker's voice is indicative of some characterization. This is illustrated in the game show example involving the game

show announcer style. It also provides the speaker with distance from his utterance. These three types of prosodic cues are often characterized by voice tensing and the use of falsetto. Prosodic cues can also be signalled through a marked use of vowel quality and vowel lengthening.

Formulaic speech is metaphoric in nature and occurs in context bound instances. Its meaning draws upon specific cultural knowledge which requires reference information not only to place but also to time. Often it is marked by a "quotational style" in which the speaker's voice quality further enumerates speaker's intent.

As mentioned above, the cues under investigation are related to conventionalized discourse strategies -- ways of planning and negotiating the discourse structure (conversational agenda) over long stretches of conversation. Our examples are therefore whole or partial episodes within a conversation, each episode consisting of a stretch of conversation involving the same participants, the same setting, and the same subject matter. Only by following the direction the discourse takes as a result of the cues being used -- that is, tracing the progression of the discourse from the use of the cue in question up to its ultimate outcome in the episode -- can we provide empirical, internal evidence for the discourse-directing nature of these cues. In cases where a misunderstanding occurs due to the lack of shared communicative conventions, often the discourse is heading in different directions in the minds of the different participants (without either's knowledge that the gap is widening) until the discrepancy is too great and the miscommunication becomes obvious to all, in which case it can be metacommunicated about and resolved. It can also happen that the discrepancy never becomes great enough to be obvious -- that the miscommunicating participants can each interpret the others' conversational contributions in a way consistent with their own idea of what the conversation is about, but each comes away with a different idea of what happened. A third type of miscommunicative episode can be a conscious manipulation of culture-specific conversational conventions by one group of participants to gain conversational control over another group -- "putting them on" or "running a game on them". (A precondition for this type of episode is that those on the same "team" share the same conversational conventions -- and therefore can coordinate their strategies through signals, prosodic and paralinguistic cues, that are invisible to the other "team").

Our first example is one where both the White and Black participants are aware of this third possibility, and where the Black speakers maintain conversational control because of the doubt in the mind of the White participants.

The participants are: G -- a White, middle aged professor,
 M -- a White graduate student,
 B -- a Black teenager,
 W -- a Black teenager,

and several other Blacks who do not speak in this section

Transcription system (adapted from Trim)

TONE GROUPS

/ minor tone group -- pause and/or register shift
// major tone group -- full fall-off

SYLLABLE MARKINGS

' high head (high non-nuclear prominence)
, low head (low non-nuclear prominence)

NUCLEI

low rise	^ rise-fall
high rise	
low fall	~ rise-fall-rise
high fall	- high level nucleus
fall-rise	_ low level nucleus

PITCH REGISTER SHIFTS

┌ shift to higher register
└ shift to lower register

PARENTHESES indicate untelligible part of tape ()

RATE

acc - accelerating
ret - slowing down

LOUDNESS

F - Loud
P - Soft

TRANSCRIPT # 1

- (1) G: What we talk about
(2) W: Oh you guys pick a subject, any old subject you know
(3) G: Any old subject
(4) B: Any old thang -- A: Are you opposed to -- to the draft.
(5) M: Yeah
(6) W: Are you? (laughter) opposed to the draft
(7) G: Yeah, Well I can be I can afford to be opposed.
- (8) W: `Tell me about your `war life / Was it, interestin // I
mean you ┌ military // service // life. // Was it, interestin //
 └ tense voice
- (9) G: Oh, it `wasn't very `interestin' / ^no //
- (10) W: `Tell me / what `part of the `service you go into the
- army //
- (11) G: ,I was in the ,army //

- (12) W: Well/ 'what \war was you in//
- (13) G: \Second World \War//
- (14) W: "Second - did you -- how you -- you^rwhere
did you \go//
- (15) G: \I was in \Europe//
- (16) W: 'That's the only ^{acc}place//
- (17) G: \That's the 'only \place//
- (18) W: \um hum
- (19) G: \England/ \France/and 'Germany//
- (20) W: \O-h:: / \well ...
- (21) G: In 'those \days/ ~ well ...
- (22) W: I mean was 'you 'really in action//
- (23) G: ^Oh / \once or \twice //
- (24) W: Did you "kill anybody //
^{acc}
- (25) G: ^I don't know/ I 'shot a 'couple of times//
- (26) W: 'You busy shootin' ^huh//
- (27) G: I ^Pdon't know/ I never "saw anybody I ^vkilled/-- I saw
^{acc}some 'dead people//
- (28) W: ^Yeah/ ah -- Have you ^{acc}ever got shot?//
- (29) G: No -- I got hurt one day (I member) We were out - out
in the morning and I got hurt they put on KP they made
me get up at four o'clock and peel potatoes Choppin'
potatoes and I chopped off this part of my finger
(laughter)
- (30) W: ()
- (31) G: That's my "War Wound"
- (32) M: It's a french fry
- (33) B: That was the first time you tried smokin that weed huh?
- (34) W: Hes trippin' - you peelin potatoes

From the very start, W and B are "running a game" on G and M

in a way obvious only to themselves. In line (4), B's pronunciation of "thing" as ~~θɪŋ~~ is in his case an exaggeration of Black English pronunciation -- and in fact is a pronunciation he never uses again, his segmental phonology being much closer to White than to Black English throughout the rest of the tape. This use of the exaggerated Black English form can be seen as a metaphoric switch, indicating to the others his willingness and ability to lead the researchers astray (as in "If they want to hear Black English, I can give them all they want and more.") W then completely takes over the role of interviewer -- switching the interviewer-informant roles around. In line (8) he uses a conventionalized Black prosodic marker on the words "military service life" -- tense voice quality, with a repeated marked intonation pattern and tone group boundaries after each word -- to express dissociation of himself from his actual words, as if marking them "foreign vocabulary" or "things that other people would say". (If one were forced to give a verbal paraphrase of this prosodic marker, perhaps the best one would be "so-called". Its use is analogous to the use of quotation marks in academic papers -- e.g., if a linguist uses the word meaning he can be justifiably asked for a definition of it, but if he writes "meaning" instead, he can avoid responsibility for defining it, and can in fact even express doubt that such a definition exists.)

There then follows a long question and answer session in which W tried to elicit a war story from G. Rhythmically, synchrony starts to break down in this section -- W tends to accelerate at the end of his questions, but G's answers lag behind in speech rate. W seems to be insistent on getting a story, while G is reluctant, (G later reported that he hesitated to say anything because he had no idea what was going on, whether the questions were serious or if he was being made fun of.) W also is indicating prosodically what the most important element of the story should be, using high level pitch and stress on the salient items in each sentence -- "action" in (22), "kill" in (24), "shootin'" in (26), and "shot" in (28) -- that is, a lively, entertaining war story is in order. G finally resolves his dilemma by taking control of the context -- telling a story that is humorous (and therefore entertaining), and through which he gently pokes fun at himself -- thereby ending the ambiguity of serious vs. joke and eliciting confirmation of its joke status in the form of a humorous contribution from each participant (lines 31-34).

This episode is an example of what we mean by the negotiation of interpretive frame. In line (8), W establishes control of the conversation and maintains it in (16) and (22) (he interrupts G to keep G on his subject). W's use of question after question, and his use of prosodic markers to show where his main areas of interest lie, suggest an interview style, where he asks all the questions and G gives all the responses. There is an ambiguity about the interpretive frame, however, since there is an element of joking in the conversation (as perceived by G, and visible in W's

mock surprise in line (20), and, through a black-specific cue, in "military service" in line (8). This conversational strategy of maintaining ambiguity between the joking and serious interpretive frames allows W to maintain conversational control -- until G, by his choice of a story, insists on the joking interpretation, relieving the ambiguity. The joking comments by everyone at the end of the story show that the renegotiation into a joking frame has been accepted by all. (Lack of acceptance here -- that is, continued insistence on a blood-and-guts war story -- would have strained the conversation to the limit, because it would have been total inflexibility in negotiation. Conversational cooperation in natural conversation consists mainly of this willingness to negotiate, rather than dictate, changes in interpretative frame.)

The second sample episode takes place a few minutes after the first, with the same participants:

TRANSCRIPT #2

(1) W: 'Did you 'agree with the e'lections? //

(laughter)

(2) W: 'Did you 'agree with the e'lections? // 'You first //

(3) M: 'Me first // \No / 'next question //

(4) W: 'Why 'do you not 'agree? //
tense voice

(5) M: 'Why do I like 'what? //

(6) W: 'Why do - 'Why 'don't you agree with the elections? //
rit

(7) M: 'Oh
P

(laughter)

(8) M: 'thought it was a 'joke //

(9) G: huh

(10) M: 'thought it was a 'joke / 'joke / a 'joke / you, know //

(11) W: 'Oh / 'it was a 'joke //

(12) M: 'yeah //

(13) W: 'Oh 'Oh the 'whole 'thing was a 'joke to you? //
F

(14) M: 'right //

(15) W: 'I hear you //
P

- (16) G: 'Who'd you vote for? //
- (17) W: I 'oh well / if I just ^{Ltense} had to //
- (18) G: \ Yeah if you just had to //
- (19) M: 'Next time you have to //
- (20) W: ^v Oh ^{falsetto} //
- (21) G: 'Next time around you have to ^v vote //
- (22) W: Well 'like ah / I ain't had to 'register from the 'git go //
- (23) G: 'um // ^{fense voice}
- (24) W: 'I ain't had to 'register "to vote from the ^beginning //
- (25) G: You 'didn't? //
- (26) W: I 'mean-- I 'mean don't 'don't I have that 'choice? //
- (27) G: ~ That's right //
- (28) W: ^L Well, then ---
- (29) G: So you 'not gonna vote / 'huh? //
- (30) 'No, ^F for 'what? //
- (31) G: ()
- (32) W: 'For 'what / ^F now 'either 'one of 'em git 'up, there / you 'know what 'they gonna 'do //
- (33) B: 'right on
^P
- (34) W: The, dogs gonna git the in / you 'know they 'gon 'just
- (35) W: put us lower in the ghetto and 'throw a little 'black man on
^(sung)
- (36) W: TV and / 'make you 'thank (think) they 'do in' somethin' 'for you //
- (laughing)
- (37) W: Now 'you know I'm right about it / 'you know 'I'm right

about, it //

(38) M: You 'think' (Nixon) is, worse than Humphrey? //

(39) W: ah 'ain't' one ain't no better than the 'other one //

(40) M: 'I think' Nixon is 'worse' //

(41) ?: ()

(42) W: 'one ain't' ^Fman they 'all terrible' //

(43) W: Now they make it look like Wallace is a dog, and Nixon is the next dog, and Humphrey is, well
(laughter)
you know, a little bit higher than the other two dogs
(laughter) but he's still a dog.

The second episode begins with W again taking the role of "interviewer", a role made explicit by M's formulaic reply in line (3) "next question". M's use of an interviewee formula foregrounds the interview frame, and W responds by using a grammatically more formal style ("do you not" rather than "don't you") and the quotational style prosodic marker (tense voice quality, exaggerated pitch contours, and rhythmic stress placement in his next question -- that is, he acknowledges M's recognition of the "interview" frame with his use of an "other" voice -- he takes on an interviewer's voice as well as his role. For M, however, this prosodic shift is unexpected and uninterpretable, to the point that he is unable to understand the sentence at all, so that W has to translate it into colloquial speech with unmarked prosody (line 6). In lines 11-15, as in the previous episode, W plays on the ambiguity of inference -- using joking forms, making fun of M (his mock surprise in lines (11) and (13), then suddenly agreeing in line (15)).

In lines (16-29), starting with G's question at (16), there is a shift as G and M are asking the questions and W is answering. The tone is now unequivocally joking, as shown by M and G giving false information [in lines (19) and (21)] without intending to be believed. The banter continues until line (30), where a sudden shift occurs. W breaks the previously established rhythmic pattern by starting in line (30) before (29) is finished; furthermore, (30) is much louder than preceding utterances, and he makes an upward pitch register shift. In line (32) W has completed the shift from conversational give-and-take to a more formal "public address" style similar to that used by black preachers and politicians. He signals his change of speech activity with a sharp upward pitch register shift (on the word "now").

That this style shift is a significant use of a black-specific discourse strategy whose meaning is lost on the whites is

clear from the different reactions to W's "sermon". B, who has not spoken previously in this episode, utters the formulaic black-channel response "right on" in line (33), exactly in keeping with Black audience call-response conventions, and his response is timed perfectly to come during W's pause. The formulaic nature of B's interjection, the appropriateness of its timing, and the fact that he chooses this point to enter the conversation all indicate that a shift has occurred to a ritualized speaking style which W and B are drawing on shared cultural knowledge to cooperatively produce.

M, not sharing their communicative conventions, does not realize that W has recontextualized his speech -- that W has indicated that his statements in (32-36) are a proclamation of his convictions and not just a position taken for the sake of argument. In line (37) W indicates that it is his last word on the subject -- yet in (38) and again in (40), M questions and then challenges W's beliefs -- because M has missed the shift of context and is still operating in a debate-like framework. W [in (39) and (42)] refuses to enter a discussion [in (42) he uses the upward pitch register shift as a prosodic marker just as in (32), perhaps as a kind of reference back to the frame established earlier], until in (43) he re-explains the content of (32-36) in less eloquent, more relaxed conversational style.

This again is a case of breakdown of negotiation of interpretive frame because of lack of shared conversational conventions. W's shift in (32) is ratified by B in (33), but M hasn't perceived the shift, and hasn't reacted one way or the other to it. When M finally speaks in (38) he and W are operating under different sets of assumptions as to what is appropriate talk. As in the previous episode, successful negotiation of a resolution finally occurs when one of the participants (in this case W) arrives at a summation that is appropriate in both frames of interpretation -- in M's interpretation as an explanation and justification of W's previous statements (appropriate in debate-like give-and-take speech activity), and in W's interpretation as simply a restatement of what he said earlier (for those who didn't understand the first time).

This brief overview of conversational conventions exemplifies the fact that mutual intelligibility is not solely contingent upon a shared language base, but we have found that shared discourse features are equally important. Discourse features rely on learned conversational conventions which draw on specific cultural knowledge.

Conversational control and cooperation, used in conversational conventions, are signalled through contextualization cues. These cues signal the preferred interpretation of a speaker's utterance through the process of conversational inference. Since the discourse structure of a conversation is being constantly negotiated by the participants through the medium of shared conversational conventions, someone not sharing the conventions

cannot participate in the negotiation and has no control over the direction the conversations takes and in fact may not be able to infer the direction the conversation has taken. The inability to determine through conversational inference whether a conversation is being presented as a serious or humourous matter is problematic. This kind of misinterpretation occurs often in interethnic communication.

The necessity of shared conversational conventions is analogous to the situation of a basketball player -- the goal is ball control and each player depends on his teammates to feed him the ball. If a player does not know the plays (cues) he cannot infer what he should do from the actions of his teammates. This lack of understanding prohibits cooperation and control, and the game grinds to a halt.

We have found a variety of prosodic cues and formulaic speech in Black rhetorical style that, when occurring together in context, convey significant conversational meaning through inference. Black conventions include much greater use of rhythmic stress placement, vowel elongation, pitch register shifts, and different voice qualities than do White conventions. Speakers unfamiliar with the Black conventions interpret them as stylistic and not significant. They are forced to rely solely on the grammatical and semantic information in the speaker's utterance for meaning, missing the wealth of information in prosodic and paralinguistic features that can function to disambiguate the speaker's intent.

Miscommunication from this type of data often leads to social inferences based on relationships about culture, language and society. We believe that this is a major factor in creating and reinforcing racial and ethnic stereotypes. Our work on interethnic communication is a contribution towards the kinds of practical application needed to provide empirical evidence of seeming differences which exist within society today.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper comes out of work done under John Gumperz at the Language Behavior Research Lab, U.C. Berkeley. We are grateful to him for many valuable ideas and helpful comments, as well as encouragement. We are also indebted to Carol Johnstone for help in preparing the manuscript.

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