Master 1

Applied Linguistics 3rd lesson

Lecture: Conversation Analysis

1. Definition of Conversation Analysis

Conversation Analysis (CA) is a method within linguistics and discourse analysis that examines the structure and organization of spoken interaction. Developed in the 1960s and 1970s by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson, CA focuses on the detailed processes by which people manage conversations in everyday life.

The main concepts

CA studies naturally occurring conversations, not scripted or artificial dialogues.

It analyzes how participants take turns, manage topics, repair misunderstandings, and display social relationships through talk.

The goal is to uncover the underlying rules and patterns that organize conversation.

2. Relationship to Analyzing Pieces of Discourse

Conversation Analysis is a subfield of discourse analysis, which looks at language use beyond the sentence level.

While discourse analysis can consider written or spoken texts, CA is especially concerned with spoken, interactive language.

CA helps us understand how meaning is constructed collaboratively, moment by moment, in real-time conversation.

It reveals how speakers negotiate meaning, manage interruptions, and use cues (like intonation and pauses) to structure their exchanges.

3. George Yule's Theory: Said and Unsaid Parts

Linguist George Yule highlights that in any piece of discourse, there are both said and unsaid elements:

The said parts are the explicit words spoken or written.

The unsaid parts are what is implied, assumed, or left unspoken—relying on shared knowledge, context, or cultural understanding.

Examples:

If someone says, "It's cold in here," the said part is the statement about temperature. The unsaid part might be a request to close a window or turn up the heat.

Yule's theory emphasizes that understanding conversation requires attention not just to explicit language, but also to underlying intentions, presuppositions, and shared background knowledge.

4. Cooperative Principle (H.P. Grice)

The Cooperative Principle, proposed by philosopher H.P. Grice, is a key concept in understanding how conversations work smoothly. Grice suggested that participants in a conversation usually cooperate with one another, following certain conversational maxims:

The Four Maxims:

Quantity: Give the right amount of information—not too much, not too little.

Quality: Be truthful; do not give information that is false or unsupported.

Relation (Relevance): Be relevant; contribute information that fits the topic and context.

Manner: Be clear, orderly, and avoid ambiguity.

Implications:

Listeners expect speakers to follow these maxims. When a maxim is flouted (broken deliberately), it usually creates implicature, or hidden meaning, which listeners interpret by reading between the lines.

Example: If someone says, "Some of the guests have arrived," (when all have arrived), the speaker is intentionally flouting the maxim of quantity, suggesting that not all have arrived.

5. Context of Situation

The context of situation refers to the circumstances in which a conversation takes place, influencing how language is used and interpreted. This includes:

Physical context: Where and when the conversation occurs.

Social context: The relationship between speakers (e.g., friends, colleagues, strangers).

Cultural context: The norms, values, and expectations that guide appropriate conversational behavior.

Discourse context: What has already been said in the conversation, shaping what is relevant or expected next.

Example:

A greeting like "Hi" may be appropriate in a casual setting among friends, but "Good morning, Professor" is more suitable in a formal academic context.

5.1 Cohesion and Ceherence

Cohesion and coherence are key concepts introduced by linguists M.A.K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan in their influential work Cohesion in English (1976):

A. Cohesion

Refers to the grammatical and lexical connections that link sentences and parts of a text together.

Cohesive devices include:

Reference: Using pronouns or demonstratives (e.g., he, she, this) to refer to something already mentioned.

Substitution: Replacing one element with another (e.g., "I want the red one"—'one' substitutes for 'shirt').

Ellipsis: Omitting elements that are understood from context.

Conjunctions: Words that link ideas (e.g., and, but, however).

Lexical cohesion: Using related words to tie ideas together (e.g., synonyms, collocations, repetition).

Example:

"John lost his keys. He looked everywhere for them."

The pronouns "he" and "them" create cohesion with "John" and "keys."

B. Coherence

Refers to the overall sense or unity that makes a text meaningful and easy to understand.

A conversation or text is coherent when its ideas are logically connected and make sense as a whole.

Coherence depends on more than just linguistic ties; it relies on shared knowledge, logical flow, and relevance to the context.

Conclusion

Conversation Analysis provides powerful tools for understanding the structure and function of spoken interactions. By examining the interplay of what is said and unsaid (George Yule), the cooperative principles guiding conversation (Grice), and the importance of context, we gain insight into how meaning is constructed and negotiated in real-life communication.

Discussion Questions:

Can you think of examples where the unsaid parts of a conversation were more important than the words themselves?

How do the cooperative principle's maxims operate in your daily conversations?

How does context influence the way you speak with different people?