

# **CONTEXT IN COMMUNICATION: ANALYSIS OF BENGALI SPOKEN DISCOURSE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study intends to explore the pattern of discourse Bengali people use while conversing. The researcher hopes that analysis of spoken discourse would help develop materials to teach speaking skills to EFL (English as Foreign Language) learners. It is perceived that people use different kinds of gestures and postures in communication. Though we can not have nods, smile, pause and other ritual and system constraints in written language, they play a vital role in shaping the oral communication effective. Though some say that analysing spoken discourse might not be helpful in determining the content of a course, the researcher finds the recorded conversations really motivating in evaluating learners' speaking skills, developing materials, and designing tasks in English.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Discourse analysis which refers to "approaches to studying language's relation to the contextual background features" (Cutting, 2002, p.1) has been an important aspect in language study since 1970s though it was first employed by Zellig Harris in 1952. As we know context makes the meaning of an utterance different than what it literally means, we should analyse spoken discourse carefully because only spoken discourse acknowledges the time, sequence, context, and social background of the persons involved in a piece of language. The researcher, in this study, aims to find a generalized pattern of spoken discourse analyzing two different conversations.

## **II. EXPLANATION OF THE STUDY**

The researcher will transcribe the recorded conversations in a systematic way. Then he would find out the ritual and system constraints of the conversations, and other layers of discourse analysis. System constraints are a set of constraints required for all communication, e.g. nods, smiles. On the other hand, ritual constraints are required for smooth social interaction, e.g. turn-taking in conversation. It should also be noted that emphasis would be given on child-father conversation to see how children use discourse items in interacting with others. After analyzing two recorded

conversations separately, the investigator will do a comparative study of those to find out a generalized pattern of discourses used by different language learners.

## **III. THE IMPORTANCE OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

Why discourse analysis is important will be clear to us if we analyse Queen Victoria's famous words 'we are not amused'. Linguistically, 'we' is a noun phrase, 'are' is a linking verb agreeing with 'we', 'not' is a negative marker, and 'amused' is an adjective. This is syntactic analysis. This does not answer who said it, to whom, where, when and why. Again, if we analyse the literary meaning of the sentence, we can say that the meaning could be "we are not pleased or entertained". This is semantic interpretation. However, if we analyse Victoria's remark in context, we would see that she "had been in a prolonged depression, caused by the death of her husband Albert, and her courtiers knew this, and that her words were a response to a joke which they had made." This statement was made to stop the courtiers trying to make her laugh.

Pragmatics and discourse analysis study context, text, and function. But pragmatics is different from discourse analysis in that discourse gives importance to social principles. As discourse

analysis involves both the linguistic and sociological study of language, it might help moderate;

- i) language teaching methodologies and learning strategies
- ii) curriculum design
- iii) material development and
- iv) classroom environment

Discourse analysis also tries to answer:

- a. how language acquisition is related to language learning theories,
- b. how communicative competence can be developed, and
- c. how coherent texts and speeches are made

#### IV. BACKGROUND STUDY

Zellig S. Harris, in 1952, first defined the term discourse analysis as “a method for the analysis of connected speech” (p.1). J B Thompson (1981) refers to discourse analysis as “... the study of socially situated speech”(p.74). According to The Linguistics Encyclopedia (1991), there are two main directions within this area: one is linguistically based, and influenced by Michael Halliday; and the other is sociologically based and influenced by F Garfinkel. These two phases of language study are also termed as discourse analysis and conversational analysis (Encyclopedia, 1991). Discourse analysis is mainly associated with John Sinclair, Malcolm Coulthad and some others. On the other hand, conversational analysis is chiefly associated with Havey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jafferson (cited in Thompson, 1984).

The first research was done on discourse analysis by Sinclair and Coulthard in 1975. They tried to examine the linguistic aspects of teachers-pupil interaction. They thought they would set up a model for the analysis of conversation which might answer the following questions:

- i. how are successive utterances related
- ii. who controls the discourse
- iii. how does he do it
- iv. how, if at all, do other participants take control
- v. how do the roles of speakers and listeners pass from one participant to another
- vi. how are new topics introduced and old topics ended

- vii. what linguistic evidence is there for discourse units larger than the utterance?  
(The Linguistic Encyclopedia, 1991)

Though Sinclair and Coulthard wanted to set up a model for discourse analysis with a view to looking for the answers of above questions, it was not clear how answers could be found in natural conversation. As in normal conversation, changes of topics are unpredictable. People can change topics whenever they want during a communication. Sometimes, a speaker may take a different turn or argue with a question instead of answering it. There might be ambiguous sentence that a listener might misunderstand what the speaker means. For example:

Father: Is that your coat on the floor again?

Son: yes. (goes on reading)

(Encyclopedia, 1991)

From the above example, we see that the son could not understand that his father asked him to pick up the coat. It might also be true that the son considered his father's question as a yes/no one.

In classrooms, we find only ordinary conversation. So analyzing discourse of natural conversation is more suggestive for further study. Sinclair and Coulthard made a three part structure called I-R-F; I stands for initiation, R for response and F for feedback. This illustrates that teachers usually initiate conversation by asking questions in classrooms followed by responses of students. After students' response, teachers give feedback. This is an example of classroom conversation. However, Burton (1981) replaces this with three-part structure of opening, supporting and challenging moves. She brings three concepts into her analysis from Keenan & Schieffin 1976 and Labov 1970 (cited in Burton (1981) :

- i. discourse frame- work based on reciprocal acts and cohesion
- ii. establishment of a discourse topic
- iii. interpretation of any utterance as a request for action

In analyzing discourse, Goffman (1976) claimed that there was a set of universal constraints in all communication. He divided them into two types:

- i. System constraints, which are general elements for all communication, and

- ii. Ritual constraints which are social constraints that help hold smooth social interaction

As discourse is about communication in context, Ochs (1979) said that mode and syntax in discourse analysis are importance. He said that as there are differences between oral and written discourse.

Since the study of discourse started, linguists have been talking about the importance of cognitive and communication skills of the persons involved in piece of conversation. Cummin's (1979, 80, 81, 84) BICS and CALP help researchers analyse discourse more efficiently. BICS stands for Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and CALP stands for Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency. This is evident that individuals' interpersonal and cognitive skills shape the way he/she interacts with others.

Hymes (1996) said conversation analysis is similar to the analysis of speech event. Speech events are held in a speech community and speech community shares rules of conduct for interaction in a language. Speech event analysis is based on assumption that "members of all societies follow some specific 'rules of speech' and non verbal behaviour with clearly recognizable opening and closing sequence" (Gumperz, 1986).

Schegloff (1986) gives emphasis on opening sequence "discussing both their internal structure, and constraints" (The Linguistic Encyclopedia, 1986, p.140) that follow a sequence. He talked about two-part summon-answer sequence. Summon could be

- i. terms of address e.g., 'John', 'Dr.', 'waiter'
- ii. courtesy phrases e.g., "pardon me"
- iii. physical devices e.g. a tap on the shoulder, waves of a hand

Answer sequence might be "yes", "what?", "uh-huh" etc. Schegloff says about SA sequence:

"Two parties have been brought together; each has acted, each by his action has produced and assumed further obligations; each is then available. And a pair of roles has been invoked and aligned."

In telephone conversations, the SA sequence is generally "followed by greeting sequence". For

example, telephone ringing is summoned and "Hello" could be the answer. Then caller might tell "hello, this is ..." and the called might tell "oh, hi....".

It is also notable that question-answer sequence differs from SA sequence. If we observe the following QA sequence recorded by Schegloff, things would be clear:

- Speaker 1: Have you seen Jim yet?
- Speaker 2: Oh! Is he in town?
- Speaker 1: Yeah, he got in yesterday.
- Speaker 2: No, I haven't seen him yet.

Sequencing rules in a conversation is also known as adjacency pairs (Sacks et al., 1974). Adjacency pairs play two roles for participants namely speaker and hearer.

Discourse analysis also involves conversational code switching. We know that discourse includes "socially set speech". But for global reach of English people from acrolect to basilect code switch in their conversation. Labov (1971) said that code switching is sometimes idiosyncratic. His example of English Spanish code switching is very interesting.

"por eso (therefore) you know it is nothing to be proud of porque yo no estoy (because I am not) proud of it, as matter of fact, I hate it".

In analyzing spoken discourse prosody should be considered as suggestive. In natural conversation pitch, intonation, stress, and rhythm indicate the meaning. Ladd (1980) and Liberman (1978) worked a lot on prosodic significance on discourse.

## V. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The researcher would like to mention that he collected the data recording some conversations in non-formal and non collaborative environment. He selected two conversations to analyse discourse. It should be noted that the conversations were recorded at day times. To introduce the persons involved in the study, in the first conversation, the doctor was working at Dhaka University Medical Centre; the patient was a university student. In the second conversation, the child was the nephew of the researcher and child's father is his brother. It can be noted that the baby boy was three and a half years old and his father was about 34 years of age and a teacher at a primary school.

## VI. THE PATIENT-DOCTOR CONVERSATION

*The patient-doctor conversation* was recorded at Dhaka University Medical Centre. In data presentation, **P** stands for patient and **D** for doctor:

	<b>P:</b> Umm, aste pari?	[Can I come?]
	<b>D:</b> (Eye gazes and head nods) + ticket ANCHEN?	[Have you taken ticket?]
	<b>P:</b> hae, (gives the slip to the doctor)	[yes.]
5	<b>D:</b> +SAMASYA ki?	[What is your problem?]
	<b>P:</b> +A mar ajke sakal theke + prachanda buk baetha	[I have been feeling severe pain in my chest since this morning]
	<b>D:</b> a-a-h!	
	<b>P:</b> huh! Ackhono baetha....	[Yes, I am still feeling pain]
10	<b>D:</b> Buker kon dike? Chap dile LAGE?	[Which side of your chest? Do you feel pain if you press?]
	<b>P:</b> =hae=	[yes]
	<b>D:</b> achha, oi to uporer baetha.	[I understand, it is external pain]
	<b>P:</b> kintu...	[but!]
15	<b>D:</b> CHAP dile lage to?	[ok, Don't you feel pain if you press]
	<b>P:</b> (nodding ) hmm	[yes]
	<b>D:</b> Boyosh koto apnar?	[How old are you?]
	<b>P:</b> + (o)Ektrish +++	[31]
	<b>D:</b> rate ghum thum kemon hoe?	[Can you sleep well at night?]
20	<b>P:</b> (o) bhalo ++	[good.]
	<b>D:</b> eito, (o) shoar theke, shoar theke hoechhe	[the pain is from sleeping, from sleeping]
	<b>P:</b> (o) shoar theke?	[From sleeping?]
	<b>D:</b> + hae, tobu kalke heart-er ECG koraben	[yes, still you should do the ECG of your heart tomorrow.]
25	<b>P:</b> hatahati korbo?	[Would I walk?]
	<b>D:</b> Na, aekhon reste thaken Bathe hole oshudh khaben ++++	[no, take rest now.] [take medicine if you feel pain.]
	<b>P:</b> Dhonya bad	[Thank you]
30	<b>D:</b> (nodding)	[ok.]

In the above conversation, the researcher found interaction of system and ritual constraints. That was an ordinary doctor-patient conversation where both the persons were educated and concerned about social principles.

### A. System constraints

The patient's "aste pari?" is the *opening signal* of the conversation, and his "dhonyabad" and the doctor's "nodding" are *closing signals*.

*Back-channel signal:* When the patient asked the doctor "aste pari?", the doctor responded with eye-gaze and head-nodding. That was the back-channel signal of the conversation.

*Turn-over signal:* turn-over signals are there in the conversation, e.g., vowel prolongation, galling information and overlaps. In line 10, the researcher found the doctor overlapped and took his turn with the falling intonation of the patient.

*Bracket signal:* Though no verbal evidence of bracket signal is found in the text, gaps or pause indicate bracket signal after line 20.

*Preempt signals:* in line 13, doctor's "achha" was a preempt signal for his understanding that the pain of the patient was external. The researcher observed that the doctor's "achha" interrupted the conversation.

*Acoustically adequate interpretable messages:* As far as the conversation is concerned, the text is acoustically adequate. Though the messages carried out in lines 27-29 are different, the participants were able to build a common theme.

As it was a one to one conversation, *non participant signal* was not found.

### **B. Ritual constraint and Grice's maxims**

Gricean norms for effective communication are relevance, truthfulness, quantity and clarity. According to these norms, communication messages must relate to what has gone before to share relevant information. The participants in a conversation have to be truthful, though there are possibilities of violating truthfulness for playfulness (e.g. by teasing). It is also important that the participants need to be brief and clear while conversing. The last part of Gricean norms is clarity which talks about avoiding obscurity in conversation.

The Gricean norms in the above conversation:

- a) *Relevance:* Each person made relevant contribution to the topic. The patient and the doctor did not go far from the topic.
- b) *Truthfulness:* Another important Grice's maxim is truthfulness which was seen in the conversation. Both the doctor and the patient said what they believed to be true.
- c) *Quantity:* as we know quantity refers to fair share of talk, the participants in that conversation had shared talking time almost fairly.
- d) *Clarity:* The sign of clarity was seen everywhere in the conversation as participants talked about illness and ways of remedy.

According to Sachank's scripts and communication theory (cited in Hatch, 1992), the doctor-patient conversation had goal, actors, props and actions. Goal of that conversation was to find

out the healing element of the ailment. Props were doctor's chamber, table, chair, pen, paper, identification receipt, and health card. Actors were doctor, patient, identification officer and doctor's attendant. Actions included doctor and patient's going to the medical centre, patient's move to collect the identification receipt, selection of doctor's chamber, making necessary conversation with the doctor, and having the prescription finally.

### **C. Speech act and speech event analysis**

Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1976) (cited in Hernandez, 2001) explains how a conversation functions in Speech act theory. This can be analysed on three different levels:

- i. locutionary- the act of saying something
- ii. illocutionary-what is done in uttering the words
- iii. perlocutionary-what is done by uttering the words

According to this theory, the above conversation maintained all these effects. There were also declaration mood in line 25 which demands a relief, representative mood in lines 18-20 which states a member of a group and objective mood in line 30 which is a statement made with honesty free from being biased. This should be pointed out here that there were no commissive and expressive acts in the above conversation.

Three examples of speech event are compliments, complaints and advice. Compliments and complaints were not found in the above conversation; however, advice was identified in line 30.

### **D. Rhetorical analysis**

In the researcher's view, the doctor/patient conversation was narrative. There were orientation, problem, steps to solution and solution. The patient's delivery mood is narrative. The researcher also found that doctor's "achha!" in line 15 and 'ei to' in line 22 were his support for his statement. These supporting and restatement moves are rhetorically significant.

### **E. Cohesion analysis**

*Deictic Markers:*

Person: I-the patient

You- indicating the patient by the doctor  
 Spatial: the doctor's chamber  
 Temporal: 'saka' in line 6 and 'ackhon' in line 9  
 Social: honorific in the conversation (lines 17/apnar, 26/thaken)

*Cohesive ties:* Demonstrative {(lines 7/ajke sokal), 10/kon dike)} and pronoun (lines 17, 29) references were there in conversation. It should be mentioned here that some of the pronouns are not mentioned in the conversation as a rule of Bengali spoken discourse. Repetition of "chap dile", "baetha" were also found.

Substitution: clausal substitution was found in line -13

Conjunction: adversative conjunction 'but' was seen in line-14. There were also some non-verbal conjunction indicated by '+ (pause)'.

#### F: Mode and Syntax

We know there is continuum between the oral and written languages. The investigator would like to state that he found phrasal and sentential structures in the conversation. Though oral conversation seems to be unplanned, it is planned cognitively. Involvement of both the participants was a notable mode in the conversation.

- |    |   |  |
|----|---|--|
|    | C: Umm, Ekta Gan chalao. ...<br>Umm, gan, chalaie, gan<br>Shune, shune khabo<br>F: Accha ...<br>++  | [Play on music.]<br>[I would like to eat listening to Music]<br>[ok]   |
| 5  | C: amar da (ta) de, umm ami,<br><br>F: Konda? .....<br>C: + tu mi amar da the, umm ami,<br>F: (h) Naeo, age, naeo<br>C: Umm, na, uuh! Uuh!  | [You have taken (food from my Part), haven't you?]<br><br>[Which one?]<br>[You, from my part, umm, from Umm, my part..]<br>[Take, take your food first ]<br>[No (physical gestures)] |
| 10 | F: Kondar da khaba?<br>C: uh, amar kaka, umm<br>Amar da<br>C: taratari khao .....<br>(o) khao, taratari<br>[F looks at the uncle and says:] | [From which part would you Like to have?]<br>[oh, my uncle, umm,<br>from my umm my share]<br>[Eat quickly (indicating to uncle)]<br>[Eat quickly (do )]                              |
| 15 | F: amra baikhir jai, bujhecho?<br>C: +thakurpure?<br>O kaka, ek din bristi hoichilona?<br>+ umm, amge uthane, khoira                        | [Do you know we go to Baikhir (to buy fish)]<br>[ Thakurpur? (a place )]<br>[o, uncle, once it was raining]  |
| 19 | much aicchhilo.   | [one day..... a small kind of fish came to our yard]   |

#### Prosody:

Most of the questions were made structuring on the interrogative markers of Bengali grammar. Moreover, emphasis on particular content words was given by putting stress on them (lines 3/anchen, 5/samasya, 11/lage).

#### G: Contextual analysis

Contextual analysis was first integrated into discourse analysis by Celce-Murcia in 1980. She suggested that it was important to analyse how and when we select a particular linguistic form to use. The questions "Samasya ki?", "Boyosh Koto?", "Ghum .....kemon?" (lines 5, 17, 19), and answers "amar ajke.....baetha" (line 6) and others indicated that the conversation was made contextually.

#### VII. THE PARENT-CHILD CONVERSATION

This conversation was recorded in the morning at 8:30 am at the residence of the child's father. As it is assumed that first language acquisition is a good tool to analyse children's "rate" in learning a language, it also helps determine the fact that materials and tasks for language teaching can be designed considering the shifts and constraints of child conversation. Here C stands for child and F for father in the conversation below:

The researcher would like to mention that “uncle” in the above conversation is the researcher himself. He was also having food with the child at the same time. The child’s father was feeding him.

#### A. System constraints

The investigator did not find any *opening and closing signals* in the above conversation.

*Back channel signals*: In response to questions, the child made eye contact with his father which reveals that the child was getting messages.

*Turnover signals*: In lines 8 and 14, the researcher found turnover signals. In this case, slowing down the tempo and vowel elongation made turnover signals. However, there were no *bracket signals*.

The child, in the above conversation, used *preempts signals* to enter into the conversation. However, for ritual constraints or for the child’s own cognitive ability, he enters into a conversation directly in line 16. Here the researcher found that the father of the child was talking to his brother and mentioned the name of a place they used to go to buy fish. At the same time, the child mentioned “thakurpuro” another place where fishes were sold. It was thought that he did that to enter into the conversation.

*Non-participant constraint*: The child’s non-participant constraints are cognitive and abrupt in some cases, in line 17 “O kaka” is a non-participant constraint.

*Acoustically adequate, interpretable messages*:

The child’s words were not always acoustically adequate. At many points, he broke down; he could not express quite what he wanted to. Lines 11-12 are a case in this point.

#### B. Ritual constraint and Grecian norms

- a) *Relevance*: the conversation was very natural and the conversants changed the topics randomly. Sometimes, the participants were in right way answering the questions.
- b) *Truthfulness, quantity and quality* were not found. The people in conversation were not focused on a particular topic; rather, they talked about many different things based on the mood swing of the child. Moreover, the

talk was dominated by the child; everyone engaged in the conversation did not have equal share in the talk. It was also found that there was no goal of the conversation. The baby talked about “gan chhalao/play on a music”, then concentrated on “amar da/my part of the food item”, and then on another story of “much aicchilo/fish came”. The father, on the other hand, wanted to feed his son anyway; he did not emphasize what his son was talking about. The uncle played the role of an inactive observer; he only helped his brother carry out the job, i.e. feeding the son. So the quality of the conversation was not found there.

- c) *Ritual constraints and self*: The researcher found that the child talked much. His “self” in “amar da/ my share”, or “ami/I” indicated that he was careful about his social identity.

#### C. Cohesion

Person deixis: tumi, ami, amra (you, I, and we)  
Spatial deixis: baikhir, thakurpur (names of places)  
Temporal deixis : ek din (one day) in line 17  
Discourse deixis: opted in most cases (you)  
Social deixis: O kaka (oh, uncle) (relational)

*Cohesive devices*:

Reference: “amar da/my part”, Amar Kaka/my uncle”, “ami/I”

Ellipses: clausal- in line 9 “umm, na .....” means that the child did not want to take food as requested in line 8.

Lexical: repetition was found in many places, e.g., in line

3 “shune, shune...”, and in lines 13 and 14

Substitution was not identified in the conversation. However “umm” had been found as a substitution of “and”.

*Prosody*:

Questions were made by emphasizing verbs or interrogative markers like “Konda?” in line 6.

### VII. GENERALIZED PATTERNS

From the analysis of the first conversation, it was evident that both the speakers were educated and concerned about social norms and expected behaviour in context. The nods, smiles, eye gazes,

pauses, and other non-linguistic utterances were part of the spoken discourse. It is also evident that people, whatever their languages are, have their own ways of interacting with others. The investigator observes that the tasks and activities in language classrooms can be designed considering the aspects of spoken discourse. Once learners are exposed to interaction in simulation, the better they would be at writing and communication.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> transcribed conversation, the child and his father participated in interaction on many topics. The researcher noticed that repetition of some particular words from the child's part carried meaning most. It can also be noted that cohesive devices of many kinds such as reference and ellipses have been used in the conversation. There was no equal share of talking time; this evidences that children like talking more than adults.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

Discourse analysis shows relationship between syntax, semantics and context. If we analyse a sentence only with the structure and meaning of the words, we might fail in real life communication. By way of illustration "I've lost my bag" could imply "I do not have any bag to bring my clothes", or "can you please give me some money?", or "sorry, I can't help you." Henceforth, the researcher hopes context is given preference in teaching language. He also hopes that the teaching learning situation of English in Bangladesh would be developed if discourse analysis is taken for consideration in developing curriculum, materials, and designing tasks, particularly to develop the speaking skills of L2 learners.

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## Appendix

### Symbols used for transcription

// or / indicates next speaker overlaps at this point

[ shows both the speakers start simultaneously

= is used for latching to show there is no gap between utterances

(.) or + stands for micro pause, ++ for a longer pause and +++ for a long pause

? for strong rising intonation

, for a slight rise

; means the syllable is lengthened

Uppercase type is used for stress (pitch, volume)

(o) indicates following talk is said softly.

(h) indicates explosive aspiration

h without brackets means audible breathing.

() is used when speakers are unsure of accuracy.

((())) indicate non-verbal sounds.