THE POLITICS OF A CONVERSATION:

CONVERSATIONAL INFERENCE IN DISCUSSION

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"Man is a political animal." Aristotle. *Politica*.

"...each of us says
Not what he wants to say, but what is seemly. Words
Conspire treacherously behind our backs
And it is not we who speak the words, the words speak us
And betray our thoughts which also
Betray our treacherous feelings...."

--Witthold Gombrowicz in Martin
Esslin, *Theater of the Absurd*

In any ritualized social encounter -- and the material for analysis has many of the characteristics of just such a culturally specific activity -- ritualization serves to conceal or suspend outside relations of power and domination. Rituals provide collections of semiotic and discourse techniques that act as emblems through which participants can express their understandings of the roles available to them within the ritual situation and for the duration of the encounter. Thus by their very nature rituals create a symbolic arena in which there can exist agreement for all participants about the allocation of resources on which dependency and autonomy in social relationships depend.

Verbal communication of all kinds presupposes shared background knowledge. Speakers, if they want to be understood, must be able to assess the hearer-interactants' social position within a known or knowable social universe. Where participants in an interaction are not known to each other, ritualization reflects the need for the inevitably present yet often unpredictable parameters of power and social relations to be made safe or otherwise neutralized through politeness formulae. As Goffman (1967) has put it, such ritual exchanges constitute "brief rituals, one individual performs for or to another; these become the recipients' possession of a small patrimony of sacredness." One might say that casual encounters of this type provide for a temporary gift of communicative exchange, which can be considered to be given gratis because it exists outside the established social structural positionings of the interactants. These positionings remain unspecified in the proceedings and they are therefore non-significant for the purpose of the ongoing exchange.

As familiarity, or more generally, social knowledge among participants increases, so can the expression of power play a more important part in the communicative exchange. Where power expression is extremely important, as in the political decision processes of many traditional societies, the rhetorical devices used provide for the definite construction of authority relations within the ritual event (Bloch 1975). Expressed authority relations make the giving and taking of communicative exchanges a matter of recognizable value. On the other hand however, where interactants are known to each other and where each has for the other an interactional history outside of the ritual sphere, the ritual event must provide within its discourse pattern a transformational aspect. For example religious ritual makes available many set, formulaic devices to allow for movement from the secular-profane to the sacred from one episode to another within the fixed time span of a single event. On the other hand, in less formal everyday situations where members are known to each other, so that even the "borrowed sacredness" of Goffman's brief encounter is not possible, it becomes necessary to make special provision for marking the ritualized aspects of the discourse. Lacking the societally transformational semiotic of religious occasions, everyday encounters must provide for this transformation indirectly as part of the ongoing interaction. Thus speakers are forced to fall back on the symbolic resources of everyday language to gain the discoursive power needed to make the event into a ritual occurrence. For this reason the ritualization of everyday communicative exchanges has a negotiable value and one that can be influenced by the interactional history of the participants from outside the event.

In the case of the dissertation defense analyzed here, the interactants' position in the world at large and in the university organization is still very much a part of the event. The degree to which it is allowed to show, i.e. influence the course of the event, must constantly be negotiated through interactive mechanisms that rely on indirect verbal and non-verbal signalling cues that by their very nature are inherently ambiguous. This ambiguity can only be resolved through context dependent meaning assessments. So that in order to make the assumption -- essential to all everyday conversation -- of co-operative goodwill, interactants must provide their own interpretative input to any speaker’s offering.

Our choice of the title "the politics of a conversation" for this enquiry draws metaphorically upon the fact that dependency on conversational good will allows hearers to accept whatever linguistic signal is provided by speakers as an adequate signal, provided they can work with it in their own terms. Neither speakers nor hearers assume only one interpretation is possible for any move, statement, or gesture. For their interaction is a motivated search for shared and agreed understanding: in short, a political effort to reach a negotiated compromise, so that language which at one level can be seen to express agreement may also act to hide disagreement.

Conversational Analysis: Theory and Methods

Our basic premise in examining this negotiating process is common to all modern traditions of conversational analysis: that verbal interaction is a co-operative activity requiring active co-ordination of moves on the part of two or more participants and that whatever is accomplished, whatever interpretations are made, and whatever information is conveyed does not inhere in the verbal and non-verbal signs as such, but must emerge from this sequentially organized interactive exchange.

Most conversational analysts tend to concentrate on the structural characteristics of conversational exchanges, attempting to show how and to what extent conversations of all kind are rule governed. In as much as conversational analysts deal with language, they focus on surface features of language usage such as, for example, the positioning of utterances within a sequence of turns, or verbal expressions used to signal asides and interjections. They seek to show how, by virtue of their positioning within the turn taking system, such utterances can come to function as part of the management strategies by which participants control the course of the interaction. Our own concern, by contrast, is not with isolating general features or rules of conversational structures as such, but with actors’ ability to use conversational strategies to make themselves understood and achieve communicative goals in particular types of social settings.

This focus on communicative ends or goals and how they are accomplished raises basic issues of sociolinguistic theory that are not ordinarily covered in the literature (Gumperz 1982a; Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz 1982). We cannot, for example assume, as conversational analysts tend to do, that careful attention to the empirical facts of turn taking alone will explain what it is that enables people to converse. Neither can we take it for granted that individuals who can produce grammatical sentences in the same language can understand each other in the sense that they can also jointly encode and decode coherent conversational sequences. Research in discourse analysis has demonstrated that in order to understand how longer messages combine to form coherent themes we must be able to relate utterance sequences to our knowledge of the world. That is, we must know how to integrate the words we hear into what we already know. In making such integrative judgments of how a text coheres, we rely on knowledge of grammar and lexicon as well as on schematic knowledge of the world of the kind not ordinarily covered in the linguists analyses. (Halliday and Hasan 1976; Spiro, Bruce, and Brewer 1980.)

In order to explain how such extralinguistic background information affects the interpretation of utterances, we assume that judgments based on schematic knowledge are made at several levels of generality. Interpretation begins with global assessments of what is expected in an interaction. This involves categorizing what we perceive in terms of one or another ‘activity’ or activity type. That is interactants are seen to be acting out particular social relationships with respect to certain topics and communicative expectations that are part of the definition of the activity, (Gumperz 1982).

A dissertation defense is a typical example of such an activity. Its goal is to evaluate a candidate’s performance and to create a record of proceedings by means of which the relevant decisions were made. But, as is common in public institutions, such institutionally defined goals are associated in performance with a host of informal practices in the course of which the record is qualified by more detailed and inevitably more personal evaluative judgments about the nature of the contribution that is being made.

Since both the official and the informal aspects of the proceedings must be produced through talk, individual speakers are faced with the problem of signalling what is being accomplished at any one time by what they say in the course of the interaction. That is, they must make clear how what they say is to be understood in relation to the event’s goal. The way in which they do this is further affected by their structural positions within the event, that is, by characteristics such as those which Bloch, in his discussion of political rituals (1975) refers to as: "the roles communicated [by the participants] in the ritual develop from the formal structure of the ritual act." In other words, as David Sapir (1978) says in commenting on Bloch, "By consenting to play the ritual game the actors assume positions within the authority structure that have been defined by the ritual."

In the present case what these positions are is clear, at least on the surface. There is the dissertation advisor Adam who chairs the proceedings and who while officially acting as one of the examiners, frequently also takes on the role of the student's advocate in the session. There is the outside member, Pat who evaluates the work from a different disciplinary perspective and who, in this case, happens to be the only woman besides the candidate. Two additional examiners from the department, Sherm and James Each bring specific types of expertise to bear upon the proceedings. But, as Cicourel shows in his analysis of the event in Chapter XX, there is the additional factor of the interactional history of the participants, which creates a substratum of relationships, the knowledge of which constantly obtrudes into the on-going interaction. Cicourel goes on to argue that conversational analysts who are privy to this knowledge can use it as a reservoir of information which they can draw on without explicitly having to state it.

Our use of the word reservoir here is intentional, to indicate what Cicourel is also concerned with, the need to specify potentially available information. For what we want to suggest is that it may neither be possible nor even necessary for analysts to know every detail of individual participants' interactional history. We hope to show in our analysis that there may be ways in which by managing the articulation between formal and informal phases of the proceedings we can see how participants rely on and how they themselves reveal the relevance of some of this knowledge. It is in this way that what we have referred to above as the "politics of a conversation" is constructed, by virtue of the fact that the interactants appear to know what can and what cannot be said, how their information is to be presented, and in what tone.

Furthermore, while it is true in general terms that verbal activities are goal oriented, we do not assume that there must be one single overriding goal that determines all interpretation. In any one instance a multiplicity of goals can be relevant. Choices among these can only be explained through situated analysis of the moves and countermoves that make up the exchange. That is, we need to seek evidence to show how a move is interpreted at any one point in time and how this interpretation is reinforced or altered by what they hear later. Contrary to what some conversational analysts claim, this requires analysis of both the linguistic form and the interactional character of the moves. We cannot take grammar and meaning for granted, but must seek to show empirically how participants perceive the grammatical, prosodic and semantic characteristics of the ongoing talk and how these perceptions affect their interpretations.

The Dissertation Defense

Although the passage analyzed in this paper is only a small portion of the total defense, it is nevertheless too long for micro-analysis. The first step, therefore, is to divide it into smaller sections. What we look for are subunits that are small enough to enable us to reveal the details of the negotiating mechanism but that are at the same time self contained in the sense that they provide internal evidence as to whether or not participants accomplish their communicative ends. In carrying out this segmentation, as throughout the analysis, we always consider form in relation to content and interpretation. Initially we scan the proceedings to discover signs or potential indicators of topical continuity or discontinuity and then try to determine how breaks in continuity at the level of content relate to what happens in other signalling channels. A number of criteria are relevant in this respect: natural breaks in the interaction, shifts in topic that extend to more than several utterances, along with shifts in style.

We do not claim that the segments thus analyzed constitute clearly bounded units of conversational structure. Generally transitions between segments are quite gradual. Nor is ours necessarily the only valid segmentation of the defense proceedings. Interactants themselves may have different views on any one particular grouping of subunits. Part of the normal procedure used with other types of materials is to ask participants to assist in determining breaks in interaction, following methods used by Erickson and Shultz (1982). In the present analysis, however, that was not possible. Our main purpose in making the segmentation we do make is to have a convenient set of units with which to decide how the communicative ends of the activity can be reflexively realized as the interaction develops.

The theoretical notion on which the analysis of what transpires within and across segments rests is the concept of conversational inference: the situated process by which participants in a conversation assess other participants' intentions, and on which they base their responses. Conversational inference is a real time phenomenon, and interpretations are subject to change as the encounter progresses. It is the analyst's task to reconstruct this dynamic process, for it cannot be examined directly. We do this by focussing on the semantic relationships or ties between subsequent moves, as well as the cohesive linkages by virtue of which moves are associated with others to make up consistent themes.

In using terms like intention or intent as semantic primes, we build on speech act theorists' notions of illocutionary force. That is we are concerned with what speakers and listeners expect or seek to communicate by means of a message rather with reference or propositional content of messages as such. But this does not imply that we need to be concerned with the psychological problem of what individuals ultimately have in mind. Our aim is to reconstruct the inferences listeners make about communicative goals in a particular context, by looking at how they respond to speakers' moves and by deducing what their responses tell us about the principles in accordance with which they select among possible lines of inference.

It is here that reliance on indirect interpretation becomes important. Speech act analysis has shown that listeners' situated meaning assessments frequently have little or no direct relationship to what would count as the propositional content of the same utterance spoken in isolation. Consider the following examples from our text (1514-1517):

Example 1

1 A: So you say pass.

2 J: Oh yeah.

3 A: And that is ... That's a neutral term.

4 J: I'm not sure.

Adam's initial utterance marks the end of a brief anecdote in which he describes his own experience in writing up field research. Although the utterance has the the syntactic form of a statement, James treats it as a yes/no question. The anecdote is part of Adam's reply to James's evaluation of the dissertation. This evaluation precedes Adam's utterance in line one by more than a minute. In the immediately preceding passage James has not directly said that the candidate should pass. Take literally, therefore, his reply in line 2 is not quite truthful. It is at best incomplete. The only way we can understand the exchange is to assume that what Adam intended to convey in line 1 was something like "Can I take it that you conclude from your evaluation that the candidate should pass?" -- even though he didn't say that explicitly. This assumption is confirmed by line 3, where Adam's reply is perhaps best glossed as a request for further clarification like "Do you intend this to be interpreted as a neutral term?" which implicitly accepts James's answer. J's reply "I'm not sure" suggests that he is somewhat reluctant to be more specific.

Note that here as well as elsewhere throughout the thesis defense participants' responses reflect indirect inferences of what a speaker intends. What is it about an exchange that enables conversationalists to go beyond the information actually lexicalized, that is put into words, in drawing such inferences? How can others understand these inferences and how can they be incorporated into the proceedings? It seems clear that examination of individual utterances one at a time either in terms of their propositional content, illocutionary force or speech act meaning cannot answer these questions. In our analysis we adopt an interpretive approach that seeks to recover what responses tell us about how previous moves have been received and then goes on to confirm or disconfirm initial hypotheses by examining subsequent moves. Although such procedures cannot deal with meaning in the traditional sense of the term, they do yield empirical evidence of what interpretations are shared.

We use the term negotiation to refer to process by which agreements are achieved. What these agreements are about is how an action or an event is to be labelled or as Goffman might say framed. It is the interpretive context that is negotiated, not what is meant in absolute terms. Negotiation is of course always constrained by turn taking and conversational management strategies of the type studied by conversational analysts. But there are other types of sociocultural and linguistic knowledge that also affect the outcome of the negotiation process. These can only be recovered through detailed analysis of the verbal message as such. We have already pointed out that in seeking to understand what transpires in an encounter participants categorize what transpires in terms of one or another socially recognized activity and that activity types are conventionally associated with interpretive schemata that set the overall agenda for what takes place, and generate expectations as to what is to be achieved. Understanding always assumes some minimal agreement of what these agenda are. But additional factors are also at work. To comprehend any one utterance, we must assume that, in absence of cues to the contrary, the speaker intends that it should fit in with the agreed upon goals of the encounter. Such assumptions of conversational cooperation motivate listeners' search for information given in preceding talk or for other types of background information background information relevant to understanding what has just been said.

Yet this search for linkages is never completely unconstrained by message form, even in cases like the present one where the utterance in question shows no surface semantic tie to the immediately preceding utterance. While conversationalists need to know more than syntax and lexicon, to infer what is intended, syntax does play a role. Note, for example, that as native speakers of American English, we know that utterances such as those in lines 1 and 3 that have the surface syntactic form of statements, can in certain circumstances also be interpreted as questions. Our awareness of this optionality and of its consequences for interpretation of intent are a function of our knowledge of English grammar, since in English questions and statements are not necessarily distinguished at the level of morphology and syntax. In languages such as Japanese and Tamil, however, where questions are always marked by special particles, this particular type of option does not exist. There are additional conventions of language usage such as those governing the assignment of prosodic contours (i.e., intonation and stress) to utterances, the use of code or style switching strategies, of formulaic utterances and of other lexical options, which affect the inferential process by recalling interpretive schemata or suggesting how message parts can be linked to create a thematic whole. We refer to these as "contextualization cues," and to the signalling conventions they reflect as "contextualization conventions."

One way in which contextualization conventions function is to serve as guide posts for monitoring the progress of conversational interaction. We use our knowledge of grammar and lexicon, along with contextualization conventions and whatever background information we have about settings and participants, to decide what discourse task is being performed and what activity is being signalled. As we have said above, this provides information about likely communicative goals and outcomes. We then build on these predictions to identify the communicative intent that underlies particular utterances. Contextualization conventions channel interpretations in one direction or another. The basic assumption is that something is being communicated. What is at issue is how it is to be interpreted. The judgments to be made at any one time are contingent judgments, both for analysts and conversationalists: they are either confirmed or disproved by what happens subsequently. If they are confirmed, our expectations are reinforced; if they are disconfirmed, we try to recode what we have heard and change our expectations of goals, outcomes, and/or speakers' intent.

Contextualization conventions are acquired as a result of a speaker's actual interactive experience, i.e. as a result of an individual's participation in particular networks of relationship (Gumperz 1982a: Chapter 2). Like grammatical knowledge, they operate largely below the level of conscious choice. Where as a result of differences in social background, these networks differ as they do in ethnically mixed societies conventions differ and communication can break down. The relevant differences in conventions may not present serious problems when individuals are at ease or in routine situations. But when the situation is stressful, i.e., when much depends on the outcome, as in a job interview or a formal negotiation, they are quite likely to affect communication adversely.

In previous work (Gumperz 1982a, 1982), we have concentrated on the unexpected consequences that occur when contextualization conventions are not shared. We studied encounters among speakers who show significant differences in communicative background arguing that in the urban societies in which we live such situations are more frequent than discourse analysts tend to assume, since the social conditions in which people tend to meet are not usually conducive to learning of new contextualization conventions. For this reason, any conversational analysis which depends on sharedness of interpretive frames, without first demonstrating that it exists, must necessarily be limited in scope. In fact any theory of universals in conversation which rests on the assumption that the grammatical knowledge on which to build inference is shared is unable to account for many common conversational phenomena. This is especially true with situation of ethnic diversity where extra-situational ethnographic knowledge is not a part of the analyst's own everyday repertoire. In looking not only at conversational structures but also the linguistic particulars that constitute conversational usage, such as discourse practices and contextualization cues, we can expose at a linguistic level the discourse strategies which provide either a shared or misunderstood communicative basis with which conversationalists work to organize conversational encounters.

In the present situation, where the participants are all long-term members of the same academic community, we would, of course, expect to find a fairly high degree of sharing at the level of contextualization conventions. Our analysis reveals the degree to which interpretation of what goes on depends on this. Nevertheless, our earlier work has been crucial in alerting us to the existence of and the need for specifying the operation of contextualization conventions in the negotiation process as such, and in particular for clarifying how what is left unsaid at the level of surface syntax and lexicon is nonetheless communicated to and built on by the participants in the thesis defense.

To return to our initial concern with the ritual character of the dissertation defense and the nature of ritual in everyday speech. Our previous discussion suggests that where everyday situations are ritualized, contextualization conventions must operate to signal the transformation of the interaction from a casual mode into a ritual exchange.

In religious or such other forms of high ritual as have traditionally been described by anthropologists, the character and operation of the contextualization conventions are prescribed as part of the ritual itself. By contrast, in everyday rituals the contextualization choices which can constitute the event *as* a ritual are more open; to some extent, the form they take must be negotiated as the interaction progresses. One of the first tasks we face as analysts in the initial segmentation of the larger sequence is to determine to what extent transitions between subsections are marked by differences in contextualization cues. This is necessary in order then to examine how such differences can function to signal the ritual aspects of the encounter, most particularly its transformation *into* a ritual.

We can illustrate this by looking at the first lines of the text segment analyzed here (1466-1582). In our transcription the text is divided into minor tone groups indicated by (/) and major tone groups indicated by (//) for falling contours and (?) for rising contours. Pauses are marked by .. or ... depending on length. Overlapping utterances are lined up as in lines 6 and 7 below. Latched utterances, that is utterances that immediately follow the preceding turn without the normal rhythmic interval are lined up under the last letter of that turn. Square brackets mark incomprehensible talk and comments about laughter, sighing and similar paralinguistic signs are put in parentheses.

Example 2

1	A:	(sigh)...Okay why don’t you go get a drink/...and th/..
2		there’s a room up here/.. y’know right at the head of these
3		stairs / that..has comfortable chairs in it/although I / I
4		mean I don’t know how long we’ll be / but just so I can /..
5		find you/ cuz this building is../
6	L:	I’ll be in the room at
7		the head of the stairs//

8 A: It's/...(pause)

9 A: It's a maze // but there's /.. and there's a drink down there/

10 ..where Sherm told me to go before //

11 (laughter)

12 S: Where have I told you to go// (laughter)

13 A: You told me that I / ...

14 J: The heated room//

15 A: should have been more observant//

16 S: oh oh dash seven//

17 A: Yes / and I figured out how it was that you meant //

18 because we all paused there / and talked for a moment/..and

19 you happened to be facin' that direction //

20 S: That's right //

21 A: Whereas I was facin' another direction/ and that explains why /

22 ..oh/.. why you got/.. eh / Okay //

23 A: So//...how do you/(sigh) you want um/..

24 P: iyeah... //

25 A: make some uh/ got some reactions James?

J: Well uh // ...I mean she’s.. quite clear /...uh..what she said/
as she left / that she obviously enjoyed this / and it came
through / ...I mean she could not have written seven thousand
pages / (laugh).. if she didn’t thoroughly enjoy it / ...and
um/ ...in um terms of what a dissertation should be /...a...a a
learning experience in which y’know the student pulls together/
..everything that they have learned and/..tries to.. be
creative at the same time/
and tries to point toward further on-going work/
obviously this.. uh/ this meets all those criteria/and I
would certainly be in favor of/... uh..y’know passing her /
obviously with the kinds of suggestions we’ll have for
revision and/...so forth //

A: Are you gonna have / some...some suggestions for her in
writing? or just...more general //

J: More general / more oral kinds of things // I mean there were
a lot of things that Pat mentioned / where she didn’t always
communicate clearly/ like/... that statement that you picked up

44 about mothers/..you know //... one had to read that three or

45 four times/ before it became clear / that that really wasn't

46 what she was saying at all // and there's a lot of that..uh..

47 of course sociologists are afflicted //

The transcript begins with Adam's giving directions to the candidate, Lee. His first remark is delivered in rapid tempo. There follows a pause, then 'and' and then another pause. The next utterance "There is a room ---" is spoken in a loud voice and with relatively measured tempo. This slower style of speaking continues till about line 8, "where Sherm told me to go." This last remark is followed by laughter and by Lee's departure, which marks a transition. The next utterance, Sherm's "where have I told you to go," is spoken in fast staccato tempo, initiating a series of rapid fire anecdotal exchanges ending in line 25 where Adam raises his voice and pitch register with "so --- got some reactions James?" There follows James's evaluation, spoken in what is a fairly slow tempo, compared to his other utterances. His talk here is marked by an unusually high number of relatively short tone groups, pronounced accenting certain syllables and a large number of pauses. These pauses often cut across syntactic clause boundaries. By suggesting that more is to come, they act as attention getting devices, to mark stressed or new information. We will use the term "contoured style" to refer to the coocurrence of a significant number (not necessarily all) of such features of tone grouping, pausing and accenting in a string of utterances.

James's turn ends with an increase in tempo and decreased contouring (page 1:line 28), and Adam follows in the same style. In his response James at first continues this style, but then reverts to contoured style in lines 6 and 7, ending with rapid tempo non-contoured style in lines 8 and 9. There is a break in the tape here. When the tape picks up again, Adam is again speaking in contoured style, continuing the evaluation of the candidate. Adam ends this passage by lowering his voice, increasing his tempo, and flattening his style with "you know shifting gears...," thus marking the shift to informal anecdote, which in turn ends on line 1, Example 1 with "so you say pass," spoken again in the loud voice and slow rhythm of the contoured style. This is followed by another long evaluative passage.

The frequency with which the alternation between the contoured and non-contoured style occurs, the number of contexts in which it occurs and its relation to content or, discourse function suggest that the prosodic markers of what we call contoured style can be seen as a contextualization cues, suggesting inferences about how the talk is to be understood. What these inferences are becomes apparent when we turn to the earlier more formal sections of the defense, where the talk revolves around thesis content. In the following passage Lee has just been commended by Pat the attention she has given to family members perceptions of daughters' behavior. Adam then responds with an evaluation of the significance of such perceptions (1338-1362):

Example 3

1 A: yeah but perceptions [ ]/..may be closely related with/..

2 P: they may

3 indeed be//

4 A: with with ah/...outcomes but/..they're probably not/..

5 P: but that you'd..that you'd

6 P: want to investigate too/ certainly//

7 A: but they're not randomly associated

8 with/ what..what structures are//

9 P: right//

10 A: I mean this is a/.. [why] with these/really/..y'know you/..

11 you ask how she got from Williams to Sherm (James chuckles)/..

12 A: I can't/..

13 S: through Galbraith//

14 A: yeah// (general laughter) I really.. you know its its/

15 its kind of hard for me/..to realize that I've somehow

16 been associated with something/ that people are interpre-

17 ting as being social psychological//(general laughter)

18 and ah/...when I/..when I [but] course what I see is/and

19 that lies behind my responds to you is that/..that behind/..

20 these perceptions/ or behind these/.. this cognition of

21 structural constraints/.. there are indeed as we all

22 structural constraints/ that are very real in the world/...

23 and that ah/.. how/..it may very well be that/.. that those

24 constraints are themselves mediated.../ by these other kinds

25 of things//---

Note that lines 1-9 where perceptions are discussed are spoken in contoured style. There follow a few lines of less formal talk and humorous remarks, but after line 18 when the discussion reverts to serious discussion of content contouring sets in again. Here and throughout the earlier interview portion of the defense contouring is associated with academic discussion, while the more rapid tempo,less accented style indicates personal comment. Since in the segment analyzed in this paper the communicative goal is evaluation of performance rather than discussion of content as such, it seems reasonable to reinterpret the stylistic contrast as associated with the opposition between formal or "on-record" and informal or "off record" evaluation. The regular shifts between "on record" and "off-record" talk mark the sequential organization of this part of the thesis defense, where each examiner in turn presents a formal evaluation followed by a more or less informal off record discussion. The informal talk may in turn be punctuated by anecdotes or similar asides.

In saying that contouring signals on-record talk, we do not mean to claim that the relevant stylistic features mark every utterance in a particular subsection. Frequently a shift in prosody sets in towards the end of one subsection and continues into the next so that the transition is a gradual one. Moreover within a subsection we often find brief alternations between contoured and non-contoured prosody. The point is that contoured style is predominant and regularly identifies what on other grounds can be seen as key items of information. It is this predominance and strategic placement of one set of prosodic markers in relation to another that along with other aspects of message content marks such passages as "on-record." In other words, the association between style and function is constitutive of what we call the ritual aspects of the event. We use the term ritual to refer to those characteristics of the event that highlight the role of surface form as opposed to content in signalling what a passage is about. Note that in the relatively casual atmosphere of this thesis, defense the relation between style and function although never directly verbalized is perceived by the participants and the agreed upon through conversational negotiation in performance. Contouring thus comes to stand for on record evaluation, that is the style in which something is said and the way it is marked off from the rest by discourse markers of various kinds rather than content alone which signals that evaluating is being done.

Once the association between prosodic style and function is established as having signalling value, it can be used within the group by members to indicate other kinds of information as well. Such uses are essentially metaphoric, because they build on situational conventions established elsewhere in the discussion, in order to communicate more than just that a situational shift has occurred. In this sense, a shift can be used reflexively both to indicate a switch in situation and to comment *on* the situation. For example, switching can serve to distinguish "asides" from either "on-record" or "off-record" talk, so that the aside stands clearly to allude to a given statement as, in effect, *off* record. In line 32, J's non-contoured and presumably off-record "I would certainly be in favor, you know of passing her" is further qualified by "obviously with the kind of suggestions we would have for revisions," an aside whose status as such, we propose, is signalled by the more rapid tempo with which it is delivered, relative to the prototypical tempo that already distinguishes off-record from on-record comments. Later on in the (1514) Adam's "this is going to go on forever" is followed by the contoured "so you say pass." The high degree of contrast between the two members of this set serves to highlight the on-record nature of the second phrase.

The contoured style of Adam’s "and I talked to her about ways you know .. I said can we break it up ... you know white space" (1506-7) achieves an ironic effect because his contouring, suggestive of a formal evaluation, clashes with the informality of the surface content of his utterance. In the humorous portions of example 3 (lines 13 ff)similar prosodic phenomena are at work.

Still another metaphorical effect is achieved later on (1666-1672), where S follows up his "I must say her 1968 story ... shocks me," spoken with rapid tempo and low voice, with the more contoured style of the utterance "Adam" there have to be female AIs pre-nineteen sixty-nine." Contouring here suggests the interpretation that the message is addressed to the group as a whole not just to Adam even though only the latter is mentioned by name. Note that Sherm’s turn is answered by Pat and that this touches off a general discussion. Metaphoric usages such as these, which are taken up by the group as a whole, serve to confirm our hypothesis about the signalling function of choice of prosodic style.

The frequent shifts from contoured to non-contoured utterances in longer evaluative passages can also be explained in similar terms. Non-contoured segments here tend to mark asides and other types of qualifying information that are semantically embedded in the passage as a whole.

Choice of style also carries other interactional information. When a second speaker copies a first speaker’s style, this suggests that they are both in agreement on the way the situation is defined and/or how the utterance is to be taken. When a second speaker shifts in replying to a first speaker, this shift also indicates a suggested shift in perspective. It is significant for our understanding of the social dynamics of the thesis defense that most of the switching is done by Adam in his role as a chairman who sees his task as moving the proceedings from one stage to the next. An exception to Adam’s usual practice is on page 2, line 1, where he responds to James’s informal remark in similar non-contoured style. This functions to reinforce the off-record nature of Adam’s remark.

By using ritualized speech style and indirect signals of conformance or non-conformance with each others moves, participants manage to present the surface impression of agreement, without having to commit themselves specific on record wording and risk conflict. Ritualization of performance style thus becomes an important part of interactional management.

Before continuing with our discussion it necessary to be more specific about what we mean by prosody. Our approach to prosody and its functioning in discourse cohesion is explained in detail in Gumperz (1982a:chapter 5). We will here summarize only the main points of the argument. The basic unit of prosody relevant to discourse cohesion is the tone group, or intonational clause. Linguists concerned with sentence level grammar have found that intonational clauses for the most part coincide with syntactic clauses. Our own analysis of the thesis defense shows that this is not always the case; see for example S's long passage on page 4, to which we will return in more detail shortly.

In our transcription, we distinguish two types of tone groups, a minor tone group marked by /, and a major tone group marked by //. Tone groups are divisible into one or more feet, which are rhythmic units containing one or more syllables and at least one tonal contour. We use the term tonal contour here to refer to characteristics defined both by stress and by pitch. Our system of marking such contours is adapted from that used by British phoneticians. The following distinctions are marked: low fall, high fall, low rise, high rise, falling rising, and rising falling. The latter two complex patterns can also be either high or low. Less pronounced contouring phenomena which are tonally dependent on either a preceding or a following contour are indicated by either low or high stress marks. In addition to these clause internal contours, we further distinguish lowering of pitch register over one or more whole tone groups with , or raising of pitch register over one or more tone groups with. Where relevant we also mark the following features of tempo: "acc" for accelerated tempo, "ral" for decrease in tempo, "stacc" for staccato enunciation, "f" for fortis enunciation, and "l" for lenis enunciation.

Prosody, along with other grammatical or lexical features of the type discussed by Halliday and Hasan (1976), is a major signal of cohesion. But beyond this, the nature of the contours employed, their location within a clause, and their sequencing across clauses provide additional information that enters into the inferential process. We can illustrate this point with the following passage where James gives his initial evaluation of the thesis:

Example 4

Well uh //...I mean she’s quite clear/...uh.. what she said/ that
she left/ that she obviously enjoyed this/ and it came through/...
I mean she could not have written seven thousand pages/ (laugh) if
she didn’t thoroughly enjoy it/... and um...in terms of what a
a dissertation should be/ ...a...a- a learning experience/ in which
y’know the student pulls together everything that they have learned
and/... tries to be creative at the sane time// and tries to point
toward further ongoing work/ obviously this... uh/.... this meets
all those criteria and/I would certainly be in favor of...uh...
y’know passing her// obviously with the kind of suggestions we’ll
have for revision and so forth//

Apart from qualifying information and asides, James’s argument here is carried by a series of statements, such as "she’s quite clear," "she obviously enjoyed this", "and it came through," "a learning experience" culminating in "I would certainly be in favor of passing her." In all these phrases the new information is marked by similar falling contours so that we get the impression that we are being presented with a list of criteria all having the same weight and carrying equal value in cumulatively contributing to the final evaluation of the candidate’s performance. By contrast, the last sentence of the passage, which mentions possible revisions, is set off from the preceding evaluative passage by fast tempo, which suggests that it is not to be treated as part of the on-record evaluation.

The next passage (1534-1546) shows the importance of shared indirect inferences in maintaining inter-speaker cooperation.

Example 5

1 S: The problem with that in the dissertation job is that she didn't

2 turn to someone on this .. committee who'd've said ..

3 P: yes ...

4 J: yeah

5 S: should you have examined?

6 P: Right .. (2 syls) .. yeah /

7 J: Right / ... But I think I think while she felt this

8 compulsion (about) tha ... uh ... //

9 S: herself //

10 J: Yeah hersel .. herself .. / she wasn't really worried about us

11 looking over her shoulder/

12 S: Uh huh //

13 J: And so she probably has to develop that sense / but I think

14 that'll just come with uh y'know more/.. research //

In item one, Pat and James's "Yes" overlaps with Sherm's "committee." When Sherm goes on, they once more anticipate him with "right," after which James takes over, with a contribution which develops Sherm's theme. On James's pause at line 22, Sherm breaks in with "herself." James then goes on with "yeah herself .. herself .." and continues as if he had actually produced the semantically complete utterance: "She felt this compulsion to do the work herself." Note that although participants here regularly interrupt each other, the fact that they are able to anticipate what the other is saying is a measure of the extent to which they are in tune with one another. This example shows some similarity to what has been called conversational duetting, a form of conversational cooperation in which two speakers' utterances combine in such a way as to jointly produce what on semantic grounds count count as complete utterances (Falk 1979). Duetting would not be possible without shared knowledge of contextualization conventions which channel the indirect inferences that must be made to anticipate others' line of argument.

Through repeated use of such stylistic devices, each examiner establishes his/her own theme. James's emphasis is on the dissertation as a personal learning experience; Sherm stresses the amount of the work done, the systematicity of the method, and suggestions for publication. Adam, the advisor seeks to give the candidate's point of view and talks about his efforts to steer the her away from pitfalls. There are few contributions from the outside examiner, in this section of the defense. She tends to comment on what others have said or make requests for clarification.

Having established the importance of stylistic parameters of the dissertation committee's interaction, particularly the ways in which the discussion is generalized through a juxtaposition of linguistic-prosodic form and content, let us now return to our earlier concern with the the role of ritual aspects of performance in the thesis defense. We will concentrate on two passages. First James's response to Adam's request for more details on his evaluation (1526-1534):

Example 6

1 Well/ I think..my sense is that..uh..she has done../*a good job*/

2 ... and she certainly has..uh.../ I mean..this project for her is

3 being everything and more I think.. that a dissertation.../should

4 be/ ...and at the state of her professional development I think..

5 a..a *good job*/and she ought to be commended//

The key evaluative expression in this passage is the underlined "a good job" which occurs in the first line and is repeated in the last. On each of these occurrences it is pronounced with a unique prosodic contour, not found anywhere else in the preceding passages. This consists of a fall rise tone on good followed by a fall on job. Such prosodic treatment suggests that more is intended than mere emphasis, but exactly what it is that is to be conveyed is not put into words.

The next passage by Sherm, the senior committee member marks the highlight of the evaluation portion of the defense. Note that his initial statement: "It’s a fine job," copies the intonation of James’ "good job." We can infer from this that he has no quarrel with James’s evaluation or is at least willing to let it stand with all its ambiguities.

Example 7

1	S:	oh...it’s a fine job//...by my/.. lights uh.../ I would have
2		wished it was shorter//(laughing) I have some sympathy for the
3		twenty five/...page psych../ dissertations//
4	P:	(laughing)... Right// (clears throat)
5	S:	Uh...the uh...uh... // this/... the one comment I’d
6		have/...ha-has to do with her writing/... uh these up//
7		...uh uh her/... the dissertation was written/... was
8		written with the frame // these are the extent theories// lets..
9		use these/...to derive hypotheses/ and get some data/ and cast
10		them against/..against the theories// (sigh) uh that’s/..that’s/
11		fine// uh..uh.. but its also...uh/.. a limit//...uh.. because

it leads her/... for example not to/...ask.. such questions as
the kind of things I was pushing her on a little bit uh/.. what
alternative meanings/ might be given to/..the uh..the/.. the
class/..variable// ...other than the socialization //
it is true that/ in this literature/..
the class variable is interpreted as a socialization variable//
...but that's not/...necessarily the/..case if you start/...
from the more general question/ ..of how can we explain ra-
dicalism/...rather than the more particular question/.. of..
...given the theories currently used to explain/.. radicalism//
...uh uh...uh she could I think/... write/..
some of this stuff up/..within the more limited frame// It'd be
better it seems to me / if she would/...expand her vision a
little bit/...uh...so that she's she's not necessarily limited//
...although ah..ah..well / ...let me take it back //...in the
longer run I would want her to do that//
...in the shorter run I'm not so sure//
...It may be wise to / ...restrict her vision / ...in order to

...uh...to / ..to get some things done /...and now I think it’s
important for her / ...to uh...to quickly move/ to get at least
one piece out and in the literature/ just to give her the
confidence that she can do it //

In analyzing this passage, we can see the interplay of visual or kinesic aspects of the situated performance with the lexical and prosodic channels. It is this speech which along with James’ contribution discussed above makes the defense cohere as an oral examination. Analysis of this material from the perspective of a written prose transcript alone does not reveal the ritual character of this speech. Sherm’s performance goes beyond lexical content by providing a rendering which, as we can see on the film, has kinesic and gestural features that provide the members of the group with a fully developed summing up and careful discussion of the thesis as an academic performance. Both the prosodically established rhythm and the contouring are coordinated on the film with head nodding and symbolically appropriate hand gestures. For example, when he discusses what else the candidate could have done, Sherm makes a gesture of bringing his finger tips together in a flat tent-like arch; and then, as his slow rhythmic speech continues, he resolves the problem he has set up in his talk. As he does so, he flattens the arch.

We are only referring to the kinesic gestures in an anecdotal fashion, as observations upon the ritual character of the performance. Other papers in this volume deal in more detail with the visual aspect of this material. The main focus of our analysis has been on the prosodic and linguistic character of the conversation. All we want to point out here is that when we recall that Sherm is the senior committee member, we can realize the way in which this speech serves to organize the event as a properly conducted examination.

Yet examination of the linguistic form of the passage and of the line of reasoning it reveals yields quite a different picture. Note the relatively high number of hesitation pauses, self corrections and asides as well as the many incomplete clauses. Tone grouping and pausing regularly violate syntactic clause boundaries. Since connection are frequently not lexicalized, many individual clauses make no sense by themselves. The written text conveys the impression that the speaker is thinking out aloud. Moreover he uses little direct evaluative vocabulary. The words used focus on what the candidate did and do not by themselves suggest that evaluating is being done. One might of course paraphrase the first few lines of what is said as stating that the candidate took existing theories for granted and that as a result the work is limited because her theoretical position kept her from exploring alternative solutions. But it is left to the audience to infer such information. The passage coheres mainly it seems, through its prosody and phrasing, just as it is transformed into a ceremonial statement through its kinesics and body rhythm. Some of the incomplete utterances could be contracted to make two or three major points, in a manner more consistent with the performance style commonly associated with oral examinations. To construct such contracted summaries of the argument, however, would be to lose sight of the ceremonial character of the performance, and thus to destroy its overall effect.

The importance of the implicit agreements on what is on-record and what is off-record information is brought out at the bottom in the passage that follows Adam's "so you say pass," where James's "oh yeah" is delivered with low pitch register and lenis enunciation, with the accent on "oh" as if to suggest that's understood. Adam then hesitates a little. But in his next turn maintains his contoured style. His accent on "neutral" could be interpreted as a request for more detailed information for the evaluation. When J follows with an almost inaudible comment, "I'm not sure," S cuts off A's attempted reply with an extra fast "we don't need...what are you looking for." The situation is resolved with Adam's clarification, which suggests that he is interested in the committee's judgment rather than the specifics of James's own evaluation. Thus, what looks like an uncomfortable moment which might lead to an overtly expressed difference of opinion or point of view, at least from the standpoint of turn taking, is avoided because the paralinguistic accompaniment of the speech's performance enables the organizational particular to surface. Thus the committee's work can get done. Incidentally, such a possible uncomfortable moment is visible in the film. (See Erickson and Shultz 1982 for a more precise definition and analysis of such moments.)

In other words, by continuing to talk in on-record "committee talk" style, Adam reminds participants that it is the committee's judgment which is needed now. This reminder is however in no way lexicalized and thus not made part of the committee record of the proceedings. To have had to do so would have been to engage in a controlling act with connotations and interpretive consequences that might have been altogether different from that of the event as it actually took place.

Conclusion

The purpose of this analysis has been to explore the conversational character of the group discussion. In this specific instance, we have focused on the analysis of the non-lexical elements of prosody and rhythm, and how they interact with the grammatical features of language to generate discourse strategies. These strategies, in turn, create the organizational character of the event. The overall goal or communicative outcome of the proceedings is to reach an agreement on the quality of the dissertation under consideration by the group, without jeopardizing existing interpersonal relationships. The examination of the candidate, as a Ph.D. oral, can be seen as an everyday activity because there is no specifically available setting, semiotic language, or lexical script with which to set the on-going event apart from any other everyday conversation. The ritual transformation must be made by means of the conversational resources of ordinary talk. That is, the participants themselves, through their conduct of the discussion, must make the event into a ritual one. They do this by means of the discourse strategies we have studied, that is by relying on prosodic conventions to set the on-record talk apart from off-record talk, establishing negotiated agreement about the terminology that can be used to discuss the quality of the thesis, and relying on indirectly agreed upon contextualization conventions to keep participants to their established roles roles within the event, e.g., as senior examiner, candidate's advisor, etc. The performance as a whole through its visual-kinesical aspects as well as through its speaking practices, can be seen to provide for the organizational particulars which make this event a ritual one.

There is particular importance in the everyday terminology used in the examination discussion, where evaluation relies on conversational expressions such as "good job," "learning experience," "enjoyable," and the like. The use of such general everyday terms sets such evaluative discussions apart from those other situations such as medical diagnosis or psychiatric interviews where more special evaluative terminologies are employed. Because of the discourse strategies employed in this case, interpretations of key terms must be negotiated in the course of the interaction. But such negotiations always leave room for ambiguity. Additional interpretive possibilities remain, that are in turn subject to further negotiation. The ritual character rests in the performance of the event itself, and not in its content or terminology. This is in contradistinction to "high" ritual, where negotiation is more likely to be possible in the content rather than in the performance, which is prescribed. It is in this way that we refer to this kind of discussion as a political activity, for an essential part of the political process is reaching agreement about key terms (Williams 1979), which can receive a negotiated meaning, but not to the exclusion of further negotiated possibilities. If the possibilities remain ultimately open, the terms can provide the latitude and warrant for expressing personal as well as shared opinion, without risking the danger of open disagreement or conflict. The importance of this type of ritualization lies precisely in its potential for creating conditions favorable to conflict avoidance.

In the conduct of this group discussion by use of discourse strategies for negotiating agreement, the committee discusses how good, bad, adequate, original, etc., the thesis is, without actually making any direct statement of an evaluative scaling which might risk disagreement, that is, without explicitly lexicalizing the detailed content of their evaluative judgments. However, it would be quite possible for any committee member to extrapolate from the discussion an account of the proceedings which could answer questions about the quality of the thesis and the performance of the candidate in precise terms, suitable for producing a written record of the proceedings. Yet such a record would not address the explicitly lexicalized features of the discourse, but would find the necessary information in each member's understanding of the proceedings, that is in personal interpretations of the key terms and of aspects of the conduct of the examination. In fact, we can speak metaphorically of evaluating, which is the work of the committee, as being done in the *semantic space between the words* and their performance. It is in the essential character of this indirectness that the political nature of the discussion is apparent.

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