

The spoken language

getting a lot of uh swel-swellling and soreness in my breasts and they told me to get one about every six months, but, I sort of took myself off the estrogen and found that I didn't have any of that feeling . . .

(Quoted from Cicourel, 1981)

Cicourel comments that the doctor's notes of what the patient is suffering from record different details from those which the patient appears to have said. It is clear that speaking in this kind of interactional mode is not helpful to the cause of the transference of information. We said above that we assume that native speakers will generally be able to express transactional intentions 'at least when they only need to express what they want to say rather briefly'. How are we to account for this native speaker's apparent inability to explain clearly what she is worried about to the doctor? We approach this problem in the next section.

1.3 Structured long turns

In this section we are going to make a distinction between 'short turns' and 'long turns'. A short turn consists of only one or two utterances, a long turn consists of a string of utterances which may last as long as an hour's lecture. There is clearly no principled point of cut-off between them. We may note, however, that short turns do not demand much of the speaker in the way of producing structure. Consider the following conversation:

- (1.7)
- C: whisky sour mix + did you +
J: whisky sour + daiquiri +
C: do you like –
K: it was all right
C: my mother's favourite is daiquiri + but I love whisky sour + it's a super –
K: and marguerita I love as well – it's beautiful
C: what's that
K: it's some + it's er tequila and lime + with something else +
C: I don't know it
J: salt + no
K: yes and it's got the rough really rough salt round the edge of the glass and you drink it through the salt + and it's whipped up somehow
C: I've never tasted it
K: it's a Mexican drink + absolutely beautiful + really liked it

This primarily interactional conversation between three female, graduate, native speakers consists of swapping short turns. Even the longest of these short turns only consists of statements of additional information: *it's got the rough . . . salt, and you drink it through the salt, and it's whipped up somehow*. If you compare what is needed to contribute a short turn like this to a conversation as opposed to what is needed to summarise the content of a film (as in extract (1.5)) or to summarise your relevant medical history for your doctor (as in extract (1.6)), it immediately becomes obvious that what is required of a speaker in a long turn is considerably more demanding than what is required of a speaker in a short turn. As soon as a speaker 'takes the floor' for a long turn, tells an anecdote, tells a joke, explains how something works, justifies a position, describes an individual, and so on, he takes responsibility for creating a structured sequence of utterances which must help the listener to create a *coherent* mental representation of what he is trying to say. What the speaker says must be coherently structured. He must make it clear who or what he is talking about, and specify any relevant properties, before he moves on to saying what happened. If he is recounting a narrative, he will, conventionally, establish where and when the events happened, and who the main participant was, before he recounts the series of events. He will recount the series of events in the order in which they happened or, if for some reason he chooses not to do this, he must explicitly mark the deviation from this normal unmarked ordering. Consider the following extract:

- (1.8) there were + some very very good houses rather old-fashioned but quite good houses + with very big rooms and that + and these were sort of better class people + people with maybe + minor civil servants and things like that you know that had been able to afford + dearer rents and that in those days you know ++ but the average working-class man + the wages were very small + the rents would run from anything from about five shillings to + seven shillings which was about all they could've possibly afforded in those days . . .

This is a long turn taken by an elderly man reminiscing about how things were when he was young. He has mentioned a particular area of the town. He goes on to say that there were, in that part of the town, *very very good houses*; he then adds some properties to those houses: *rather old-fashioned, quite good houses, with very big rooms*. He then speaks of the people who lived in those houses, *minor civil servants*, and the essential requisite shared by such people *that had been able to afford + dearer rents*. He then contrasts the

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condition of people who could afford to live in such houses with the condition of *the average working-class man* who only earned *very small wages*, only enough to pay a very small rent *from about five shillings to + seven shillings*. The structure of progression in this extract is reasonably easy to perceive. It is by no means always made explicit by the speaker, and the listener has to do a certain amount of work to see how the succeeding statements fit together to form a coherent representation of what the population in that part of the town was like and why. Consider now a further long turn by another elderly speaker reminiscing about his past:

- (1.9) I was + I was only eh + I was seven when the First World War broke out + I can remember the First World War though + I can remember + soldiers marching up the Canongate you know + of course being a kid and + following the band and + you know thinking it was wonderful and I can remember soldiers coming home + with mud still on them and all that sort of thing + these are things that do stick in your memory

This speaker begins by relating himself at the tender age of seven to the breaking out of *the First World War* and follows this by stating that, despite this early age, he can *remember the First World War*. He then gives examples of some memories, *soldiers marching up the Canongate*; and remarks that *being a kid* (of seven or so), *following the band* (presumably the band leading the marching soldiers), he thought it *was wonderful*. He then adds a further, different memory, presumably of later in the War, *soldiers coming home*; and then generalises, *these are things that do stick in your memory*. Just as the previous speaker moved from a part of town to houses in that part of town, to people living in those houses, gradually narrowing down, so this speaker begins with a global statement about remembering *the First World War* and then narrows down to *the soldiers marching* and *the band*. In each case it is not difficult to perceive a structure in what the speaker says.

The third example of a long turn is provided by a young woman who is commenting on recent changes in a part of Edinburgh:

- (1.10) actually I was coming down the Grassmarket + today and + it's quite nice just now the Grassmarket since + it's always had the antique shops but they're looking – they're em become a bit nicer and they've got the fair down there too which is + the Grassmarket Fair on the left hand side + it's an open-air market + er not an open-air market it's an indoor market on the left-hand side you know

She first identifies what she's talking about, *the Grassmarket*; and

gives her credentials for having an opinion about it, *I was coming down . . . today*; and provides some properties for it, *it's quite nice just now* (general), *it's always had the antique shops* (particular); and adds some properties to them, *but they're looking . . . become a bit nicer*. She then adds a further piece of information about the Grassmarket, *they've got the fair down there too*; and further specifies 'the fair', *the Grassmarket Fair on the left-hand side*; adds a further piece of information about 'the fair', *it's an open-air market*; realises she has said the wrong thing, and corrects herself. Again, even in this rather loose interactional description, it is possible to discern a structure, a structure of the kind which necessarily underlies long turns which clearly do not consist simply of lists of unstructured statements.

The ability to construct such long turns appears to vary with individuals, in part, no doubt, depending on the opportunity they have had to produce long turns which other people bother to listen to. The ability to produce long transactional turns, in which clear information is transferred, is, we claim, not an ability which is automatically acquired by all native speakers of a language. It is an ability which appears to need adequate models, adequate practice and feedback. Several recent surveys in Britain have thrown up comments by employers, potential employers, Income Tax offices, Social Security offices and other public services, that many school-leavers, particularly among those who leave school at sixteen, are 'inarticulate'. We assume that this means that they do not succeed in transferring information effectively in long turns. The patient describing her medical history (extract (1.6)), and many of the extracts we cite in chapter 4, exemplify partial failure to communicate information in transactional long turns.

How does this finding affect foreign language teaching? If such a large number of native English speakers find difficulty with communicating information effectively in long turns, it seems reasonable to suppose that native speakers of other languages may suffer from the same disadvantage. If one of the demands in the English syllabus turns out to be transferring information effectively in English, it may be that the most satisfactory response to the problem would be first to train the student to talk effectively in this mode in the native language before being required to perform this cognitively complex task in the foreign language.

The general point which needs to be made, however, is that it is important that the teacher should realise that simply training the student to produce short turns will not automatically yield a student who can perform satisfactorily in long turns. It is currently fashionable in language teaching to pay particular attention to the

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forms and function of short turns – regarded in a ‘communicative’ or ‘functional’ light, in terms of categories of ‘speech acts’. This seems an excellent development in the early stages of language learning, in that it is a development which appears to mirror the normal acquisition of language skills in all cultures. It must be clear, however, that exclusive concentration on short turns throughout the curriculum will yield speakers who are only able to take part in the sort of conversation we illustrated in extract (1.7). Indeed if the behests of some courses which deal exclusively with ‘speech acts’ uttered in complete sentences are taken seriously, the foreign speaker will not actually be able to participate in a conversation of that sort, but only perform in highly dramatic conversations caricatured in the following extract:

- (1.11)
- A: (greet B) Good morning.
 - B: (greet A) Good morning.
 - A: (request) Might I possibly borrow your garden fork?
 - B: (agree) Yes. (warn) It’s rather heavy.
 - A: (accept) Oh. (thank) Thank you very much.
(apologise) I’m sorry I stuck it in your foot.
 - B: (accept apology) That’s all right. (generalise) I’m used to it. (warn) Careful you don’t do it. (exclaim) You have! (offer) Can I lend you some iodine?
 - A: (accept) Yes, please. (thank) Thank you.

The concern with teaching short turns arises fairly naturally from the traditional view in language teaching, which was that the only structure the student was required to master was the sentence. Recently the focus of attention has shifted from the form of the sentence to the functions it can be used to perform. This should yield a student who is able to produce correct sentences in a short turn, responding correctly to an identified social stimulus. It must surely be clear that students who are only capable of producing short turns are going to experience a lot of frustration when they try to speak the foreign language. They may have achieved basic interactional skills and they may have the language forms available to permit them to request information, services etc., but they are very far indeed from the expressed aim of many courses which is to permit the students to ‘express themselves’ in the foreign language. In chapters 2 and 4 we return to this problem.

1.4 Spoken language models and feasibility

One of the pleasures of teaching the written language is that it is so easy to provide good models of almost any kind of writing. Models