
UNIT 10 CONVERSATION CONVENTIONS

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10.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to

- take and give turns during a conversation,
- politely intervene when others are speaking, when necessary,
- continue a conversation when there is an uncomfortable silence, and
- use appropriate tones for statements and questions.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous units we looked at some of the ways in which we achieve our communicative ends. Most of the examples we examined were interaction between two people. In this unit, we will look at how conversation progresses in a group of four or five members.

You would find it useful to know the maxims of conversation stated by H.P. Grice. He has identified four major principles of conversation:

Quantity

Quality

Relevance and

Manner

Quantity: Usually there are mutually shared expectations about how conversation should proceed. Each person talks and is expected to talk as much as is appropriate, neither too much nor too little. Then the turn passes to the next speaker who is expected to respond to what has been said.

Quality: When someone speaks, we generally assume that what he is saying is what he believes to be true. Sincerity and responsibility for what one says are implied in this.

In other words conversation will be affected if the listeners do not assume the truth value of what is being said.

Relevance: Good listening to the subject of the conversation is important in order to respond appropriately to what is said. Abrupt changes of topic lead to the disruption of conversation.

Manner: In addition to the above, how we speak also assumes importance. Whether we agree or disagree with what others say, we need to be polite and courteous while speaking. Language has several devices by which we can tone down negative comments, emphasise what we wish to say, encourage others to respond.

10.2 CONVERSATION CONVENTIONS

Conversation is based on the cooperative principle. We should know when to speak and when to stop. We need to understand others' points of view and express our own. We might want to interrupt another person, take a lead in the conversation, continue a conversation or bring it to an end. In the following sections we will look at a few examples which illustrate all these functions.

10.2.1 Taking and Giving Turns

Turns alternate methodically in conversation. A speaker says something, stops and waits for the other's response. The second person takes the chance and responds. A third speaker might want to add, qualify or contradict what has been said. This is how the maxim of quantity is maintained. Although there seems to be a regularity in this, it is not premeditated but emerges naturally.

Let us look at a few examples:

- Turns can be given by asking a question directly addressing a person and turns can be taken by responding directly to it.

Cliff: Let's go to the pictures. **(To Alison) What do you say lovely?**

Alison: **I don't think I'll be able to.** Perhaps Jimmy would like to go. **(To Jimmy) Would you like to?**

Jimmy: And have my enjoyment ruined by the Sunday night jobs in the front row? **No thank you. ...**

In the example above each speaker gives a turn to the other who immediately takes it.

Here is another conversation by team members on a space experiment:

Mercer looked at his meter and looked disturbed.

"What's the trouble?" asked Calvert.

"It's broken _ reading too high. Odd; I've never known that to happen before. I'll check it on my breathing circuit." ... **"Skipper! Will you take an O₂ reading?"**

There was a much longer pause than the request justified.

Then Norton radioed back: "I think there's **something wrong** with my meter."

A slow smile spread across Mercer's face.

"It's up fifty percent, isn't it?"

“Yes, what does that mean?”

“It means that we can all take off our masks. Isn’t that convenient?”

“I’m not sure.... It seems too good to be true.”

- Turns can be taken without any explicit request to respond. Each person spontaneously reacts to what has been said before.

“Yes, of course, if it’s fine tomorrow,” said Mrs Ramsay. “But you’ll have to be up with lark”

“But,” said his father ... ‘It won’t be fine”

“But it may be fine-I expect it will be fine.” Said Mrs. Ramsay

“It’s due west” said the atheist Tansley.

“Nonsense” said Mrs. Ramsay with great severity.

“There’ll be no landing at the Lighthouse tomorrow,” said Charles Tansley.

“And even if it isn’t fine tomorrow,” said Mrs. Ramsay it will be another day.

“And now ... and now stand up and let me measure your leg.”

Notice the length of the utterances. Notice how words in one utterance are repeated in the subsequent utterances.

√ Check Your Progress 1

Given below is a set of utterances made by two people at a musical evening. Arrange them into a meaningful conversation:

What an awful voice! I wonder who she is? She is my wife. Oh I’m awfully sorry. Of course, it isn’t really her voice that’s so bad, but that terrible song she has to sing. Wonder who wrote that awful song? I did.

In the section above we saw the ways in which turns pass around among members in a group. There may be occasions when one is impelled to react or add to something even before one’s due turn. How does one do this?

Read this conversation between Jane Eyre and Rochester and notice how Rochester interrupts Jane and leads the conversation on :

“Thank you, sir; I am sorry to give _”

“Oh, no need to apologize ... You’ll like Ireland, I think: they’re such warm-hearted people there, they say.”

“It’s a long way off, sir.”

“No matter _ a girl of your sense will not object to the voyage or the distance.”

“Not the voyage but the distance: and the sea is a barrier _ “

“From what, Jane?”

“From England and Thornfield: and _”

“Well?”

“From you, sir”

Here is a conversation among a group of friends. Notice how the conversation moves on from one member to another:

- A: "I got so terribly late for the meeting this morning. It is awful, the traffic _"
- B: "That's city life for you _"
- C: "Things need not be so bad if there's better management _"
- A: "Better management! That's what they are doing. Building flyovers all around _"
- B: "I'm sure things will ease after the construction is over_"
- A: "Sorry? Does it ever get over? The roads are constantly dug up, for one reason or the other_"
- C: But aren't they dug up to improve facilities?
- B: Do you think that really happens?
- C: Of course, there are so many things we take for granted.
- A: Come on, now, don't talk as if you were the spokesperson for the Government. This is not what it used to be even five years ago.
- C: Five years ago, did you and I have motor-bikes? So many thousands like us are crowding the roads now...
- A: That's enough.
- C: Let me finish, we actually need to move business to the outskirts. There's a lot of unused land out there.
- B: Hear, hear! First we struggle to come to the city and now when we've found work for ourselves, he's asking us to go back to the countryside.
- C: We must get saner and understand what comfort is. If we can earn the same money out there with our present capabilities, why not?
- A: Why not indeed?

Some of the expressions we could use to interrupt are:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| I'm sorry to interrupt, | Sorry, but it is important to remember that |
| Could I say something at this point, | Excuse me for interrupting |
| If you could give me a moment | Just a little correction |
| I haven't finished yet | |

√ **Check Your Progress 2**

Insert suitable phrases from the box below to make the utterances in the following conversation continuous:

- A: Wasn't that a wonderful experience?
- B:, the "Nursery Mela"? Something new, yes, but...
- A:? You are for ever critical of everything.

B:, but don't you think the public was taken for a ride? The prices were exorbitant, almost double what we might get

A:? Sorry, you won't get this variety and this quality.

B:, the vendors there had a nice laugh at our expense. It was a gimmick to thrust what grew freely for a price. The Government must have earned its share too.

A: why did you buy so many plants?

B: ; it's sort of infectious. I'm not sure even two or three of them will survive, much less bloom.

sorry, did you notice, got tempted like everyone else,

you mean, at the roadside stalls, here comes your 'but', in that case,

10.2.3 Concluding Conversations

Conversations do not end abruptly. They need to be brought gradually to a natural close.

- Unwillingness to respond could be an indication for closure of conversation.

Here is an example to illustrate this.

"And where do you live? Where are your friends?"

I was silent.

"Can we send for anyone you know?"

I shook my head.

"What account can you give of yourself?"

"I can give you no details tonight."

"But what then do you expect me to do for you?"

"Nothing"

"Do you mean, that we have now given you what you require, we may dismiss you to the rainy night?"

"I will trust you. I really have no fear. Do with me what you like. But excuse me from talking much _my breath is short. I feel a spasm when I talk"

"Hannah, let her sit there at present, and ask her no questions; in ten minutes more give her the remainder of the bread and milk; Mary and Diana let us go into the matter and talk the matter over."

(Adapted from Jane Eyre)

- Close of conversation can be indicated in other ways: "satisfaction with the talk and hope of future meetings", "curt dismissal of undesirable contacts", "evasive conclusions" etc.

Read the following sets of conversation and infer the attitude of the speaker closing the conversation:

A: There are quite a few other details to be discussed, if we have the time.

B: Yes, all this seems very interesting, but perhaps we could meet again?

A: I saw this nice play this week at Prithvi last Saturday. You must see it. I'll tell you what it is about.

B: Some other time. I'm rather busy right now.

A: There are quite a few ideas on the proposed improvements in our colony that I thought I could discuss with you.

B: Sure, but I am going away to my home town for a few months. Perhaps, we could discuss them after I return?

10.3 PRONUNCIATION PRACTICE

We do not always talk at the same pitch. Our voice goes higher or lower according to the content of our communication.

Speak the following taking a new, higher note for each word:

higher

and

higher

climb

voice

my

make

can

I

Speak the following taking a new, lower note for each word:

I

can

make

my

voice

go

lower

and

lower

Activity

Sing the following rhyme raising the pitch with each word in the first line and lowering the pitch in the second line:

Taller, taller, taller, taller, I can reach the sky!

Low, low, low, low, I am coming down to you.

Read the following passage aloud.

Notice the difference between the general pitch level of the first part with the second part. Determine whether you think a high or a low level is more appropriate.

The football stadium was packed with thousands of eager fans, boisterously brandishing programmes, rattles and bells _ all in support of their hero, who at this moment was careening down the wing, the ball apparently stuck to his toes; past one opponent, then another and another, untill, with a mighty efforts, he kicked the ball late into the enemy's net...Goal later.... back in the dressing room, with the deep satisfaction of conquerors, the men lay submerged in the warm relaxing water. The steam rose like mist around them as their aching and tense muscles thawed. Away from the noise of the crowd, with only the few murmurs of congratulations, many succumbed to sleep.

Another important feature of speech is intonation. We will now look at the tone used for questions and statements

Single words

A single word can be a statement, a question or an exclamation. The tone with which we utter a word determines its meaning. In other words we use different tones to express several meanings.

Intonation is essentially a variation in the pitch. We can have a level pitch, a high pitch or a low pitch. Generally, there is a movement from high to low, which we call falling tone or from low to high which we call rising tone. There can also be combinations of fall-rise and rise-fall.

Let us take the word 'yes'.

1. "Are you ready?"

"Yes"

This is a straightforward answer and concludes the interchange. The question is answered. The tone used here is a 'fall'.

2. A knock at the door.

"Yes"

This means: "Come in. Who is it?"

Here the tone used is a 'rise'.

3. "Have you visited Aurangabad?"

"Yes".

The speaker might wish to know why the questioner asked the question. So it invites further comment. In this case there is a rise.

If doesn't expect the conversation to continue then she might state a fact and close the exchange. In this case there is a fall.

There can be other combinations of fall and rise for conveying several other meanings.

Read the following sentence aloud:

While the **cold** weather has brought **transport** chaos and devastation to **California's** billion-dollar **citrus** fruit industry, **some** residents in **Malibu** were **delighted** by the **snowfall**.

As we read the above sentence out aloud we realise that the highlighted words or word parts receive stress and the other words don't. When we look at it as a whole, the entire sentence has a wave-like, rise and fall progression. This is what we call intonation.

Intonation has many functions in communication. Intonation reveals the speaker's mental and emotional attitude. In other words meaning is what is revealed through intonation.

It is possible for two speakers to say the same set of words but by using different intonations to vary the meaning. For example, the sentence

The **meeting** concluded with tea.

could be the final sentence in the report of an association. But when a person who comes to the meeting expecting a lavish repast says the same sentence there is a difference in the intonation as in

The meeting concluded with **tea**.

Similarly, take for example, the following sentence: I love mangoes. Depending on the meaning that the speaker wishes to convey, s/he may emphasize any of the three words.

I love mangoes. (*I love mangoes, not my friend,.*)

I **love** mangoes.. (*I love mangoes, not simply like them.*)

I love **mangoes**. (*It is mangoes that I love, not apples.*)

Questions:

When we ask questions which get yes or no for an answer, there is usually a rise in tone.

Practise asking these questions.

Do you believe it is **true**?

Have you wondered why English spelling is **so difficult**?

Is that all you had **to say**?

But aren't you shortening her life by giving her **so much**.

The following are also yes/no questions to be uttered with a rising tone. Notice that the helping verbs are understood and not stated.

Fancy **a walk**? (*Do you fancy a walk?*)

Rate gyros **operating**? (*Are the rate gyros operating*

Questions that begin with the question words, why, what, where, when, who, how, have a fall in tone.

What's the use of it?

How much would I have to pay?

When did all this happen?
Who's responsible for all this?
Why didn't you tell me before?

Statements

Statements usually are said with a fall in the tone.

Practise saying these statements:

I think in time I shall get on with my scholars very well.
I will take care of the bookings.
That saves us a lot of trouble.
You must manage them yourself
It is too good to be true.

10.5 LET US SUM UP

Positive and negative responses to others' opinions or statements can be expressed through various expressions. A simple 'yes' or 'no' can be expanded into short sentences or phrases. When we disagree, we need to make an extra effort to see that we are not rude and impolite. However, the degree of politeness will vary according to the relationship shared by the speakers.

We also learnt about pitch and intonation in sentences.

10.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- A: What an awful voice! I wonder who she is?

B: She is my wife

A: Oh I'm awfully sorry. Of course, it isn't really her voice that's so bad, but that terrible song she has to sing. Wonder who wrote that awful song?

B: I did
- you mean
here comes your 'but'
sorry
at the roadside stalls
did you notice
in that case
got tempted like everyone else