Sharing a Text:
A Co-operative Aspect
of Verbal Interaction

Richard J. Watts

In text linguistics and discourse analysis we have progressed beyond the point at which the only candidate for the status of text was a linguistic object resulting from the activity of writing. Since Lord and Parry's research[1] no-one doubts the validity of a notion of oral literature; hence "oral text" is not a contradiction in terms. Likewise drama and recorded interviews are immediately acceptable as dialogic texts. Free verbal interaction in the form of conversation, small talk and chat, on the other hand, has experienced some difficulty in gaining admittance to the illustrious company of text types. It is often grudgingly dealt with as if it were a subgenre of the discussion or interview, although I have yet to see a satisfactory definition of either of these terms.

I am not implying here that conversation has not enjoyed enough attention by researchers. On the contrary, at present we are experiencing a veritable boom in conversation analysis.[2] But the principal impetus towards the detailed, intensive and serious study of free verbal interaction ("free" in the sense of not being directed by any fixed communication goal or theme on the part of the participants) has come from sociologists and linguists with a bent for the social and ethnological status of such interaction, not from theoretical linguists and not, so far as I can judge, from text linguists.

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[1] Cf. Lord (1960), Parry (1971), Finnegan (1977).

[2] "Conversation" tends to be used in the literature as a catch-all term for a very wide and varied spectrum of oral discourse. I shall henceforth avoid the resultant ambiguity in the term – "conversation" as all oral discourse and "conversation" as a specific type of oral discourse – by referring in general to "verbal interaction".

Yet precisely this form of verbal interaction displays a complexity and a dexterity of performance to fascinate even the most die-hard theroretical linguist. I shall illustrate its potential interest as a text type by examining one small area of socio-communicative verbal interaction which I shall call "text sharing". Text sharing occurs within the total fabric of the interaction whenever two or more participants contribute towards the ongoing development of its structure without them running the risk of threatening either their own or another participant's face. I shall return to the concept of "face" later.

However, before we consider such points in more detail, let us consider one definition of a dialogic text offered by Ann Banfield (1982). Banfield's main purpose is to argue, by offering empirical evidence of a linguistic nature, that the written narrative text is not communicative and that the attempt to establish a narrative voice or narrator whose communicative partner is a narratee, fictive reader or implied reader (or any other term we care to suggest) is misled. The argument is fascinating, provocative and at times highly convincing, but that is not my point here. It stands to reason that in order to prove that the written text is not communicative, she needs to define what she understands by communicative discourse and, within that framework, a dialogic text. It also follows that for her – as both a theoretical linguist and a literary theoretician – this type of text is of very little intrinsic interest.

Banfield posits that the most basic syntactic category in a generative linguistic model is not the sentence, but what she calls the "expression". The expression node (or E-node) in her grammar can be expanded in a number of ways which may or may not include a sentence. An expression may be an expressive structure on its own (i. e. with no sentence embedded within it), an expressive structure and a sentence, or simply a sentence. The crucial point in her argument, however, is that an expression may never be embedded within a sentence. Thus we may have any of the following utterances (1)–(4), but not (5):

(1) Good God!
(2) Another crack like that and out!
(3) What's the time?
(4) Hell, why should I do it?
(5) *He asked hell why he should do it.

The time orientation of the expression is always the time of the utterance, the *now*, and the locative orientation the place of utterance, the *here*. The only utterer implied at the level of the expression is the *I*, the *speaker* him/herself, and the only addressee is the *you*, the *hearer* or *hearers*. Thus, in discourse, a text can be defined as "a sequence of Es

such that the first person is coreferential from E to E or is coreferential with an *addressee/hearer* or *hearer* of the preceding E" (Banfield 1982: 135). She adds that the second person may be singular or plural. In addition, "throughout a *text,* every instance of *present* is cotemporal with the speech act and every instance of *past* anterior to *present*" (Banfield 1982: 60).

As far as it goes, this is a reasonable definition of a dialogic text. But it implies that discourse consists of a sequence of discrete expressions with discrete interchanges from one participant to the next. Even allowing for the fact that this is a necessary idealization and takes no account of overlap and interruption, the assignment of one expression uniquely to one participant is not always borne out by the facts of free verbal interaction. Consider the following extract from informal small talk among six participants, all members of the same family, one afternoon early in April 1984:[3]

(6) S That was Amstrad wasn't it?
    D No no no no no. What's that guy called now?
    S What works in Comet's?
    D Yeah.
    S John Bates.
    D John Bates. He told me Amstrad was rubbish. (0,5)
    S I don't know.
    D He sells them.
      (2,1)
    R Why – why was there/why was it rubbish?[4]

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[3] The data in this paper are taken from an extensive corpus of tape-recorded socio-communicative verbal interaction at present being transcribed and analyzed at the English department of the University of Berne. The transcriptions given here do not include such significant variables as intonation, volume level, syllable lengthening, etc., which might prejudice the interpretation of the data. I offer the reader the admittedly pusillanimous excuse that these factors have indeed been taken into account, but do not significantly weaken the concept of text sharing. If anything, they strengthen it, but a detailed argumentation will have to be waived in the present paper.

[4] The following transcription conventions have been used in the analysis of the data:

(0,5)	= a pause of half a second
(,)	= a pause of less than half a second in duration
:er (,):	= a filled pause
/	= self interruption
–	= repetition, stammering
—	= an incomplete turn at talk
+	= termination of an intervention at a point prior to the termina-

If (6) is to be considered a dialogic text, it must meet Banfield's two conditions. Up to the point at which R enters the interaction, this appears to be the case; his utterance, however, causes problems. He has most certainly been a hearer of the previous expression, but this utterance does not refer to it. In addition, although he has been a hearer, he has certainly not been an addressee, since the interaction previous to his entry has been exclusively between D and S. Now if D and S had been conversing in a restaurant and R had been a total stranger at the next table overhearing the interaction, would his utterance then count as part of the text? In strict accordance with Banfield's definition, it would, but I have my doubts.

I shall leave this question open, since there is a more serious objection to be raised. The past tense in R's expression surely does not encode a time point anterior to the present time of the utterance. R does not intend to ask why Amstrad was rubbish at the point in time when John Bates made that statement, and thereby to imply that it might not be rubbish now. So according to Banfield's criteria, R shifts to a new text with his utterance.

Such an analysis, however, is clearly counter-intuitive, since the anaphoric pronoun "it" may only be interpreted by the other participants by going back through their memory of the expressions uttered until they find a suitable coreferent by which a logically relevant implication can be deduced. Significantly, the relevant coreferent, the NP "Amstrad", is in the same sentential expression as the past tense form "was", which re-occurs in R's expression. We have here one form of text sharing, in which a participant uses a previous expression by another participant, altering it slightly in order to return the interaction to its central topic. Thus whether or not a free verbal interaction achieves the status of text does not depend solely on the kind of semantico-syntactic criteria set up by Banfield, but also on a central topic to which the participants may return as often and as intensively as they like and from which sub-topics may radiate. The utterances within which the topic and sub-topics occur contain a set of propositions which constitute the common knowledge of the participants, and any utterance must be relevant to this

		tion of the turn in which the intervention occurs
*	=	a back-channel intervention
&	=	intervention by another co-participant causing simultaneous speech, or simultaneous speech from the beginning of a turn at talk

common knowledge by allowing linguistically direct or pragmatically indirect implications to be deduced by the co-participants.[5]

To be fair to Banfield, her concept of the text is in reality a concept of textual shift within the total narrative, which she illustrates in the framework of what she calls "narration" and "representation". If we add to Banfield's conditions the condition of pragmatically deducible relevance to a central topic and its sub-topics, we may be more adequately equipped to define the textual status of free verbal interaction. Looked at in this way, it is perfectly conceivable that such interaction may consist of a number of texts. In order to support a notion of textual shift, however, we must concentrate on the dialectic nature of verbal interaction.

Any utterance addressed to a hearer or set of hearers has a right to a response, and that response might, but need not, merit a response by the original speaker. Failure to respond is a violation of the speaker's right to conversational territory, commonly referred to in the literature as "negative face".[6] Failure to respond relevantly is likely to be detrimental to the responder's and the original speaker's status within the social group, i. e. it may violate the "positive face" (or public self image) of either. The guiding principle behind a well-structured verbal interaction is thus that of relevance. The original speaker must be able to deduce an implication, either directly or indirectly, from the common stock of knowledge shared by the participants or built up through the interaction by means of topic development. The structure itself takes the form of interchanges from one speaker to another, which are termed "adjacency pairs". Thus whenever an adjacency pair has been completed and a new first pair-part is set up, we may speak of a textual shift.

It is clear that in extract (6) a number of shifts have been made. S asks for confirmation of a statement and receives a negative response from D. D then requests information concerning a person who, judging by the deictic pronoun "that", is relevant to the topic. S appears to violate the condition of relevant response to a first pair-part by asking a question herself. But she neither signals this possible face-threat in any of the conventionally acceptable ways, e. g. by prefacing the utterance with an expression such as "you mean" or the non-lexical expression "er", nor does D give any indication that he has taken it as a face-threat. In point of fact, no face-threat has been committed, since S has shared the text

[5] For a discussion of the concept of "relevance" within a pragmalinguistic framework cf. Wilson and Sperber (1978).

[6] For a detailed discussion of the concept of face and the politeness phenomena which are employed to obviate the threat to one's own or a co-participant's face, the reader is referred to Brown and Levinson (1978).

with D. Instead of responding relevantly, she completes his utterance with a relative clause modifying the NP "that guy" in D's utterance. She does so with interrogative intonation thereby implying that not enough information is on hand to warrant a relevant response. D is obliged to respond to S's question before she can respond to his.

The two examples of text sharing in (6) are not representative of the most common occurrences, however. In neither case does the sharer, the participant who uses a previous utterance as the framework or basis of his/her utterance, interrupt the previous speaker. Normally interruption would be interpreted as a violation of the speaker's conversational territory, as an attempt to take the floor from the speaker when the latter has not indicated that it has been relinquished, hence as a threat to the speaker's face. The textual structure of free verbal interaction is violated at points such as these, and the ways in which the equilibrium is restored are indicative of the degree to which communication is successful.

One type of interruption that cannot be interpreted as text-sharing merely signals to the co-participants that the interrupter would like to take the floor for a turn at talk.[7] It announces his claim to the floor in advance and may be considered as a floor-seeking gambit.[8] Speakers do not normally allow themselves to be interrupted, however, and it is highly unlikely that the interrupter really expects to gain the floor at that particular point.

Extract (6) continues as follows:

(7) D Well he reckons after the / after about a year the parts start to / all
        these working / you know cos they're all this sort of ultra-thin modern
        & (,) that you slide out and this
        &
    B & Well (1, 1) don't you –
    D business. They tend to go wrong very quickly.
        You can't get 'em repaired.
    B Well don't you think that with anything
        electrical or like that & you get a rogue
                                 &
    D   & The more ???–
        one and it – and it & goes wrong. It's the
                            &

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[7] The terminology used in the present article and the theory on which it is based
    may be found in the seminal article by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974).
[8] For the term "gambit" cf. Keller (1979).

D   & Oh yes yeah yeah +
same w – with television and (,) motor cars
even. You le– & —
                                          &

S   & You can't guarantee can
you?

B No but with these Amstrads don't you think that :er (,) s–/ you
give a dog a bad name and it's a & jolly goo–/ hard job to get rid
                                     &

D   & Yes +
of it. You know what I mean (1, 7) but :um (,): might not be a case
Amstrad. They might be rubbish. (0,7) What do you think David? Do
you think they are?

B has to wait until D has completed his turn, confusing though it may be, before she is able to enter the conversation. She conventionally prefaces the floor-seeker and the beginning of her turn with the expression "well", which functions as the minimizer of a possible face-threatening act.[9]

Other types of interruption may be more threatening to the speaker even though they may not be meant as face-threatening acts. S, for example, interrupts B in the turn which she now proceeds to develop at a point which cannot possibly be interpreted as a transition relevance place, i. e. a point in the text at which transition from one speaker to the next is possible and/or permissible. B hesitates and is about to self-interrupt when S enters. S's utterance is in fact a response to B's apparent request for information in her opening question "don't you find that S". The question, however, is purely formulaic and merely prefaces an assessment by B. Her response to S is interesting. On the one hand, she complies with S's request for information with the expression "no". On the other hand, she indicates that her negative face has indeed been threatened by following up the expresssion "no" with the contradictory coordinator "but" and reformulating the turn more precisely, this time deliberately relating it to the overall topic of the text through the NP "these Amstrads".

Interruptions such as these cannot be interpreted as text-sharing, since they threaten the speaker's negative face. They require some kind of remedial work on the part of the interrupter. But not all interruptions are face-threatening acts. Many are supportive expressions of the type known as back channel behaviour and merely indicate to the ongoing speaker that the listener is still attending. Many are clear examples of text sharing.

[9] Cf. Owen (1983) and Watts (1985).

Let us consider extract (8) which is taken from a five-party lunchtime conversation among family members:

(8) M And they've got lots of tableaux B *mm+ beautiful. With a lovely
        tableau of an old kitchen B *mm+ and there's a tableau of a/ o– o– of
        the :er (,): the farriers you know that shoe & —
                                                        &
    B   & Shoe the & horses
                                                        &
    M   & The horses and
        leather shops cobblers & and—
                           &
    B   & We'll take a trip
        down there tomorrow you and me.

M has just told a story about herself and her grandson visiting an exhibition of local life and customs in a small Cornish port and is now describing the exhibition. B's first two utterances are typical supportive back channel behaviour, the first occurring at a transition relevance place (falling intonation and syntactic completion at the NP "tableaux") and the second with a rising intonation at the noun "kitchen". B's other two utterances, however, must be interpreted as interruptions. The second of these successfully wrests the floor away from M, since M gives up her turn at the coordinator "and", not completing her list. B's utterance is even addressed to another co-participant, although this is not clear from a mere transcription of the oral text. We have here a clear case of negative interruption, a violation of M's right to complete her turn.

The remaining utterance by B cannot be interpreted negatively, however, since it helps M to complete her list. Neither can it be interpreted as back channel behaviour, since it does more than merely indicate to the ongoing speaker that the channel of communication is still open. B has been signalling her interest throughout M's turn, but shortly after the second back channel utterance M runs into difficulty in encoding the information. The pause filled by "er" can be interpreted as a floor-holding signal, and it could have given B an opportunity to interrupt negatively at this point. It is significant that she does not interrupt. In continuing her list with the NP "the farriers" M appears to believe that there is a danger of her not being understood, since she appeals to B for confirmation with the expression "you know". B duly gives confirmation as soon as the verb "shoe" occurs, and her NP "the horses" is immediately picked up by M to allow her to continue the turn. The granting of confirmation is not placed at a transition relevance place, but at the next most logically suitable point in the text and is accepted by M.

Extract (9) is taken from the same conversation and it deserves some attention, since it displays an example of very tightly woven text sharing which does not involve interruption:

(9) M It's a lovely shop. We get smoked salmon there (1, 0) B *oh + and it's absolutely gorgeous.
    M & Very nice. They do a lovely smoked mackerel.
       &
    W & And they do a very nice smoked – smoked mackerel that you can slice.

After the adjective "gorgeous" there is a clear transition relevance place in M's turn which W uses in order to join her in praise of the assortment of smoked fish on sale at the shop concerned. M in no way considers that W is making a bid for the floor at this point, and with split-second timing they provide each other with the lexemes and structural elements needed to convey the information. Both M and W carry out their turns simultaneously. Whatever is said by one participant is immediately integrated into the other's ongoing utterance, thus creating a veritable conversational fugue in miniature. The fact that M and W have been married for almost fifty years helps to account for the fine anticipation shown by each of them concerning what the other is likely to say. Indeed the total lack of social distance and the high degeree of intimacy between the participants in this type of verbal interaction help to explain why interruptions will very rarely be interpretable as face threats and very frequently as text sharing.

This type is perhaps the most interesting, as it provides evidence of the amazing speed with which we are able to process incoming oral language data and build them into our own projected turn. It also demonstrates the inadequacy of Banfield's definition of dialogic text as "a sequence of E[expression]s such that the first person is coreferential from E to E or is coreferential with an *Addressee/hearer* [...] of the preceding E". Far from being one of the exceptions of simultaneous speech which prove the rule of alternating turns at talk, this example of text sharing clearly demonstrates that the two speakers are not only aware of what the other is saying during the time when they are both speaking, but also that they are able to use elements of the other's expression within what they themselves are encoding.

A more extensive examination of free verbal interaction would reveal that the ability to share a text is widespread and that such closely interwoven text sharing is one of its most notable characteristics. It is surely one of those features which contradict any claims – explicit or implicit – that free verbal interaction is somehow not worthy of the linguist's

attention. I would, in conclusion, make my own claim that it is only by studying this type of phenomenon seriously that some of the recent aberrations in linguistic theory may be corrected and a more useful approach to the structure and function of human language be developed. One point is beyond dispute: both phylogenetically and ontogenetically oral verbal interaction as a text type is prior to the written text.

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