

## Dialogic syntax and the construction of engaged meanings

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This presentation explores the co-construction of dialogue in the context of the animated conversational exchange of friendly multi-party interactions. The co-construction of dialogue is, in turn, a direct response to the visceral need to engage with one another in what I call the maximization of social proximity. Consequently, as the social pressures of engagement increase, an interesting feature emerges, namely speakers start incorporating the linguistic structures produced by the participants in the interaction into their own utterances. Drawing on the work of J. Du Bois (2010) on dialogic syntax, and the consequent notion of resonance, I will argue that the to and fro of the reproductions of the words of others has at least three immediate consequences to the study of language in face-to-face interaction:

- a) it addresses the study of language as a social activity that results from interpersonal engagement;
- b) it pushes language into new directions, for it encourages the exploration of novel equivalences (and differences) that are constantly being made across the utterances of different speakers; and
- c) it is one of a series of strategies used by speakers for the expression of emotive meanings.

Examination of the linguistic patterns that result across the voices of participants in multi-party interactions show that "dialogic syntax is not just syntax used in dialogue" (ibid p.22). It is in fact the study of the structure of engagement between speakers through the use of signs. More specifically, it addresses the structural relation between distinct utterances produced by different speakers that, together, explore and extend the boundaries of the system. So, given any two or more utterances, a certain number of comparable structural links - or similarities - can be established between them. These similarities can be established along various aspects of form and meaning, from prosody to the overall organization of the discourse, from more overt to more abstract linguistic or discourse patterns. In short, speakers can make any aspect of their own utterance 'rhyme' with some aspect of another speaker's previous utterance. Drawing on examples from Brazilian Portuguese, I will show that the network of linguistic parallelisms - or resonant structures - found across speakers does in fact reiterate Du Bois' proposal that engaged forms make engaged meanings (ibid p.9). This presentation suggests an answer to the question 'What is the nature of these engaged meanings?', arguing that such parallelisms form an indispensable outlet for the coding of ordinary affective engagement.

For an example of the kind of parallelism that will be discussed, consider the excerpt below in which the speakers have been talking about the stress caused by house remodeling. They close the topic with the following exchange:

(1) Brazilian Portuguese

7. NICE: Isso é que acaba com a gente.

8. Nu □ é:?

9. LIA: Isso é que mata n[é.

10. VERA: [É:é.

11. NICE: Isso é que mata.

In this example, we can see how the syntactic template *Isso é que* + Predicate ('This is what' + Predicate), which starts in line 7, is reproduced across lines 9 and 11. Of note here is the

fact that this template, and the agreement marker *nué* in line 8, are reproduced, with modifications, in lines 9 and 10, thus leading Nice, in line 11, to incorporate these modifications into her own initial template. In so doing, Nice makes her concluding statement in line 11 both her own, as well as everyone else's. The increasing convergence across these utterances correlate, iconically, with the increasing agreement among the speakers about the assessment made initially in line 7; that is, the more the speakers agree, the more their utterances converge. In this respect, note that the utterances converge at the phrasal level: the predicate in line 9, *mata* 'kills' is a stronger rendition of the initial predicate *acaba com a gente* 'gets you' in line 7. Note the convergence also in the subsequent reproductions of the agreement marker *nué* 'don't you think?' in line 8 (literally: *não* ('not') + *é* ('is')) across the intonation units that follow. That is, *não + é* [nãwué] is first realized as *nué* [nwɛ] in line 8, *né* [nɛ] in line 9, and finally as *é* [ɛ] in line 10. The progressive reduction of the phrase *não é* 'not is' corresponds, interactionally, to a progressive reduction of potential differences, and a move toward collective agreement. Note, in this respect, that in Brazilian Portuguese the longer form *nué* [nwɛ] is often used to request corroboration of a previous statement, it is an invitation for agreement roughly equivalent to the tag phrase in English 'don't you think'; the subsequent shorter form *né* [nɛ] (line 9), on the other hand, is used when the speaker takes the statement for granted, and requests that the other speakers agree not to dispute it. Finally, we have the form *é* [ɛ] 'yes/yeah/ that's right' (line 10). And although there is no negative morpheme present in line 10 (lit. 'it is'), the form 'é' [ɛ] emerged out of immediately preceding negative forms, and so it still resonates with them in this respect. Note, in addition, that the continuing, appeal intonation contour (?) at the end of line 8, and the non-appeal, falling intonation (.) at the end of lines 9 and 10 further reflect the increasing convergence (from less) to more agreement in the use of these markers.

In view of the high number and different types of parallelisms that can be observed in naturally occurring interactions, it is suggested that grammars may be best viewed as systems that emerged out of, and are shaped by, speakers' need to engage with one another, as they search for the expression of optimal social proximity.

## References

Du Bois, John W. (2007) *The Stance Triangle* in Englebretson, R.(ed) *Sancetaking in Discourse*. John Benjamins. Amsterdam.

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