

Ellipsis and Reduced Utterances in Conversation: A Linguistic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Language is a resource and like any other resource, we generally do away with repetition and use it economically. One device that we frequently use to avoid redundancy and to speak and write naturally is the ellipsis. In the present paper, I have chosen a conversational text to demonstrate and illustrate how ellipsis helps us to achieve these objectives. It is an audio-visual conversation, but for the sake of convenience, I have used only the scripted version of the conversation. However, I have referred to aspects of spoken English that characterize conversations in general and this conversation in particular. While analyzing the table tennis conversation, I have used examples from literature to illustrate some features of spoken language and to support my analysis of the conversation.

Key expressions: ellipsis, reduced utterances, gapped conversation, features of spoken language, redundancy

Introduction

Language exists and operates in spoken and written modes. These two mediums differ in many ways. Spoken language is characterized by a tone of voice, emphasis, contrast, focus, pauses and silences, to mention just a few features. The vocabulary of spoken medium is easier. When we speak in everyday situations, we use simple words; we avoid using compound words and multi-syllabic words. The grammar of a spoken language is simpler than that of a written language. For example, we prefer verbs to nouns, active voice to passive voice. Spoken medium is high context mode whereas written medium is low context mode. Low context mode requires language users to be unambiguous, explicit and straightforward. On the other hand, high context heavily relies on assumptions and presuppositions. The physical context enables conversational interlocutors to understand most

things effortlessly. Let me use James Thurber's story Unicorn in the Garden to explain what I mean. This is a story about a man and his wife who do not go well with one another. The man makes up a story to trap his wife so that he can send her to a lunatic asylum. When the man tells his wife that he saw a unicorn in the garden eating roses and a lily, the wife says to her husband, "You are a booby and I'll have you put in a booby hatch". The man, who has never liked the words 'booby' and 'booby hatch' and likes them even less on a shining morning, says to her "We'll see about that!" Placed in a positive psychological interpersonal context, "We'll see about that" may convey several positive messages. For instance, it may mean an assurance, a promise, a tentative commitment, etc. Context plays a pivotal role in facilitating comprehension. Let me cite an example from Shakespeare's Othello. It is the physical and psychological contexts that help us

to understand what Iago means when he says, "I am not what I am". That is how we understand what Othello means when he looks at sleeping Desdemona and says, "Put out the light and then put out the light".

Discussion

The present paper analyses a conversation that takes place during a table tennis game. The conversational participants are two players and an umpire. The situation involves an argument between one player (Nigel) and the umpire (Judith). Our aim in this paper is to discuss the interaction focusing on sentence structure and ellipsis. The text under analysis has been chosen from Bury et al (1985). It is a written representation of a videoed text which is as follows:

Judith: Seventeen-fifteen. Nigel still serving. Let.

Nigel: Let? Did you say "let"?

Judith: Yes.

Nigel: That didn't touch the net.

Judith: I'm sorry, Nigel, it definitely did touch the net.

Dave: Did hit the net, Nigel. Honestly.

Nigel: I'm sure it didn't, Dave.

Judith: Who's umpiring this game, Nigel? You or me?

Nigel: Well, if you're umpiring Judith, keep your eyes on the game.

Judith: I was keeping my eyes on the game. It's a let, and that's final.

Dave: Come on. We've got a match to play.

I can't spend the whole day arguing.

Nigel: All right. I don't care. I'm winning anyway.

Judith: Right. Seventeen-fifteen. Still your service, Nigel.

Grice (1975: 41-58) discusses conversations with reference to the maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner. In the first maxim, the conversation partners are expected to be precise and concise when taking turns. The amount of information provided should not exceed the amount required. Alternatively, they should not give less information than what the context requires. They should offer information appropriate for the situation. This maxim encourages precision. The second maxim is the maxim of quality, which expects speakers to avoid talking about things and issues for which they have no evidence. The underlying prescription is truthfulness. The third maxim requires relevance. Digressions and beating about the bush do not fit into this norm. The fourth principle demands clarity; it does not approve of ambiguity, opaqueness and obliqueness.

By the way, a brief discussion of the distinction between given information and new information will be useful here. When we converse with someone in informal and even formal situations, we frequently speak in incomplete sentences. Let us look at the following little conversation from the point of view of this feature of spoken discourse:

Mohan: When did you come back home?

Ramesh: This morning.

Mohan: How did you travel?

Ramesh: By air.

Mohan: When are you travelling next?

Ramesh: Next Monday.

Mohan: Who else is travelling with you?

Ramesh: Nobody.

In this conversational interaction, there are two participants. Mohan asks four questions and Ramesh answers those questions. Since Mohan asks questions, he uses complete sentences. In his case, the question of given and new information does not arise. He is asking questions; he is not answering questions. It is Ramesh who answers questions. Therefore, it is he who has to think of given and new information. The most important word in Mohan's first question is "When" and so Ramesh has to answer the question keeping in mind the time -eliciting the wh-word which is an interrogative pronoun. The rest of the words (did you come back home) in the question constitute given information for both Mohan and Ramesh. The onus of avoiding these words and answering the question in the briefest possible manner lies with Ramesh. That is why he answers in just one word (Yesterday). There is absolute semantic consonance between the nucleus of the first question (When) and the expected word in the answer (Yesterday). We can explain the rest of the questions accordingly. It is clear that Mohan has used twenty-one words in his four questions whereas Ramesh has used just seven words in the same number of replies. This is so because Ramesh has avoided those words that carry the given information. Another feature of the interaction is the use of incomplete sentences, which is a characteristic of most conversations.

Now, let me return to the table tennis

conversation. One prominent feature of the interaction is extensive use of what Brown (1975: 104) calls 'reduced utterances:

- (i) Seventeen-fifteen.
- (ii) Nigel still serving.
- (iii) Let?
- (iv) Yes.
- (v) Did hit the net, Nigel.
- (vi) Honestly.
- (vii) You or me?
- (viii) All right.
- (ix) Right.
- (x) Still your service, Nigel.

As Palmer (1971: 71) points out, traditional grammars sometimes provide a kind of definition of a sentence: 'a sentence is the expression of a complete thought'. But, is 'Yes' a complete thought in isolation? A great deal of spoken language does not consist of sentences in the sense in which the term is understood with reference to formal writing. Much of it is made up of interrupted, incomplete, unfinished, or even chaotic sentences. Speech may be made up of utterances or separate bits, but utterances seldom correspond to sentences. Some linguists argue that incomplete sentences should be analysed independently and treated as possible structures of the language. But then there would be an infinite number of structures and no grammar would claim even partial completeness.

All of the above listed 'incomplete' sentences are dependent on what goes before each one of them. There are two important points about

these sentences. First, they make extensive use of pro-forms; they are, then, to be analyzed in terms of the complete, expanded, 'original' form. Secondly, their characteristics are often found within sentences too. They are contextually conditioned and only to be understood as such. "Yes", which is a response to "Did you say 'let'?" is such an utterance.

Thus a sentence may consist of one or more words. One-word sentences such as "Yes" are comprehensible only in relation to or with reference to a particular situation, or in the context of a particular statement made or a question asked in another sentence, usually by another speaker. The 'completive' type of sentence consists of a form that merely supplements a situation- that is, an earlier speech, a gesture, or the mere presence of an object (Strang, 1962: 64). The sentence "Honestly" is one such example. In short, the syntax of this conversation is natural and unplanned. It is composed of utterances rather than sentences. Moreover, the utterances are fragmented and they overlap (Wardhaugh 1986: 287).

The complete sentences become reduced utterances due to the process of omission or deletion or bracketing. We usually avoid the information that has already been given in some form or another. This omission is called ellipsis. Leech and Svartvik (1975) define ellipsis as the omission of information that is already obvious from linguistic context or sometimes from the situation outside the language. Cobuild (1990) defines ellipsis as the tendency of people to omit words rather than repeat them and that happens at spoken as well as written levels. Quirk and Greenbaum (1985) define an ellipsis as an abbreviation in the sentence at the level of writing, informal conversation, and broadcast

commentaries. Let me cite an example from James Thurber's story *The Moth and the Star*. The moth who is the protagonist of the story falls in love with a certain star. His parents try to dissuade him, but he does not heed the words of either parent and leaves his parental house and every night tries to reach the star. He never reaches the star, but when he is a very old moth, he begins to think that he really reached the star and goes around saying 'so'. 'This' gives him a deep and lasting pleasure and he lives to a great old age. I would like to draw your attention to the words 'so' and 'this'. These two little words help the author to avoid repetition. In order to understand the function of these words, we need to look at their antecedents or preceding co-referential expressions that these two words refer to. The word 'so' is a reduced form of the expression 'that he really had reached the star'; the word 'This' is a reduced form of the expression 'thinking that he really had reached the star and going around saying that he really had reached the star'.

Let me now examine the table tennis text keeping in mind what we have said in the preceding paragraph and identify examples of ellipsis:

- (i) Seventeen-fifteen. Nigel still serving.
- (ii) Let?
- (iii) Yes.
- (iv) Did hit the net, Nigel. Honestly.
- (v) I'm sure it didn't, Dave.
- (vi) Seventeen-fifteen. Still your service, Nigel.

Ellipsis is very clear in the text for the simple reason that it is an informal conversational text. Other reasons for such a large number of

elliptical utterances are the type of discourse and topic. In the first part of the first example, the subject (the score) and the verb (is) are omitted. The expanded form of the utterance would be 'The score is seventeen –fifteen'. In its second part, the verb (is) is dropped. In the second example, 'let' replaces a whole question (Did you say 'let?'). In example three, 'yes' replaces a complete answer (Yes, I did say 'let.') to Nigel's question (Did you say 'let?'). In the next example, a whole clause is deleted and the manner adverb is retained to emphasize the truth of Dave's words and Judith's decision. So, the utterance can be understood as 'Honestly, it touched the net, Nigel'. In the fifth example, part of the verb phrase (hit) and object (the net) are done away with. These two constituents have been replaced by the past tense form of 'do' which is a dummy operator. Thus the contracted form 'didn't' emphasizes the denial and refusal on Nigel's part. In the final example, the subjects (It, It) and verbs (is, is) have been obliterated or rendered redundant, thus returning to the initial tone of the conversation.

Both written and spoken discourses include ellipses, but spoken discourses deal with them more frequently. Face-to-face spoken interactions usually involve short and fast turns, with a great deal of overlap. There is also no room for side talk or branching on the part of the participants. They have to stick to the main points and that is another good reason why there is an extensive ellipsis. In the table tennis text, the topic is an argument about a specific point-whether the ball is a let or not. Besides, there are time restrictions. So, the short, elliptical utterances in the original interaction are much more effective than their following full form equivalents:

Judith: The score is seventeen-fifteen. Nigel is still serving. It's a let.

Nigel: Is it let? Did you say "let"?

Judith: Yes, it is let.

Nigel: That didn't touch the net.

Judith: I'm sorry, Nigel, it definitely did touch the net.

Dave: It did hit the net, Nigel. Honestly, it did hit the net.

Nigel: I'm sure it didn't touch the net, Dave.

Judith: Who's umpiring this game, Nigel? Are you umpiring or am I umpiring?

Nigel: Well, if you're umpiring Judith, keep your eyes on the game.

Judith: I was keeping my eyes on the game. It's a let and that's final.

Dave: Come on. We've got a match to play.

Nigel: It's all right. I don't care. I'm winning anyway.

Judith: Right. It's seventeen-fifteen. It's still your service, Nigel.

It seems that social factors such as relationships among participants and informality of the situation are also responsible for this relatively large number of elliptical sentences. The illustrations cited above show that ellipsis is simply 'substitution by zero' (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 142). It is something left unsaid and this something left unspoken makes the conversation sound more natural. But there is no implication here that what is left unuttered is not understood; on the other hand, 'unsaid' implies 'understood

nevertheless'. As the Romantic poet John Keats says in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter". Language does not function in isolation; it functions in actual situations of use. There is always a great deal of evidence available to the hearer for interpreting a sentence than is contained in the sentence itself.

Some types of ellipsis are not dependent on the adjacent linguistic context for their interpretation. 'Seventeen-fifteen' and 'Nigel still serving' are examples of this kind. They depend on the situational context. These forms of ellipsis are restricted to 'familiar' English. Here, we need to remember one thing. The way a commentator or umpire parcels out information is significant. They assume that the audience is familiar with the basic structure of the events they are describing. Thus when a cricket commentator says, 'And now Kapil to Imran', he assumes that his elliptical sentence will be understood as 'Kapil is bowling to Imran', not as 'Kapil is talking to Imran'. Similarly, when Judith says, 'Seventeen-fifteen', she is not referring to the year 'Seventeen hundred and fifteen'; nor is she telling the time of the day 'Seventeen hours and fifteen minutes or 'Five fifteen P.M.' A commentator or umpire is able to work within the framework of the table tennis match. Crystal and Davy (1969: 144) describe such a framework as a stable framework of reference known both to the commentator and the audience and spectator. He or she can use the context as the basis for precise items of information strung rapidly together with minimum connective irrelevance. Thus he or she is able to achieve economy of grammatical structure, reducing the element of repetitiveness.

Conclusion

When we listen to the argument between the table tennis player and the umpire, we use textual as well as extra-textual context to make sense of reduced utterances. The textual context refers to how elliptical expressions are used and why. The deleted expressions are present in deep structures of utterances and invisible or inaudible in their surface structures. Our knowledge of logic, how language functions, of how people use language helps us to make sense of reduced utterances. This skill is as important as the guessing skill that helps us to interpret a gapped telephone conversation. Let me explain this skill at some length. When we listen to a telephone conversation, we hear only what one person says; we don't hear what the person at the other end says. The statements, questions, exclamations and commands uttered by the person in our presence help us guess what the absent interlocutor probably has said. Let us illustrate this point. Let us read (imagine we are listening to what we are reading) the following telephone conversation and fill in the gaps.

Miss Green: Hello? Yes, this is Professor Hunter's house. Yes, Miss Hunter is here. One moment please. (She gives the telephone to Mary Hunter). It's for you dear. I think it's Dr Smith.

Mary: Good morning. Yes, Miss Hunter speaking. Yes, Dr Smith, I'm very well. Thank you. Yes, father's well too. He's excited this morning, but we'll look after him. What's that? Freda's in the hospital? Yes, of course, I'll come. I wanted to stay with my father, but it doesn't matter. Yes, I'll be there in an hour. Goodbye. (She cradles the telephone)

We can fill the gaps as follows:

(**Dr. Smith** dials Professor Hunter's

telephone number; the phone rings. Miss Green picks up the receiver and answers the call)

Miss Green: Hello?

Dr Smith: Is that Professor Hunter's house?

Miss Green: Yes, this is Professor Hunter's house.

Dr Smith: Is Miss Hunter at home? / Can I speak to Miss Hunter, please?

Miss Green: Yes, Miss Hunter is here. One moment please. (She gives the telephone to Mary Hunter).

Miss Green (To Miss Hunter): It's for you dear. I think it's Dr Smith.

Mary: Good morning.

Dr Smith: Good morning. I am Dr Smith speaking. Am I talking to Miss Hunter, please?

Mary: Yes, Dr Smith. This is Miss Hunter speaking.

Dr Smith: How are you, Miss Hunter?

Mary: I'm very well, Dr Smith. Thank you.

Dr Smith: How's Professor Hunter?

Mary: Yes, father's well too. He's excited this morning, but we'll look after him.

Dr Smith: I'm sorry to tell you that Freda's in hospital.

Mary: What? Freda's in the hospital?

Dr Smith: She remembers you. Can you come to the hospital, please?

Mary: Yes, of course, I'll come. I wanted to

stay with my father, but it doesn't matter.

Dr Smith: Please come as early as possible.

Mary: Yes, I'll be there in an hour.

Dr Smith: Thanks and goodbye.

Mary: Goodbye. (She cradles the telephone)

When we teach conversation skills, we need to bring to our learners' notice that it is natural to use reduced utterances when we converse in real-life situations. However, I understand that initially, we would expect our students to learn, produce, and practice full sentences and later ask them to identify reduced sentences in sample conversations, supply correct and appropriate dropped expressions, rewrite all the reduced utterances in their full forms, and finally script a conversation having several reduced utterances. It is not that they are unfamiliar with this phenomenon; they use reduced sentences in their own languages; we just need to transfer the skill from their mother tongue to the other tongue. Similarly, our learners can guess the unheard utterances in telephone conversations on the basis of the heard utterances. Literature lends itself quite well for this purpose. Teachers can pick up conversations from one-act plays, full-length plays and short stories and ask students to recognize instances of ellipsis and explain why certain words, phrases and even clauses are deleted, what purpose ellipsis serves in each case, and what would happen if speakers used only full forms all the time throughout their conversations. Teachers can simulate telephone conversation situations wherein one speaker is in the classroom and another in the adjacent classroom. The other students can hear what he is saying but cannot hear what the speaker in the adjacent classroom is saying. Using the audible speaker's inputs, the rest of the class is

expected to imagine what the speaker in the adjacent classroom must have said. Such games, simulations, and activities would be more useful, and interesting than mere theoretical explanations of ellipsis, reduced structures, etc.

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The Journal of Teaching and Research in English Literature (JTREL)

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