



Speech Genre: A Study of Gossip in Australian English Speaking Context

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Abstract

A gossip as a casual conversation usually occurs in diverse context or a wide range of social situations; has distinct and various topics; and involve an irregular set of participants. The scholars scrutinize that conversation has highly structured activity of which people tacitly realize that there are some basic conventions to follow – such as when to speak or to stay silent and to listen. In this study, I specifically discuss one of the speech genre – a gossip, in Australian English speaking context. The gossip data of the study is taken from the research conducted by Thornburry, Scott, and Slade, Diana (2006). In a discussion, I focus the analysis of the generic structure of the gossip and how it establishes the social function (within) the speech members. Several findings conveyed that: 1) there is a leeway of shifting from one genre to another – e.g. narrative to gossip, within the same participants; 2) conversation can be successful if all the participants aware of and follow the basic conventions – when to talk or to listen, support to judgement or reluctant to the focus of conversation; 3) the genre, e.g. narrative or gossip, could motivate people to leave or to join the conversation which then could establish and reinforce the group membership and maintain the values of the social group.

Keywords: Gossip, Casual Conversation, Speech Genre

How to cite: Hamka, N. (2018). Speech Genre: A Study of Gossip in Australian English Speaking Context. *ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 1 (3), 263-271.

1. Introduction

Casual conversation is a fundamental and pervasive of human activity in which we engage with in most of the time. Because the form of the casual conversation usually occurs in diverse context or a wide range of social situations; has distinct and various topics; involve an irregular set of participants, the conversation may be seemed problematic to determine the extent to which the conversation is systematic (Crystal, 1987). Today, the study about the conversation scrutinizes that it has highly structured activity; people tacitly realize that there are some basic conventions to follow – such as when to speak or to stay silent and to listen (Schegloff, 2007). Another function of conversation is emphasized by Thornburry and Slade (2006); they posited that conversation could be highly contributed to the second language process through conversational interaction.

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At first, the study will briefly discuss the broad term of a genre; then I will present what is chat and chunk and followed by the description of a generic structure of the casual conversation. Next, the study will focus on what is gossip and then implement the generic structure of the gossip to the data to be analyzed. To begin with, Anderson defined the genre as categories of language use, e.g. the sermon, in which it might be similar to speech event yet it might be a part of the speech event. For instance, the sermon is a genre and may at the same time be a speech event, (when performed conventionally in a church); however, a sermon may be a genre, that is invoked in another speech event, for example, 'at a party for humorous effect' (2006, p. 668). Thornbury and Slade (2006) scrutinized genre from two broad perspectives – sociolinguistics and linguistics. In the view of the sociolinguistics, the term genre is usually used to refer to such textual category of discourse, e.g. sermon, stories, or jokes.

Besides, from the linguistics point of view, the term genre is utilized both in critical discourse analysis (CDA) and systematic functional linguistics (SFL). Genre, regarding CDA, is used as a socially confirmed method for utilizing language regarding a specific sort of social activity. While in SFL, the genre is defined concerning the use of language to accomplish culturally acknowledged goals. Furthermore, Martin (1984) as cited in Thornbury and Slade (2006) described that people use genre (which is a staged, goal oriented, and social process) to engage with other members of a culture. The latter definition by Martin (1984) is elaborated by Thornbury and Slade (2006) as follows: staged – it refers to the stages or steps in which meanings are conveyed through stages (usually more than one stages); goal oriented – explains that genres will keep moving through stages to accomplish the goal or culmination of the genre; and social processes – it involves an interactive negotiation to achieve social purpose of genres.

2. Literature Review

Thornbury and Slade (2006) posited that genres (in which it can be analyzed through text both spoken and written) have different goals in culture and that, genres occurred in various ways and stages which Martin (1984) termed it as schematic structure. Halliday (1985) divided the schematic structure into two main elements – obligatory and optional. One of the examples that Halliday (1985) provided to describe the optional and the obligatory elements is the situation of a shopping cultures in western countries. He mentioned that salutation and offer of service may and may not be occurred (which he called it as optional) but it will always be followed by a sale request, sale compliance, sale, purchase, and purchase closure which he called as obligatory sequences.

On the other hand, Mitchel (1957) found that salutation is obligatory in shopping situation in Tunisia. Mitchell described the sequences as follows: first, it is begun with salutation then followed by an enquiry to the product, after that it is followed by investigation, then bargaining process, and finally a conclusion. Mitchell claimed that salutation is important as the social function to maintain the degree of social harmony. And that, being familiar with this generic structure of the genre will automatically include people as the member of the same speech community who can effectively participate in the social activity. In the following paragraphs, the study will look in detail the generic structure of the genre in gossip.

Before going into the details, Eggins and Slade (1997) described what is chat and chunk. Chat is the aspect of the conversation where the structure is managed locally – turn-by-turn. While chunk is the segment of the conversation which have macro-structure

that is predictable. Eiggins and Slade (1997) claimed that gossip is highly interactive genre which contains chunking elements and one of the most occurring in English casual conversation. They describe that, gossip has their own generic structure, they are as follows:

1) *establishing that there is a distinctive genre of gossip*

Eiggins and Slade (1997) scrutinized that gossip is distinctive and has its own characteristic linguistics structure. They described this claim through the data from Slades in text 7.1 – entitled A Classic Affair. They found that the conversation's focus is not on the event like in genre, in narrative, or storytelling, but rather on focusing the speakers' negative opinion about the third person's focus (Anna) and her affair. Moreover, the study posited that this negative evaluation is the one that motivates the conversation.

2) *defining and labelling the genre of gossip*

In the research, Eiggins and Slade (1997) emphasized that gossip is a talk that involves the pejorative evaluation of the absent of the third party. The study also described that the talk in gossip is meant to remain confidential no reported back to the one who is gossiped. Furthermore, Eiggins and Slade (1997) explained that gossip commonly occur in the conversation with the acquaintances and close friends.

3) *establishing the social function of the gossip*

Eiggins and Slade (1997) presented their claim through the description of the text 7.2 (Richard). They found that through gossiping Richard who absent in the conversation, the members of the talk establish their similarity, shared their attitudes to work and agreed upon the work standard that Richard should do in the office. From this case and other previous studies about the social function of gossip, Eiggins and Slade (1997) concluded that the social function of gossip is: 1) 'to establish and reinforce group membership; and 2) as a form of social control' (p, 337-338).

4) *identifying and differentiating the text stages*

As it has been explained in the proceeding paragraphs that genre occurred in different ways and stages which called as schematic structure – obligatory and optional. In gossip, Eiggins and Slade (1997) described the obligatory elements of gossip is: **third person focus ^ substantiating behaviour ^ pejorative evaluation**. Third person focus becomes obligatory in gossip because in this stage the speakers introduce the focus of the talk. Also, through this stage the concept of we versus they, us versus them, is established. In substantiating behavior, it is obligatory in gossip since in this particular stage the member(s) of the talk presents the evidence which enables other participants to construct a negative judgement. The negative evaluation that derives from the stage of substantiating behavior is called pejorative evaluation. This is obligatory as well because in this stage the flow of the gossip is determined whether gossip will keep continuing through the confirmation of other participants or will shut down because the other participants reluctant to the focus of the gossip.

Eiggins and Slade (1997) also posited the optional elements in gossip – probe and wrap-up. In gossip, the act of requesting more details is called probe. This often occurs as other participants of the talk probe for more information about the substantiating behavior which followed by pejorative evaluation. While wrap-up, Eiggins and Slade called it as the

final stage of the gossip structure. The function of wrap-up is to summarize the event or behavior which is outlined in the gossip text.

5) *specifying obligatory and optional stages and devising a structural formula*

In the study by Eggins and Slade (1997), they described the generic structure of the gossip which is derived from Slade's data, text 7.3 Clara and Stephen. Eggins and Slade claimed that this generic structure could be applied to both acquaintances and close friends:

'Third Person Focus ^ [[Substantiating behavior • {(probe)/Pejorative Evaluation} ^ (Defense) ^ Response to Defense] “^ (Concession) ^ (Wrap-up)”’ (p. 357).

'Key:

- ^ = is followed by
- = occur in either sequence
- () = optional
- [] = domain of recursion or sequencing
- “ = recursion' (Eggins and Slade, 1997, p. 349-350)

6) and finally is specifying the semantic and lexico-grammatical realizations for each stage (see Eggins and Slade, 1997, p. 357-366).

This study will be looking at the macro-structure of the casual conversation in gossip (overall organization) – how conversation can be successful and understood, by analyzing the characteristic generic patterning in the genre of the conversation – especially in gossip.

3. Data source

The writer of the study does not produce the data himself, but requested it from his lecturer of Language and Social Interaction course, Professor Diana Slade who have an authority of the data in the book entitled Analyzing casual conversation. Therefore, the gossip data of the study is taken from the research conducted by Thornburry, Scott, and Slade, Diana (2006).

4. Findings and Discussion

In the text 1: State Theatre, the story is focused on the negative evaluation of Joanna (the one who is absent in the gossip conversation; who was being pushy based on Bron's experiences and evaluation). In the text, there are two topics discussed – the state theatre and Joanna.

Table 1. State Theatre (example Chat and Chunk)

Turn	Move	Speaker	Text
1.	1/a 1/b	Gary	Well, I got the pictures tomorrow night. Boy, I, I love that, that State Theatre.
2.	2	Pauline	Oh, isn't it beautiful!
3.	3	Gary	Yeah.
4.	4	Bron	Yeah.
5.	5	Gary	Yeah.

6.	6/a 6/b	Pauline	I really love, It's my favorite.
7.	7	Pat	I've never been there
8.	8/a 8/b 8/c	Bron	Oh, it's beautiful! Oh it's beautiful! It's got chandeliers and things.
9.	9/a 9/b 9/c	Gary	I usually just wear jeans and sand shoes to go to the pictures but if, If I go to the State, I usually put on something just a little bit better
10.	[laugh]	[laugh]	[laugh]
11.	11	Gary	You can't outdo the place.
12.	12	Pauline	No.
13.	13	Bron	Exactly.
Chunk			
14.	14/a 14/b	Pat	I remember once I went to a film, and ah, I'd just bought this new outfit and it was long silky, black pants that came up all in one.
15.	15	Pauline	Mmm.
Chunk			
16.	16/a 16/b 16/c 16/d 16/e	Pat	And then it was an overlay with splits right up to here, and that was in silk, and then it had a black sash. And I didn't think anything of it till I had to go to the toilet I had to take the whole lot off and pull the whole lot down. [laugh]
17.	[laugh]	[laugh]	[laugh]
18.	18	Pat	So I missed half the film.

[Slade's data: in Thornbury, Scott and Slade, Diana (2006): *Conversation: from Description to Pedagogy* Cambridge University Press, United Kingdom.]

At first glance to the excerpt 1.1 above, it is noticed that the conversation is highly interactive (chat) with several chunks as well. In the turn 1 to 13, the speakers are talking to each other interactively, while in turn 14 and 16, it is Pat talking longer by telling her story about her experience go to the movie wearing such clothes '**new outfit and it was long silky, black pants that came up all in one**' which later become her problem when such situation must occur '**And I didn't think anything of it till I had to go to the toilet**' then followed by the outcome '**So missed half the film**'. This part of the gossip is considered as chunk as we can identify the predictable macro structure, such as when Pat says '**I remember once...**'. At that moment, the other members of the conversation could realize that Pat is going to take the floor, dominate the conversation for an extended period, and tell her story of something that relates to the topic of conversation.

This first excerpt is different regarding its genre. Excerpt 1.1 is considered as narrative (see Eggins and Slade, 1997, p.274-325) that is the topic of conversation is about the state theatre. In contrast, excerpt 1.2 focused on the third person (Joanna) and involved such negative judgements, and that the genre is considered as gossip.

Table 2. Text Theatre (Gossip)

Turn	Move	Speaker	Text
	Third-person focus		
26.	26	Bron	I'm about to throw Joanne out the window.
27.	27	Pat	Joanna who?
28.	28	Bron	Blackwell
	Probe		
29.	29	Pat	Why?
	Pejorative evaluation (1)		
30.	30/a	Bron	She gets really pushy.
	Substantiating behavior (1)		
	30/b	Bron	I'm looking for a file for a Gary.
	30/c		Kerry gave me three others and
	30/d		I was in the middle of finding the third one for her
31.	31	Gary	Kerry gave three did she?
32.	32/a	Bron	Yeah,
	32/b		you know
	32/c		they have to be done and
	32/d		Joanna came up and she said
	32/e		"oh, can you do this?"
	32/f		and I said
	32/g		"well you're at the end of a very long
	32/h		line if you're prepared to wait"
	32/i		and she said
	32/j		"well, she's at the Oncology clinic right
	32/k		now"
	32/l		and I said
	32/m		"but these have to be done as well"
	32/n		and sort of smiling all the way through it
	32/o		I said
	32/p		"look, you know it's three minutes to three
	32/q		Liz should be down in a minute
	32/r		if you want to wait till then
	32/s		and she went ahhh [huffing sound]
	32/t		then she went away and
			I thought "oh yeah, end of the == story."

	Pejorative evaluation (2)		
33.	33	Gary	==she gets very worried
	Substantiating behavior (2)		
34.	34/a	Bron	and then she came back again
	34/b		and um she said
	34/c		“are those files there?”
	34/d		did Kerry give you those files there?”
	34/e		and I knew what she was going to say
	34/f		next.
	34/g		And I said
	34/h		“oh, among other things”
	34/i		and she went
	34/j		“oh it’s just that they can wait until
	34/k		after this one ‘cause they’re needed
	34/l		today”.
			Oh I was about ready to strangle her
			=she gets
	Pejorative evaluation (3)		
35.	35	Gary	Joanne’s too busy
36.	36/a	Bron	I know and
	36/b		I appreciate that she’s busy
	Pejorative evaluation (4)		
	36/c		but she gets really pushy
37.	37/a	Pat	Yeah,
	37/b		I don’t like pushy people either

[Slade's data: in Thornbury, Scott and Slade, Diana (2006): *Conversation: from Description to Pedagogy* Cambridge University Press, United Kingdom.]

In general observation, it can be noticed that in the gossip session, Pauline did not join in the conversation anymore. She involved only when the members of the group conversation were talking about the state theatre. However, when the topic shifted from state theatre to gossiping about Joanna, there are only three people join (Bron, Pat, and Gary). As it can be observed in the excerpt 1.2, Bron and Pat Joined in to construct the third-person focus. Although Bron has mentioned Joanna in the beginning, it is not clear yet whom she meant; perhaps there are more than one Joannas in their office.

In the next turn, Pat asked and seemed curious about what happened to Joanna (in turn 29), and that she is considered doing a probing. The probe is then followed by pejorative evaluation from Bron '**She gets really pushy**' which become her first negative evaluation to Joanna. Then, Bron continued the turn by presenting her first substantiating behavior as her evidence of her judgement (Joanna is pushy people). In the turn 33 and 35, Gary gave her pejorative evaluation which mitigating the judgement. Moreover, in turn

34, Bron gave her second substantiating behaviour and then followed by her pejorative evaluation in turn 36/c which supported by Pat in turn 37/b.

In the gossip sequence above, it can be noticed that Bron is dominating the gossip conversation – she has the relatively long talk. It can be seen in the turns (started in turn 30, then 32, and finally 34). In the latter gossip excerpt, the purpose of the text (especially the chunk produced by Pat) is not emphasizing the event, but rather on sharing opinion and judgement about the third person (Joanna). And that, it is the topic about Joanna that keeps the gossip going.

Also, in the text 1.2 we can notice that there is two evaluation which established as the responses to Bron's talk. First, the evaluation from Gary who tried to minimize the evaluation of the evidence that presented by Bron. Gary said 'she gets very worried' and 'Joanne's too busy' which indicated that she attempted to provide justifications why Joanna was pushy, in which it can be understood that Joanna is not that pushy unless she has to do it – under circumstances such as worry and busy. In contrast, Pat's turn is fewer than others (only occurred in turn 27, 29, and 37). Unlike Gary, Pat showed solidarity to the gossip by responding Bron's substantiating behavior with his pejorative evaluation '***I don't like pushy people either***'. Here, Pat shared her moral value to the conversation and indirectly agreed upon Bron's opinion about Joanna.

5. Conclusion

From the excerpts (1.1 and 1.2), it can be concluded that in the conversation, there is a possibility to shift the topic from one genre to another with the same participants. In the excerpt 1.1, turn 1 to 18, the genre is narrative where the social function of the talk is simply expository. While excerpt 1.2, the talk has shifted to focus on Joanna – the third person. In the excerpt 1.2, the social function of the talk is to establish and reinforce the group membership and maintain the values of the social group (Eggins and Slade, 1997). Implicitly, the moral value of the gossip emphasized the fact that everyone is busy. However, it cannot be justified as the reason to become pushy to others; it is simply inappropriate and uncomfortable for others.

For the conversation to be successful, the members of the talk should have a sense of when they are allowed to talk and when should listen. In the excerpt 1.1, turn 14 by Pat '***I remember once...***', she is (implicitly) giving a signal that she will take the floor and hold it for an extended period. In excerpt 1.2, although it is not a clear signal, I assume that the word '***you know***', '***I said***', and '***she said***' repeated several times indicating that she is trying to describe the situation and that she might hold the floor. Moreover, the conversation of gossip can be continuing if the participants respond and support the judgement, but gossip cannot be continued when the participant(s) reluctant to the focus of the conversation. In excerpt 1.2, Gary is being hesitant to the judgement and tried to mitigate Joanna's face, and that could be a signal to Bron to stop gossiping her. Hence, Bron asserted her point that Joanna should not be pushy although she is very busy.

All in all, the topic of conversation is an important variable that could decide what genre of the conversation — narrative or gossip. It could motivate people to join in or leave the conversation (such as Pauline leave in the excerpt 1.2), and it could stop the talk if it is unfavored for the other member(s) of the conversation.

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