

## A COURSE IN CONVERSATION AS CULTURAL PRACTICE

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This paper describes an upper level foreign language course designed to enable students to *learn about conversation* as both a universal and culture-specific form of talk, and to *learn to converse* at an advanced level and in culturally appropriate ways with speakers of French from France and Francophone countries. Students explore both universal and culture-specific features of social conversation, such as listening behavior, selection and shifting of topic, interruption, and overlap. In order to improve communicative skills in French, students learn the technique of conversational shadowing (Murphey, 2001) and practice various forms of response in conversational interaction. This work in theory and practice culminates in the planning and carrying out of a “real-world” conversation hour (Kaplan, 1997) hosted by students in the course for a variety of native speakers of French in the undergraduate institution and surrounding community. An important objective is to foster students’ critical reflection about cultural aspects of communication in all languages, including their own. In addition, the course aims to provide the practice and interaction which are indispensable to conversational fluency and culturally appropriate communication in a foreign language.

### INTRODUCTION

French sociologist Raymonde Carroll, in her landmark study of cross-cultural differences between French and Americans, *Evidences Invisibles* (1987), writes that, according to Americans, the French interrupt constantly in a conversation, finish the other person’s sentences, ask questions and then don’t listen to the answers. Americans, according to the French, answer the slightest question with a lecture, go back to the beginning of time with explanations, and understand absolutely nothing of the art of conversation (p. 44). For the French, social conversation creates and reflects connection between people, whereas Americans place more emphasis on the information value of conversational exchange. The title of Carroll’s book, *Evidences Invisibles*, which can be translated as “obvious but invisible things,” highlights the basic assumptions and values in our own culture(s) which are second nature, and therefore hidden, to all of us as cultural subjects.

Differences in communicative norms (e.g., when and how to start up a conversation, interrupt, or take one's turn) and the values they represent can therefore contribute to cross-cultural misunderstandings. Research has shown, for example, that conversation between speakers of French from France is marked by frequent overlap and animated back and forth, reflecting the values of involvement and spontaneity (Wieland, 1991; Mullan, 2002). Americans and other speakers of English, by contrast, tend to wait for an interlocutor to finish before taking a turn, reflecting a cultural respect for autonomy (Béal, 1993). In French conversation, expression of opinions is extremely important, and exchange of ideas shows commitment to the conversation. Speakers of English from certain cultures, on the other hand, may mitigate opinions in accordance with politeness norms. So, as Carroll writes, it is easier to speak a foreign language perfectly than to "speak" another culture without accent (1987, p. 65).

This paper describes an undergraduate, upper level foreign language course, French Conversation as Cultural Practice, that I developed and taught for the first time in the fall of 2009. My objectives in the course were to enable students to *learn about conversation* as both a universal and culture-specific form of talk, and to *learn to converse* at an advanced level and in culturally appropriate ways with speakers of French from France and Francophone countries. The course focused on raising students' awareness of talk as a cultural phenomenon, and on developing their interactional competence. The second goal entails the enhancement of language proficiency and, perhaps more importantly, what Zaharna (2010)<sup>1</sup> has termed "social fluency."

## LEARNING ABOUT CONVERSATION

At the beginning of the course we discussed the nature and structure of ordinary social conversation and considered how informal conversation as a genre differs from debates, interviews, and other forms of exchange. We talked about the characteristics of social conversation as linguists have defined them (André-Larochebouvy, 1984; Donaldson, 1979; Goffman, 1981; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1996; Vion, 1992): the relatively small number of participants involved, the taking of turns, the spontaneous and non-instrumental nature of the talk, the cooperative rather than competitive mode of interaction, and the symmetrical and egalitarian dimension of participant roles. As a point of departure for discussion, students filled out a short questionnaire, writing definitions of what they considered to be a good conversation among friends and a

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<sup>1</sup> See also article by Zaharna in this Proceedings, "The Associative Perspective of Communication and Relational Communication in the Arab World."

successful conversation between two strangers at a cocktail party or dinner, and what “rules” or norms they could articulate for social conversation in their home culture, including, for example, what topics, if any, might be considered delicate or even taboo. We discussed settings and places traditionally associated with or conducive to conversation in various cultures, such as the dinner table, cafés, or the *salon* in seventeenth century France. In addition, we compared textbook dialogues with transcripts of real talk, noticing many characteristics of natural conversation (false starts, overlap, or repetition) which are omitted from textbook representations. Finally, students learned and practiced vocabulary in French, including specialized linguistic terms and commonly used words relating to conversation and conversation analysis. Students learned to identify salient features of conversation, including verbal backchanneling<sup>2</sup> cues, turn-taking, overlap (e.g., sentence completions), beginnings and endings, silence, selecting and changing of topics, taking the floor, throwing the ball back, and adjacency pairs (greeting-greeting; offer-acceptance; congratulation-thanks). In order to appreciate the culture-specific dimension of many of these features, students read Carroll’s (1987) chapter on conversation, excerpts from linguist Kerbrat-Orecchioni’s (1996) descriptive analysis, Mullan’s (2002) work on engagement in French conversation, Wieland’s (1991) study of turn-taking, and my own study of backchanneling among speakers of French (Knutson, 2009). From these readings students retained the important ideas that for French speakers, involvement and expressing opinions are highly valued, that interruption and overlap are positive signs of engagement, and that French conversation often reflects tolerance for disagreement and even conflict.

Students also attended a lecture by a departmental colleague specializing in conversation analysis and Japanese, who explained the objectives and methodology of conversation analysis as a field of study and provided examples of contrasting norms in Japanese and American conversation.

## Learning to Converse

**Materials.** Following this theoretical introduction to the subject, we moved on to observing and practicing conversation in French. Input materials for noticing conversational interaction can be found in on-line corpora (Beeching, 2009), and transcripts can be generated from television programs or films. In this first iteration of the course, I used data I had collected for a study of listening behavior (Knutson, 2009), consisting of video-recorded conversations between native speakers of French from

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<sup>2</sup> *Back-channelling* is a way of showing a speaker that you are following what they are saying and understand, often through interjections like *I see, yes, OK, uhuh, really?*

France, Switzerland, and West Africa, with transcripts. In these recordings, following the conversations, participants were interviewed briefly about what constituted, for them, a good conversation, and how they knew that someone was really listening to them. Students in the course listened to several of these interviews as well. Two conversation manuals (Bragger & Rice, 2005; Siskin & Krueger, 2001) were sources of audio conversations and interviews, readings on cultural topics, useful expressions and communicative strategies for throwing the ball back, taking the floor, or winding down conversations. Chapters on expressing feelings and opinions and talking about the news were most useful and relevant for our purposes. Newspaper articles and television broadcasts relating to a variety of political and cultural topics were a starting point for expressing a point of view and eliciting opinions from others.

With respect to grammatical structures, I provided explanations and exercises on past narration and use of direct and indirect object pronouns. Importantly and with some dismay, I discovered that all students at this advanced level -- even those with very high oral proficiency -- were more or less unable to narrate using past tenses in conversation. Explaining something that happened and how one felt, and reporting what someone else said (in indirect discourse) are essential to ordinary social conversation. It was an important lesson for me in teaching this course to understand for the first time how much practice even very advanced students still required in these areas.

**Activities.** As stated above, the course was designed to provide the practice and interaction necessary to the improvement of conversational fluency and culturally appropriate communication. Among the more conventional activities in the course were classroom discussion of readings and videos; listening, reading, and writing exercises in conversation manuals; presentation and discussion of current events items from on-line sources such as TV5 ([www.tv5.org](http://www.tv5.org)), Radio France Internationale ([www.rfi.fr](http://www.rfi.fr)) or France24 ([www.france24.fr](http://www.france24.fr)); review and practice of selected grammatical structures; and homework assignments such as the writing of dialogues, narratives, and opinion pieces.

Less conventional activities included free mini-conversations of about five minutes' duration between partners at the beginning of class. Initially students self-selected topics and usually talked about daily life; later I assigned more challenging topics relating to news or issues of the day. I invited native speaker guests to class, including international students and French-speaking faculty from Europe, Middle East, and Africa, who offered perspectives on the nature and value of social conversation in other cultures. I tasked students with conducting and recording interviews assigned with French and Francophone international students outside of class as homework, and they

reported on their interviews, showing short clips of the video or audio material to their classmates.

We learned and practiced the technique of conversational shadowing, in which the listener selectively repeats an interlocutor's words as a form of listening response and uptake (Murphey, 2001). I also created short exercises in which one speaker takes up through selective repetition what another has said and responds, as in the following examples (see Appendix A).

- Exercise 1: A: I went to the movies this weekend.  
B: [Repeat + reaction.]  
Oh, you went to the movies, that's great!
- Exercise 2: A: Everything's so expensive now, don't you think?  
B: [Agree + contrasting statement.]  
Yes, but salaries have gone up at the same time. (Yes, but/  
On the other hand/ That's true, but/ Still...)

As Tannen (1987; 1989) has ably demonstrated, other-repetition in conversational interaction is affiliative of nature and establishes connection between speakers. In terms of language performance per se, repetition of what an interlocutor says allows second language speakers to respond quickly and easily, thereby facilitating fluency and the maintenance of face through participation (Ejzenberg, 2000). It also serves the culturally important goals, in French conversation, of keeping an animated exchange going, and building connection between conversational partners.

Toward the end of the semester, the class hosted a "real-world" conversation hour in the early evening for a variety of invited native and near-native speakers of French, including faculty from various departments, exchange students from Algeria, Tunisia, and Madagascar, and a French art gallery owner from the community. Following a training model developed at the Foreign Service Institute's School of Language Studies (Kaplan, 1997), students prepared for the reception by considering appropriate topics to talk about (Thornbury & Slade, 2006, pp. 263-264), and practicing conversation management and interactional strategies. They were instructed to interact with a certain number of individuals at the reception and to perform various interactional tasks such as joining a group, moving on, introducing a topic, expressing an opinion, and so forth. Not the least of many challenges was the factor of noise, and the need to respond when it is difficult to hear. Students wrote a self-assessment and evaluation of the exercise afterwards, and were encouraged to reflect upon what they noticed about cultural aspects of communication in interacting with guests as well as what they felt they did well, and in what areas they still needed practice. In their evaluations many

underscored the value of using conversational skills outside the classroom and for a sustained period, and expressed enthusiasm about the increased confidence they had gained through the experience.

### **Assessment**

Because this was a pilot course, I solicited input frequently, beginning with a pre-course questionnaire inquiring about student expectations and learning goals, and ending with an exit survey requesting feedback on possible modifications in course content and methods for the next iteration, in addition to the required institutional course evaluation.

To assess students' learning – both knowledge about conversation as cultural practice and conversational ability and performance -- I composed written exams and quizzes on the readings, and, most interestingly for all of us, oral conversations video-recorded at the institution's media resource center. Not only did the recordings facilitate the evaluation process for me, but as a group we enjoyed viewing several of the conversations in class.

A chart of levels of interactional competency, such as the one developed by the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (as cited in Thornbury & Slade, 2006, p. 306), can help both students and instructors articulate objectives and measure progress in the area of conversational interaction. While I did not use an assessment document of this kind the first time, I plan to do so in the future, since such indicators make visible what students might hope to accomplish and what they can achieve by the end of the course. The Council of Europe document, interestingly, provides descriptors of competency levels that focus more explicitly on pragmatics and sociolinguistic competence (including the concepts of positive/negative face and politeness) than do the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines and National Standards (2001).

### **SUCCESSSES**

One of the most successful classroom activities, from both my point of view and that of the students, was a spontaneous conversation in which each participant was assigned a particular role or conversational style (Thornbury & Slade, 2006, p. 293): for example, a person who constantly contradicts what someone else says, a person who always tells an anecdote or joke; a person who is obsessed with one topic and always brings the talk around to that topic; a person who is very interested in what others say and asks a

lot of questions; a person who always agrees with others; a person who constantly changes the topic. I divided the class into two groups of six students, distributed cards with descriptions of each role (in French), and allowed a few minutes for thought. Together we decided on a topic to begin the conversation. Each group carried on a conversation for about fifteen minutes, with the other group as audience. The interaction was lively, engaged, purposeful, and extremely entertaining for all. The entire class period consisted of continuous, equally shared talk and laughter. There was no culture-specific dimension to this activity as designed, and I had decided to try the activity out just as it was the first time. However, interesting cross-cultural scenarios (Americans and French participant roles, for example) could certainly be added to the task.

Students felt they learned a good deal from free mini-conversations with a partner, and whole group conversations about current events. They enjoyed and performed well in short uptake exercises, and, without being prompted to do so, began to incorporate repetition and backchanneling in conversations with partners. Sometimes the repeats they uttered were unnatural sounding, reminding me of how difficult it is to actually produce native-like interactional behavior, and how little it takes to “get it wrong.” In terms of pragmatic consciousness-raising, from students’ exams and discussions it was clear that the idea of variation of conversational norms concerning listening behavior, overlap, sharing the floor, and politeness had particular impact.

Students appreciated the interviews with foreign students; they enjoyed establishing these connections, and a few continued to see their interviewees after the assignment. They were interested in foreigner perspectives, especially their thoughts about Americans. Face-to-face contact (as opposed to watching recordings) made an impression, because it created relationships. One student suggested, for the future, partnering with international students to present projects on topics like conversation in Paris or informal talk among French college students.

A number of students remarked that the course was not what they had expected. Indeed, the term “conversation course” does not usually suggest the study of conversation as a form of discourse or the culture-specific aspects of the genre; more often such a course is a vehicle for speaking practice designed to improve fluency in the foreign or second language. Perhaps some students were at least initially more interested in speaking French themselves than in learning about how French speakers speak. Yet it is my sense, based on what I read in questionnaires and evaluations, that by the end of the course students understood that speaking well requires not just fluid and accurate manipulation of language (structures, vocabulary, syntax), but also

understanding of and competence in culturally appropriate communicative dynamics (staying engaged, jumping in, or showing interest).

### **Caveats and Future Improvements**

In interviews or roundtable discussions, native speaker informants, when asked to compare French and Americans in conversation, may not have given much thought to the question, and more than a few minimized cultural differences for various reasons. As Galloway (2010) suggested, teaching culture is a “messy” affair; it is often difficult to say what is cultural and what is individual. I learned the importance of exposing students to a variety of informants, linguists and non-linguists, experienced language learners and novices, people with extensive experience in other cultures, and those with little. Working with interviewees made me think that the greater the variety of informants, and the more data to work with, the less students might accept as “truth” what any one subject (including their professor) says. The experience confirmed furthermore that open-ended or “bull’s eye” questions (“Tell me about...”), like those used in ethnographic interviews (Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996) often elicit richer responses than highly specific questions targeting a particular behavior or idea.

When students made audio- or video-recordings of their interviews, technology was understandably a significant factor. In the future, I will require students to use media support services rather than personal equipment, so that all recordings are of equally good quality.

I would have liked to incorporate more film, TV programs, or other visual input material into the course; however, a perennial difficulty of teaching pragmatics is the dearth of ready-made materials in any language (Washburn, 2001), and it is extremely labor intensive to research, preview, and subsequently transcribe segments for classroom use. More input materials and research on conversational norms are also in short supply for French speaking countries other than France and Canada.

Finally, other projects or topics I might add to the course include: a unit on electronic discourse, including an e-mail exchange with students in a French-speaking country, or social networking on-line (O’Dowd, 2007); face-to-face interaction via video-conferencing with students from a French-speaking country; a presentation about the history of the art of conversation as art in France (Fumaroli, 1992); and a supplementary module for prospective study abroad students, designed to help them prepare ethnographic projects involving the observation and analysis of social conversation in an L2 environment.

## CONCLUDING NOTE

Interestingly, when international students were interviewed about what makes for good conversation, or what one can talk about with strangers, many said: *Ça dépend* [It depends]. This phrase uttered again and again was an important one for me and my students to hear. Pragmatics is the study of how language is used in specific contexts, by specific speakers, in specific situations. It is, in the end, difficult to say in any definitive way "what French speakers do" when they converse, because there are so many variables to consider (gender, age, situation, geography, to name a few). And even if norms or patterns can be ascertained, they may change over time. For these reasons, Erickson's (1986) advice to "cultivate skills of critical reflection by using them in actual situations of interaction" rather than trying to provide "group-specific performance lessons" (p. 314) is important to remember. If awareness is raised and new schemata created for appreciating the close intersection of language and culture, it is time well spent and, when put into (cultural) practice with real conversational partners, time enjoyed.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Par contre... [On the other hand...]

Quand même... [Even so...]

Modèle:     A:     Tout est si cher actuellement, pas vrai? [Everything's so expensive today, isn't it?]

              B:     Oui, mais les salaires ont augmenté en même temps. [Yes, but salaries have gone up at the same time.]

1.     Il pleut constamment depuis un mois. [It's been raining constantly for a month.]
2.     Ce café est vraiment fort! [This coffee is really strong!]
3.     Le français est si difficile. [French is so hard.]
4.     La grammaire est vraiment ennuyeuse. [Grammar is really boring.]
5.     J'ai mis 5 kilos depuis l'année dernière. [I've put on 5 kilos since last year.]
6.     On ne peut pas garer la voiture près du campus. [You can't park near campus.]
7.     Il peut faire très froid en Nouvelle Angleterre. [It can get very cold in New England.]
8.     Je ne peux pas comprendre l'accent de Pierre quand il parle en anglais. [I can't understand Pierre's accent when he speaks English.]
9.     Jean-Luc est vraiment trop frugal. [Jean-Luc is really too careful with money.]
10.    Elisabeth est toujours en retard. [Elisabeth his always late.]
11.    L'assurance médicale est nécessaire pour tout le monde. [Health insurance is necessary for everyone.]
12.    Les Américains n'ont pas besoin de parler des langues étrangères. [Americans don't need to speak foreign languages.]