Chafe, Wallace

Aspects of discourse analysis

WALLACE CHAFE

ASPECTS OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Abstract

This paper uses a short conversational excerpt to illustrate some of the ways in which the study of ordinary discourse can be not only scientifically but also aesthetically rewarding. The discussion focuses on two considerations of special importance. One is the flow of discourse *topics*, the other the flow of *emotions*. I show how conversations are structured around the flow of topics and subtopics, with the briefest segments, prosodic phrases, expressing momentary foci of consciousness. I point to the fact that the boundaries of *sentences* are inserted "on the run" as people talk, providing evidence that sentences are not direct reflections of cognitively stable units. I then show how emotions may ebb and flow as conversations proceed, and I devote special attention to the feeling of nonseriousness that is expressed with laughter.

Key words

Discourse; topics; schemas; conversation; prosody; emotions; laughter

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When I was a young student, I listened to lectures on music appreciation, art appreciation, and architecture appreciation, and I found them valuable because they taught me to see and hear much more in a work of art than I would have seen and heard without them. In more recent years, perhaps surprisingly, I have had a similar feeling about ordinary conversational language. The more I have learned about the complexities of conversational discourse, the more I have found it not unlike learning to appreciate a work of art. Any sample of conversation is full of so many intermingled complexities that it can rival art as a source of aesthetic pleasure. Here we can examine a short conversational excerpt to view some of the things that make it an aesthetically rewarding object of study, directing our attention to two considerations I believe are especially interesting and rewarding. One of them involves the flow of *topics* in discourse, the other the flow of *emotions*. The discussion is based on my book *Discourse, Consciousness, and Time* (Chafe 1994), but in some respects it goes beyond what was included there.

The data come from a conversation that may appear to be totally mundane – not a wonderful piece of oral literature. What I hope to convey, however, is a sense that even such a mundane example provides significant insights into human mental processes, and conversely into ways in which language is shaped by such processes. This example is excerpted from a recorded conversation between three elderly women who will be called Anna, Irene, and Helen. Anna was 90 years old, Irene was 83, and Helen was 72. None of the three showed any deficits in their mental faculties.

Conversations are, after all, the most common way in which language is used. Humans must have evolved to spend much of their time doing exactly this kind of thing. We could speculate on why conversations should be adaptive from an evolutionary point of view. I suggest that they provide a way for separate minds to connect with other minds so that humans are not limited by their individual experiences, but are able to assimilate experiences of others into their own stores of knowledge. Conversations allow a sharing of many kinds of knowledge, much of it quite trivial although, to varying degrees, people may make an effort to tell things that are in some way interesting to their interlocutors.

The following is a transcript of this excerpt. The first twelve lines, numbered -12 through -1, provide a context for the portion to be discussed, with lines that are numbered 1 through 64. In those lines I have used an acute accent to show rising pitch, a grave accent for falling pitch, a circumflex accent for a rise-fall, and a macron for a pitch that is simply high, without a contour. I have underlined the part of an utterance that has the highest pitch. Boldface shows the loudest portion of an utterance. Lengthened syllables are shown with an equals sign. The smiling face shows a pulse of laughter. Terminal contours at the ends of intonation units are distinguished with a period for a terminal falling pitch, a comma for a rise, a semicolon for a fall that does not fall all the way, a question mark for the kind of high rise that is associated with yes-no questions, and a dash for a level pitch contour at the end.

-12. IRENE	I'm resenting this medicine.
-11.	And I think it's contributing to my problems.
-10.	I really do.
-9.	... I think that .. the .. cardazam is,
-8.	.. I think that the .. diuretic is,
-7. HELEN	... Well now your,
-6.	your ankles were down this morning and your legs.
-5. IRENE	Well yes.
-4.	They are.
-3.	They were.
-2.	... Now look at em.
-1.	... Now they're s ... tight again.

1. ANNA   ...(1.8) **Óh** did I **téll** yóu,
2. IRENE   ...(.4) Nô **whât**.
3. ANNA   ...(.5) that ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺
4.   ...(.8) that the spríng **broke** in my reclînér?
5. IRENE   **Òh** yês.
6.   [1You told us1] thát,
7. HELEN   [1Oh yés,1]
8.   [2you got it fíxed2] [3úp?3]
9. IRENE   [2and .. Dórson's2] [3fíxed3] it?
10. ANNA   [3And3]
11.   and twò mê=n càme în and wrêstled it all over the **flóor**?

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12.   ...(1.6) **À=nd** they fôund òut,
13.   ...(.4) that ...(.9) it was êasier,
14.   .. they went back out the truck-
15.   ...(.4) and gôt a ...(.3) a **whóle** assèmbly,
16.   for **óne** sï=de.
17.   The .. the ...(.3) the
18. IRENE   ...(.7) Mhm,
19. ANNA   .. yòu know mâkes the
20. HELEN   Was **thìs** on the <u>sèat</u> or the [1**bà=ck**1].
21. ANNA   [1mákes the1] fēet go ôut.
22.   ...(2.0) The .. uh the ...(.5) the **fòotrest** goes out.
23.   .. You know there's a ...(1.2) a ...(.4) a ...(.4) **mèchanism** [they have.]
24. ANNA   ...(.5) So they pūt a <u>whôle</u> nêw mèchanism ïn on the sïde.
25. IRENE   ...(.3) Hmh.

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26. ANNA   ...(.2) And **Í** wasn't **prepàred** for them to
27.   ...(1.4) I was <u>gôing</u> to **tīp** them,
28.   ...(.7) but I **wásn't prepàred,**
29.   ...(1.2) to ...(.3) búy the cháir,
30.   [óver agáin,]
31. IRENE   [☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺]
32. HELEN   No ☺ ☺ ,
33. ANNA   so,
34.   I **gâve** em tèn dôllars,
35.   .. but **that's** all I häd.
36. IRENE   ...(.3) Well **thât** was **<u>enôugh,</u>**
37. ANNA   .. **Í guess** that was enough-
38. IRENE   ...(.6) I [guess.]
39. ANNA   [they're] on sàlary with the ...(.3) wīth the

	còmpany ànyway.
40. IRENE	I'm sùre.
41. ANNA	...(1.6) But they were só **jòvial** and and
42. IRENE	.. Yéah.

43. HELEN	.. **Was** [that] sprīng from your s<u>ēa</u>t or the **bǎck**
of your chair.	
44. ANNA	[nìce.]
45.	...(.9) Now **īt** was a ...(.3) a <u>tī</u>ght little sprìng,
46.	...(.6) thàt um [...(.2)] **gòverned** the mêchanism.
47. HELEN	[Mm,]
48. ANNA	...(1.0) And hèld the <u>chà</u>ir **togèther,**
49.	...(.6) when you p=ūt **òut;**
50. HELEN	...(.2) Òh the [<u>fóo</u>trest].
51. ANNA	[the foot foot] rest,

52.	...(1.1) And I tóld
53.	...(.2) wèll I thìnk I tôld you this,
54.	...(.5) I **phôned** her and said,
55.	...(1.0) I don't know whéther I can **sìt** in the
	chair at âll or not,
56.	...(1.3) and Í said
57.	.. and **besîdes** when I go bý it it snâr=ls at me.
58. IRENE	☺ ☺ ☺ [☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺]
59. ANNA	[And ☺ ☺ she] sh shē said,
60.	oh it's all rīght to sìt on it,
61.	.. but dôn't pùt the ...(.3) fòotrest out.
62.	...(.3) (...(.3) ☺ ☺

| 63. HELEN | ... How are we on the— |
| 64. ANNA | ... ☺ ☺ ☺ |

It is important to realize that language is dynamic. Linguists forget that when they work with pieces of language that are written down and divorced from any natural place within the flow of time. Tree diagrams or other static representations of sentences do not show language as it really is. It is more helpful to think of language with the metaphor of a flowing stream. But there are really two streams: one a stream of thoughts, the other a stream of sounds. Thoughts have priority over sounds in the sense that organizing and communicating thoughts is the purpose of language. The sounds are present in the service of the thoughts, and they follow wherever the thoughts may lead. The thoughts are what drive language forward through time and give it direction. But what is it that gives direction to thoughts?

Topics and subtopics

The answer, I think, is *topics* – not in the sense of "topic and comment" or "topicality", but in the sense of "topic of a conversation," or what are sometimes called discourse topics. A topic in this sense is a coherent collection of ideas, introduced by some participant in a conversation and typically developed mainly by that participant, although often by several participants jointly. A topic may then be explicitly closed, or it may just peter out. As long as a topic remains open, participants in the conversation experience a drive to develop it. I like to quote William James on that point:

> In all our voluntary thinking there is some topic or subject about which all the members of the thought revolve. Half the time this topic is a problem, a gap we cannot yet fill with a definite picture, word, or phrase, but which ... influences us in an intensely active and determinate psychic way. Whatever may be the images and phrases that pass before us, we feel their relation to this aching gap. To fill it up is our thought's destiny (James 1890, vol. 1: 259).

A first step in discourse analysis can be to listen to a recording of a conversation with the goal of identifying its topics – segments of discourse during which one or more of the speakers talk about "the same thing." Topics are identifiable in the first place from their content, but usually there are phonetic cues as well: often a longer-than-normal pause before a new topic is introduced; often heightened pitch, loudness, acceleration, or a new voice quality at the beginning, and a tapering off in these prosodic features at the end. And contributions from interlocutors often signal, too, where a topic begins or ends.

There seems to be a basic level of topichood, with topics at that level often included within larger supertopics. Supertopics do not show the internal structure of basic-level topics, and they do not generate the same drive for closure, James's aching gap. Lines 1–62 in this transcript constitute one of these basic-level topics. I have included the end of the very different topic that preceded it, a discussion of medications, lines -12 to -1. Irene was the main speaker in that earlier topic, and there was a pause of almost two seconds before Anna began to talk about the broken recliner.

Anna began by saying *Oh,* suggesting that this topic had just occurred to her, and then she used the trick of drawing her listeners into the topic by asking *did I tell you,* forcing some kind of acknowledgment on their part. Irene had been highly involved in the previous topic as she talked about her medicines, and she was quick to jump in with line 2. If we move to the end of Anna's broken recliner topic, we see that it was dropped after line 62, when all three women discussed finishing their conversation and going to lunch. Thus, lines 1 through 62 constituted a clearly defined discourse unit: a basic level topic.

The person who introduced this topic was Anna, and she was the one who was largely responsible for its development. Irene's contributions are listed in

(1) They were limited to confirmations and agreements and some appreciative laughter.

(1) <u>IRENE's contributions</u>

    5. Oh yes,
    6. you told us that,
    9. and Dorson's fixed it?
    18. Mhm,
    25. Hmh,
    31. ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺
    36. Well that was enough,
    38. I guess.
    40. I'm sure.
    42. Yeah.
    58. ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺

Helen influenced the course of topic development with her question about the location of the spring. Her contributions are listed in (2). Everything else in this topic was contributed by Anna.

(2) <u>HELEN's contributions</u>

    7. Oh yes,
    8. you got it fixed up?
    20. Was this on the seat or the back.
    32. No ☺ ☺,
    43. Was that spring from your seat or
    the back of your chair.
    47. Mm,
    50. Oh the footrest.

When someone introduces a new topic, most of the information within it is either in a semiactive state or is completely inactive, simply because the focus of active consciousness has an extremely limited capacity in terms of both content and the time that is available for it. It is necessary, therefore, to navigate within the topic, focusing first on one included idea and then another. What, then, determines the path of this navigation process? In Chafe (1994) I discussed and illustrated two forces that may guide a speaker (or several speakers) as they progress through a topic. One is reliance on a *schema*, an already familiar path that provides a speaker with a sort of recipe for the ideas to be verbalized and the order in which to verbalize them. The other guiding force may be interaction among the participants, whose questions or provocations can move the process forward.

Schemas are conspicuous in conversational narratives, where they typically lead up to and then away from a climax of some sort: something that is unexpected or otherwise interesting. Often the other participants exhibit their interest by responding to the climax in some way. Anna's topic was a sort of minor narrative. Its climax was her dilemma over whether and how much to tip the repairmen, where she joked about not giving them so much that she would "buy the chair over again," as she said. She did this in lines 26–30, and her listeners inserted laughter in lines 31 and 32. There followed a denouement in which she wondered whether ten dollars was enough, and then a coda in which she commented on the repairmen's joviality and niceness.

If it had not been for Helen, that might have been the end of Anna's topic. But earlier, in line 20, Helen had tried to establish whether it was the seat or the back of the chair that needed repairing. She did not receive an answer that satisfied her at that point, even though Anna must have felt that she made it clear that it was the footrest. Helen held her question in the background for a while, and then repeated it in 43 when Anna showed signs of being finished with her topic, as is evident from her 1.6 second pause in 41 and Irene's acknowledgment in 42. This was an appropriate point for someone else to say something, and Helen took advantage of it. After Helen's repeated question in 43, Anna needed to be more explicit about what needed fixing. Thus, lines 43 through 51 formed a kind of addendum to the main topic, the result of Helen's question.

The topic might have concluded in line 51, but this addendum gave Anna enough time to recall something else. She was able to flash back in time to when she had phoned the company to schedule the repair in the first place. Lines 52 to 62 then formed a small added narrative, which led up to Anna's second little joke in line 57, "when I go by it it snarls at me."

If we return to the main topic in lines 1 through 42, it divides clearly into the three parts which are separated with single underlines. First came Anna's introduction of the topic through line 11, then her description of the repair itself through line 25, and finally her dilemma about tipping, which extended into line 44 and overlapped with Helen's question. The first of these three subtopics consisted basically of an extended question by Anna, divided prosodically into two parts:

Oh did I tell you that the spring broke in my recliner?

followed by:

And two men came in and wrestled it all over the floor?

Anna ended each of these questions with a rise to falsetto voice at the end of the word *recliner* and on the word *floor*. After the first part there was a flurry of recognition and acceptance of this topic by the others.

This *introduction* was followed by a pause, after which Anna introduced the *repair* subtopic: the men going back to the truck and returning with the whole assembly, which they then installed. The fact that this subtopic was a separate item of memory was evident from the fact that it began with a truncated statement in 12–13:

12–13. And they found out that it was easier,

Both the 1.6 second pause and the truncation, as well as the heightened intensity of the word *and,* set off this subtopic from the one that preceded it. This subtopic then ended in 24 with creaky voice (shown with an umlaut) on the words *in* and *side* and the acknowledgment by Irene in 25.

There followed the *tip* subtopic, which followed at first without a pause but then again a truncated false start in 26:

26. And I wasn't prepared for them to

after which there was a 1.4 second pause before Anna pulled things together. In other words, both false starts and an approximately 1.5 second pause set off the beginnings of both the *repair* subtopic and the *tip* subtopic.

There was no reference to Anna herself during the *repair* subtopic in lines 12 through 25, but then Anna reintroduced herself in line 26 at the beginning of a subtopic that was centered on her own anxiety about the tip. The ideas of the participants in a conversation are usually treated as given information, and are expressed not only with pronouns but also with low pitch. In line 26, however, Anna treated the idea of herself as an idea that had lapsed into the semiactive state because of her absence from the preceding subtopic concerning the *repair*. Thus, the pronoun, expressing what I have called accessible information, was given prosodic prominence in both pitch and loudness. The *tip* subtopic also ended with an acknowledgment by Irene: the word *yeah* in 42. Listeners clearly have a feeling for topic and subtopic structure.

The overall topic structure, then, as this conversation finally developed, is summarized in (3): a main topic containing three subtopics, and then two addenda.

(3) <u>Overall topic structure</u>

    Main topic: The Broken Recliner (1–42)
                   Subtopic 1: Introduction (1–11)
                   Subtopic 2: The Repair (12–25)
                   Subtopic 3: The Tip (26–44)
      Addendum 1: The Footrest (43–51)
      Addendum 2: The Phone Call (52–62)

The path that was taken through this topic structure could not have been foreseen when Anna first introduced the repair incident and then her tipping dilemma.

The topic went further because of Helen's question, and then finally Anna's added recall of her clever comment in the earlier phone conversation. Topic development is not at all fixed when a topic is introduced. It is easily subject to modification as things proceed, sometimes as a result of questions, sometimes because of unanticipated memories. There may be something misleading about an outline like that in (4), because it fails to take account of the dynamic and unanticipated nature of what is being created as things proceed.

For that reason I have felt hesitant about calling a transcription a *text,* if that word implies some kind of fixed object. What appears on paper or on a computer screen does not represent something that existed before it was produced, or even something that existed after the conversation was over. It is helpful to record speech on paper or a computer so that we can analyze it, but that should not mislead us into thinking that it has some kind of lasting reality. One sometimes hears that the participants in a conversation are engaged in the joint construction of a text. I think it is preferable to regard a conversation as a way in which separate minds are able to influence and be influenced by each other, managing to some extent to fill the gap between them, not by constructing a lasting object but through an interplay of constantly changing ideas.

Sentences

If one breaks down subtopics into subsubtopics, there comes a point at which one meets what one might want to call *sentences*. There is much that could be said about the status of sentences in conversational language, but I will simply refer to the example that is repeated here as (4), where I have omitted prosodic markings except for the punctuation that shows terminal contours:

(4) <u>A sentence (?)</u>

    45. Now it was a tight little spring,
    46. that governed the mechanism.
    48. And held the chair together,
    49. when you put out;
    51. the foot rest,

What is interesting here is the lack of agreement between the prosody and the syntax, a lack of agreement that is found quite often in ordinary speech. Lines 45 and 46 constitute a perfectly good sentence, both syntactically and prosodically. But then it was continued in the next three intonation units, and finally all of (4) formed a perfectly good syntactic sentence but not a good prosodic one. The partially falling pitch at the end of 49 was unusual between a transitive verb and its object, and 51 did not end with the falling pitch we might expect from the syntactic closure at this point.

Should we then accept syntax as the only criterion for sentencehood? From this example alone it might seem that prosody should be ignored, since without it (4) would be unquestionably a sentence. But prosody does provide valuable insights into the processes speakers employ as they put language together, and it shows how those processes can occur one step at a time. One can say that sentences are formed "on the run," and that is why prosody and syntax do not always match.

It is also relevant that when speakers talk about essentially the same thing on different occasions, retelling something they have told before, they often fail to put sentence boundaries in the same place (Chafe 1998). Again, it seems that what goes into a sentence is decided on-line as people are talking. People proceed to express one idea after another until they reach a point where they suddenly decide that they have come to some kind of closure, at which point they drop their pitch. If they are lucky, they have reached syntactic closure as well, but often they have not. Sentences thus seem not to reflect units of memory, but ongoing and often temporary decisions about closure. In that sense they differ importantly from topics and subtopics, which have a stability across repeated tellings that suggests that they do express units of memory.

Prosodic phrases

If we move down the hierarchy from larger to smaller elements of discourse, from topics to subtopics to subsubtopics, eventually we arrive at a level of organization that is reflected in the way I have segmented this excerpt into separate lines. Each line in the transcript represents a prosodic phrase (or intonation unit), a separate spurt of language that is defined by various prosodic features including pitch, volume, timing, and the presence of pauses. I have hypothesized that each intonation unit – each line in the above transcript – is limited to only one new idea: one idea that is being activated from a previously inactive state.

If you test this hypothesis against any randomly selected piece of discourse, you might think at first that it is constantly being disconfirmed. You might, in other words, find it easy to discover intonation units that seem to contain more than a single new idea. Why the hypothesis is especially useful is that these pieces of apparent counterevidence can lead to the recognition of other phenomena that are themselves of considerable interest. When one takes these other phenomena into account, the hypothesis stands up quite well.

Although verbs sometimes express ideas that are independently new, there is an important subset of verbs that fail to express something new by themselves but *enable* the activation of another idea, so that the combination of this enabling verb plus its object expresses a single idea. Jan Firbas (1992) wrote about verbs that express what he called "appearance or existence on the scene". I have repeated two examples in (5):

(5) <u>Enabling verbs</u>

  15. ...(.4) and gôt a ...(.3) a **whóle** assèmbly,
  11. and twò mê=n càme în and wrêstled it all over the **flóor**?

In line 15 the verb *got* functioned to introduce the idea of the *whole assembly.* 15 is a good example of an intonation unit that contains several content words, in this case *got, whole,* and *assembly,* but can reasonably be interpreted as expressing only one new idea, the composite idea of getting the whole assembly.

    Line 11 is more challenging. The verb *came in* fits well with Firbas's category of something that expresses "appearance on the scene." It enabled the activation of the idea of the two men. In other words, *two men came in* can be interpreted as expressing a single new idea. But there is another problem here. The phrase *and wrestled it all over the floor* is part of the same prosodic phrase; there is no prosodic boundary in the middle of this line. Even if *wrestled it all over the floor* expressed a single event, that event was obviously separate from the idea of the two men coming in, and yet these two ideas were combined in one prosodic phrase. Examples like line 11 are relatively uncommon, but they do appear from time to time. Since the one new idea per intonation unit hypothesis has by and large proved fruitful, is there anything systematic that can be said about such counterexamples?

    With respect to 11 one can entertain three possibilities, which are not necessarily in conflict. For one thing, if Anna told Irene and Helen about her broken recliner on an earlier occasion, she was not going through this verbalization process for the first time. Perhaps telling the same thing to the same audience earlier made it possible for her to include more information in this prosodic phrase. We can notice also that Anna had a lot of time to put 11 together while Irene and Helen were responding in lines 5 though 9. In other words, extra time for formulating language could be another factor that allows intonation units to contain more than they otherwise would. But there is another possibility that has more interesting implications for cognitive processing in general. Let us suppose that the one new idea constraint applies when a speaker is speaking with what might be regarded as a relaxed level of mental energy. Perhaps it is occasionally possible for a speaker to experience a burst of mental energy that goes beyond that relaxed level, allowing the speaker to include more in a prosodic phrase. I have found that unusually large prosodic phrases may occur at two salient places in a discourse. One such place is at the climax of a narrative, where there is an increased level of emotional arousal. Another place is at or near the introduction of a new topic, where the speaker may be stimulated by the introduction process itself. That might be what happened in 11, where Anna's level of mental energy may have been heightened by her decision to talk about this incident. But let us look further at levels of excitement.

    It is interesting to notice that ideas are expressed mainly by the tongue, in its articulation of vowels and consonants. Emotions, on the other hand, are expressed

mainly by the larynx: above all by variations in pitch. To oversimplify a bit, the tongue on the one hand and the larynx on the other hand divide between them the expression of ideas and emotions respectively. The activity of the larynx provides a large uncharted territory for future linguistic exploration, but the following are a few preliminary speculations.

The excerpt we have been examining may not seem filled with emotion. Anna and her friends did not exhibit conspicuous anger or fear or joy. There was not any high drama. But what I suggest is that even relatively low-key conversations like this one are sprinkled with low levels of excitement, which ebbs and flows. Usually this excitement arises first in the speaker but the speaker may communicate it to others, who may find the conversation interesting to the extent that some level of excitement is produced. It is communicated above all through variations in pitch, although there are other prosodic cues as well.

We can look first at a brief segment in which excitement appears to be minimal. (6) shows the beginning of the *repair* subtopic:

(6) A segment with little excitement

    12. ...(1.6) **À=nd** they fôund out,
    13. ...(.4) that ...(.9) it was êasier,
    14. .. they went back out the truck-
    15. ...(.4) and gôt a ...(.3) a **whóle** assèmbly,
    16. for **óne** sĭ=de.

The highest pitch in this segment reached 214 Hz in the word *easier* in line 13, but for the most part the pitch hovered between a little under 150 Hz to a little over 200 Hz. The segment in (6) can be compared with that in (7):

(7) A segment with more excitement

    26. ...(.2) And **Í** wasn't **prepàred** for them to
    27. ...(1.4) I was gôing to **tīp** them,
    28. ...(.7) but I **wásn't prepàred,**
    29. ...(1.2) to ...(.3) búy the cháir,
    30. [óver agáin,]
    31. IRENE   [☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺]
    32. HELEN No ☺ ☺,

The first thing to notice in (7) is that all the peak pitches are higher than any of those in (6), with a maximum of 260 Hz on the word *buy* in line 29, as compared with the maximum of only 214 Hz in (6). Furthermore, the range in (7) extends from below 100 Hz to above 250 Hz, as compared with a range from about 150 to 200 Hz in (6). On the other hand, the average frequencies in these two segments are similar: in (7) 163 Hz, which is actually a little lower than the average of 175

Hz for (6). It seems that Anna's average pitch hovers around 170 Hz in either case. Thus, what distinguishes (7) from (6) is the greater range, extending both above and below a midpoint that is not very different. In (7) there is simply more pitch variation. We hear this greater variation as expressing a greater degree of excitement, arousal, or interest. But how is the content of (7) responsible for this excitement? This segment formed the beginning of the subtopic where Anna told about her dilemma in knowing whether and how much to tip the two repairmen. Thus, she was reporting an anxiety that was missing from her more matter-of-fact account of the repair process itself in (6).

When speakers come to a point of greater emotional involvement it does not need to be spectacular. Even at a low level of involvement they may expect and be gratified by responses showing that it was appreciated, that what they are saying was worth telling. And this was in fact the point where both Irene and Helen responded with laughter in lines 31 and 32. The expanded pitch range in (7) was thus correlated with the level of excitement in the content at this point, and it was taken up and appreciated by Irene and Helen, as confirmed by their laughter.

Irene's and Helen's laughter in 31 and 32 raises the larger question of what laughter does. It is also produced in the larynx, and it is also the expression of an emotion. Many conversations are sprinkled with laughter at many points. In fact it has been pointed out that in daily life laughter occurs more often sprinkled through ordinary conversations than it does as a response to deliberate jokes (Provine 2000; Norrick 1993, Chafe 2007). I suggest that people have a tacit awareness that adding new ideas to another person's store of knowledge can be a serious matter, a mild imposition. Laughter is a signal that the thought being expressed is not something that needs to be taken too seriously. It is a mitigating device that makes imposing ideas on others less of an imposition than it might otherwise be.

The first time there was laughter in this excerpt was when Anna first introduced her topic in line 3, as repeated in (8). Why did Anna laugh here? I suggest that by explicitly removing the seriousness that might otherwise be attached to her account, Anna was, as it were, lubricating the interaction, relieving her listeners of the kind of concern that might be associated with more serious matters. What happened to her recliner was not something important, but something people could enjoy recalling. With this laughter at the very beginning of her topic Anna established a nonserious mood for the topic as a whole.

(8) The first case of laughter

  1. ANNA ......(1.8) **Ôh** did I **téll** yóu,
  2. IRENE ...(.4) Nô **whât**.
  3. ANNA ...(.5) that ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺
  4.   ...(.8) that the spríng **broke** in my reclînér?

The next laughter was that which occurred at the end of (7): Irene's and Helen's response to Anna's mild excitement in lines 31 and 32. Anna made a little joke when she talked about "buying the chair over again." Irene and Helen knew that Anna did not really think that her tip would amount to the original price of the chair. Laughter occurs when something is pseudo-plausible but is at the same time recognized as conflicting with what we know of reality. It is possible to imagine a world in which a false logic would make this possible, but recognizing at the same time that such a world does not conform to what we know of the real world is what brought on the laughter (Chafe 2007).

The third and last occurrence of laughter was in response to another exaggeration on the part of Anna, shown in (9). Irene's laughter in line 58 showed her realization that, when Anna imagined a world in which the chair was a living animal that snarled at her, of course it did not really do that. Anna then confirmed it with her own laughter in line 59. Once it has been established, the feeling of nonseriousness can persist, as you can see where Anna continued laughing in line 62. Humor is contagious, and in (9) we can see Anna and Irene both being affected by it.

(9) The last case of laughter

    57.   .. and **besîdes** when I go bý it it snâr=ls at me.
    58. IRENE   ☺ ☺ ☺ [☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺]
    59. ANNA   [And ☺ ☺ she H] sh shē said,
    60.   oh it's all rīght to sìt on it,
    61.   .. but dôn't pùt the ...(.3) fòotrest out.
    62.   ...(.3) (...(.3) ☺ ☺

We have seen examples of emotions that extended over sequences of several prosodic phrases, but with a finer-grained analysis we can also discover some very localized emotions. We would need to examine many more cases before we could reach any generally valid conclusions, but I will end by suggesting that rise-fall pitch contours are manifestations of localized mild excitement. As shown in (10), in line 34 the word *gave* was pronounced with a rise-fall contour, as was the first syllable of *dollars*. I suggest that this rise-fall pattern expresses a brief, momentary rise in emotional level. In line 34 this increase was superimposed on an already higher baseline. The total effect was to convey Anna's feeling of anxiety over whether ten dollars was enough.

(10) Momentary excitement

   34. I **gâve** em tèn dôllars,

Summary

I have used this example to illustrate the manner in which ordinary conversations are constructed from the flow of topics and subtopics, with the briefest segments, prosodic phrases, expressing momentary foci of consciousness. The analysis of discourse along these lines is discussed further in Chafe (2001). I then showed how emotions can change in the course of a conversation (Chafe 2002), and gave special attention to the feeling of nonseriousness that is expressed with laughter (Chafe 2007).

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Wallace Chafe was employed by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington as a specialist in Native American languages before moving in 1962 to the University of California at Berkeley. In 1986 he moved to the Santa Barbara campus, where he is now Research Professor Emeritus. His research has focused on Native American languages, differences between speaking and writing, the functions of prosody, the nature of humor, and the relation between language and thought. Among his many writings have been the books *Meaning and the Structure of Language* (1970), *Discourse, Consciousness, and Time* (1994), and *The Importance of Not Being Earnest* (2007).

Address: Professor Wallace Chafe, Department of Linguistics, University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, California 93106, USA. [email: chafe@linguistics.ucsb.edu]