Some Considerations on Conversation Analysis

Nguyen Van Tam

Dong Thap University, Vietnam

Abstract

Conversation Analysis is quite a new approach to analyzing spoken language. This paper makes an attempt to review its major strengths and weaknesses. Accordingly, the paper looks at specific examples of Vietnamese language and argues that apart from the noted strengths, one of its major disadvantage is the fact that interlocutors frequently flout conversational maxims may cause trouble for analysts to examine cross-culture talks, which are now arising in the times of global communication.

Key words: Conversation Analysis, strength, weakness, maxim, principle

Introduction: It seems that no one knows exactly when language appears in the world, but it is undeniable that language is considered the most crucial means of communication that human beings employ to communicate together and two common communicative forms of language are spoken and written one. Yule (2014) claimed that spoken language must have existed approximately 100,000 ago before written language (about 5,000 years ago). There are many different concepts of language. While Fromkin (2004) asserted language is the source of human life and power, Kumaravadivelu (2006) considered it system, discourse, and ideology. Therefore, it is not easy to master a language and its meaning. A number of researches have been performed by many linguists with the hope to find out functions, relationships, and meaning of language in spoken and written forms. However, it is a question up to now. With such objectives, linguists have taken many various approaches (e.g. Corpus analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, Genre analysis, Discourse Grammar, Conversation Analysis) to analyze explicit and implicit meaning used in a language by various tools, especially in a conversation with the purpose of helping interlocutors understand each other. This essay centrally aims to analyze the effect of the underlying principles as well as associated tools utilized in discourse analysis, namely in conversation analysis. Simultaneously, the author of this paper will elaborate strengths and weaknesses of this approach.

Paltridge (2006) argued that the relationship between language and context plays a decisive role in communicative process. If a language is used without a context, it simply conveys literal meaning. Take a sentence "it is hot here" as an example. If you read this sentence on the board or in a book, it can tell you a fact or a state of some affairs. However, if it is spoken by someone in a particular setting, it does not simply refer to the temperature,

but requests somebody to open the door or window because the atmosphere in a room may be stuffy. Austin and Searle (1962, 1969 cited in Paltridge 2006) believed that language can be employed to do other functions than describe a state of some affairs. According to Austin (1962, cited in Paltridge, 2006), when someone utters a speech, this utterance will consist of speech acts : locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act. The locutionary act is the saying of something which is meaningful and can be understood (literal meaning of a word). For example, saying the sentence "Shoot a snake", hearers understand the words "shoot, a, snake". The illocutionary act is used to perform a function (such as an order for someone to kill a snake). At last, the perlocutionay act refers to the results or effects that are produced by means of saying something. For instance "Shoot a snake", someone finally will kill a snake.

It is undeniable that language, both spoken and written forms, is the most crucial means of human communication. So far there have been many theories and models about speech and communication. In spoken language, one of the major theories is the co-operative principle (Grice, 1975), which directs us to the understanding and interpretation of what someone says in a conversation. The principle serves as a cornerstone in spoken discourse in achieving mutual understanding between interlocutors and thus, easing communication. However, it is not always the case due to the complex nature of spoken discourse, which results in the violating/flouting of the co-operative principle. And this paper investigates the strengths and weaknesses of Conversation Analysis with cases of Vietnamese language (the native language of the present author himself). And all examples brought in for discussions are regular pieces of daily speech by the Vietnamese.

Strengths of Conversation Analysis

Grice's co-operative principle (1975) is specifically theorized under four sub-principles known as maxims of *quality, quantity, relation* and *manner*.

(i) *The maxim of quantity,* where one tries to be as informative as one possibly can, and gives as much information as is needed, and no more.
(ii) *The maxim of quality,* where one tries to be truthful, and does not give information that is false or that is not supported by evidence.
(iii) *The maxim of relation,* where one tries to be relevant, and says things that are pertinent to the discussion.
(iv) *The maxim of manner,* when one tries to be as clear, as brief, and as orderly as one can in what one says, and where one avoids obscurity and ambiguity.

In other words, the assumptions we make about the meaning and communicative functions from a spoken text lie on the fact that interlocutors make their conversational contribution as required by saying what needs to be said – of being *true, clear, relevant* and *informative* enough – at the specific appropriate point in the interaction and having a reason for saying what they say.

It goes without saying that these maxims are specifically applied spoken language or conversations. With regard to Conversation Analysis, it can be conceived as a specific analytic trajectory which may be used to reach a specific kind of systematic insight in the ways in which members of society 'do interaction' (Have, 1986).

One of the strengths of Conversation Analysis is that the themes in conversations are ordinary and close (Paltridge, 2006). They can be stories, everyday exchanges, negotiations, or social issues. For these simple topics, the interlocutors are not much difficult to have mutual understanding and conversation analysts are easy to analyse speech acts, speech events, conversational implication, or the meaning of a dialogue. A further advantage is that conversation analysts can base on speakers' feelings, attitudes, feedbacks, or repairs to predict what the interlocutors say, while it is very difficult for written discourse because it is simply a text (Lien, 2005). Furthermore, it is the primacy of the source of information, "conversation analysts only concentrate on the analysis of the text rather than consideration of psychological factors." (Paltridge, 2006:108). Another benefit of conversation analysis is less intricate in using grammar and vocabulary. Halliday (1989) held that grammar in spoken language is not by far complicated than written one. In addition, he added "written discourse tends to be more lexically dense than spoken discourse", i.e. the message/information is concise.

One more strength of Conversation Analysis is found by Silverman (1998) as follows:
- Supplying fully detailed transcripts for readers to have easy reference and examination.
- Engaging in sets of data through tape recordings which create favorable conditions for the study of fine detail.
- Achieving reliability based on naturally occurring conversation.
- Addressing the most fundamental details of the interaction rather than depending on the false gloss appearance.
- Being able to study what can be witnessed such as behavior.

In the same vein, Tan & Tan (2006: 347) add that Conversation Analysis can be an effective tool for the analysis of 'interactions between learners and instructors in face-to-face' and heighten 'the social aspect of learning.'

Let's have a look at the following example in Vietnamese between two friends:
(1) - **Tan**: Ê Mai, mình gặp khó khăn cho buổi báo cáo vào tuần sau. Bạn giúp mình được không?
   (*Eh, Mai, I have some problems with my next week report. Can you help me?*)
   - Thuy: Được chứ. Vấn đề gì thế? (*Sure. What is the problem?*)

The dialogue (1) (between Tan and Thuy) shows its compliance with the conversational maxims of relevance, quantity and clarity. When Tan asks Thuy for help, she is willing and enthusiastic to lend him a hand. Through this exchange, it is easy to recognize the "explicitness in spoken discourse" (Paltridge, 2006:16).

Instead of saying in response like *Why do you request me, why not someone else*? Thuy replies "Sure", and thus obviously accepts to help Tan in general terms. In addition, with a question "What is the problem?" the maxim of relevance is strictly observed, i.e. the direction of the conversation goes straightforward to the point, "keeping the ball on move". It also indicates that Thuy does not sound too curious about Tan's problem. This has a close correlation with two other key notions (politeness and face). As we know, when communicating with each other, the interlocutors try to avoid making their partners "embarrassed, humiliated or losing face" (Brown & Levinson, 1987). To make the listener feels good, the speaker often uses politeness strategies by not imposing, giving opinions or putting the listener into an unexpected situation, especially when he or she is in an urgent need. This is one of the significant aspects of human talks. We seek for help by talking to others. Thus the maxim of relevance is one of the basic co-operative principles in human conversations.

Turn taking also plays an important role in Conversation Analysis. Paltridge (2006) asserted that turn taking is how interlocutors manage and take their turn.

(2) - **Thuy**: Được chứ. Vấn đề gì thế? (*Sure. What is the problem?*)

- **Tan**: À bạn biết đó. Một số người cho rằng việc học thêm có nhiều lợi ích. Mình vẫn băn khoăn   về vấn đề này. (*Well, you know. Some people think that extra private lessons outside school hours have many benefits. I am wondering whether it is true or not.*)

- **Thuy**: Ừ, khó có thể đưa ra cho bạn một câu trả lời thuyết phục ngay. Lợi ích ư? Chính xác là gì? (*Yeah, a little difficult to give you a sensible answer. Benefits? Uh, What do you mean exactly?*)

This piece of conversation shows that Thuy and Tan take their turns in exchange. According to Lien (2005), turn taking is also politeness in interaction. For example, one speaker knows how to finish his/her utterance on time so that another speaker takes up their turn. On the contrary, they will be considered impolite, if they talk too much or provide unnecessary information for listeners, which can make them bored.

Weaknesses of Conversation Analysis : Like other approaches, Conversation Analysis has its own downsides. Baxter (2002:853) argued that Conversation Analysis is considered "monolithic" and Hammersley (2003) claimed that it is biased to consider it a self-sufficient tool. He thought that it would be better if conversation analysts were participants not spectators, they will have more objective evaluation. Meanwhile, Wetherell (1998) believed that it would be beneficial if conversation analysts considered post-structural views on discourse the subject positions speakers take up in the discourse rather than just looking at the text itself.

Even Paltridge (2006) stated that Conversation Analysis is the application of 'qualitative methodology', and it is also a 'bottom-up approach, in which the conversational aspects and patterns are derived inductively from the conversation itself'; therefore it often remains unclear how this method can be used to measure possible changes in conversational skills.

Perhaps, one of the major weaknesses of Conversation Analysis is that flouting conversational maxims regularly occurs, which are caused by changeable contexts of cultural communication. Take the following examples (Nguyen, 2000):

(3) Nếu tôi nhớ không lầm thì Chị hương có chồng năm ngoái.
    (*If I am not mistaken, Ms Hương got married last year*)

(4) Tôi nhớ không rõ, chúng ta gặp nhau rồi thì phải.
    (*It seems that we already met before*)

(5) Theo tôi được biết vợ chồng họ không bao giờ nặng lời với nhau.
    (*As far as I know, they never have a quarrel*)

(6) Tôi không dám chắc, họ có vẻ yêu nhau lắm.
    (*I am not sure, but they love each other very much*)

(7) Nói chị bỏ ngoài tai, tính tình của ông xã chị khó chịu lắm
    (*If you don't mind, I tell you that your husband is unpleasant*)

In all above examples, the first section of each utterance (*If I am not mistaken…; It seems…; As far as I know …; I am not sure …; If you don't mind …*) apparently flouts both the maxims of Quantity, Quality and even Manner because these sections are both redundant/unwanted and blur or decrease the certainty of the core information that follows (*Ms Huong got married last year; we already met before; they never have a quarrel; but they love each other very much; your husband is unpleasant*). And thus, it might push the listener into a situation of half belief or on-check information.

Yet, the speakers in these examples still observe the co-operative principle because they make an attempt to utter as much as possible (better than keep silent and cease the conversation in an unexpected ways which may disappoint the listener in one way or another and the speaker himself/herself would not like it in most cases). And for these motivations, daily conversations, though partly flouting the conversational maxims, are going on in all languages.

Have a look at another typical example in which a mother takes her 7-year-old son to go shopping in a supermarket.

(8) Son: Mẹ mua cho con chiếc xe hơi đồ chơi mới đó đi.
        (*Mum, buy that new toy car for me*)
    Mother: Mình có nhiều tiền quá he.
        (*We have a lot of money, don't we*?)
    Son: Con biết rồi mẹ.
        (*I understand, Mum*)

The son wants her mother to buy a new toy car for him and expects her to give a relevant reply, i.e. either "Yes" or "No". But, instead, the mother raises another question, which in normal Vietnam culture implies that the mother refuses to buy the toy for him. And thus, the son asks no more. As a result, though native interlocutors should have no trouble to make sense of the discourse when conversational maxims are flouted in one way or another, this

might make problems for non-native conversation analysts, who would like to investigate cross-culture communication.

Conclusion: In conclusion, it is true to say that the approaches have their strengths and weaknesses and it would be impractical to undervalue one of them. However, the strong points of conversation analysis, in author's opinion, outweigh than other approaches for discourse principles and tools used to analyse the content of a conversation. From the above analyses, it is concluded that language plays an indispensable role in our interaction and the relationship between language and context are considered fish and water. To understand this correlation, it is necessary for conversation analysts to have a specific context, a specific culture, and particular interlocutor. In the scope of this paper, the author tried to sketch out an overall picture of language, especially speech acts, cooperative principles, conversational implicature employed in a conversation and the strengths and weaknesses of conversation analysis. Hopefully that this writing has a great contribution to highlight the underlying principles utilized in discourse analysis, namely in conversation analysis and lays a cornerstone for further study.

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