

On the open secret of language*

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Abstract

Language is not inside speaking but comes forth as a consequence of dialogue and tradition.

Speaking is independent of language

In our halcyon days, some of us were intrigued by the idea of a language machine, sitting in our heads, and cranking out well-formed sentences for us. Linguistics was all about reconstructing the design of that machine. And early psycholinguistic studies (see Greene 1972 for an overview) seemed to corroborate that view, managing to link design features of the machine directly to mental processes.

However, the language machine did not last long. McCawley (1968) fairly soon showed that well-formedness did not result directly from any productive device, but must be understood as conditions on the output of such a device. Grammar, if anything, is a filter on independent productions. And the short-lived experiment of Generative Semantics conclusively demonstrated that well-formedness, if at all a meaningful notion, is inextricably context-dependent (Lakoff 1989).

The obvious conclusion is that humans have a capacity for a particular mode of sound production, speaking, which is appropriated in doing language, but which is not necessarily constrained by established linguistic norms. Activities such as babbling (Lindblom 1997), glossolalia (Samarin 1972, Holm 1996), and sound poetry (Keith 2005, Olsson 2005: ch. 6), where speaking does not adapt to recognized norms, provide further support for this conclusion. It also fits very nicely with MacNeilage's carefully elaborated argument (MacNeilage 2008) that speaking is itself an appropriation of existing action schemata, and evolutionarily independent of language.

Speaking is the iteration of syllables, grouped into intonation units (see Szczepek Reed 2010 and Anward 2010 for a recent discussion), as in (1) below, an extract from a telephone conversation.

- (1) >hejdeee:va.
 hardumammahemma_i<
 (>hi-it-is-Eva.
 have-you-mother-home_i<)

* This is for Björn Lindblom, inspiring partner in many conversations, and prime mover in the quest for a derivation of language from non-language. This article is a kind a précis of a much longer work in progress, called *Doing language*.

In the first line of (1), there are five syllables. One of these, the fourth one, is carrying pitch accent (marked by underlining) and they are bound together by a falling intonation contour (marked by the final period). In the second line, there are six syllables, a pitch accent, and a slightly rising intonation contour (marked by the final inverted question mark).

Language comes from dialogue

So where does language come from? A language, a *langue* in a modified Saussurean sense (Saussure 1916, particularly ch. 4), is a regular outcome of conversation. Conversation is grounded in a natural attitude of humans, a dialogical attitude (Linell 2009), which compels humans to hear a sound as an address and an aboutness, to answer an address with a returned address and a continued aboutness, and to assume that other humans work in the same way as you do.

Participants informed by a dialogical attitude will accomplish activities where they take turns at connected dialogical actions, and where each action is relevant to the one preceding it, and anticipates a relevant action following it. And these dialogical actions serve to update an ongoing social activity, by introducing into it and maintaining there participants and relations among them. Some of these participants and relations are physically present in the activity ('real'), while others are only symbolically present, i.e. they enter and remain in the activity only through linguistic expression.

The result is a conversation, or a dialogue, as in (2), which is the opening of a land-line phone call (recorded by Anna Lindström; see Lindström 1994). Eva calls a neighbour in a practical matter. Bodil, a young girl who is visiting the neighbours' house to play with their daughter Veronika, answers the phone.

(2) Pippiperuk 1, opening

00 ((fyra signaler))
 01 Bodil: >sexsjutvåfyra¿<
 02 Eva: >hejdeee:va.
 03 hardumammahemma¿<
 04 Bodil: näe:.
 (00 ((four signals))
 01 Bodil: >six-seven-two-four¿<
 02 Eva: >hi-it-is-Eva.
 03 have-you-mother-home¿<
 04 Bodil: noo:.)

The first two turns of (2) is a classical example of an adjacency pair (Schegloff & Sacks 1973, Schegloff 2007), where, in the analysis of Schegloff (1968), a first action, a summons (line 00), makes a second action, an answer (line 01), relevant, and where the pair as a whole makes further talk (line 02) relevant. The answer to the summons is not just any answer, though, but an identification, which is accomplished through recital of a telephone number, and this identification, in its turn, makes a second identification relevant. The second identification, by first name this time, follows in the third turn (line 02), and it is preceded by a greeting, which makes a second greeting relevant. However, Eva does not wait for a second greeting. Instead, she asks Bodil to pass on the phone call to an adult, thereby deferring the second greeting by means of an inserted question.

In accomplishing this small stretch of interaction, Eva and Bodil also do a small *langue*. Their unfolding respository of dialogical actions simultaneously unfolds a system of syntagmatically related turns, where each turn is demarcated by a change in voice.

The ensuing system looks like this:

((fyra signaler))	summons
Bodil: >(se <u>x</u> sju tvåfyra)¿<	answer identification
Eva: >hejde <u>ee</u> :va.	identification greeting
hardum <u>a</u> mmahemma¿<	question
Bodil: näe:.	answer

In this way, by taking turns at dialogical actions, participants continuously structure their ongoing conversation like a language (to borrow a formulation from Lacan 1977).

And from tradition

And when participants speak in a tradition, that is, model new conversations on old ones, they provide their conversations with further structuration.

After the phone call, whose opening we saw in (2), Eva makes two more calls, to two other neighbours. The openings of these calls follow in (3) and (4).

(3) Pippiperuk 2, opening

00 ((två signaler))
01 Karin: två noll noll sju två¿
02 Eva: ja hej <u>s</u> an de va >eva andersson<,
03 (0.3)
04 Karin: m[h <u>m</u> ¿
(00 ((two signals))
01 Karin: tw <u>o</u> zero zero seven tw <u>o</u> ¿
02 Eva: yes hi- <u>s</u> an it was >Eva Andersson<,
03 (0.3)
04 Karin: m[h <u>m</u> ¿)

(4) Flintskalleperuk, opening

00 ((två signaler))
01 Sylvia: sylvia¿hh
02 Eva: ja hej <u>s</u> an de va >eva <u>a</u> ndersson:<
03 Sylvia: ja hej:
(00 ((two signals))
01 Sylvia: Sylvia¿hh
02 Eva: yes hi- <u>s</u> an it was >Eva <u>A</u> ndersson:<

03 Sylvia: yes hi:)

It is plain to see that (3) and (4) are versions of (2).

In all three cases, a summons (line 00) is followed by an answer, which is also a first identification (line 01). Then comes a first greeting, followed by a second identification (line 02). And then in (3), like in (2), the second greeting which is made relevant by the first greeting does not directly come forth, but in (4), it does.

But there are also differences between the two openings. The third turn of *Pippiperuk 1* consists of two intonation units:

hejd_eee:va.

and

hardum_ammahemma: <

Through her first intonation unit, Eva accomplishes a first greeting and a second identification. Through her second intonation unit, she cancels the relevance of a second greeting by her current interlocutor.

In constructing the third turn of *Pippiperuk 2*, Eva uses only one intonation unit:

jahe_ejsandeva>evaandersson< ,

Again, she does a first greeting and a second identification, but this time she does not cancel the relevance of a second greeting. This time, Eva is not talking to a child, who she does not want to talk to, she is talking to another adult, a neighbour who not necessarily will recognize her (and in fact does not at first) and who she does want to talk to.

This difference in social relations between the two contexts is indexed by formal differences between the two turns: a more elaborated first greeting, where *ja* (yes) and the suffix *san*¹ are added to *hej* (hi), and a more formal second introduction, which includes both Eva's first name and her last name, and where the tense is changed, from present (*e*; is) to past (*va*; was).

The opening of *Flintskalleperuk* is cast in the same mold, and differs from that of *Pippiperuk 2* only in the placement of the pitch accent in the third turn - and, in the occurrence of a second greeting.

Thus, the openings of these three phone calls resonate² with each other, in that their articulations into turns and intonation units match quite closely. When we align recurrent, i.e. formally and functionally similar, units vertically, in a diagraph format (Du Bois 2004), we see how the openings through this resonance are integrated into one system, where a further dimension of difference, Jakobson's axis of selection (Jakobson 1956: 60), comes into play. This is shown in (5) below.

Dialogical actions are indicated in abbreviated form (a = answer, g = greeting, i = identification, q = question, r = reaction, s = summons).

¹ The suffix *san* is derived from the parenthetical *sa'n* 'said-he', and now serves to strengthen certain interjections.

² For this notion of resonance, see Anward & Lindblom 1999: 14, 27, and 37, and Du Bois 2004.

(5) Pippiperuk 1, Pippiperuk 2, and Flintskalleperuk, openings integrated

((fyra signaler))	s
B: >(se <u>x</u> sju <u>t</u> vå <u>f</u> yr <u>a</u>)ζ<	a i
E: >he <u>j</u> de <u>e</u> e:va.	i g
hardu <u>m</u> am <u>m</u> ahemmaζ<	q
B: n <u>ä</u> e:.	a
((två signaler))	s
K: två <u>n</u> oll <u>n</u> oll <u>s</u> j <u>t</u> vå <u>ζ</u>	a i
E: ja <u>h</u> e <u>j</u> sande <u>v</u> ae <u>v</u> a <u>a</u> ndersson,	i g
(0.3) K: m <u>h</u> mζ	r
((två signaler))	s
S: sylvia <u>ζ</u> hh	a i
E: ja <u>h</u> e <u>j</u> sande <u>v</u> ae <u>v</u> a <u>a</u> ndersson:	i g
S: ja <u>h</u> e <u>j</u>	g

Any such diagraph can be interpreted as a *langue*, that is, a network, or system, of syntagmatically, paradigmatically, and associatively³ related units. Relations of temporal precedence translate straightforwardly into syntagmatic relations, and vertically aligned items are paradigmatically related.

The resonance of the openings also affords further articulation of them, through the application of the following principle, the fundamental ‘discovery procedure’ of structural linguistics (see e.g. Gleason 1961, chs. 5-7; and also Peters 1983: 37, and Anward & Lindblom 1999: 28).

(6) Segmentation

A turn which contains a recurrent part is articulated into that part, a preceding environment, and a following environment.

The recurrent items *två* and *sju* articulate the second turns of (2) and (3) into *sex två sju fyra* and *två nollnoll sju två*, and the recurrent items *hej*, *de* and *eva* articulate the third turns of (2), (3), and (4) into *hej de e eva hardumammahemma* and *ja hej san de va eva andersson*.

3 Associative relations, relations of similarity, in form or meaning, are the system-defining relations introduced by Saussure (1916 [1967]: 170-175) alongside syntagmatic relations. Hjelmslev (1959: 152) proposed to substitute paradigmatic relations for associative relations, but in fact, all three types of relation capture essential features of conversational practice.

And then we arrive at the langue in (7).

(7) Pippiperuk 1, Pippiperuk 2, and Flintskalleperuk, openings integrated

((fyra signaler))	s
B: >(s <u>e</u> x sju två fyra)¿<	a i
E: >hej de e e:va.	i g
hardum <u>a</u> mmahemma¿<	q
B: näe:.	a
((två signaler))	s
K: två nollnoll sju två¿	a i
E: ja hej san de va eva andersson,	i g
(0.3) K: mhm¿	r
((två signaler))	s
S: sylvia¿hh	a i
E: ja hej san de va eva <u>a</u> ndersson:	i g
S: ja hej	g

By taking turns at dialogical actions, and by modelling new conversations on old conversations, participants continuously structure their conversations like a language, along the axes of combination and selection, and down to the level of words and phrases.

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