Sentences as interaction: the function of conditional clauses and its implication in dialogic discourse

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Abstract

Given that sentences in dialogic discourse tend to be interrupted with such frequency that incomplete sentences may be considered a normal phenomenon, I adopt the position that the notion of the sentence should be abandoned as a unit of analysis for spontaneous spoken language. In this article, I investigate the possibility that sentences in dialogues are not always constructed by an individual speaker but are constructed as a product of collaborative effort involving more than one participant. Despite the context dependency or the speaker's preference or politeness in the use of the clause construction, it is possible to extend the function of conditional clauses as the fundamental role of communication in the process of discourse development. That is, when conditional clauses precede, they relate to entities that are topical or given, and play an important role in bridging between the preceding discourse and the subsequent discourse development. I also suggest that this research may be extended into the study of theatrical dialogue, by highlighting a particular sentence construction in particular context, 'conditional clause'.

Keywords: conditional clauses; sentence; discourse entities; collaborative process; dialogue

I. Introduction

This article aims to investigate the correlation between types of discourse entities and patterns of sentence construction in discourse. Sentences in dialogic discourse tend to be interrupted by the interlocutor before they are completed. Incomplete sentences are not an unusual phenomenon in dialogue, and the traditional notion of the sentence in written mode does not automatically apply to utterance units in spontaneous speech. Focusing on the clause constructions observed in exchanges between two participants, I firstly define the utterance unit, and describe types of discourse entities in dialogic discourse. Subsequently, I examine how these discourse entities interact with patterns of sentence construction and how the topics of these entities are established in discourse development. The findings presented here suggest that discourse entities can be realized by explicit referring expressions rather than by implicit referring expressions in a set of utterance units. The result is also compared with one of Harold Pinter's famous drama texts, *The Dumb Waiter*. Finally, I clarify that sentences in dialogues are not always constructed by an individual speaker but are constructed

as a product of collaborative effort involving more than one participant.

II. General issues and specific questions

Given that sentences in dialogic discourse tend to be interrupted with such frequency that incomplete sentences may be considered a normal phenomenon, I adopt the position that the notion of the sentence should be abandoned as a unit of analysis for spontaneous spoken language. This basic view of the collaborative character in dialogue gives rise to the following research question: how are clauses and utterances combined and interconnected with each other? This question may be extended into the study of discourse development, by highlighting a particular sentence construction in a particular context, 'conditional clause': how are conditional clauses used in spontaneous spoken language?

III. Data

The data I use here is part of an experimentally-collected small corpus of eight English dialogues based on maps that do not have written labels to identify the landmarks (called English labelless Map Task Corpus in short). This is a small set of data experimentally collected by a researcher after completing the original Map Task Corpus (MTC).

Originally, the Map Task Corpus (MTC) was compiled as a corpus project in the Human Communication Research Centre (HCRC), University of Edinburgh, UK. The corpus consists of recordings and transcriptions of 128 dialogues produced by speakers of Scottish English. Informants were 64 undergraduates of the University of Glasgow, with a mean age of 20, both males and females (See Anderson *et al*. 1991).

The task involves two participants, one is called *instruction giver* (*giver* for short; *G* or *A* is used in the transcription data) and the other *instruction follower* (*follower* for short; *F* or *B* is used in the transcription data). Each of them is given a specially drawn map to work with, but each participant is not able to see the other participant's map. The goal of the task is that the giver instructs the follower to draw a route, while the follower reproduces this route on his or her own map. Both maps have the same total number of landmarks (11 or 12) which are labelled with their intended names. However, the maps which the giver and the follower have are not identical. The participants are informed that their maps may not be identical, but they are not aware of how they may differ. In addition, both participants have the start point marked on the map, but only the giver

has the finish point.

The dialogue data has another advantage. Significantly, dialogue is more collaborative and more structured than spoken narratives. In this task, the participants cannot speak freely, and the speakers should listen and understand the utterances and intentions of the interlocutors. Nevertheless, the participants are not prevented from speaking spontaneously. Therefore, the MTC represents naturally occurring dialogue data.

IV. Clause constructions in naturally occurring dialogues

What is the basic unit for the spoken texts? An utterance unit is defined as a finite or non-finite clause, but let us briefly survey the definition of sentences in spoken discourse. 'Sentence' is a controversial unit in the analysis of spoken language. A number of scholars attempt to redefine the traditional concept of sentences in different wordings: For example, Halliday (1985)'s 'clause and clause-complex' in written mode and 'information units and tone groups' in spoken mode; In speech, the plausible unit of structure can be defined by intonational or paralinguistic information, such as Quirk *et al.*(1985)'s 'tone unit', Chafe and Danielwicz (1987)'s 'intonation units', and Brown and Yule (1983)'s 'utterance units by pauses'. In computational linguistics, Grosz and Sidner (1986) introduce the notion that an 'utterance unit' is a minimum unit of discourse structure and one utterance unit contains 'a center of attention'. Miller and Weinert (1998) finally end up with commenting'…the notion of the sentence should be abandoned as a unit of analysis for spontaneous spoken language'. Furthermore, Biber *et al*. (1999) illustrate a variety of different functions of linguistic category in spoken English from those in written modes in their corpus findings. I must define an utterance as any expression containing referring expressions to meet my need, and describing utterance unit with the information of pauses and overlaps can help to make the data more reliable.

Then, is it a crucial factor that the types of discourse entities can depend on the way participants collaborate to judge the most salient entity in particular patterns of sentence construction?   For example, in the following extract, utterances TA3 and TA5 by the same speaker are two utterances rather than one single sentence broken by the speaker TB4:

(1)

*TA 3: if you go down to the bottom left hand corner of your page,

*TB 4: Aha.

*TA 5: do you have a van?

<div align="right">(Lleq4c8)</div>

TA3's utterance is syntactically a conditional clause followed by TA5's non-subordinate interrogative, but functionally, TA3 is performed as an instruction implying the follower's acceptance *Aha*, which serves to introduce a new entity *a van* in discourse.

Here is another example:

(2)

*TA 61   If you go {a t} between the mountain and the trees.

*TB 62: Right.

*TA 63: And then you go down below the trees towards the right hand side,

<div align="right">(Lleq4c9)</div>

The problem arises as to whether this is the same type of exchange as the previous example: Are these two clauses (or two utterances) or one sentence interrupted by the interlocutor? Stirling (1998) discusses the grammatical status of this type of isolated *if*-clauses functioning as directives. He analysed this directive isolated *if*-clauses as minor sentence types rather than 'incomplete' or 'elliptical' sentences, and concluded that 'in many respects they behave like independent clauses, and crosslinguistic evidence supports the hypothesis that they may be in the process of conventionalization as main clause usages' (292).[1] I focus on the function of these conditional clauses in the dialogue data, and explore how they are combined and interconnected with discourse and pragmatic factors.

V. A case study: types of conditional clauses

Three types of conditional clauses were chosen for this study:

Type 1. conditional clause + main clause

Type 2. Main clause + conditional clause

Type 3. Standing conditional clause only

Here is a typical example of Type 1:

(3)
*TA 63: < If you go round the right hand side of that, so that you can then draw a line straight up on the right hand side of the derelict /
*TB 64: Right, okay.
*TA 65: building. >

<div align="right">(Lleq4c8)</div>

The conditional clause is followed by the main clause *so that* construction. The whole sentence construction is completed before the interlocutor's back-channels, *Right*, *okay*. Here is a typical example of Type 2:

(4)
*TA 267: {n laugh} Only not climb over it, but sort of draw a line {n laugh} along the west side of it, if you understand what I mean.

<div align="right">(Lleq4c1)</div>

The examples of Type 3 are the cases where the conditional clause has no main clause, so it stands alone:

(5)
*TA 78: Well, are you able {a t}... If you bring your line up the right hand side, and bring it round and over.
*TB 79: < Those funny objects, sort of buildings, /
*TA 80: Yeah, up over the top of it.
*TB 81: ruins, things. >

<div align="right">(Lleq4c2)</div>

Here new entities are willingly introduced by the instruction follower's turn-taking (TB79) without completing the sentence construction. Another example of Type 3 is given below.

(6)
*TA 126: And from there do another loop round, downwards to the bottom of the page, so it loops down below the {a bla} … below the giraffes, and stop that loop at the end of the third giraffe.
*TB 93: {m mmm} Okay.
*TA 94: If that seems remotely clear.

<div align="right">(Lleq4c3)</div>

Rather than an afterthought, the conditional clause here seems to be added with the new information supplemented after the TA 126's previous utterance that explains the specific direction, and the main clause 'stop that loop at the end of the third giraffe' are briefly confirmed by the interlocutor's back-channels, so this type is considered as Type 3.

VI. Results

In this section, the three types of conditional clauses used in the English Map Task dialogue are counted, and the result is compared with the result from Miller and Weinert (1998)'s original Map Task dialogues, which is presented as follows: Out of 83 *if* clauses, 59 examples are T3.
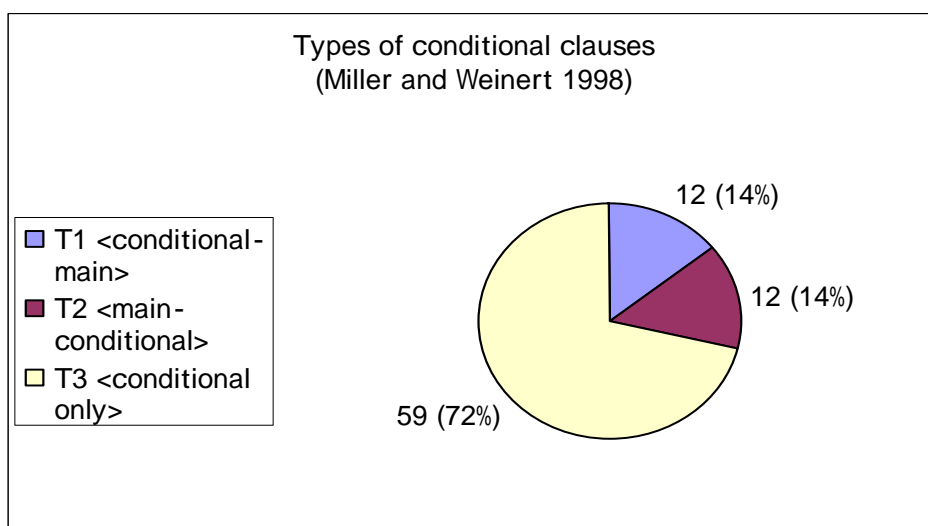

Figure 1. Types of Conditional Clauses in English MTC (Miller and Weinert 1998)

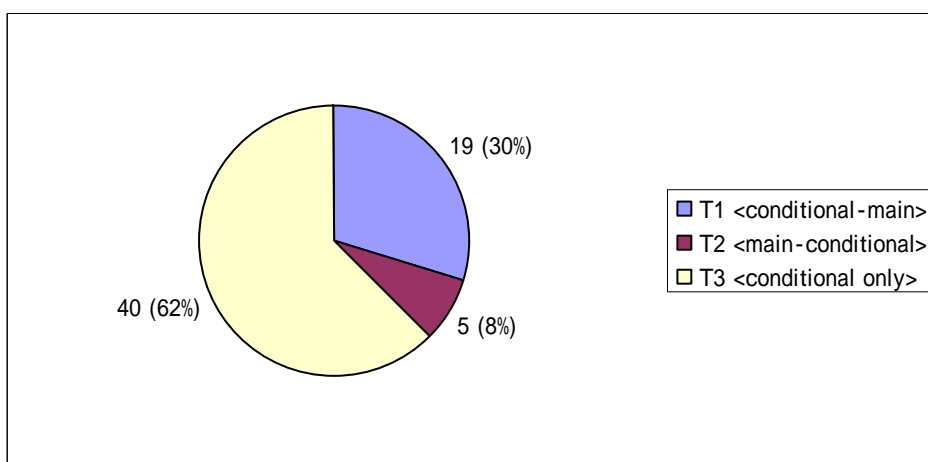Then, our own results are the following: Out of 64 *if* clauses, 40 examples are T3.

Figure 2 Types of Conditional Clauses in 8 English Labelless MTC

In both sets of data, examples of Type 3 are the most frequent in number.

VII. Functions of conditional clauses

Based on the result of the dominant frequency of Type 3, it can be valid to mainly focus on the function of this type. As shown below, there appear to be three functions of conditional clauses in the dialogues: (1) Collaborative instruction, (2) The introduction of new entities by the interlocutor, and (3) Checking and instruction. Let us consider these respectively.

The main function of Type 3 conditional clauses that stand alone is collaborative instruction or mild order:

(7)
*TA 49: {m erm} If you just draw a line along the bottom
*TB 50: Of the page?
*TA 51: < Yes. Until you're level with where /
*TB 52: right
*TA 53: the diagram is. >
*TB 54: Okey dokey.

(Lleq4c2)

Here the instruction follower (TB) also takes turns from the instruction giver before completing the utterances and gives back-channels in a collaborative way. So, given that the instruction is collaborative, new entities can be introduced by the interlocutor as follows:

(8)
*TA 78: Well, are you able {a t}... If you bring your line up the right hand side, and bring it round and over.
*TB 79: < Those funny objects, sort of buildings, /
*TA 80: Yeah, up over the top of it.
*TB 81: ruins, things. >
*TA 82: Right.
(Lleq4c2)

Instructions are frequently combined with a checking function, as shown below:

(9)
*TA 32: If you're
*TB 33: yeah.
*TA 34: level with the left hand side of that.

*TB 35: Right, okay, right.
*TA 36: And then if you go up and round the top of that... of the farm, so
    that... And stop just at the end of the farm on the right.
*TB 37: Right, okay. Right.

<div align="right">(Lleq4c8)</div>

The checking function preceding the instruction serves to confirm the direction the participants understand and that they are doing the right thing. Incidentally, in example (10) the instruction giver starts checking, but immediately changes the construction into a direct question:

(10)
*TA 157   Right. If you... Do you have a cross with a {c finish}?
*TB 158   No.
*TA 159   Right. Do you have a... a... I don't really know what it is, it looks
    like a...
*TB 160   Got a level crossing or something, like a fence.

<div align="right">(Lleq4c2)</div>

The false-start shifts to the question of introducing a new landmark, which is refused by the follower in TB 158 and then the giver in TA159 attempts to introduce another landmark in the same direct question. This shift may indicate the giver's confirmation about the search for manageable entities.

The findings so far may be summarized as follows:

1. Conditional clauses that stand alone can function as instructions or mild orders.

2. This type of instruction implicitly requires back-channels from the interlocutor.

3. Conditional clauses serve to set up a background for introducing new entities into the discourse.

Here arises a question: Are conditional clauses genre-specific? The answers may be yes for the function of Type 3, but in general this type of clause is not uncommon in spoken language. Miller and Weinert (1998) propose that the function of this type can play an important role as 'a link to the preceding text or to the immediate context of utterance and is given' or as a 'scene-setting' function (102). The example is quoted below:

(11)

A1: what what sort of thing do you get disciplinewise in your family

B1: it's not bad my dad he doesn't say a lot but you know if ***I say something*** it's
always my Dad that'll come and give me a row but he's not that strict really
you know I can predict what he's going to say it doesn't bother me that much

(102)

The conditional clause in B1's utterance sets the scene for the subsequent narratives about the father's attitude. It may be possible to generalize the role of conditional clauses in discourse in the process of discourse development. That is, when conditional clauses precede, they can indicate a topic shift to a new stage of segment or episode and play an important role in bridging between the preceding discourse and the subsequent discourse development. Biber et al. (1999) correctly comments it as 'cohesive function' Thus, Type 3 functioning as an instruction can be directly related to the immediately subsequent discourse, which provide a background for introducing a new entity as first mention.

It is true that Type 3 conditional clauses are more frequent than other types in English MTC, but it is difficult to assert that Type 3 is 'typical' in the MTC. Let us return to the frequency of the three types of conditional clauses, where this time I present the frequency of the individual eight dialogues, respectively:
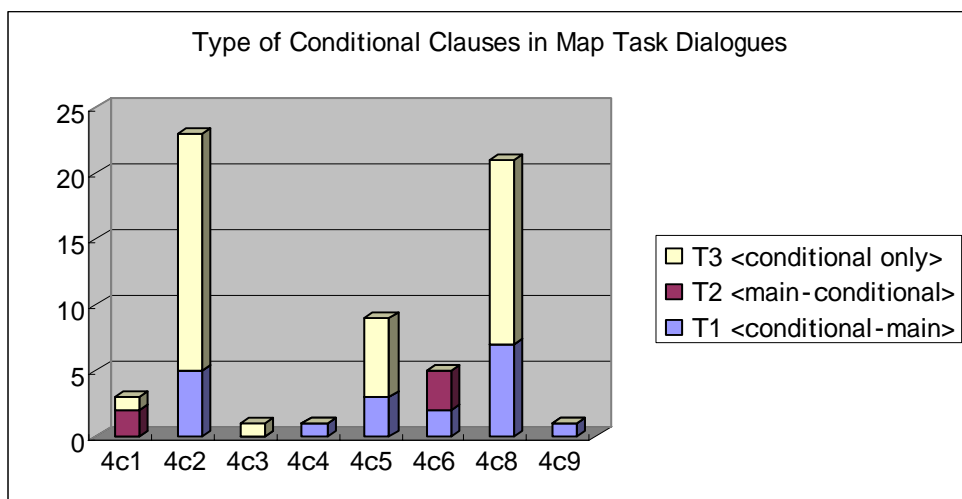

Figure 8.3. Types of Conditional Clauses

in 8 English Labelless MTC (individual)

There are dialogues that contain a small number of conditional clauses: In five dialogues, 4c1, 4c3, 4c4, 4c6, and 4c9, out of eight, the number of conditional clauses is less than five examples in each dialogue. Thus, it is obvious that Type 3 conditional clauses are not exclusively available in introducing new entities in discourse. Instead, the use of conditional clauses can depend on the speaker's condition whether the pair is familiar or not familiar each other. This is because Type 3 conditional clauses functioning as a mild order or instruction are strongly connected with politeness.[2] That is, the unfamiliar participants, especially the instruction giver, are likely to instruct the interlocutor in a more polite way. Therefore, as is already shown, the main constructions used for initiating a new entity are realized by questions and imperatives. Incidentally, these constructions can be combined with conditional clauses, but are not always. Here is a typical introduction of new entities with a non-conditional clause:

(12)
    TA 139: Right. From there, can you go about three centimetres west. Have you come to sort of, sort of like a {a c} canoe shed or something. It's got like a boat shed or something. I don't know what it's like a
    TB 140: Yeah, but I'm nowhere near that.
    TA 141: {n laugh} Are you near the coast? Have you got a coastline?

VIII. A Note on the Comparison with the Dialogue in Drama

I have seen the pattern of clauses that are relevant to the way the participants introduce a new entity in discourse. However, are new entities always introduced like this in the dialogue? While the patterns of NPs can vary exclusively in naturally occurring discourse, there may be different patterns of use in introducing new entities in the dialogue in different contextual settings. In this section, let us briefly draw on the dialogue in one of the literary texts: Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* Whereas new entities in the Map Task are fundamentally introduced as indefinite NPs entities, in other words, entities that are 'not shared', new entities in ordinary conversations are introduced as either shared or not shared. In this specific text, conditional clauses are not used with a similar function, except for rare example like Type 2. In contrast to MTC, it may be interesting to note that some discourse entities are introduced promptly by pronouns in The Dumb Waiter. In example (13), the pronoun *he* is shared and contextually evoked between the two participants:

(13)
GUS: What time is *he* getting in touch?
(BEN reads.)
What time is *he* getting in touch?
BEN: What's the matter with you? It could be any time. Any time.

<div align="right">(DW:38)</div>

The drama text is not the mirror of the naturally occurring dialogue in real life, but it is believed to reflect some typical patterns of discourse processing. Here Gus's question is delayed and ignored. This pronoun *he* is a first-mentioned entity that recurs from time to time in the course of discussions between the two participants without identifying its referent, because the entity is mutually shared in that *he* means their boss, Wilson.

Another example shows the use of a pronoun *him* that is shared, and the explicit expressions *the last one* and *that girl* that have no identifiable referent in the immediately preceding discourse in example (14):

(14)
GUS: There are a number of things I want to ask *him*. But I can never get round to it, when I see him.
(Pause)
I've been thinking about *the last one*.
BEN: What last one ?
GUS: *That girl*.

<div align="right">(DW:52)</div>

Gus is a junior partner in crime, and Gus rather than Ben keeps asking questions about numerous things, and then suddenly introduces new entities by the use of demonstratives and pronouns that are not mutually understood. Three examples are shown here:

(15)
GUS: Have you noticed the time *that tank* takes to fill?
BEN: What tank?
GUS: In the lavatory.
BEN: No. Does it?

<div align="right">(DW:39)</div>

<div align="right">11</div>

(16)
BEN: Well, what are you waiting for?
GUS: I want to see if *they* light.
BEN: What?
GUS: The matches.

<div align="right">(DW:48)</div>

(17)
GUS: (entering) *It*'s going.
BEN: What?
GUS: The stove.

<div align="right">(DW:49)</div>

NP *that tank* (15) and pronouns *they* (16) and *It* (17) have no antecedent in the immediately preceding discourse, but they are evoked in the situational context that the participants are currently involved.[3] It is natural that uncertainty of the specific reference can be cleared up in the course of exchange in normal spontaneous conversation. Especially, the interpretation of pronouns requires a great deal of cooperation between the participants (Biber *et al*. 1999). I quote these examples as the ones that would definitely occur in the real conversation. Instead, it would be imaginable that if this pattern is repeated considerably frequently, the sense of collaboration can be seriously lost.

IX. Conclusion

Focusing on the function of conditional clauses and its implication in discourse development, I investigated that sentences in dialogues are not always represented by an individual speaker but are constructed as a product of collaborative effort involving more than one participant. Clause constructions function differently from genre to genre, and there is a significant difference between written and spoken languages and even between similar genres such as non-literary and literary dialogues. Conditional clauses are not the exception. Instead, it is illustrated that there are three functions of conditional clauses in the dialogues: (1) collaborative instruction, (2) the introduction of new entities by the interlocutor, and (3) combination of checking and instruction, and these can be directly related to the immediately subsequent discourse development. Despite the context dependency or the speaker's preference in the use of the clause construction, it is possible to extend its interpretation as the fundamental role of conditional clauses in discourse in the process of discourse development. That is, when conditional clauses precede, they relate to entities that are

topical or given, and play an important role in bridging between the preceding discourse and the subsequent discourse development. Finally, the pragmatic implications of NPs in initial and subsequent mentions largely depend on the collaborative process of the participants in dialogues. I assume that the phenomena cannot be genre specific to Map Task dialogues but recur in various types of spoken discourse. Further work could usefully consider whether these processes are predicted and likely to underlie other uses of language as well.

Notes

[1] Stirling (1998) considers these *if*-constructions to be minor clauses based on mainly three reasons: the isolated *if*-clauses (1) are prosodically complete, (2) cannot be analysed as elliptical, and, most importantly, (3) have the effective illocutionary force of an indirect request. The meaning of directives about (3) will lead to the explanation that these directive conditionals 'may belong to a chain of formulations of the same directive, involving more direct commands as well as the indirect *if*-clause directive' (290) , which is relevant to the common features in Map Task Dialogues.
[2] This point is indicated by James Hurford (personal communication).
[3] Clancy (1980) reported that there were a variety of reasons for the use of pronouns or ellipsis in introducing a new referent. The use of pronouns in English is usually caused by the momentary distraction or confusion of the speaker who forget briefly about the needs of the listener. On the other hand, he points out that 'Japanese introductions using ellipsis seemed to be based on the speaker's presupposition that the listener was familiar with the character in question' (145).

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