
Abstract

This chapter provides us with an overview of the role and function of the chairperson, at both CPs and other, agnate, conference speech events. Advice regarding preferred approaches to chair discourse, as well potential problems areas, will be discussed.

23.1 Overview

In one of the few published works focusing upon the roles and functions of the conference free paper/parallel session chairperson, Langham (2007) lists a number of chair speech functions. These are paraphrased and listed in Table 23.1:

Generally, the CP chairperson's duties are handled by experienced senior members of the discourse community, who are usually accomplished English speakers or otherwise prominent in the academic field. As such, most are international conferencing veterans, familiar with the accepted discourse norms associated with their role. While the above-listed items all represent speech-act eventualities that might concern the chair, they do not amount to a canonical or synoptic overview of a typical chairperson's role.

In my observations, the most typical functions of the chair included many listed in Table 23.1 but the most common among these were:

- (1) welcoming the audience to the session and introducing the speakers
- (2) keeping time and warning or interrupting if the speaker's allotted CP time is not being maintained
- (3) thanking the presenter(s) upon the completion of the CP
- (4) marking the transition into the DS

Table 23.1 Speech functions of a presentation session chairperson (adapted from Langham, 2007)

Opening a session
Introducing yourself as chair
Stating the title of the session
Stating time limits
Asking audience to switch off their mobile phones
Introducing a speaker
Asking a presenter to conclude a presentation
Stopping a presentation
Thanking a speaker
Inviting questions immediately after the presentation
Inviting more questions midway through the Q&A session
Nominating questioners
Controlling difficult or awkward situations (technical, temporal, or social)
Aiding a presenter who cannot answer a question
Asking a questioner to speak more loudly or clearly
Stopping questions/answers that are too long when there is little or no time for Q&A
Asking questions (from the chair) when there are no more questions from the audience
Transitioning to the next presentation
Announcing cancellations or organizational/managerial information
Closing a session

- (5) indicating DS procedures including requests to state one’s name/affiliation, whether it is necessary for the discussants to move to an open microphone, and keeping questions succinct and to the point
- (6) when questions or comments were not forthcoming from the audience, the chair often provided a question, usually a soft one (which requires the chairperson to pay close attention to the content during the CP)
- (7) cutting off overly lengthy comments from the floor as well as helping to clarify comments for presenters uncertain about some aspect of the comment (a common occurrence for NNES presenters)
- (8) formally closing the DS and the session(s) as a whole, and thanking both presenters and participants.

However, it is often the case that relatively new members to the community are asked to take the role of the chair, and occasionally those who have some reservations about their English abilities are given the honors. In such cases, the chairperson may employ English that is either awkward or unsuited to the situation, a phenomenon that might be magnified due to the visibility and status associated with the chairperson’s role.

The following sections include some of the problematic areas I have noted that such prospective chairpersons may want to consider.

23.2 Overelaborate Introductions and Closings

Terms like ‘wonderful’ or ‘outstanding’ should not be used lightly in English. These forms of praise are quite intense and, if used too readily or bunched together, the uptake might not be one of admiration or respect but could actually come across as forced praise at best, mockery at worst. One example:

Thank you, Professor Wu for your brilliant, wonderful presentation.

Unless Prof. Wu’s presentation was indeed one of the very best the chairperson has ever seen, this may be interpreted more as sarcasm than as praise. Another overelaborate introduction I noted (all names have been changed) was:

Dr. Patel is one of most brilliant doctors in his field, a world-class surgeon, and a truly magnificent colleague.

The above utterance sounds more like a teary award speech or a dramatic testimonial rather than an introduction at an academic conference—although it might be appropriate for introducing esteemed celebrity academics. Otherwise, it may seem as if the speaker is trying too hard to convince the audience of Dr. Patel’s greatness. Less effusive praise might be preferred:

Pre-presentation: *As you may know, Dr. Patel is one of the leading researchers in the field of...*

Post-presentation: *Thank you for that very interesting presentation, Professor Wu.*

Based on the synoptic formulae, I observed in 44 FP/PSs, chairperson introductions could be reduced to a generic template, the following of which might be considered a canonical structure:

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, welcome to _____ session. My name is _____. I’ll be serving as the chair for this session (along) with [cochair’s name]. I’d like to introduce our first speaker Professor X from (affiliation). His/her talk/lecture/presentation is entitled X.

It might be noted here that a title (*Dr., Professor*) might be preferable to using ‘*he/his/her*.’ Also, in some cases, the presentation title need not be stated, particularly if the presenter is an invited or keynote speaker and or the title is prominently displayed on the screen. Chairs should also note that lengthy biographies or lists of

achievements should accompany only the most celebrated speakers. Some presenters I spoke with expressed annoyance at the chair explicitly detailing their (often modest) academic achievements and, on some occasions, claimed that the chairperson actually ‘stole the thunder’ of the speaker by stating data that the presenter wanted to address by him or herself. In very short FP/PSs, lengthy chair introductions can also take up the speaker’s valuable time.

23.3 Violations of Tenor by the Chair

In several cases I observed, the chairperson fluctuated between using both formal and familiar language, with rather jarring results. One example (again with the names changed) occurred as follows:

Our next speaker is Dr. Kim Kyung-Sun from Seoul National University’s department of Obstetrics and Gynecology who will talk about (presentation title). Dr. Sun, start your lecture.

Shifting from the formalized introduction to the imperious, ‘*Start your lecture*’ (or, likewise, ending with ‘*Now we’ll stop*’—which was observed on three occasions) is a major chairing faux pas indeed—a rather blunt example of tenor code-switching. Telling the presenter to ‘*start*,’ in the imperative voice, is more redolent of a workplace superior or a parent talking to a child. Instead, the most effective way of signaling a speaker to start would be, after providing the required introductory information, to simply say, ‘*Dr. Kim...*’ and gesture with an open hand for Dr. Kim to start. Once again, less is better.

Further, prospective chairs should note that a presentation does not equal a ‘lecture.’ The term ‘lecture’ often carries a negative connotation in English, the image associated is that of a speaker reciting a monologue from a position of power or superiority. A lecture is not thought to be interactive nor presumed to be a meeting of equals.

Finally, moderators and/or chairs should be hesitant to cause any interruption to the presenter. Suddenly adjusting lights, the microphone volume or position, or moving around the room for any purpose is very distracting for speakers, and often interferes with audience enjoyment and comprehension as well. Unless the problem is indeed weighty (which would include addressing speakers who have gone overtime), a ‘less is more’ rule would again apply.

23.4 Using Address Forms

Readers may have noticed that I have written ‘*Dr. Kim*’ in the example above, which is different from the questionable introduction made in the negative example that preceded it. I have deliberately done so in order to help bring to light another point of concern, using appropriate address forms.

Which is the presenter’s family name and which is their first, or given, name (or even middle name)? The chair or other host speaker should generally refer to the family name alone in a formal introduction. If one is not sure which is the family name and which is the first or middle name (in many languages and cultures, this distinction is not always clear), it is incumbent upon the host to ask the guest in advance. Could you imagine introducing Stephen Hawking as Dr. Stephen?

Readers should also note that many programs will list the presenter’s names in the formal written order, which is often distinct from the standard spoken order. This can be perplexing for delegates from East Asia in particular (as well as their international counterparts interacting with them).

For example, my formal written name (as on my passport) is Guest, Michael Robert. Guest is my family name. Ideally, I should be called Professor Guest in an introduction, not Professor Michael or, even worse, Mr. Robert (my middle name.) Korean and Chinese names are almost always written in this order, so a Dr. Kim Kyung-Sun should be duly referred to as Dr. Kim.

If in doubt, the chairperson should always ask the presenters for accurate name pronunciation and/or preferred address forms in advance of the session. Personally, I am not very fond of being addressed as ‘Ass. Professor Guest,’ as has occasionally occurred.

23.5 The Role of the Chair in Symposia/Colloquia

The role of the chairperson in symposia will tend to be slightly more elaborate than that employed for standard CPs. A synoptic example opening of a symposium from the chair typically included the following elements:

1. *Greeting*
2. *Welcome*
3. *Introduction of topic/themes and participant*
4. *Explanation of format or procedures*
5. *Introducing the first speaker.*

The following is a symposia/colloquia chair template based on several examples that I observed and noted:

Good afternoon and welcome to the seminar, entitled X. Our four speakers on the topic today are Dr. X from Y (etc.) First, each of the four invited speakers

will address the topic of X for ten minutes, after which there will be open discussion between the four speakers. Following that, we'll take questions and comments from the audience, and finish with a final short comment from each of the speakers. So first, I'd like Dr. X to open the proceedings. Dr.?

On several occasions, the chairperson also outlined the seminar theme in the introduction, largely to establish its relevance, novelty, or scope. In just under half of the cases observed, the chair also introduced him/herself. Below are five other notable moves based on my observations involving recurring patterns of speech made by the chair in symposia/colloquia, which can be summarized synoptically as follows:

1. Indicating a transition of speakers/participants:

Thank you Dr. X. Now I'd like to ask Dr. Y to take the platform/stage/podium/mic. Dr.?

2. Switching modes to a more open discussion among symposium/colloquium participants:

Thank you. Next, I'd like to invite open discussion between the four panel members. Dr. X, would you like to address any of the points made by the other panel members?

3. Switching modes to open discussion from the floor:

Thank you for your comments and thoughts, Professors. Next I'd like to open the discussion to the floor, so if any audience members have a question or comment please feel free to stand up and ask.

4. Offering thanks and salutations:

I'd like to thank everyone for taking part in this symposium, particularly the four panel members who gave their time to share their thoughts with us today. Let's give them a round of applause.

5. Official closing:

And with that, I'd like to close the symposium. Thank you for attending.

23.6 Introducing a Workshop

A workshop might be described as a 'horizontal' speech event in that the accepted mode is more interactive, with the audience expecting to participate actively. Workshops usually involve a demonstration or hands-on practice, often by utilizing pair or group work, or some other interactive format offering practical skill development or contents holding immediate pedagogical value. Workshops rarely involve elaborate introductions, and the tenor is generally more informal than in CPS or seminars. In most cases, the workshop is not managed by a chairperson but

by the workshop leader him/herself (invited seminars covering the same field will tend to employ a chairperson).

One of the very few introductions made by the chair to introduce a workshop leader that I observed took place as follows and might serve as a suitable template for workshop openings:

Thank you for choosing to attend this workshop. Leading the workshop today, entitled X, is Dr. X from Y. So, doctor, I'll turn it over to you.

The explicit use of 'turn(ing) over' the room to the workshop leader served as a very succinct and effective transition of turn-taking and power sharing.

Questions and Exercises for Chapter 23

1. What are the five typical steps included in the chairperson's managing of a symposium or colloquium?
2. If a presenter's listed name is Badr al din Abboud, how should the chair introduce the speaker? What precautionary steps can be taken to avoid any embarrassment or address form misunderstanding?
3. In what situations do you think it is acceptable for the chair to interrupt a speaker?
4. What amount of detail should be included when introducing FP/PS presenters? How will this be different from the introduction of keynote or plenary speakers?
5. What responsibilities does the chair have when managing CP discussion sessions?

Reference

Langham, C. S. (2007). *English for oral and poster presentations*. Tokyo: Ishiyaku.