The Academic Conference Social Dimension

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Abstract

The social side of conferencing eludes simple discourse or genre analysis. However, members of the discourse community will typically make use of these occasions to establish or cement relations. Networking is considered by many to be the primary reason for conference attendance, but the nature and content of the spoken discourse employed will depend upon the varied goals, relationships, and immediate environment of the participants. In this short chapter, a few central features of this dimension, particularly the triangulation of extemporaneous conference talk alternating between 'general English', formulaic academic phrases, and specialist terminology, will be discussed.

A few years ago, I was helping one of my Japanese medical colleagues to prepare for an upcoming research sabbatical in the USA when I asked him what his greatest concern or worry was. Would it be his ability to keep pace in English in the fast-paced world of the clinician, I wondered? Would it be his ability to keep abreast of clinical developments at meeting and in-house conferences? Or might it even be the daily stresses of operating with his family in tow in a foreign milieu? Answer: None of the above. The doctor told me that his biggest fear was the welcome party scheduled for soon after his arrival (Fig. 24.1).

He was petrified of not giving a proper self-introduction, and particularly of saying something unseemly or culturally inappropriate. '*I don't know what to say to the other doctors at the party,*' summarized his fear. Lack of confidence in his interpersonal competence (or, possibly, cross-cultural competence) was paramount in his mind.

Since such parties are generally expected to be informal affairs, I was surprised at the gravity with which he was treating this seemingly (to me) minor event. I told him that self-introductions of the 'let me tell you all about myself' variety are largely English classroom exercises and that English actually had very few set formal phrases established for such occasions (unlike his L1, Japanese). As such, it would actually be hard to say the 'wrong' thing. His greatest enemy in this case

Fig. 24.1 Conference social events are difficult to codify, yet they are essential arenas for interaction

would probably be giving too much forethought, overplanning what to say—with the result that it might come across as mechanically scripted. I told him that after a standard 'thanks,' an opening such as:

> *I'd like to thank Dr. X for inviting me/for this party/for his kind words and I look forward to…*

Anything beyond this should be improvised and natural because sentiments coming from the heart, even if delivered in flawed English, would be considered more suitable than a fully prepared, scripted response—particularly if the speaker is using a second language where they may feel uncomfortable establishing an appropriate level of formality. Having said that, there are several gambits that I overheard being used effectively while starting or managing conversations around conference banquet tables, product displays, or while attendees viewed posters—as well as an equal number that did not seem to be as effective.

Not surprisingly, the largest chunk of academic conference discourse takes place away from the CPs, plenaries and keynote speeches, poster sessions, and symposia. I am referring to the bonding, cementing, networking, discussion, conjecture, consultations, and simple 'shop talk' that mark the many real-time, unscripted interactions between attendees before or after sessions, during coffee and snack

times, or over lunch, the type of discourse that Swales (1990) categorizes as a 'pre-genre'.

Many of these interactions are between colleagues, old friends and acquaintances, or other familiar faces. In such cases, rhetorical moves and discourse patterns can vary to the point where little or no generic code can be identified, as they depend upon the exigencies of the type and length of relationship. Where existing relations inform the interactions, explicit topic markers are often dropped, discourse purposes may be unclear (such interaction being more a matter of personal communion than of goal-directed academic discussion), and shifts in the discourse will usually be more subtly marked.

On the other hand, many interactions involve new relations, speakers hitherto unknown to one another: presenters with audience members, spontaneous talk arising from peer proximity, audience members keen to discuss the field with those who attended the same session. When interactants are unfamiliar with each other, or at least not on fully collegial terms, certain patterns do emerge from the spoken texts.

One aspect of the function of new introductions involves giving one's name. Surprisingly, this can easily become an area of confusion if not managed well. Unless one has a generic name that would readily be grasped by any listener with a fundamental grasp of English, one would do well to clearly separate and enunciate their names, or indicate how they wish to be addressed, and this spoken form can be reinforced by indicating the written form as business cards are exchanged (very common in many Asian cultures). Names in 'unfamiliar' languages can all too often become an acoustic blur to interactants, resulting in occasional awkward or potentially embarrassing encounters using inappropriate or grossly mispronounced address forms.

Helpful touchstones in understanding this dimension are Halliday's (1985) three metafunctions of language: the textual, the ideational, and the interpersonal. The textual function language refers to the grammatical forms that create cohesion between clauses in discourse and is closely aligned with mode. The ideational function refers to the experience in which the grammatical choices allow interactants to construe meaning or the logic which connects semantic units, and is related to the concept of field. The interpersonal function includes those forms used to mark relationships between the speakers and is closely connected to mood. These include fleeting micro-encounters, as well as the more complex semiotic relationships and more highly structured institutionalized interactions. The various types of extemporaneous spoken interactions at academic conferences see a constant shifting between the prioritization of these metafunctions (although Halliday's claim is that all three metafunctions are extant in all language use).

Particularly notable in my observations of these pre-genre interactions was a shift within the ideational metafunction, particularly as manifested in that triangulation of specialist terminology, formulaic academic phrases, and general English that we discussed earlier. Whereas the spoken mode of CPs tended to balance these three metafunctions, and the written slide CP texts largely reduces; instances of general English (except to retain grammatical functions), impromptu discussion among conference attendees tended to accentuate the use of 'general English'—although specialist terms that mark insider discourse were still being widely deployed.

Much of this can be chalked up to the difficulty of maintaining an academic register in unplanned face-to-face real-time interactions. The demands of immediacy give rise to the increased use of approximants ('*sort of, like*'), lower-register terms ('*We noticed it was really high*', as opposed to '*We observed elevated outcomes*'), and vague, reformulated, and/or incomplete phrases ('*So, it was yeah, we were happy, satisfied, you could say*'. '*Well that's a little hmm Ok…*'). A greater number of discourse organizers ('*Know what I mean?*' '*Ok, so we're talking about…*') and explicit stance markers ('*I have no idea about…*' '*We've got to find out…*') were also commonly used markers of these highly interactive social sessions.

These forms were used without the same sense of violating the expected standards of the academic discourse community that they would have if they had been used during a CP. This is because prepared speech demands greater precision in terms of lexical choices, while unprepared spontaneous, real-time speech allows for these to be substituted by more imprecise forms, forms that can be negotiated in real time or interpreted indirectly through more prosodic or paralinguistic interactive features.

However, it must be noted that even in these spontaneous unscripted interactions most interactants still tried to maintain an academic tenor. Formulaic academic phrases and specialist terms still tended to be deployed, even outside of the formalized academic speech events, within the wider conference social environment. In such interactions, there remained a greater usage of academic lexis than one would expect to hear outside the conference venue, as participants strove to mark themselves, and maintain their identities, as members of the academic community.

Questions and Exercises for Chapter 24

1. What are the social or environmental factors that might influence a speaker's choice regarding the degree of academic English used in extemporaneous conference discourse?
2. If required to provide some type of self-introduction during impromptu conference conversations, what information would you include? What factors would influence or alter your choice of introduction form or content?

References

Halliday, M. A. K. (1985). *An introduction to functional grammar*. London: Arnold.
Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.