

What Makes for Lively Conversation? A Comparison of Dialogues and Monologues

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Abstract

With a view to creating a more effective syllabus and materials for conversational English classes for EFL learners, the present study attempts to identify what makes a conversation interactive, lively and cooperative. Our hypothesis is that the interactive factors and elements of conversational English will remain when the linguistic features that are shared by both dialogues and monologues are taken away from dialogues. Although this was suggested in Anna-Brita Stenstrom (1990), the notion has not been actively pursued.

The BNC demographic component (four million words), comprising spontaneous face-to-face conversations, was utilized as a sample of dialogues and a total of 106 files (about one million words) comprising oral history interviews and lectures were selected from the BNC context-governed component to represent monologues. Log-likelihood measures were employed to reveal lexical items and phrases that are particular to either dialogues or monologues.

Results show that there are crucial differences in the frequencies and varieties of discourse markers, hedges, expressions of vagueness, intensifiers, expletives, modality elements, adverbial adjuncts, conjunctions, and epistemic verbs. For example, while “lovely” and “really” are characteristic -ly adverbs of dialogue, “certainly” and “clearly” have the highest log-likelihood scores in favor of monologue. The findings also indicate that turn-taking and turn-yielding expressions are found predominantly but not exclusively in dialogues.

The main conclusion drawn from the study is that classification and examination of the differences will yield an inventory of resources which speakers utilize to make their conversation interactive, lively and cooperative. The inventory is useful not only for EFL teachers in terms of authentic materials and curriculum design but also for linguists interested in interactional aspects of language.

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