THE INFORMAL COUNSELLING SEQUENCES AS DIALOGIC GESTALT

Ilaria Riccioni

Introduction

This paper is based on a series of research projects carried out on an extensive corpus of naturally-occurring conversations. These research projects, begun around seven years ago, have led our research group to single out and analyse, among others topics, a particular dialogic situation which is clearly recurrent in informal interactions. We have named it *Informal Counselling* (*counselling amicale*). This designation was chosen since the phenomenon shared some structural analogies with situations found in professional counselling. (cf. § 2.1). Once the research programme in question had been set up (Zuczkowski 2004), it developed over the following years (Riccioni & Zuczkowski 2005; Riccioni 2006) and is still in progress today.

Interest has been focused on some structural recursivity which seems to show this dialogical phenomenon and which permits us to study it as if it had a dynamic and internally organized Gestalt. Features such as speech acts, conversational roles, interactional results and so on have been considered closely.

As we will attempt to demonstrate, the situation in question has distinctive characteristics which make it easy to recognise and single out in the conversational flow: a kind of dialogic Gestalt which is segregated from the broader background of *everyday talk*. The dynamic Gestalt is self-organizing due to the implicit and reciprocal negotiation of the pragma-linguistic choices and dialogic roles of the interlocutors involved.

This study is aligned both with research carried out in the theoretical-methodological context of Conversation Analysis (CA) on the phenomenon known as *troubles talk* (Jefferson & Lee 1981; Jefferson 1984, 1988), and with other interactional linguistic studies working in the same field (Traverso 1996).

CA is not only an important reference point for scholars studying interactional phenomena, but in my opinion, for many reasons it could be considered a phenomenological approach to conversation. CA uses a rigorous method and is based on the systematic observation of everyday talk (*conversation*)[1] from which structures are singled out. These are organized in a dynamic and autonomous way at different levels[2] within and through the interaction. It is a method which systematically rejects introspective and motivational interpretations that give an account of "why", focusing

---

[1] The term *conversation* refers to everyday talk, produced in mainly informal situations in which two or more participants take it in turns to speak. Conversation is an activity co-produced by the participants, the meaning of which is continually constructed and negotiated through the interaction.

[2] The main distinction is between *organization at a global level* and *organization at a local level*. The first refers to the global structure of a conversation (from the *opening* to the *closing phase*, passing through the *intermediate phase* in which the *topics* are developed); the second refers to interactional strategies carried out turn by turn (micro-sequence level).

instead on "how", in other words, on the description of the phenomenon established by the empirical data. In this way, analysis shows that the internal organization of a conversation does not take the form of a theoretical construct, but describes a strategy actually followed (and implicitly recognised) by the participants.

This paper will analyse the organization of Informal Counselling sequences at macro-structural and micro-structural levels.

Our research is focused in particular on:

1) the internal structures of the Informal Counselling sequences;

2) the friend-counsellor's conversational roles in the context of this dialogic structure;

3) the "advice-giving" both as a speech act and as a conversational structured activity.

1. The Reference Corpus

The research is based on a broad corpus of naturally-occurring informal conversations, collected in the course of the last seven years by the Centre for Research in Communication Psychology at the University of Macerata.

The most notable feature of this corpus is the fact that conversational partners are, in most cases, people relationally bound (friends, partners, parents-children, siblings, other family members etc.). The age of the subjects then is fairly variable, even though interactions between peers (university students) are the most prevalent. The conversations belong to fairly heterogeneous types: dialogues in which 'this and that' is spoken of or a specific topic (university life, friendships, love, gossip, plans, sport, TV etc.) but also other types in which the relational component is more evident such as the exchange of confidences and "intimate" communication. (Zuczkowski 1999, 2004) There are also those which are latently or openly conflictual, including real quarrels. (cf. Bongelli, Canestrari, Riccioni in this number).

In most cases two people are involved, but there are also quite frequent instances of conversations with three or more voices. Above all the interactions occur face to face with only a few telephone and chat line conversations. The geographical and cultural area from which the interlocutors prevalently come is limited to the Centre-South regions of Italy.

2. Informal Counselling as a Dialogic Structure

A distinctive recursive dialogical structure emerges from our corpus. Apart from individual characteristics of the conversational partners (age, sex, social-cultural status etc.) or the relationships between them (friends, girl/boyfriends, married couples, family members, colleagues etc.), they very frequently produce particular dialogic sequences typified by the sharing of a general focus: a personal problem of one of the participants (more or less "intimate", more or less important). It is to this conversational activity that we have given the name *Informal Counselling*.

From a global viewpoint we can single out three principal phases within the sequences:

a) An *opening phase*, in which the "problem" is introduced and around which the discussion will revolve. This type of linguistic action is often carried out by the person who has the problem; in some cases, however, it can be the interlocutor who brings up the subject or asks for it to be discussed. The opening of these sequences may be "intentional" or "chance". In the first case, "the problem" seems to be one of the basic reasons behind one of the participants starting the conversation. In the second case, the subject may come up suddenly and quite by chance, while people are talking about this and that in a "neutral" way, guided by the association of ideas and subjects that are typical of informal conversations. The problem in question may be something "new" and therefore will lead the speaker into quite long narrations and explanations; on the other hand it may be a problem already known to the interlocutor: various clues in the dialogue may suggest the references to the *histoire conversationnelle* of the interlocutors involved (Golopentia 1985, 1988).

b) an *intermediate phase* in which the interlocutors share the problem as a communicative focus. This is the most variable phase as regards duration, linguistic actions carried out by the participants and, obviously, the subjects dealt with. One of the most obvious structural factors to be noticed is the participants' assumption of complementary roles. The study of these sequences suggests that the person who is talking about a personal problem usually seems to have two fundamental aims corresponding to the assumption of two dialogic roles which are often mutually exclusive: 1) talking about the problem in order to obtain an opinion on the situation or some advice; 2) talking about the problem simply to give vent to one's feelings, seeing the interlocutor more as having an "attentive ear" and a "warm heart" rather than being an advisor. The interlocutor takes on the complementary role of confidant (Traverso 1996)[3].

c) a *closing phase*, in which the parties interrupt their conversation or shift it onto another communicative focus. Within these sequences it is possible to observe other recurrent dialogic structures at a micro-sequential level. Some of the organizations typical of this level will be dealt with in the following paragraphs.

2.1 *Informal Counselling* **versus** *Professional Counselling*

In the Introduction I mentioned that the expression Informal Counselling, which I use to describe these dialogic sequences, derives from analogies with professional counselling. Both in *informal* and professional *counselling* there comes a point in which "both people or just one of the two, either more or less implicitly, ask themselves the question 'how do we get out of this', that is, how they can solve the problem" (Zuczkowski 2004, 13, trans. by the auth.). Yet if the principal duty of the counsellor is to "help the patient make autonomous decisions based on his capabilities and strong points, in order to resolve the problem" (Zuczkowski 2004, 123, trans. by the auth.), in *Informal Counselling* it is clear that very often the confidant tries to "solve the problem for the other person", offer solutions and has a strong tendency to use the technique of *advice*.

---

[3] This role, as we shall explain in the following paragraph, can be divided into various types which often differ greatly and have important effects on the outcome of the conversation (Riccioni, 2006).

3. The Dialogic Roles of the *Informal Counsellor*

It has been said that in these types of sequences the interlocutors tend to take on, in general terms, two complementary roles: *"confider"* (the person who is talking about their particular problem) and *confidant* (the person listening to the disclosure).

Our corpus shows how the role of confidant can assume characteristics and express attitudes which differ markedly. Within this generic role, we can single out various options open to a speaker and therefore the different conversational roles that he/she can assume. These roles are constructed, defined and negotiated in the course of the interaction. The assumption of these roles seems to wield a strong influence over the reactions and over the relational and interactional attitudes of the "confider", and as a result over the outcome of the conversation. In Gestalt terms, we can say that the role taken on by one party (confidant) influences the relationship between the parties (the confidant -"confider" relationship) and the entire Gestalt (Informal Counselling sequences).

In this case, the confidant can, for example, fill the role of *container* (a participating and empathetic listener who reacts to the venting of emotions by showing support), or else they can drop this role in order to reclaim, in different ways, their own space, offering themselves: a) as a *"confider",* thus shifting the focus onto themselves and their own problems which are of a similar nature; b) as an *ally*, clearly taking the side of the interlocutor against the "source" of the problem (an event or a third person); c) as an *advisor*, who may offer guidance or be more pressing; d) but also as an *opponent* who lacks understanding, is abusive, critical, disparaging etc.

Within the same dialogic sequence it is even possible for the confidant to pass from one of these roles to another.

3.1 Relational Proximity and Intrusiveness

The study of a notable number of Informal Counselling sequences, has led us to suppose that there is a link between relational and emotional proximity and the tendency to "intrude" and actively intervene in the interlocutor's discourse, sometimes ignoring the most basic rules of *politeness* (Riccioni 2006). The characteristics of this "intrusion" can be examined both from the formal point of view, for example, with the active entrance into the interlocutor's conversational space by frequent overlaps which often are followed by an interruption (Bongelli 2005), but also with questions or other interventions that can guide or divert the conversation etc.; and from the content's point of view, for example, entering the interlocutor's "territory", by expressing opinions and taking sides both in support of and against the other, offering guidance and making suggestions that can even go as far as being direct criticisms or lectures.

It seems to be a fairly evident phenomenon that the rules of *negative* and *positive* politeness (Brown, Levinson 1987) in conversations between family members are restructured, "adapted to the relationship" and, generally, made "more flexible". It seems as if the disclosures of the people with whom we are "in confidence" permit us to extend and enlarge our sphere of influence both over the interlocutor's *private life space* as well as over his *conversational space* (Riccioni 2005).

At the point when the interlocutors' reciprocal roles, interactional attitudes and behaviour alters, these sequences can demonstrate different results. These range from a reciprocal display of understanding and relational proximity to conflict and verbal dispute, passing obviously through intermediate stages.

As already mentioned, our data show that one of the "favourite" roles of the confidant appears to be that of the *advisor.* The following paragraphs are therefore dedicated to the analysis of this role and the structured dialogic activity linked to it.

4. Phenomenology of the Speech Act in *Advice Giving*: Syntactic-Grammatical and Semantic Aspects

A speech act which is immediately recognizable as advice can use a series of very different superficial structures. I am going to present a few and illustrate them with examples taken from the corpus[4].
In general, an interlocutor can suggest that another person should do something by using expressions such as:

a) *declarative*, hetero-centred as in (3),or *auto-centred*;
b) *interrogative*, as in (2);
c) *imperative*, as in (1), (7) (8) (11).

If the primary speech act (Searle 1975), both for the speaker and for the interlocutor is to give advice, then one might reasonably suppose that the choice of formula used would make a difference not only to the speaker's intentions (regarding just how much they want the other person to follow their advice), but also with regard to the impact produced on the interlocutor.

When imperative or interrogative structures are used, from a grammatical point of view the subject of the sentence is usually YOU as in the following example:

```
(1) Alba: But if you ask me, wait a bit because this stress will go away
now, little by little,
```

An imperative expression can be formulated positively so that it takes on the structure of an order or negatively so that it is literally a prohibition. Interrogative formulas are very often expressed in the negative: a typical opening to this type of advice is *Why not*, as in the following example

```
(2) Sara: Yes, but why don't you call me on these occasions?
```

Whereas declarative structures, being more versatile, mean that advice can be given in a less "intrusive" way, in the form of guidance, at least at a superficial level.

They are therefore more *polite*, as can be seen in the following example:

```
3)Sandra: Until you ask him a precise question, you can never get a
reply.
```

---

[4] Naturally I'm dealing with a partial rather than an exhaustive phenomenology drawn from the conversation data in my possession and which we might assume is intrinsically linked to it in many ways.

These can be centred both on the YOU of the interlocutor and the I of the speaker. But cases that have a generic or indeterminate referential index cannot be ruled out (e.g. people, one etc.), as in the following example:

```
(4) Mum: You've played at making him even more annoyed though, haven't
you? You're in this too, you know! (.) One who doesn't want to reply says
"At the moment Dad I don't want to talk about it. Let's go back to it
another time. I'm too tense now" (…) At this point he got even angrier!
```

Nor can the use of impersonal forms (e.g. it is necessary, it is better, one can, one should etc.):

```
(5) Sara: Oh, all right, it'd be better if you called me now and then.
```

The time frame is generally *present* or *future. Hypothetical sentences* are also fairly common[5]. *Modals verbs* are very frequently used (must, can, will/would), particularly must:

```
(6) Alba: But you know what you have to do, actually, must do:: when you
need to let go of yourself and cry you must do it because anyway if you
don't, how's it going to help,
```

As regards contents' aspects, if we choose the "focus" of the advice as the discriminating factor, we can observe advice centred on *doing*, linked to some practical action which the "confider" must carry out:

```
(7) Simona: Ok, but call her then! (…) It won't be like having her here
next to you but (.) at least you'll hear her.
```

or on *thinking:*

```
(8)  1. Mara: Yes, but thi::nk, think about the fact that::,
         anyway you're working, and doing well::, a moment to
         find some amusement, to maybe::, to some pro[blems that] IF =
     2. Serena:[If only I had been!]
     3. Mara:= YOU'D BEEN AT HOME LIKE YOU WERE LAST YEAR, (.) YOU
         WOULD HAVE GOT EVEN MORE DEPRESSED.
```

or on *feeling***:**

```
(9) Francesca: […], but certain things you just have to accept. You
shouldn't take them too seriously.
```

From the point of view of interpersonal psychological orientation, the advice can be "partisan". The confidant can take the side of the interlocutor against another person:

```
(11) Sabrina: […] I mean, you can't always limit yourself just because
he doesn't feel like doing this, doesn't feel like doing that, always at
home, I mean, what a drag!
```

---

[5] In Italian there is a variation in this structure, either the subjunctive and conditional are used or in spoken language the imperfect indicative followed by the imperfect indicative.

But the confidant can also take the side of a third person against the interlocutor, as in the following fragment, which also shows the reaction of rejection which can frequently be observed in similar cases:

```
(12)  1. Lucia: OK Vale but you:: try and understand her, she might
         well be:: [STRESSED],
      2. Valeria: OHLUCI'!]BUTI'MSTRESSEDOUT TOO […]
```

5. Advice Giving as a Structured Dialogic Activity

At times advice is fairly explicitly requested, as in the following example:

```
(13)Fiamma: But do you think it's right to involve him?
```

However, cases in which advice is not asked for are very much more frequent. At times, as in (14) the advisor throws in the sponge and is aware of the fact that his/her suggestions will not be acted upon. She is also aware of the essential character of these suggestions which excludes the element of constraint for the interlocutor (Poggi & Castelfranchi 1990)[6]:

```
(14) Sandra: You must get out of this house, you must get to know other
people, you can't always be thinking about Alessio twenty four hours
a day, it's a limiting, without Alessio you'd be worse off than before.
You must find other interests, I'm not talking just about people, other
things too, not necessarily other people:: one should feel OK on one's
own, then people are just an extra, fuck it! (..) If I tell you these
things but you don't believe them, what can I do for you? Can I get them
into your head? I can't do a thing,
```

Quite strong "resistance" to the offer of advice is frequent and ranges from lack of recognition (the interlocutor continues to talk about his/her problem, in self-continuity, as if he/she didn't acknowledge the advice for what it is) to a direct refusal. This may be partial, and in this case, indicated with discourse markers such as "*yes, but*", "*ok, but*", "*yes, ok, but*" etc., which indicate and anticipate the expression of disagreement. On the other hand the refusal may be total.

Some authors (Jefferson & Lee 1981; Jefferson 1984, 1988) have analysed sequences of this type within the theoretical context of CA and have named the phenomenon *troubles talk*. It is a phenomenon organized in sequences where, as a rule, the parties take on the complementary roles of *Troubles Teller* and *Troubles Recipient*. These authors also noticed that in these situations the activity of *advice giving* can create problems in the conversation. In fact, the roles of *Troubles Teller* and *Advice Giver* are not *properly aligned* because: a) they both occupy the general category of *Speaker*; b) they do not share the same focus on the problem which is the subject of the discussion. The first focuses on him/herself and on the emotional experience which is causing trouble whereas the second focuses on the problem and features of the problem that have to be solved. According to the above-mentioned authors, the

---

[6] The advisor's speech act in itself does not oblige the person who is being advised in any way. The advice is just a disinterested suggestion which the addressee may freely choose to accept or not.

reason why advice meets with great resistance is due largely to questions of lack of alignment and untimeliness rather than the quality, relevance and applicability of the advice itself.

Linked with the question of resistance to advice, there is a phenomenon which to my mind, is important. This regards the unaccommodating attitude of the interlocutor who sees that his/her advice instead of being accepted is taken lightly or refused. This attitude seems to be expressed in ways which range from insistence to giving in even to an abrupt withdrawal from the conversation, as can be seen in the following example:

```
(15) Mum:Oh! All I can say is this. Wear what the fuck you like. You have
to go dancing, you anyway have to wear something suitable, right? Do
whatever you like, anyway you always do do what you like.
```

To sum up, from an interactional viewpoint, we have shown that often advice:

1) is not requested either implicitly or explicitly;
2) is given rather insistently;
3) encounters a certain explicit or implicit resistance from the person who receives it;
4) if it meets any resistance, may lead to demonstrations of disappointment, frustration, impatience or outright resentment.

Advice then can not only take on the superficial structure of an order, but from the viewpoint of the psychological and relational dynamics triggered, it appears that is also partly maintains the element of a "constraint". From the conversational point of view, if the advice is a real piece of advice, it does not involve the type of "power relations" which would constrain the interlocutor to accept it. The very fact that it is not binding, means that if it is not accepted it should not cause the advice giver to feel frustration and wish for "retaliation". If this does occur, then we are not dealing with advice but with a person who is pursuing his/her own aims whether they are aware or unaware of this.

Summary

We report on a series of researches focused on a particular and recurring dialogic structure that we have defined as *Informal Counselling*. We have identified such dialogic structure by analysing a wide corpus of both recorded and transcribed naturally-occurring conversations between people who are very close to each other (friends, partners, parent-children, siblings etc.). The concept of *Informal counselling sequence* will be defined. Then, the interest will be focused on some structural recursivity which shows this dialogical phenomenon and which permit us to study it as if it had a dynamic and internally organized Gestalt. In particular, we consider: (1) the internal structures of the *Informal Counselling sequences*; (2) the friend-counsellor's conversational roles; (3) the "advice-giving" both as speech act and as conversational structured activity (on considering the syntactic-grammar organization and both contents and semantic-pragmatic structures).

Zusammenfassung

Wir berichten über eine Forschungsserie, die sich auf eine bestimmte und wiederkehrende Dialogstruktur konzentriert, die von uns als *Informelle Beratung* bezeichnet wird. Diese Dialogstruktur wurde mittels Analyse einer weit gefassten Sammlung von sowohl aufgezeichneten als auch transkribierten, sich unter natürlichen Umständen ereignenden Konversationen zwischen Leuten, die sich sehr nahe stehen (Freunde, Partner, Eltern-Kinder, Geschwister etc.), kenntlich gemacht. Das Konzept der *Informellen Beratungssequenz* wird dargestellt. Im Folgenden konzentriert sich das Erkenntnisinteresse auf einige strukturelle Rekursivitäten, die uns dieses dialogische Phänomen zeigen und uns erlauben es so zu untersuchen als ob es so wie dynamische und interne Gestalten organisiert wäre. Im Besonderen berücksichtigen wir: (1) die interne Struktur der *Informellen Beratungssequenz*; (2) die Rolle des Freundes als Berater; (3) das „Ratschlag geben" sowohl in der gesprochenen Handlung als auch in einer strukturierten Konversationsaktivität (unter Berücksichtigung des syntaktisch-grammatikalischen Aufbaus, sowie sowohl der Inhalte als auch der semantisch-pragmatischen Strukturen).

References

Bongelli, R. (2005): *Sovrapposizioni e interruzioni dialogiche*. Bergamo: Edizioni Junior.

Brown, P. & Levinson, S.C. (1987): *Politeness. **Some universals in language usage***. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Golopentia, S. (1985): *L'histoire conversationnelle*. Documentation de travail du Centre International de Sémiologie et de Linguistique de l'Université d'Urbino, 149, série A.

Golopentia, S. (1988): *Les voies de la pragmatique*. Saratoga, California: Anma Libri & Co, Stanford French and Italian Studies.

Jefferson, G. (1984): On the organization of laughter in talk about troubles, in Atkinson, J.M. & Heritage, J. (Eds.): *Structures of social actions. Studies in Conversation Analysis*, 346-369. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jefferson, G. (1988): On the sequential organization of troubles talk in ordinary communication. *Social Problems 35 (4),* 418-441.

Jefferson, G. & Lee, J.R.E. (1981): The rejection of advice: Managing the problematic convergence of a 'Troubles-telling' and a 'Service Encounter'. *Journal of Pragmatics 5,* 399-422.

Poggi I. & Castelfranchi, C. (1990): Dare consigli, in Humphris, C. (Ed): *Atti del 2° seminario internazionale per insegnanti di lingua*, 29-49. Bollettino DILIT, 3.

Riccioni, I. (2005): *La percezione della sintonia dialogica*. Bergamo: Edizioni Junior.

Riccioni, I. (2006): I ruoli del confidente nel counselling amicale: "contenitore", "alleato", "contendente", in *Annali della Facoltà di Scienze della Formazione, Università di Macerata,* **633-686. Pisa-Roma: Accademia Editoriale.**

Riccioni, I. & Zuczkowski, A. (2005): Analisi della comunicazione e AT. *Rivista Italiana di Analisi Transazionale e Metodologie Psicoterapeutiche 12, XXV,* 72-88.

Searle, J.R .(1975): Indirect Speech Acts, in Cole, P. & Morgan, J.L. (Eds.): *Syntax and Semantics-Speech Acts,* **59-82. New York-London: Academic Press.**

Traverso, V. (1996): *La conversation familière. Analyse pragmatique des interactions.* **Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon.**

Zuczkowski, A. (Ed.): *La comunicazione intima.* **Bologna: Clueb.**

Zuczkowski, A. (Ed.): *Dialoghi quotidiani: il counselling amicale*. Bologna: Clueb.

Address of the Author:
Ilaria Riccioni
Department of Educational Science, University of Macerata,
P.le Luigi Bertelli 1,
62100 Macerata, Italy.
Email address: i.riccioni@unimc.it