

DIALOG CONSIDERATIONS

—The Role of Naturalness—

D. J. Lehner

INTRODUCTION

This paper represents an attempt to illustrate and become familiar with the concept of naturalness in speech interaction found with dialog based text books used commonly in the past. For this purpose various types of dialogs, based on the criteria of naturalness or unnaturalness have been selected using both linguistic and non-linguistic criteria as the basis for each selection. Each dialog has also been rated on a scale between 1 and 5—with 1 representing the lowest level and 5 the highest from a 'naturalness' point of view. Each dialog has been picked from a previously popular text book that has been used to impart English in an EFL environment. The selections herein were used widespread in Japan and in some cases suggestions have been made in an attempt to make the dialogs more natural.

I

The first dialog comes from the book *FUNCTIONS OF AMERICAN ENGLISH*, ppgs. 66-67. It is concerned with teaching such skills as complaining, apologizing, forgiving, and expressing disappointment. I have been forced to rate it between 2 and 2.5, as it seems to be unnatural for a variety of reasons—both from a linguistic standpoint as well as from a non-linguistic one. It goes as follows:

D. J. Lehner

MARY: Ken! Ken!

KEN: Hi, Mary. How are you?

MARY: Hi, I'm fine. How are you?

KEN: Good.

MARY: Listen, I, I'm not exactly sure how to put this. but. um...has my dog been digging up your backyard again.?

KEN: I...don't think so. I, I haven't noticed.

MARY: Well, I sure hope he hasn't; I saw him running through your yard yesterday, and...

KEN: Oh, that's all right. I...don't worry about it. I don't mind your dog running through. Anyway, it...really is a shame that there's no place for dogs to run in this neighborhood.

MARY: Oh, it's true, but, that's still no excuse. I'll try and keep him on a leash so he doesn't bother you...

BOB: Ken, could I...could I talk with you for a minute?

MARY: Oh, hi, honey.

KEN: Hi Bob.

BOB: Hi. Mary...Un Ken, I. I hate to bring this up, but... that new stereo system you got...

KEN: Yeah?

BOB: You were playing it very late last night...

KEN: Yeah?

BOB: It kept me awake...

KEN: Oh I'm sorry...

BOB: ...a couple of hours.

KEN: I'm sorry. I, I didn't realize it was that loud.

BOB: Well, it was that loud, and it was pretty late, and...check with Mary if

DIALOG CONSIDERATIONS—— The Role of Naturalness ——

you don't believe me...

MARY: Huh, it's true, it, it was a bit loud, but, uh, it wasn't really bad...

KEN: I'm very sorry. I, I didn't realize it. I promise I'll keep it down in the future.

BOB: Oh, it's no problem; it's OK. You know, it only happened once.

MARY: I sure am glad we've straightened that out.

First of all, I would like to say that I realize the importance of teaching items such as complaints, forgiving, apologizing etc. They are indeed, very practical and useful skills. I am also equally cognizant that it may be hard to come up with good dialog examples that can be employed in order to teach these skills. The above dialog gives us a plausible situation that would call for a complaint/apology exchange. However, it falls far short in its quest for "sounding" natural. Let's examine the reasons why.

In the first place, from the opening words between Mary and Ken, it is quite obvious that they are very close friends. In fact, from the content in the dialog, we know that they are neighbors. Therefore, one would have to assume that Bob (obviously Mary's husband) should also be a close friend of Ken's-again as evidenced by the first name basis they are on. A readily apparent observation is that Bob has violated a non-linguistic rule in avoiding to greet his neighbor with a "hello" or "hi, Ken", before launching into his complaint. Friendly neighbors would typically greet each other first, especially since Ken said "hi" to Bob right away when they met. Bob doesn't even acknowledge this, and in fact, greets only his wife with "hi, Mary"!

Another point to be discussed is the fact that Bob's faux pas of not greeting his neighbor happens to also be a violation of a linguistic sequencing rule. In short, friends should take care of the niceties of greeting before complaining-unless it is a

big matter, which doesn't seem to be the case in this dialog given the fact that "it only happened once" and Bob quickly forgave Ken for the loudness of his stereo the night before. It would be a mistake, I feel, to teach students (as dialogue seems to emphasize) that, when complaining you must always come across very strongly—even when you are doing so towards a neighbor or close friend for a rather minor offence. It could conceivably lead to big problems within the relationship.

Another linguistic mistake that seemed to have taken place was a rather perplexing change of register instigated completely by Bob. He starts out rather casually with "...could I talk to you for a minute?", and "...I hate to bring this up...", which would seem to indicate a rather casual or slightly intimate register (even though he has already confused us by not greeting Ken). Ken answers in a similar style as Bob goes through the beginning stages of his complaint and then when Ken finally apologizes in the manner seemingly dictated by the register the complainer (Bob) has elected, i.e. "I'm sorry. I, I didn't realize it was that loud.". Bob let's him have it with a child-like "Well, it was that loud. and it was pretty late, and ...check with Mary if you don't believe me"! This kind of unexpected shift on Bob's part causes Ken to reword his apology on a slightly different register that makes it more polite. "I'm VERY sorry, I, I didn't realize it. I PROMISE I'll keep it down in the future." (emphasis added as demonstrated on the taped version for use with the text). At this point. Bob suddenly changes his register back down to a much more friendly level and says, "Oh, it's no problem; it's o.k. You know, it only happened once." (!) Such changes in register usually don't come so quickly in a natural situation, especially given Ken's immediate, friendly apology.

Along the same lines as the above is a slightly different violation of a kind of politeness formulae rule as well. After Bob gets his initial complaint off his chest, i.e. "...it kept me awake a couple of hours," Ken apologizes with "I'm sorry. I, I didn't realize it was that loud." It would seem that the statement "I didn't realize it

DIALOG CONSIDERATIONS—— The Role of Naturalness ——

was that loud” is an attempt to show there was no intent involved in the action. Ken is trying to show that he is sorry by using a common expression of sincerity. While this phrase may be criticized as having become slightly trite, it should never be taken completely in its literal sense. In the dialog, however. Bob does exactly that, as shown by his reply. “Well it WAS that loud...” (emphasis added). Very obviously Ken wasn’t really trying to escape from his “guilt” with respect to this matter; he was merely apologizing within the register they were in at that time.

Another point to be discussed has to do with some of Mary’s utterances. First of all, if the stereo had been on as loud as Bob maintains it was, then Mary probably would have said so. Instead, she gives a rather ambiguous reply that contradicts herself, i.e., “Huh, it’s true. It was a bit loud, but, uh, it wasn’t that bad...”. What are we to make of this? Either it was too loud (as she says at first) or it wasn’t (as she says next). Obviously, the dialog would be better off without such a statement at all.

Also unnecessary, it seems to me is Mary’s final sentence: “I sure am glad we’ve straightened that out.” If Bob had played the social discourse game the way he should have this statement also would not be required. There was not really anything to be “straightened out”; Ken had tried to accomplish just that from the very beginning of the whole problem situation.

As a result of the linguistic and non-linguistic reasons cited above, I cannot recommend this dialog for use in its present form. I think that it is basically acceptable up to the time when Bob enters the conversation and as a result I would like to suggest the following revisions starting from that point:

BOB: Hi, Ken! How’s it going?

KEN: Not bad Bob. How are things with you?

BOB: OK....

D. J. Lehner

MARY: Oh, hi dear.

BOB: Hi, Mary...uh Ken. I hate to bring this up but, that new stereo system you got...

KEN: Yeah?

BOB: You were playing it a little late last night...

KEN: I was? I...

BOB: Yeah, it kept me awake for a few hours.

KEN: Oh, gee Bob. I'm really sorry about that. I didn't realize it was on that loud.

BOB: Oh, that's OK Ken. Just try to keep it down a little at night, would you?

KEN: I sure will. Sorry about that Bob.

BOB: Forget it.

MARY: How about a cup of coffee, Ken?

KEN: Sounds great!

With these changes, the above dialogue seems to have regained the proper register for the situation. It also now doesn't seem so inconsistent and in fact, gives the student a better idea as to how to form apologies with persons that enjoy a close relationship. The politeness formulae also seem to fit much better and there is no problem with sequencing either.

II

The next dialog that I would like to examine is taken from the book *SPECTRUM 3* UNIT 16: "IT MUST BE YOUR BROTHER". In contrast to the first selection, this one shows many good points with respect to naturalness and has accordingly been rated as a "4" on a scale between 1 and 5. The setting is an inti-

DIALOG CONSIDERATIONS——The Role of Naturalness——

mate one and the dialog itself deals with the areas of apologizing for calling at a bad time; asking about plans; extending invitations; and describing food.

JOAN: (Rrring,rrring) Will you get it Sam? It must be your brother. He's the only one who calls this early.

SAM: Hello?

FRED: Hello Sammy. I hope I'm not disturbing you.

SAM: Uh, no. I was just sleeping. (yawns).

FRED: Oh, I'm sorry I woke you up. Do you want me to call back later?

SAM: No, no, that's O.K.. Fred. Just let me try to open my left eye.

FRED: I always forget you like to sleep late on Saturday mornings.

SAM: Late? It's seven o'clock!

FRED: It's the best time of the day.

SAM: Funny. I've always like ten o'clock better.

FRED: Well, I won't keep you. I just wanted to tell you that Aunt Thelma and Uncle Max are coming here tomorrow from St. Louis to visit Mom and Dad. They're on their way to a dentists' convention in Chicago.

SAM: Oh, yeah? (yawns).

FRED: Joyce and I are having everyone over for dinner tomorrow night. Do you think you and Joan can make it?

SAM: Well, I don't think we're doing anything, but I'll have to check with Joan.

FRED: Oh, isn't she there?

SAM: Well, I know you might find this hard to believe, but Joan's still asleep.

FRED: Oh, well. I hope you can come. Joyce is making her special chicken.

SAM: Well, I'll call you later and let you know.

FRED: O.K. bye Sammy.

SAM: Bye, Fred.

This dialog is quite natural in almost every way. From a linguistic point of view, the register begins on an intimate level and remains so throughout. Expressions such as, “I was just sleeping”. “Just let me try to open my left eye”, “Late? It’s seven o’clock”, “I’ve always liked ten o’clock better” and “I know you may find this hard to believe, but Joan’s still asleep”, by Sam indicate a type of intimate register only found between family or very close friends. Given that this book is for upper intermediate and advance level students, this kind of exposure to that style of register is most appropriate and educational. This kind of semi-sarcastic joking style is very natural in such a setting.

Another linguistic point is that the sequencing rules have been maintained too. Fred and Sam start off their conversation with appropriate small talk i.e. “Do you want me to call back later?”, “No that’s ok”, “I always forget you like to sleep late on Saturday mornings.”, “It’s the best time of the say”, etc. Only after a certain amount of small talk does Fred get to the main point of the phone call in the first place. This is surely quite natural.

Alteration rules appropriately come into the picture in this dialog as well. Note Fred’s use of a very familiar form for his brother’s name (Sammy); and the use of the informal “bye” at the close of the conversation.

Non-linguistic factors also play a role in this appraisal. This seems to be very much like a typical family setting. The brothers joke with each other, i.e.. “...but I’ll have to check with Joan.”, “Why, isn’t she there?”, etc. Also the wife declines to answer the phone saying, “...it must be your brother, he’s the only one that calls this early.” Sam’s reference to his wife cooking her “special” chicken. etc. Such exchanges are natural in this situation and most informative in teaching students some of the socio-linguistic subtleties found in the English language. This dialog does a good job of imparting language skills as well as ultra information and therefore, is a very good one.

III

Next, I would like to introduce a dialog that fails in the area of naturalness. Taken from the book *DIALOGS AND DRILLS* —— VOLUME III. pg.104, it's entitled "YOU'VE DONE YOURSELF PROUD" and attempts to teach idioms to upper beginning level students:

MAN: Nice going Judy. You really jumped the gun on our competition by signing up that new client.

WOMAN: Well, actually. I got a head start when I bumped into their president at a cocktail party last week.

MAN: Great job anyway! You've certainly done yourself proud. You've chalked up quite a record with us.

WOMAN: Thanks Mike. But I was really on pins and needles till I got his John Henry on the dotted line.

Obviously, the above dialog is attempting to teach the student idioms.

However, it would seem that using the medium of the dialog is not really appropriate for that purpose because the teaching point is so obvious that it is unnatural. To over-use idioms in the above manner is certainly not the way native speakers would speak. I do, however, empathize with the author's purpose. Idioms are an intimate part of any language and consequently, the ability to use and understand them is very important. However, where do we draw the line as to which idioms we include and which ones we don't? This happens to be a rather pertinent question, especially when we consider that expectancy of an idiom is often quite short and as a result, students may waste their time learning idioms that will not even be used in a few years time. On the other hand, if the idiom does happen to survive for a number of years it probably will become a hackneyed, banal expression that

D. J. Lehner

the student should avoid using in his conversations.

A good teacher should decide when (i.e. at what level) and which current idioms he/she should teach to his students and perhaps should avoid a dialog environment. In other words, he should teach the appropriate idioms when the situation arises from other text material, stressing where and with whom they should be used.

Linguistically, the above dialogue has problems with an excessive use of idioms. Non-linguistically, the setting isn't real clear and this causes a problem with register. If they are only co-workers, then perhaps the use of idioms is ok. However, it seems that there is a chance that the man is the woman's superior from the way he addresses her, e.g. "You've done yourself proud", "You've chalked up quite a record with us", things that, it seems, a normal, everyday, co-worker probably wouldn't say in such a situation. Further evidence of this is the use of the word "us" which gives a feeling of management. Surely, if it is a case of the woman speaking to a superior, the register would be a little bit different.

Based on the over-use of idioms, unclear setting and register I have rated the above dialog as a "2". I cannot recommend its use and therefore suggest the following revisions: first of all, to make the setting clearer, perhaps we should recommend an introductory paragraph that explains that Judy is an employee at an advertising firm and has just signed up a very important customer. She is now talking with her BOSS about it. Along these same lines then, we should also change the titles of both participants in the dialogue from "MAN" to "BOSS" and "WOMAN" to "JUDY", respectively:

BOSS: Nice going Judy. You really jumped the gun on our competition by signing up that new client.

JUDY: Well, actually. I got a head start when I bumped into their president at a

DIALOG CONSIDERATIONS——The Role of Naturalness——

cocktail party last week.

BOSS: Great job anyway! You've certainly done yourself proud. You've chalked up quite a record with us.

JUDY: Thanks. But I was pretty nervous until I actually got him to sign the contract.

As can be seen from the changes made, the last line of idioms has been completely removed. It certainly would be a bad teacher who would teach those idioms to his students by having them memorize the dialog in its original form.

In order to teach such idioms as those found in the last line of the above exchange, perhaps a format of listing such expressions below the main dialog should be employed. In that way the student would still be exposed to them, but not under the condition of forced memorization. This would, in addition, also give the teacher a better opportunity to explain about each idiom to the student by making up "acceptable" dialogs. At the same time, it would accomplish the goal of maintaining "naturalness" at the sake of pure idiom exposure, which would seem to be the most appropriate approach from a good teacher's point of view.

IV

The following dialog from the excellent book *AMERICAN STREAMLINE DEPARTURES*, UNIT 27-"IN PRISON", is a good example of a fairly natural dialog intended for adult beginners which I have rated as a "3.5" on a scale from 1 to 5. It teaches "going to" constructions and is very appropriate for the lower level student as the vocabulary is not so difficult and the lesson is well laid out.

TIM: Well, tomorrow we're going to leave this place!

D. J. Lehner

FRED: Yes. What are you going to do first?

TIM: Well, I'm going to meet my girlfriend, and take her to an expensive restaurant. We're going to have lobster and champagne. What about you, Fred?

FRED: My wife's going to meet me outside the prison. Then we're going to visit her mother-in-law.

TIM: Your mother-in-law? You're kidding!

FRED: No. I'm not. I'm going to work for my mother-in-law.

TIM: Really? You're not going to work for your mother-in-law!

FRED: Well, she has a little hamburger place in Chicago.

TIM: What are you going to do there?

FRED: I'm going to be a dishwasher.

TIM: What? Wash dishes? Well, I'm not going to work. I'm going to have a good time.

FRED: You're lucky. I'm going to rob a bank next week.

TIM: Are you crazy? Why?

FRED: Because I'm happy in prison!

This dialogue is good from a linguistic point of view because it follows its sequencing rules quite well. Starting from "Well, tomorrow we're getting out of here!", then "What are you going to do first..." etc., it follows a very easily followed and logical sequence of events that also imparts the necessary language and structures the lesson contains.

The register remains constant throughout with no major jumps either up or down. Although one could say that this type of speaking doesn't really fit into the context, as convicts are stereo-typically supposed to use very ungrammatical and rough language, it is obvious that a teacher probably wouldn't want to teach such

DIALOG CONSIDERATIONS—The Role of Naturalness—

expressions (i.e. “convict” language) at a beginning level or indeed, ever.

From a non-linguistic point of view, this dialogue is also very good. Here we have a situation where both of the convicts are describing future acts with the key structure “going to” and we can readily identify with them using a little bit of imagination. Tim’s ideas as to what he will do once released are quite natural, i.e. “I’m going to meet my girlfriend...”, “we’re going to have lobster and champagne...” at an expensive restaurant, etc. Fred’s statements start off sounding like a plausible, real-life situation, i.e. “My wife’s going to meet me outside the prison...”. However, with his next breath he introduces a new twist to what is happening, by mentioning that then he and his wife are going to go to his mother-in-laws! This could actually happen in such a case and the student could easily see just how plausible it really is after some discussion.

From this point the lesson could possibly open up a crosscultural discussion about prison life, mother-in-laws etc. The student would thus, learn some sociolinguistic facts about the (in this case) American scene with respect to prisons, and more interestingly, mother-in-laws. In the same discussion teacher and student could easily be led into talking about different kinds of jobs as in the dialogue Fred mentions he will be washing dishes for his mother-in-law.

After such discussion, the student would be much better able to understand the subtle joke that comes out in the last part of the dialog, i.e. Fred’s plans about robbing a bank because he’s happy in prison. As has been already stated above, this dialog teaches necessary structures in an original and instructive way. In addition, it offers a good opportunity for cross-cultural discussion, which will enable the student to pick up some ideas about social values in another country. For all of the above reasons and also because I have used this same dialog on numerous occasions successfully. I highly recommend it as a very natural, instructional lesson that both teacher and student will enjoy using.

CONCLUSION

Dialogs commonly used in the past for teaching English have been selected. It is apparent that, in the past, some 'good' and some 'bad' dialogs from a naturalness point of view were used at many levels of English language education. It is absolutely imperative that any and all teachers of English in EFL (and even ESL) environments carefully consider the appropriateness and 'naturalness' of text books especially when dialog use is involved. The texts selected are from the past but one question remains: 'Have the dialogs employed these days changed a great deal in the present time?' This question is problematic but relevant and, therefore must be dealt with.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dye, Joan and Nancy Frankfort, *SPECTRUM 3*.

Regents Publishing Company Inc. 1984. Ch. 16, pg.122.

Hartly, Bernard and Peter Viney. *AMERICAN SRTEAMLINE DEPARTURES*. Oxford University Press, 1983. Unit 27.

Jones, Leo and C. van Bayer, *FUNCTIONS OF AMERICAN ENGLISH-COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES FOR THE CLASSROOM*.

Cambridge University Press. 1983 (reprinted 1984). Ca. 12, pgs. 66-67.

White, William B., *DIALOG'S AND DRILLS, Vol, III* Waragai Press, 1978. Ch. 24, pg. 104.