MODERN CONVERSATIONAL ANALYSIS AND GREETINGS OF THE PAST

Eugene Green

Boston University

Levinson's model of greetings, applied to a text of the eighteenth century, Swift's *Polite Conversation,* provides a good yet incomplete fit.   Issues, concerned with status, familiarity, intiator of greetings, and visual identity, arise that are integral to face to face encounters, if not directly, as in Levinson's model, to telephone conversations. These issues compel both a need to modify Levinson's model and to develop procedures for studying face to face greetings nowadays.

adjaceny pairs, dispreferred sequences, identity, recognition, repair, turn-taking

1. METHODOLOGICAL PRELIMINARIES

Modern research in conversational analysis as discussed, for example, by Levinson has advanced through the implementation of methodological designs for testing hypotheses and collecting data. The studies undertaken assume that conversations in diverse contexts are not haphazard but have regular structures based on a principle of turn-taking. One issue for study that these regularities raise, moreover, concerns their occurrence in the past, whether or not they similarly characterize conversations in the contexts of earlier societies. To explore the possibility of analyzing structures in conversations of the past, requires, however, reviewing how to assess the reliability of what is available in written materials. As a preliminary step to study in historical pragmatics, the following analysis centers on greetings in conversation, to assess past procedures and evidence. Fortunately, Jonathan Swift's eighteenth century work *Polite*

Conversation supplies commentary on his procedures for recording data as well as the material he gathered.

1.1 Procedures in data collecting

As in much linguistic field work currently, conversational analysis also relies on electronic devices to collect data, to transcribe accurately, and to time accurately exchanges between conversants. Such devices enable verification and provide a basis for replicating results, comparing analyses, and modifying designs. Yet short of electronic exactness, the past use of memory (as well as nowadays) to apprehend and to record conversation in itself has a reliability and valuable flexibility. Exercised deliberately, memory is an instrument of mind that sharpens awareness, that absorbs and retains salient patterns of conversation. To credit memory as an aid for retaining data, as Jonathan Swift does in his *Polite Conversation*, is traditional but also indicative of a writer's sense of procedures conducive to accuracy. His book's preface recommends his illustrative conversations to anyone with a "good Memory, who is a diligent Observer, [has] a skilful Ear, some Knowledge in Musick, and an exact Taste" (1964[1738]: 112). The preface also reports his method for collecting data: 'as soon as I left the Company, I immediately entred the choicest Expressions that passed during the Visit. . . (1964[1738]: 100). According to Swift's editors, Davis and Landa, the compilation of utterances for *Polite Conversation* may well have been, as the preface claims, a twelve year labor of concentrated memory (1964: xxvii-xxx; 1964[1738]: 100). In sum, if Swift's comment on remembering conversations is true, then his transcribing them in notebooks resembles what linguists like Sapir did in writing out utterances from non-alphabetic languages.

1.2 Approaches to conversational data: irregularities

To avoid artifactual analyses, Levinson advocates a search in recorded, conversational sequences for manifest irregularities, both in turn-taking and in efforts to repair them. These include interruptions, pauses, and commentary in communication that participants themselves identify during sequences that comprise greetings. The idea is that in 'editing' themselves and one another, the participants in a greeting sequence react overtly to structural patterns that are genuinely part of their pragmatic repertoire. In his preface to *Polite Conversation* Swift also recognizes the value of attending to features that reveal what structural elements in greeting and conversation are significant for participants. Emphasizing a need to understand the causes of laughter, he says, that they demand "much Observation, long Practice, and a sound Judgment" (1964 [1738]: 102). Moreover, although he finally discards a critical apparatus, Swift had initially intended to use "certain Marks, Asterisks, or Nota Bene's . . . after most Questions, and every Reply or Answer" that characterize episodes of laughter in conversation (1964 [1738]: 102). Yet he concludes that the lack of an apparatus, despite its "great Importance," affords benefits, for he argues that "something ought to left for ingenious Readers to find out" (1964[1738]: 102). What is evident, then, is that in the course of collecting data, Swift appreciated, as modern field workers do, those features that for participants are integral to such segments of conversation as greetings.

1.3 Approaches to conversational analysis: heuristic value

To determine some patterns integral to greetings is often enough to find opportunities for discovering the presence of others not yet fully identified. Thus the focus on what is integral to greetings is heuristic for conceiving and explaining elements that are habitual but still undescribed or unexplained. Swift himself found his work providing opportunities for heuristic discovery. Long a diligent transcriber, he says that for "these last six or seven Years, I have not been able to add above nine valuable Sentences to enrich my Collection" (1964 [1738]: 101). Since Swift did not, however, write an analysis of the dialogues, including greetings, which he created from the conversations that came his way, the heuristic value of his achievement lies in its representativeness. If he culled his data for new or overlooked types of utterance, what he presents lends itself to analysis and to an extended examination of materials available in the writings of his contemporaries. What Swift offers, even so, is a rich sample with which to begin.

2. LINKING MODERN ANALYSES OF GREETINGS AND PAST MATERIALS

Except for electronic devices and a deliberate approach to analysis, Swift's research, at least in intent, resembles modern methods of data gathering. Since research on greetings nowadays aims at uncovering formal and pragmatic structures, one measure of analysis is to test its applicability to written materials from the past. So if sequential patterns identified in the pragmatics of modern greetings apply reasonably well to samples of written material, then the likelihood is strong for historical continuity. What is more, a study of written materials is also heuristic, for just as language changes, so, too, does the structure of greetings. A study of greetings recorded in writing, therefore, throws a perspective on what remains unchanged as well as on what has become archaic or obsolete.

2.1 Status: appellatives in past and present greetings

In Swift's greetings, for instance, even a preliminary glance reveals a consciousness of status as vital in utterances concerned with recognition. Yet Levinson's review says nothing directly on the status of participants who greet each other. So although status is a feature plainly evident in greetings of the past and often muted nowadays, this difference in salience prompts a reexamination of data already available and a study of what approaches to take in further research into modern forms of greeting.

To begin, Swift's opening sequence in *Polite Conversation* assumes that status is integral to greetings – his stage instruction says, "*Lord* Sparkish *meeting Colonel* Atwit" (1964 [1738]: 131). Then the verbal greetings follow:

> Colonel: Well met, my Lord.
> Lord Sparkish: Thank ye Colonel ; a Parson would have said, I
> hope we shall meet in Heaven.

The appellatives here underscore an observance of status already indicated in the preceding stage instruction. That "Lord" and "Colonel" both occur at the end of each utterance in this intial

sequence leaves unanswered whether their placement is unmarked. In Levinson's examples, appellatives appear in different positions, sometimes at the outset of an utterance as in a pre-arrangement – "Erm (2.8) what are you doing today ?" – sometimes at the close as in this: "Hi John" (1983). The pause of 2.8 seconds after the speaker's "Erm" suggests but by no means decides that an appellative at the outset of an utterance is a marked position. Whether "Erm" is an indicator of greater familiarity among equals than "John" also resists inference. Nonetheless, this brief contrast between Swift's and Levinson's examples already shows at least three lines of inquiry worth undertaking.

2.2 Commensurable structures in modern greetings and in Swift's

As for pragmatic sequences, Levinson's well-articulated analysis of modern greetings offers the possibility of providing a workable framework for a fuller grasp of Swift's data. Here such features as identification, recognition, turn-taking, adjacency pairs, dispreferred sequences, and repair all constitute indicators for evaluating what Swift presents in *Polite Conversation.* Two questions to ask concern the robustness of Swift's greetings: whether they accommodate Levinson's framework and whether they actually contain material on pragmatic sequences so far unexamined.

3. LEVINSON'S FRAMEWORK APPLIED TO SWIFT'S DATA

3.1 Summons, turn-taking, and adjacency pairs

In modern studies of greetings three features consistently appear as salient: summons, turn-taking and adjacency pairs. These features govern the structure and position of utterances designed to help two speakers respond to each other during the course of a greeting. Levinson's examples and analysis of telephone greetings manifestly establish summons, turn-taking and adjacency pairs as integral features. Here is one representative exchange (1983: 311):

> Caller: ((causes telephone to ring for Respondent))
> Turn 1 Respondent: Hello
> Turn 2 Caller: Hi
> Turn 3 Respondent: Oh hi ::

Here the telephone summons a Respondent to answer and to say "Hello." This summoning actually constitutes part of an adjacency pair; furthermore, the ring is tantamount to a caller's question "Anyone there?" expecting a reply, unless no one is available. In this sequence the expectation of a response lies at the heart of an adjacency pair, as each participant takes a structured turn in preparing to greet each other. A second adjacency pair underlies the turn-taking of the Respondent's "Hello" and the Caller's "Hi."

Although telephones supply a ready channel for collecting data on summons, turn-taking and adjacency pairs, Swift's less precise method – overhearing live greetings – is even so vital nowadays. In *Polite Conversation* his counterpart to the summoning ring of the telephone is an

intermediary, often a servant.   So in one instance, summoning enters a footman's announcement to a group already in conversation (1964 [1738]: 154):

> Footman: An please your Honour, there's a Man below wants to speak to you.
> Colonel: Ladies, your Pardon for a Minute.
>
> [*Colonel goes out*]

This sequences demonstrates an adjacency pair for greetings that intrude on conversation, the Footman is a conveyer of a polite summons; the Colonel's absenting himself involves both a physical and verbal response.   The physical response is apparent in regard to the Footman's summons: the Colonel's leaving the room. The verbal response, divided from the physical, is not for the Footman but for the Ladies.

One may quickly imagine a modern analog for this split between physical and verbal responses to a summons (although the literature apparently does not contain an analysis of the sequence). Suppose, then, in modern circumstances a telephone ringing in a room of people in conversation. One likelihood (the circumstances not yet determined) is that a Respondent says to the others gathered, "Excuse me a moment," and then leaves the room to take the call elsewhere. Once the Respondent does respond with, say, a "Hello," to the telephone Caller, the sequence then completes an adjacency pair comparable to Levinson's example above of "Caller" and "Turn 1."

What this imagined sequence with its "Excuse me a moment" as an analog to the Colonel's "Ladies, your Pardon for a Minute" introduces is a hiatus. The summons to respond to a greeter who interrupts the conversation, deliberately or not, prompts a verbal formula intended to avert discourtesy. Yet how the verbal formula works in detail, linked to a physical response of absenting oneself, still requires analysis. Indeed, Levinson discusses interruptions to adjacency pairs but none of them involves the arrival of an intrusive summons. Now that the telephone channel makes it possible for a speaker to receive a second caller in the midst of conversation, the wherewithal to examine intrusive summons is actually available.

3.2 Recognition and identification

Levinson's sample greeting, as quoted above, represents, besides turn-taking and adjacency pairs, a system for identifying and recognizing callers and respondents. The "Hello" of Turn 1, part of an adjacency pair, is also a display of voice quality, offering the Caller a first opportunity to identify the Respondent. Although Levinson also says that relying on voice quality to identify oneself does not apply to business calls, many of them generated electronically, he forgoes discussing other features that affect recognition.   If the Caller knows the Respondent, voice quality works well for purposes of identification; otherwise, one usually relies on a variety of other features that manifest themselves in utterances at Turn 2. These include marks of status, formality, and age.

Swift's opening sequence, given above (*2.1*), depends immediately on visual display to identify speakers, as indicated in his stage instruction. This visual recognition then yields to a verbal exchange to reinforce the Colonel and Lord's mutual identity and recognition. In addition to the use of appellatives, noted above, the Colonel's speaking first may also convey, in matters of identify and recognition, a sense of deference. That face to face greeting involves deference,

determined by who takes a first turn is, however, an anecdotal observation that awaits testing. Since it is not at once obvious that status alone determines the initiator of a greeting, conversational analysis needs to determine under varying circumstances who is the first to speak. In societies, too, that mask overt identifiers of status, studies on who first initiates a greeting may prove revealing.

The Respondent's turn, as in Swift's example of the Colonel and the Lord, is a feature significant for purposes of recognition. Here the inferences to draw on Lord Sparkish's phrase "Thank ye" must remain provisionary. That the phrase is probably formulaic draws some support from Swift's method of supplying data, his seeking to record representative modes of expression rather than idiosyncratic utterances. If so, then "Thank ye" instances *noblesse oblige*, a mode of expression to indicate familiarity between members of different social classes but not a concomittant intimacy. Further, Sparkish's response to the Colonel's greeting suggests in its play on what a Parson might say (*2.1*), an adjacency pair built on an echoing of verb forms. To the Colonel's "met," Lord Sparkish responds with the imagined Parson's "shall meet," a patterning of recognition that is both cordial and institutional.

Swift's use of the formulaic "Thank ye" and the imagined response of a parson differs in focus from Levinson's discussion. For telephone exchanges, as in Levinson's data, the voice quality of a respondent's "Hello" or "Hi" is a feature of recognition that informs a caller whether the greeting meets expectations. Successful recognition indicates familiarity, yet what Levinson does not show is that the familiar comprises in itself a complex category. Clearly the familiarity of the Colonel and the Lord hardly falls in the same domain that the colloquial "Hi" presupposes. (If a caller's "Hello" or "Hi" has a voice-quality that leaves a respondent uncertain, then the speakers have to repair possible confusions, the presupposed familiarity supplanted by a need for repair.) So in this comparison of Swift's example of a greeting and Levinson's, the features of identification and recognition encompass matters of status, familiarity, intimacy, and register.

3.3 Repair and dispreferred sequences in greetings

Inasmuch as callers, at least in British and North American settings, mostly trust in voice quality as a mark of identification, a respondent's uncertainty usually triggers an effort at repair. That voice quality is sometimes insufficient in a telephone greeting accounts, as Levinson shows, for the following example (1983: 343):

> Caller ((rings))
> Turn 1 Respondent: Hello,
> Turn 2 Caller: Hi. Susan?
> Turn 3 Respondent: Ye: s
> Turn 4 Caller: This's Judith (.) Rossman
> Turn 5 Respondent: *Judith!*

Despite using the Respondent's name (with a low-rise intonational contour) at Turn 2, the Caller fails to identify herself directly, resulting in a prolonged "Ye: s" and a surname after pause at Turn 4. So Turn 4 instances a repair, initiated by the Respondent's evident uncertainty at Turn 3. This uncertainty, marked with a quality of hesitance, results from the Respondent's inability to identify who is speaking at Turn 2 , so that together this failure of recognition triggers a renewed

effort at a successful greeting. This renewed effort to repair a failed recognition, begun with the lapse at Turn 2 and concluded with the emphatic repetition at Turn 5, comprises a dispreferred sequence.

Swift's counterpart to this hitch in voice detection is a hitch in visual contact, a failure to see what ought to be plain. This visual hitch follows the greeting of the Colonel and Lord Sparkish (*2.1*) and concerns the inadvertence of a third speaker, Tom Neverout, who participates in *Polite Conversation*. Neverout approaches, sees the Colonel, but not Lord Sparkish. His oversight engenders a greeting marked by a dispreferred sequence, designed to result in a repair (1964 [1738]: 131):

<div style="text-align:center">[Neverout <i>comes up.</i>]</div>

Turn 1	*Colonel:* How do you do *Tom?*
Turn 2	*Neverout:* Never the better for you.
Turn 1 (Pre-S)	*Colonel:* I hope you're never the worse.
	But, where's your Manners?
	Don't you see my Lord *Sparkish?*
Turn 2	*Neverout:* My Lord, I beg your Lordship's Pardon.
Turn 3	*Lord Sparkish: Tom,* How is it?
	what, you can't see the Wood for Trees?

Set aside for the moment the reasons for the Colonel's taking the first turn in the greeting, and Tom's failure to notice and to greet Lord Sparkish engenders the mechanisms of repair. To correct the oversight the Colonel's questions – "But, where's your Manners? Don't you see my Lord Sparkish?" – both direct Neverout and trigger a sequence of combined greeting and apology. This form of correction, marked by "Pre-S," best fits what Levinson call as summons, "built to prefigure," as he says, "the specific kind of action that they potentially precede" (1983: 345-6). The Colonel's questions, too, "occup[y] a specific slot in a specific kind of sequence with distinctive properties" (1983: 346). Designated as Turn 1 (Pre-S) they precede Neverout's subsequent, apologetic, "My Lord, I beg your Lordship's Pardon," an utterance that fulfills as well the identifying function of greetings. The Colonel's questions also prepare for Turn 3, Lord Sparkish's utterances that complete the greeting sequence. The Lord's "How is it?" is an elliptical expression for "How is it with you?" in use since the fifteenth century. That the elliptical "How is it?" follows Neverout's apology makes Turn 3 highly marked, since ordinarily such an expression opens a greeting sequence. The consequence is that Turn 3 completes a greeting but as a highly marked question points again to the awkwardness brought on by Neverout's initial mistake in not seeing Lord Sparkish. So the set of turns here, from Turn 1 (Pre-S) to Turn 3, instances a dispreferred sequence.

To grasp the source of this dispreferred sequence is to revisit Neverout's initial failure to greet Lord Sparkish. In the exchange of greetings between Neverout and the Colonel lies an antipathy that engenders the oversight and the dispreferred sequence. Although the Colonel's "How do you do *Tom?*" seems unexceptional, his speaking first and Neverout's response, "Never the better for you," together reveal a strain in the greeting. Had Neverout responded , "Never the better" (elliptical for "I'm doing never the better") to the Colonel's ,"How do you do *Tom?*" the greeting exchanged would have counted as amicable. But the phrase "for you" in Neverout's reply constitutes his rejection of the Colonel's greeting, a rebuff presumably due to anger. In this

regard Neverout's rebuff of a greeting correlates with Levinson's outline for dispreferred sequences in which refusals, say, counter requests or disagreements contend with assessments (1983: 336).

Also if the Colonel's greeting Lord Sparkish first (2.1) is an act of deference, his addressing Neverout first, while using an emphatic *Tom*, suggests uneasy familiarity. Here what is not plain is whether in greetings between those familiar to each other uneasiness helps to determine who takes the first turn. What is moreover not obvious in taking a first turn in a greeting is the relation between emotional affect and the facts of arriving and being already in place. Although the telephone as a channel establishes a customary protocol in sequences, face to face encounters do not necessarily. (Anecdotally, people troubled by nuisance calls sometimes pick up receivers and wait for the caller to speak.)

Furthermore, if in telephone conversations, dispreferred sequences generally accompany delays in response, Swift's writing an italicized first name for Neverout – *Tom* – denotes an extra emphasis, probably a sign of expected disharmony. Very likely, too, to emphasize an addressee's name is to isolate it in a brief pause, as if in this instance, stress and pause together imply uneasiness. Since as Levinson argues, delays in telephone conversations at Turn 1 foreshadow "problems . . . coming up" (1983: 337), Swift's italics suggest a similar awareness of the Colonel's troubled disposition, as he greets Neverout.

Neverout's anger then accounts for both his response in Turn 2 and his failure to see Lord Sparkish. His oversight prepares for the dispreferred sequence that contains an apology, prompted by the Colonel's pre-summons. How strong emotions color modern greetings is yet another issue to explore.

4. DISCUSSION

The analysis of greetings in Swift's *Polite Conversation* in the light of Levinson's framework yields come encouragement for further exploration. For one thing, the burden of the argument advanced here is that modern methods, benefited by the use of electronic equipment, support renewed attention to written materials. The difference in channels does not exclude cogent comparison. Moreover, if the results of such comparisons continue to prove fruitful, as in the study of Swift's greetings, then what investigators find in written materials becomes a resource for new lines of research. From an analysis of Swift's greetings, there issues a set of problems for research into contemporary conversations. First, what sort of designs for direct verbal and visual encounters will yield replicable results? Is it possible to discern features of status, familiarity, and intimacy within the rubrics of identification and recognition? What can instances of pause, associated with various positions in turn-taking , impart on matters of emotional affect? What does the association of visual recognition and turn-taking reveal in regard to the status or power of those who approach each other in a moment of greeting? These questions and others certainly are germane to greetings nowadays. Swift's *Polite Conversation*, too, offers an excellent example of data recorded in the past that is robust enough to further understanding of how people greet each other. Other texts of the past are likely, also, to furnish fresh understanding.

Levinson, S. C., 1983. Pragmatics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swift, J., [1738] 1964. A Proposal for correcting the English tongue, Polite Conversation, Etc. H. Davis, L. Landa (eds.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.