

THE POWER OF CONSTRAINTS: A LESSON FROM *AMERICAN PSYCHO*¹

The paper explores the thesis that in his novel *American Psycho*, Bret Easton Ellis exposes the constraints that govern everyday conversation: the dialogues that the book's main hero, Patrick Bateman, leads take to the extreme the structural and ritual characteristics of human interaction, revealing the purely social nature of our exchanges. The analysis of an excerpt suggests an even greater importance of adherence to constraints in conversation than has so far been acknowledged.

Example of Dialogue²

I run into Bradley Simpson from P & P outside F.A.O. Schwarz and he's	1
wearing a glen-plaid worsted wool suit with notched lapels by Perry Ellis, a	2
cotton broadcloth shirt by Gitman Brothers, a silk tie by Savoy, a chronograph	3
with a crocodileskin band by Breil, a cotton raincoat by Paul Smith and a fur felt	4
hat by Paul Stuart. After he says, "Hey Davis," I inexplicably start listing the	5
names of all eight reindeer, alphabetically, and when I've finished, he smiles and	6
says, "Listen, there's a Christmas party at Nekenieh on the twentieth, see you	7
there?" I smile and assure him I'll be at Nekenieh on the twentieth /.../	8

Textuality

The first question to be asked is whether the above example actually represents dialogue, whether it really is a text in the first place. If it seems that it does not meet the seven standards of textuality,³ this could be due to the specific traits of spoken discourse: conversational turns, for instance, may occur in any conversation. Surprisingly, acceptability – “the text receiver's attitude that the set of occurrences should constitute a cohesive and coherent text having some use or relevance for the receiver”⁴ – does not appear to be a problem for Bateman's interlocutor, although it may of course present a difficulty for the reader as the secondary addressee.

¹ The paper is based on the following study: Kavalir, Monika. Deconstruction of Dialogue in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. In: Nikčević Batričević, Aleksandra (ed.), Knežević, Marija (ed.). *On the Borders of Convention*. Newcastle (UK): Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, pp. 79-92.

² Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 1991), 178–179.

³ Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler, *Introduction to Text Linguistics* (London, New York: Longman, [1981] 1994).

⁴ Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler, *Introduction to Text Linguistics* (London, New York: Longman, [1981] 1994), 7.

The problematic standards include intentionality, informativity, situationality and intertextuality. At first glance, intentionality, concerning “the text producer’s attitude that the set of occurrences should constitute a cohesive and coherent text instrumental in fulfilling the producer’s intentions”,⁵ and informativity, “the extent to which the occurrences of the presented text are expected vs. unexpected or known vs. unknown/certain”,⁶ are not observed, but it is argued in this paper that one of the fundamental messages *American Psycho* carries for conversation analysis is that the purpose of conversation is only secondarily an exchange of information, its main function is social. In this light, it can be said that both participants’ intentions – maintaining social relationships – are fulfilled in the dialogue; if this is so, informativity as a standard is negligible. As a consequence, the standard of situationality, concerning “the factors which make a text relevant to a situation of occurrence”,⁷ is met as well. To be able to pass judgement on the text’s intertextuality,⁸ the properties of conversation as a text type and the relevance of these properties for *American Psycho* need to be looked into. It is nevertheless clear that there is no significant evidence speaking against the dialogue status of the above excerpt from *American Psycho*.

Turn-Taking and Overlap

Talk can be seen as methodic, there is “order at all points”⁹ but “[t]he problem is to discover, describe, and analyze that order or orderliness”.¹⁰ Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson note three basic facts about conversation: “(1) turn-taking occurs; (2) one speaker tends to talk at a time; and (3) turns are taken with as little gap or overlap between them as possible”.¹¹ The above dialogue obeys the formal principle of turn-taking.

It has been proposed that in any conversation the current speaker can exercise three degrees of control over the next turn. The next speaker can be explicitly selected, the current speaker’s utterance may be constrained without selecting the next speaker, or it can be left to

⁵ See Note 4.

⁶ Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler, *Introduction to Text Linguistics* (London, New York: Longman, [1981] 1994), 8–9.

⁷ Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler, *Introduction to Text Linguistics* (London, New York: Longman, [1981] 1994), 9.

⁸ Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler, *Introduction to Text Linguistics* (London, New York: Longman, [1981] 1994), 10–11.

⁹ Ian Hutchby and Robin Wooffitt, *Conversation Analysis* (Cambridge: Polity, [1998] 2001), 21.

¹⁰ George Psathas, *Conversation Analysis: The Study of Talk-in-Interaction* (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage, 1995), 45.

¹¹ Harvey Sacks et al., “A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation,” *Language* 50 (1974): 696–735, quoted in Ian Hutchby and Robin Wooffitt, *Conversation Analysis* (Cambridge: Polity, [1998] 2001), 47.

one of the other participants to continue the conversation by selecting themselves. Since the above dialogue only involves two conversationalists, there is no difference between the second and third possibilities of turn-taking. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the cues for speaker change can be grammatical, paralinguistic or kinesic (or any combination of these).¹² In spite of Malcolm Coulthard's remark that "turns to speak are valued and speakers compete for them",¹³ the above dialogue from *American Psycho* is actually quite polite and includes an example of next speaker selection by current speaker as Simpson calls Bateman by (another man's) name. Turn-taking points are marked by linguistic means, but also kinesically (smiling in line 8).

Adjacency Pairs and Repair

Many actions in conversation are typically paired, and Emmanuel Schegloff and Harvey Sacks proposed the concept of adjacency pairs with the following characteristics: (a) It is a sequence of two communicative actions; (b) the two actions often occur adjacent to each other; (c) they are produced by different speakers; (d) one action is a *first pair part* and the other is a *second pair part*, i.e. they are sequentially ordered; and (e) they are categorized or type-connected so that any given first pair part must be matched with one of a relatively few types of second pair parts.¹⁴

In the above dialogue, the type of adjacency pair used is Greeting-Greeting (line 5) where Simpson produces a greeting, which is normally likely to be answered by another greeting.¹⁵ It is true that the two pair parts do not match in terms of content, but they do match in terms of structure – or at least, they match to a degree satisfactory to Bateman's interlocutor. While many people may not consider listing the names of reindeer an appropriate response to greeting, the characters in *American Psycho* obviously do.

Despite some authors' critiques that "most conversational data consists of more substantial 'turns' in which several utterances can occur, or in which the basic adjacency pair organisation is difficult to determine",^{16,17} the notion of adjacency pair has great import for the analysis of dialogue in *American Psycho*. What is problematic about the dialogue in this book

¹² Malcolm Coulthard, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* (London, New York: Longman, [1977] 1985), 60, 68.

¹³ Malcolm Coulthard, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* (London, New York: Longman, [1977] 1985), 67.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Schegloff, and Harvey Sacks, "Opening up closings," *Semiotica* 7 (1973), 289–327, quoted in Robert E. Nofsinger, *Everyday Conversation* (Newbury Park, London, New Delhi: Sage, 1991), 51.

¹⁵ Cf. Guy Cook, *Discourse* Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1989] 2001), 53.

¹⁶ Gillian Brown and George Yule, *Discourse Analysis* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, [1983] 1993), 230.

¹⁷ Cf. Amy B. M. Tsui, *English Conversation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 25ff.

is the fact that there does not seem to be a preference organization with ‘preferred’ and ‘dispreferred’ responses.^{18,19} It seems as if in the above dialogue any kind of structurally convenient response will do.

Another feature absent from these dialogues is repair. “Repair refers to the efforts of participants to deal with trouble in speaking, hearing or understanding.”²⁰ Given the surprising content of Bateman’s turns, one would expect his interlocutors to initiate repair to check their understanding; no such thing happens, however, since nobody is even paying attention or trying to understand.

Conclusion

David Herman emphasizes the importance of using literary dialogues as “models for hypothetical discourse situations” because they help us rethink and evaluate the linguistic presumptions that operate in how we construct the meaning of discourse. He points out that “[l]iterary dialogues [...] stage the principles and mechanisms of dialogue in general.”²¹ In the analysed dialogue, Ellis stresses the impact of structure, of “external” elements of conversation. As long as the proper constraints are imposed, the interaction is valid. Even though the content of Bateman’s speech is inappropriate, his conversational behaviour is otherwise impeccable and makes up for this. The author pointedly shows that “behind the ‘implacable familiarity’ of everyday actions lie fascinating and exact orders of organization.”²² The message *American Psycho* has for conversation analysis is the following: while wrong content with right structure would not work in *all* situations *all* of the time, it might work in *some* situations *some* of the time. This proves the importance of the structural and ritual aspects of conversation, which may at times override the substantial aspects.

¹⁸ Ian Hutchby and Robin Wooffitt, *Conversation Analysis* (Cambridge: Polity, [1998] 2001), 43ff.

¹⁹ Guy Cook, *Discourse* Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1989] 2001), 53–54.

²⁰ Elizabeth G. Weber, *Varieties of Questions in English Conversation* (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1993), 30.

²¹ David Herman, “The Mutt and Jute Dialogue in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*: Some Gricean Perspectives,” *Style* 28 (1994), 219–241. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2342/is_n2_v28/ai_16528210 (accessed 6 February 2011).

²² John Heritage, “Presenting Emanuel A. Schegloff,” in *Discussing Conversation Analysis: The Work of Emanuel A. Schegloff*, ed. Carlo L. Prevnigano and Paul J. Thibault. (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2003), 7.