



CONVERSATION ANALYSIS
IN “HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS”
BY ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Viorica CONDRAT,
Ph.D. Student,
“Alecu Russo” State University of Bălți, Republic of Moldova

Abstract

Conversation may seem chaotic at first sight. Yet, under analysis, it appears to be a highly structured process, which follows specific rules and norms adopted by a given linguistic community. The present article analyzes the conversation interchange between the protagonists of Ernest Hemingway's short story “Hills like White Elephants”. The undertaken study reveals the similarities between fictional and natural conversations. It is an attempt to prove that any conversation is centered on a practical necessity. The author aims at highlighting the existence of a literary conversation (i.e. between the writer and the reader), where the literary text appears as a reciprocal discourse based on a literary-communicative intention.

Rezumat

Aparent haotică, conversația este, de fapt, un proces complicat, ce decurge în conformitate cu anumite reguli prestabilite și acceptate de o anumită comunitate lingvistică. Articolul se axează pe analiza interacțiunii verbale dintre personajele povestirii „Dealurile ca niște elefanți albi” de Ernest Hemingway. Această analiză relevă corespondența dintre conversația naturală și cea ficțională. Concluzia este că, la baza oricărei interacțiuni verbale, se află o necesitate practică. Autoarea încearcă de a demonstra existența unei conversații literare (între autor și cititor), textul literar prezentându-se drept un discurs reciproc, la baza căruia se află o intenție literar-communicativă.

Conversation is above all based on the communicative cooperation among its participants. Though it may seem chaotic at the surface, it is, in fact, an intricate process which follows specific patterns established by the speakers themselves on the one hand and the linguistic norms of a given speech community on the other. David Crystal asserts: “Conversation turns out, upon analysis, to be a highly structured activity in which people tacitly operate with a set of basic conventions”¹. In her turn, Joan Cutting states that “conversation is discourse mutually constructed and negotiated in time between speakers; it is usually informal and unplanned”². Guy Cook also sees conversation as a discourse type which occurs when:

1. It is not primarily necessitated by a practical task;
2. Any unequal power of participants is partially suspended;
3. The number of the participants is small;
4. Turns are quite short;
5. Talk is primarily for the participants not for an outside audience³.

In his book “Discourse and Literature” the same author claims that conversation ‘shares many features with literature’⁴. He supports his assertion by pointing to the fact that they both are unmotivated by practical need and marked by an intimate relationship between sender and receiver. Besides, they are at once predictable and unpredictable. This comparative approach aiming at connecting literature and conversation seems to be relevant for the present paper which seeks to make an analysis of a fictional conversation. Moreover, it is an attempt to see how the ‘conversation’ between the author and the reader ‘unfolds’.

Undoubtedly, natural and fictional conversations differ in many ways. Michael Toolan points: “It is not merely that in fiction the talk is ‘tidied up’, that there are relatively few unclear utterances, overlaps, false starts, hesitations, and repetitions: there are also literary conventions at work governing the fictional representations of talk, so that the rendered text is quite other than a

¹Crystal, 1987, p. 116.

²Cutting, 2002, p. 28.

³Cook, 2000, p. 51.

⁴Cook, 1995, p. 47.

faithful transcription of a natural conversation. However, certain structural and functional principles govern fictional dialogue, as they do natural dialogue”⁵.

It is commonly accepted that conversation consists of turns (i.e. opening, turn-taking, holding a turn, passing a turn, closing, overlapping, repair, upshot, adjacency pair and sequencing). Another important feature to be mentioned here is that conversation can be regarded as a practical application of the speech act theory which comprises locution, illocution and perlocution. The goal of this paper is to determine how the above-mentioned features are rendered in a fictional conversation. In addition, it aims at finding out the way the communicative intention is realized.

The choice of the short story “Hills like White Elephants” was due to the fact that, apart from being a masterpiece in the minimalist tradition, it is essentially a two-party communicative exchange taking place between two lovers. We could say that the entire story consists of their conversation. Both participants know each other very well which justifies the informal tone of their conversation. Moreover, they share the same knowledge of the world which makes their discourse meaningful and coherent, though it seems weird to the reader at first. However, it is clear that at the basis of their conversation there is a certain discomfort, which is silenced till the middle of their interaction, moreover, there is no explicit mention of it till the very end of the conversation (they never speak overtly about the abortion). These features considered together result in a conversational ‘turbulence’.

Concerning the power relations between the speakers, it is clear that the man enjoys superior rights whereas the young girl has lesser speaking rights here. Thus, the man does not directly answer the girl’s question in: ‘It’s pretty hot’. He rudely cuts short the girl’s reflections in: ‘Oh, cut it out’. Then beginning with: ‘It’s really an awfully simple operation, Jig. It’s not really an operation at all’, he tries to impose the girl to have an abortion, however, he does not want to be considered the bad guy. Being a hypocrite he wants her to believe that she is the only one who will make the final decision though he has decided everything long before. Another power marker is to be found in the man’s tendency to contradict his partner (‘I’ve never seen one’, ‘Just because you say I wouldn’t have doesn’t prove anything’, ‘No, we can’t’, ‘No, we can’t. It isn’t ours any more’, ‘No, it isn’t. And once they take it away, you never get it back’, ‘You mustn’t feel that way’, ‘I don’t want you to do anything that you don’t want to do –’, ‘I don’t care anything about it’), which implies his lack of desire to compromise. Thus, his discourse is primarily manipulative.

The girl’s lines reveal her readiness to acquiesce to her man’s will and even in her speech she tries to please him. She overtly admits it in: ‘I don’t care about me’ and ‘Oh, yes. But I don’t care about me. And I’ll do it and then everything will be fine’. Her weak attempts to make her point of view heard fail or are shut up. Her silence reveals her predisposition to subdue, though she might not agree with what her partner says. However, there is an attempt at power exchange in: ‘Can’t we maybe stop talking?’, though her helplessness is revealed again when she implores him to stop talking in: ‘Would you please please please please please please please stop talking?’. That is why she appeals to her final resource: ‘I’ll scream’, which can be regarded as an overt attempt at topic suppression.

Their conversation consists of six stages. The first stage is an opening where ‘What should we drink?’ is the girl’s turn taking, ‘It’s pretty hot’ is the man’s holding the turn and ‘Let’s drink beer’ is the girl’s closing. It is an adjacency pair where the girl asks a question and receives an indirect answer. Thus, the man’s speech act is an indirect one; his utterance ‘It’s pretty hot’ reveals his agreement to have a drink in order to quench his thirst. The girl’s closing is a directive which compels the American to perform the action of ordering two big glasses of beer.

At the second stage, every line stands for the character’s turn in conversation. This stage reveals the tension existing between the two lovers. In: ‘They look like white elephants’ the girl draws a parallel between the hills she sees and white elephants. The man’s turn ‘I’ve never seen one’ points to his desire to drop this topic; again it is an indirect speech act. However, the girl prefers to hold the turn ‘No, you wouldn’t’, which annoys her interlocutor who is eager to contradict her and start an argument.

⁵Carter et alii, 2005, p. 193.

The third stage is preceded by the girl's silence which unveils her wish to avoid a row and her readiness to compromise. Instead she shifts their attention to a new topic. This stage consists of three adjacency pairs. The first is a question followed by a preferred response ("They've painted something on it. What does it say?" – 'Anis del Toro. It's a drink'). The second consists of a request which is not verbally answered ('Could we try it?'): the man does not give his consent to try the new drink instead he orders it. The third comprises a question ('Do you want it with water?'), an insertion sequence ('I don't know. Is it good with water?' – 'It's all right') and no final answer: [Q (Q A) A*]. The insertion sequence proves the girl's incapacity to make decisions herself, whereas the detail that the man did not wait for her final answer points to the fact that he is accustomed to decide for her. It is understood that the girl trusts him as she considers him to be more experienced (she has never tasted the drink, while he has).

The fourth stage again discloses the interlocutors' anxiety. In: 'It tastes like liquorice' the girl expresses her disappointment with the drink which is done indirectly. The man takes his turn which is meant to support her utterance ('That's the way with everything'). The girl agrees with what he says ('Yes. Everything tastes of liquorice. Especially all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe'); moreover, she basically repeats his affirmation. In order to make it more believable she goes on with: 'Especially all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe.' It is an indirect act which hides her dissatisfaction with her present life as it has brought only disappointment so far. In the first part of the utterance we have the hyperbole 'all' which arouses certain expectations with the reader, but the detachment 'like absinthe' points to lack of any plausible aspiration in the characters' life, besides it projects the absurdity of considering 'absinthe' as 'all the things you've waited so long for'. Thus, the girl indirectly asserts her dissatisfaction with her partner. This annoys him and makes him produce a directive which is supposed to silence her ('Oh, cut it out'). In her turn, the girl tries weakly to put the blame on him ('You started it. I was being amused. I was having a fine time'). He is dissatisfied even with such an insignificant attempt to disobey though he does not state it directly ('Well, let's try and have a fine time'), his dissatisfaction is marked by the presence of the preface 'Well' and by his hurry to silence the topic. The girl is willingly taking the turn: 'All right'. However, she persists in comparing the hills with white elephants. Her 'Wasn't that bright?' is an effort to pass the turn. The man does not take the turn displaying no enthusiasm ('That was bright'). She then apparently changes the topic and passes the turn again ('I wanted to try this new drink. That's all we do, isn't it - look at things and try new drinks?'). The partner agrees but once more does not take the turn ('I guess so'). It becomes clear that he does not want to develop this topic. However, the girl goes back to the resemblance between the Ebro hills and the white elephants ('They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees. They're lovely hills'). She even makes a self-repair 'I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees' which looks more like an excuse. That is why the man does not start a row or cuts her down; instead he shifts the girl's attention to something else. 'Should we have another drink?' and 'All right' is an adjacency pair in which the man asks a question and he gets the preferred response from the girl.

The next stage explains the obsessive recurrence of the image of the hills like white elephants in the girl's conversation as well as the reason why it annoys the man to such an extent. As a matter of fact it marks the climax in their conversation. The man tries to persuade the girl that there is no harm in having an abortion; furthermore, it will help their relationship go on. He tries to manipulate her and he succeeds in imposing his will but not in convincing her over the benefits of abortion.

The man does not directly open the new topic. He utters an assessment ('The beer's nice and cool') to which the young girl agrees ('It's lovely'). The fact that she gives a preferred response encourages the man to get to his point, i.e. to verbally realize his communicative intention: to talk his partner into having an abortion ('It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig'). He starts by presenting the 'operation' as a piece of cake. In the first utterance he makes use of the intensifiers 'really' and 'awfully' meant to emphasize how simple the operation is. However, he changes his strategy in the second utterance by stating that it is not even an operation in the end. He makes a short pause to listen to the girl's response, however, she prefers to keep silent which implies that she does not agree with it. Instead, he answers for her 'I know you wouldn't mind, Jig' which is an evidence of imposing his will on her as well as a tactic to get a confirmation. The next two utterances reveal again his intention of distorting the truth. The girl still keeps silence which

reveals on the one hand her disagreement and on the other her trepidation not to contradict him. Feeling this, the man goes on praising the benefits of the operation, besides he utters a commissive meant to persuade her 'I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time'. However, the girl is worried with what will happen afterwards which is a reference to her previous utterance: 'Everything tastes of liquorice'. In fact, she hears a confirmation of her doubts in the man's answer: 'We'll be fine afterwards. *Just like we were* before'. The girl's doubt is reflected in her question: 'What makes you think so?'. The man's response is meant to add to his persuasive arguments, that is why he uses the hyperbole 'the only thing' that causes their unhappiness, moreover, he repeats it in the next utterance. The girl is silent for a while and then again asks for a confirmation that they will be 'all right and happy'. The man readily gives this confirmation adding more arguments in favor of the abortion. However, his 'I've known lots of people that have done it' makes the girl produce a dispreferred response. She also has known such people but her irony in 'And afterwards they were all so happy' reveals once more her reserve. The man's preface 'Well' (Well, if you don't want to you don't have to. I wouldn't have you do it if you didn't want to. But I know it's perfectly simple) shows his dissatisfaction. He goes for another strategy in which he tries to convince the girl that he does not force her to it. The following utterances: 'I think it's the best thing to do. But I don't want you to do it if you don't really want to' are contradictory: on the one hand he lets the girl decide, on the other he emphasizes his dissatisfaction: [assertion + BUT + denial]. All this culminates in his hidden threat 'You know how I get when I worry'. The girl is ready to subdue though he does not like to see her as a martyr (the preface 'well', and then his affirmation 'I don't want you to do it if you feel that way').

There is a pause followed by a series of 'dueling' exchange: the girl believes that they could keep the baby whereas the man contradicts her ('I said we could have everything' vs. 'No, we can't'). Thus, we have the adjacency pair: 'assessment – disagreement' repeated six times. The girl's persistence becomes annoying that is why the man utters the directive 'Come on back in the shade. You mustn't feel that way'. This reflects his domineering role in their relationship. His partner is still reluctant to give in ('I don't feel any way. I just know things'). He shifts to another tactic meant to present him in a better light ('I don't want you to do anything that you don't want to do –') which he fails to do because of the girl's interruption (Nor that isn't good for me). As she understands that she won't make him change his mind she changes the subject: 'Could we have another beer?'. She gets the expected answer, however, the man wants to make the final upshot in: 'All right. But you've got to realize –but once again he is interrupted by the girl's directive: 'Can't we maybe stop talking?'. In: 'You've got to realize that I don't want you to do it if you don't want to. I'm perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to you' he manages to realize his upshot which results in the girl's concrete question 'Doesn't it mean anything to you?'. The man's turn once more is contradicting: [assertion + BUT + denial], moreover, he adds his conviction that abortion is a trivial matter ('Of course it does. But I don't want anybody but you. I don't want anyone else. And I know it's perfectly simple). In: "Yes, you know it's perfectly simple' the girl repeats his last utterance and the usage of the pronoun 'you' reveals her irony: she is not as certain as her partner is. The man persists in pretending that he is really sure about the operation being 'perfectly simple' which is reflected by the emphatic 'do' in 'I do know it'. The girl can't stand anymore this verbal torturing so she begs her partner to drop this subject: 'Would you please please please please please please stop talking'. She repeats the word 'please' for seven times which implies that she is at her wits' end. As the man perseveres in persuading her in his 'good' intentions ('But I don't want you to. I don't care anything about it'), the girl overtly utters the threat: 'I'll scream'.

This stage is interrupted by the appearance of the waitress. Once the latter is gone, the characters' conversation enters the final stage, which consists of a pre-sequence and a closing ('Do you feel better?' – 'I feel fine. There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine.'). The closing marks the girl's determination not to reinitiate the talk.

Upon analysis, we see that this conversation consists of:

- 1) an opening;
- 2) three pre-sequences to the main topic;

- 3) the realization of the participants' communicative intention;
- 4) a closing.

It is clear that the issue they discuss causes many problems in the couple of various natures: psychological, verbal, social. Verbally, they can't even openly speak out what is bothering them (e.g. they use three pre-sequences before starting the topic, besides; they never use the word 'abortion' in their conversation). Psychologically, the participants try to impose their view upon the other as they see the issue of abortion differently. Here, the one who holds the domineering position is bound to succeed. Socially, the woman's unexpected pregnancy causes a breakdown in her relationship with the American man.

Their conversation is motivated by a practical need as the discomfort both feel will be at the basis of all their verbal exchange. Moreover, the enactment of power is not equal: the man enjoys more power than the woman. This contradicts the first two points in Guy Cook's classification. Yet, it follows the other two (the number of the participants is small; turns are quite short). Thus, every conversation is centered on a specific communicative intention, whereas the power enactment is always present as people are not equal.

However, there is a peculiarity when it comes to the fifth item i.e. talk is primarily for the participants not for an outside audience. This is true when we speak about natural conversation, yet the conversation in fiction is above all addressed to the reader. Thus, the author intentionally introduces a third participant to the fictional conversation (and to the whole text as well) who is to observe the author's literary intention. Consequently, we can speak of the presence of two outsiders: the author and the reader who, in their turn, are having a conversation through the literary text. In Guy Cook's opinion, such a *conversation* is a 'non-reciprocal discourse'⁶. The non-reciprocity of the author-reader conversation is questionable as the literary work is bound to produce a particular effect on the reader though it might not be the one intended by the author.

Therefore, the literary work appears as a well-planned discourse which is aimed at a hearer (in this case, the reader) who is to respond to what he/she reads.

If the short story "Hills like White Elephants" were to be considered a conversation between Ernest Hemingway and his reader, then it is structured as follows:

- opening, i.e. the title;
- pre-sequence, i.e. what precedes the theme;
- the revealing of the theme;
- no closing, i.e. an open-plot structure.

The author opts to converse with the reader through:

- 1) aposiopesis;
- 2) repetition;
- 3) irony;
- 4) symbols and imagery;
- 5) the characters' dialogue.

Ernest Hemingway was the first to speak of the iceberg theory in literature: 'If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of the iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water'⁷. Thus, the implied meaning, the silence (in this case of both the author and his characters) reveal the writer's intention. The schemata ensure the successful outcome of the conversation between the author and the reader; that is why regardless of the author's not mentioning the word 'abortion' in the text, the reader is keenly aware that this is the main focus of the discussion.

As the choice of the words has been very selective, every repetition becomes extremely significant. Moreover, it acquires a new shade of meaning. Thus, for instance the word 'fine' is repeated several times, every time having a new connotation. The girl's 'I was having a *fine* time' is full of irony and it doesn't coincide with the man's 'Well, let's try and have a *fine* time'. They see 'having a fine time' differently. The man asserts 'we'll be *fine* afterwards' where the word 'fine' is supposed to reassure whereas it emphasizes the man's carelessness. The last sentence 'I feel *fine*' is again ironic. The girl is devastated but she can't bear the man's pressure anymore she prefers to

⁶Cook, 2000, p. 60.

⁷Iceberg.

give in than continue his game. The author communicates in this way his sympathy to the female character and highlights the indifferent nature of her partner. In addition, he points to the unequal division of power in this relationship: the girl is to surrender and not to rebel.

The climatic repetition of the word 'please' when the girl begs the American to stop *the verbal torture* reflects that she is close to hysteria. By repeating it seven times, Ernest Hemingway unveils the degree of forlornness of his character to the reader.

The irony is the key concept in the writer's interaction with his reader. One cannot help feeling his mockery while making the American deaf to his girlfriend's misery. As a matter of fact, he mocked the American's blunt hypocrisy and his seeming superiority.

It is obvious that Ernest Hemingway does not openly reveal his literary intention. This is realized by his attempt to render an accurate transcript of his characters' conversation. Much of the paralinguistic features of the communication are left to be decoded by the reader. Though, the author sets the needed tone which is supposed to help in the process of decoding.

Thus, the writer's input in his *conversation* with the reader is not realized verbally (there are no concrete comments from his part), but by means of imagery and symbolism. For instance, the analogy between the Ebro hills and white elephants stand for an expecting woman's womb while the repetition of this clause suggests the beauty of motherhood which is denied to the girl (this explains the American's annoyance in the story).

Another symbol is to be found in the setting. The action takes place at a railway station. The striking opposition between the *white and long* hills of the Ebro and the barren land at the station (*there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun*) reveal the conflict – fertility vs. aridity – and highlight the theme of the story. The proximity here plays an important role. Thus, the hills, which are set at some distance away, stand for the possibility of keeping the baby, though it involves time and patience. Whereas, the station, which is nearby, offers the easiest way: to ignore the problem and go on living aimlessly.

The setting also implies the departure point; the characters are to take a new road, unfortunately, from bad to worse. They are somewhere in the middle, between love and indifference.

All this considered, the short story "Hills like White Elephants" is a conversation within a conversation, i.e. the author converses with the reader through his characters' dialogue (as well through symbolism, irony and aposiopesis). It is a reciprocal discourse where the author indirectly involves the reader in a discussion, the outcome of which is to arouse a specific response in the reader. It is a structured conversation which focuses on a specific intention. It goes without saying that every reader takes an active part in this interaction, however, his participation is also done indirectly. Thus, literature could be regarded as an indirect verbal interaction between the writer and the reader. Like in natural conversation, this one is also motivated by a practical need: the author comes with the intention of revealing a specific problem bringing forth his/her arguments, where the contribution of the reader is to analyze them and agree or disagree. Hence the author does not only aim at highlighting an important literary issue but also at arousing a response from the reader.

Bibliography

CARTER, R., SIMPSON, P. *Language, Discourse and Literature. An Introductory reading in Discourse Stylistics*. Routledge, 2005 [=Carter et alii, 2005].

COOK, G. *Discourse*. Oxford: OUP, 2000 [=Cook, 2000].

COOK, G. *Discourse and Literature*. Oxford: OUP, 1995 [=Cook, 1995].

CRYSTAL, D. *Advances in Spoken Discourse Analysis*. Loutlege: London, 1987 [=Crystal, 1987].

CUTTING, J. *Pragmatics and Discourse*. Routledge, 2002 [=Cutting, 2002].

Literature. A Pocket Anthology. Longman: Ed. Gwynn, 2005 [=Literature, 2005].

Iceberg Theory // http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iceberg_Theory [=Iceberg].