

# Multi-party conversation: implications for dialogue models

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Most existing models of interaction are based on dyadic (2-party) conversations in which the only social roles realised are *speaker* and *hearer*, i.e. they don't address situations in which there are more than two people present which may or may not contribute to the conversation. Goffman introduces a distinction between *overhearers* and those participants which are directly involved in the conversation. The latter are referred to as *ratified participant*. Each utterance in such settings, would not necessarily be addressing ALL such participants, which means in turn that there's also a role distinction between direct addressees and those who are listening in but aren't overhearers in the sense that they 'can' respond to an utterance even if they aren't being directly addressed. Goffman dubs these as *side-participants*.

It has now been empirically demonstrated that *overhearers* in a conversation have a different status than *ratified participants*, with respect to collective understanding. Namely, they understand 'less' than ratified participants. Consider the following excerpt:

A: Why didn't you come to the workshop yesterday?  
B: I was ill. Also needed to finish the abstract I told you about.  
C: Abstract?  
B: Yes, for the postgraduate conference.  
C: Oh.

Suppose now that C were an overhearer, in which case he would not be able to ask the clarification question he did and the conversation would go on between A and B with C ONLY listening in. An overhearer understands less, precisely because she/he cannot due to certain physical/social constraints, negotiate an understanding when two people refer to something they have mutual knowledge of, but which the overhearer does not know about.

Nevertheless, the question still remains: Is there a difference between side participants and direct addressees with respect to collective understanding? One's tempted to say no just because of what C as a side-participant can do above. However, evidence needs to be gathered systematically from the corpus to demonstrate this. But before any practical corpus analysis can be performed, we need some criteria according to which conversationalists could be classified as either direct addressees or side participants relative to a given utterance. Some of these are paralinguistic phenomena such as gaze, eye contact and body orientation, in addition to cases where participants are being explicitly addressed using their names. All of these however are sufficient but not necessary.

Independently of any such criteria, there are cases where there can be no doubt as to whether an utterance has been produced by a side-participant. These can be gathered by segmenting a multi-party dialogue into a sequence of dyadic exchanges. An utterance inside the boundaries of each such segment established between a pair of participants in a multi-party situation, can be assumed to have been addressing the other participant in the dyad. Thus if the last speaker in each segment does not display any sign of change in her set of direct addressees, then the person responsible for the termination of the segment is definitely a side-participant relative to the last utterance therein.

A scheme has been developed to categorise and distinguish these dyadic segments in terms of their termination points. The scheme is as expected, motivated primarily by the main theme of the analysis, namely the status of side-participants in terms of collective understanding. I will not lay it out here but roughly among others it singles out those segments where there is explicit evidence in terms of the content of the utterance terminating the segment, that the side-participant has understood the content of the dyadic exchange within the segment. The segments are also classified in terms of the participant responsible for their termination, i.e. last speaker or interrupting side-participant. The last speaker is responsible for the termination when for instance she turns her head towards the uninvolved side-participant and asks him a question at which point he becomes a direct addressee of the last utterance in the segment.

One clear form of evidence used to demonstrate the plausibility of the hypothesis that side participants do in fact register/understand the content of dyadic exchanges between other pairs, lies in *elliptical* utterances, produced by side-participants at the termination points of the segments in question (regardless of the person responsible for the termination). Elliptical utterances are those, the meaning of which is context-dependent, i.e. it relies on preceding utterances which in our case fall inside the boundaries of the terminated dyadic segment.

A second form of evidence has to do with ellipsis within the last utterances of dyadic segments, which the last speaker is responsible for terminating. Such utterances indicate that the last speaker is making the tacit assumption that the side-participant does indeed understand (has followed) the content of the subdialogue in which she hasn't taken an active part.

All this is significant since the existing dyadic models of context need to be scaled-up to cover multi-party dialogue. Utterances modify context, but the question of how and when such updates take place needs an empirical basis. In dyadic situations evidence of understanding has been empirically demonstrated to be required from the hearer in order that the content of the speaker's utterance be added to the shared context and be available for subsequent reference. The analysis performed here however, would mean that such evidence does not have to be presented by side participants and that it can be safely assumed that side participants can "follow" dyadic exchanges between the other parties. The hypothesis here can be dubbed as *communal acknowledgement* meaning that an utterance acknowledged solely by the direct addressee of the utterance would result in an update, regardless of whether the side participants at that point present such evidence.

Another reason that makes communal acknowledgement a safe assumption is that it seems like the real distinguishing characteristic of side-participants as opposed to overhearers is that side-participants can/will produce clarification requests whenever it is that they feel the need to interrupt in such manner, depending also on their intentions at that moment(see the example above).