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As Good as it Gets – **Scripted Data in Discourse Analysis**

Abstract

The present paper deals with the issue of using scripted conversations as data for discourse analysis. After some theoretical preliminaries the author presents a qualitative study of six randomly selected extracts from the film *As Good as it Gets* (© 1997 TriStar Pictures). The analytical tools used in the sample analysis are borrowed from Gricean pragmatics, speech act theory, interactional sociolinguistics, variation analysis, conversation analyis and the ethnography of communication.
Keywords: scripted data, discourse analysis, pragmatics, conversation analysis, discourse markers

What should be the basis of analysis and what constitutes data has been a heavily debated issue in discourse analysis for a long time. Brown and Yule differentiate between the 'constructed-data' approach and the 'performance-data' approach (Brown & Yule 1983: 20). One of the criteria Van Dijk sets up to define the term *discourse* is that it must be actual language in use, i.e. authentic and not invented language data (van Dijk 1985: 2).

The reason why different authors take different approaches to gathering data has a lot to do with the vastness of the field of discourse analysis, there are formalist as well as functionalist approaches, depending on if and to what extent language is viewed as an autonomous system and on how much it is considered dependent on other, extra-linguistic factors such as context, interaction, social roles etc. Schiffrin (1993), for example, differentiates between six different approaches to the linguistic analysis of discourse (some of them are closer to the functionalist, some to the formalist paradigm), namely speech act theory, interactional sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication, pragmatics, conversation analysis and variation analysis. According to her, two of these (speech act theory and pragmatics) originally focus on meaning, context and communication of constructed utterances in hypothetical contexts[1], the other four make a point on analysing stretches of discourse that have actually occurred, rather than could occur in a particular context, but they vary in terms of how much information on the context should be included in the analysis.

The sociolinguistic interview is a good example of an attempt to gather naturally occurring data, but is not without its limitations. Holmes (2007) describes why the findings of research based on such data have to be taken with reservations, as social distance between the

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[1] "Like the speech act example […], the prototypical pragmatics example is a constructed utterance in a constructed context." (Schiffrin 1993: 9)

interviewer and the interviewee, speech accommodation and the choice of topic may influence the actual discourse elicited from the subjects.

Research in the field of the ethnography of communication (cf. Gumperz 1972), on the other hand, requires extensive fieldwork within a community as well as a comparison between communities, however, for the same reasons as within the framework of a sociolinguistic interview, a lot of valuable information can be lost on the participant-observer even if data is gathered in his or her own speech community, let alone outside the observer's speech community.

To cut a long story short, unless we visualise fieldwork carried out by an invisible analyst who has his or her recording (and mind-reading) machine switched on 24 hours a day 7 days a week to ensure that the data will include only naturally-occurring utterances which realistically represent the actual proportions of particular speech events, it is almost impossible to collect representative data for the analysis of everyday conversation.

An alternative way of gathering data for analysis, the one I intend to propagate in the present paper, involves looking at scripted, i.e. invented (as opposed to constructed) sequences of utterances. Naturally, one has to allow for potential limitations that such non-naturally occurring data can pose on the study of discourse (to mention but one, the observer's paradox [Labov 1972: 209] becomes the viewer's paradox, i.e. script writers have a particular audience in mind when creating dramatized dialogues, which most probably influences their choices in terms of style, register, etc.). Despite such limitations, however, this approach strikes up a pleasant balance between what Hudson calls 'the armchair approach' to linguistics (theorizing about the implications of linguistic phenomena on the basis of constructed examples), and techniques that involve gathering naturally-occurring data. To put it another way, similarly to linguists who rely on their own intuitions in order to make grammaticality judgements, the discourse analyst who looks at dramatised dialogues relies on script writers' intuitions about conversational mechanisms and communicative strategies.

In what follows I will be analysing six arbitrarily selected extracts from the film *As Good as it Gets* (© 1997 TriStar Pictures) with the aid of some of the concepts used in pragmatics, sociolinguistics and conversation analysis. The film is about a sociopath (Melvin Udall) on the loose, who, although extremely successful in his professional life as a writer of romantic pulp fiction, does not seem to have acquired the rules of peaceful co-existence with his fellow human beings (the main reason being that he fails to treat them as such). The havoc he wreaks damages everybody around him: his neighbour (Simon), the waitress (Carol) he seems to have a fixation on, his psychologist (Dr. Green) and publisher alike, until he himself has to endure the agonies he describes in his books. His utterances are prototypical examples of disregarding face wants, violating, flouting, opting out of various maxims of Grice's Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975) and Geoffrey Leech's Principle of Politeness (Leech 1983).

In extract 1 (see appendix for transcripts) Face Threatening Acts (henceforth FTAs) include (9), (11), (17), (18).

(9) can be considered on the one hand a flouting of the maxim of relevance, since Melvin does not by any means make his contribution relevant to his interlocutor's request for information, on the other hand, from the viewpoint of conversational analysis, this is an instance of topic conflict. Melvin is voicing his disapproval of the presence of an African-American individual on the premises regardless of the fact that this was not the topic proposed: he disregards the preference structure "request for information-giving information".

In addition, from a sociolinguistic viewpoint we can observe a stark contrast between Simon's powerless language (frequent use of hedging devices such as in 6 and 15) and Melvin's powerful use of vocabulary items, loaded with (sometimes obscene) content (cf. also Fairclough 1989).

The exchange is closed by an extremely impolite meta-communicative utterance in which Melvin makes his abhorrence to social pleasantries, to the social function of language in general, even more pronounced (20).

In extract two, Simon's off-record politeness strategy in (6) aimed at asking for an explanation why Melvin has thrown Verdel (Simon's dog) down the garbage shuttle is deliberately misinterpreted for its locutionary content (by now, Simon should know that indirectness and saving face does not work with Mr. Udall), and when Simon finally decides to use a more direct strategy, a rogative in (8), Melvin simply flouts of the maxim of relevance in the following utterance (9). It is especially interesting from the viewpoint of conversational analysis that Melvin manages to hold the floor from (13) through (33) without once being interrupted. The fact that regardless of the numerous transition relevance points (henceforth TRPs), Simon is not given a chance to take the floor can be interpreted as the shortcoming of analysing invented discourse, or, on the contrary, it can be explained by Melvin's use of floor-holding strategies such as parallel structures (not if…, not even if…, not…, not…) and discourse markers such as "so" in (14) or "or" in (22) frequently observed as devices for managing to hold the floor over long turns even in naturally-occurring data (cf. e.g. Cook 1989). A sociolinguist would also observe the use of a very offensive type of sexist language in the form of pejorative gay imagery (fudge-packer, queer, garden, camp, sweetheart).

In extract 3 the rudeness of (6) can be explained in terms of Leech's Maxim of Tact (minimize cost to other, maximize benefit to other) and its complimentary Maxim of Generosity (minimize benefit to self, maximize cost to self), both are maxims of the Politeness Principle – Melvin maximizes benefit to self and cost (as well as inconvenience) to other.

Maxim of Tact
    (a) minimize cost to other
    [(b) maximize benefit to other]

Peel these potatoes.   cost to h less polite
Hand me the newspaper.
Sit down.
Look at that
Enjoy your holiday.
Have another sandwich.   benefit to h more polite
(Leech 1983: 107)

figure 1

While (5) can be interpreted as an off-record politeness strategy, the poignant sarcasm of this utterance nicely illustrates the fact that the use of an indirect strategy does not necessarily make the speaker sound more polite.

Extract 3 is also interesting from the viewpoint of the meaning of silences, a major concern of conversation analysis. Melvin's sequence of utterances from (18) through (20) (which flout

the maxim of quantity for a change) are followed by an extremely long silence that marks the fact that he has touched an extremely sore point with Carol, in pragmatic terms he has also violated the maxim of sympathy (cf. Leech 1983). (23) is followed by what Yule calls an "attributable silence" (Yule 1996: 73), this time on Melvin's part, hence the justification of the meta-linguistics act in (24).

When Melvin does finally reply in (27) and (28), we can observe a shift in style within a single turn from the more careless "yeah" to the more formal "yes".

Extract 4 begins with a blunt question yet again unaccompanied by any pre-sequences or face saving acts, which is a clear sign of anti-social behaviour by any linguistic standard. In contrast, Carol's inserted sequence (10) (a question in reply to a question) is mitigated by the pre-sequence (9), which serves as an excuse for her asking the same question. After Melvin spells out what the implicature of his initial question was in (24), sequences (25) through (30) provide data for analysis in terms of story structure. Applying Labov and Waletzky's (1967) model, we can observe (25) and (26) as the abstract, (27) as the orientation, (28) and (29) as the complicating actions of Carol's story. It is interesting to notice that Melvin interrupts her at the exact point where she has switched to the historic present in (30), a point which has been observed in the literature to be either an evaluative device or a means of focussing, drawing attention to the story and thereby creating tension in the listener (cf. McCarthy 1991: 61). This is yet again an example for how invented data, that is a proficient script-writer's intuitions are underlined by the findings of research on the basis of naturally occurring texts.

We can observe a similar story structure in Melvin's turn as well, but this time the 'abstract', an optional structural element, is left out.

Utterance (13) in extract 5 is interesting from a speech act theory viewpoint, as it is a "metaspeech" or "metapragmatic" act (Lucy 1993), which is often observed to be uttered by people providing explicit speech act labels for their utterances. Its function and effect can be compared with the following example uttered by President George Bush upon the Iraqi take-over of Kuwait in October, 1990.

[example 1]
Iraq will not be permitted to annex Kuwait.
That's not a threat,
it's not a boast…
That's just the way it's gonna be.

In extract (6), utterances (18) through (21) support the claim the existence of a set of principles (be it sociolinguistic, pragmatic or conversational) is proven by the fact that any type of non-observance is duly noted, in other words, even a character like Melvin who has a tendency to disregard social conventions must be fully aware of what a normal exchange should be like, what the cultural schema is for any type of exchange (cf. Yule 1996: 87).

In addition to the above analytical perspectives, we can also observe the use of discourse markers as framing, floor-holding and turn-taking devices, hedges or boosters on the force of the utterance as well as the functions DMs fulfil in narrative structure, rhetorical structure and topical coherence. The table below summarizes the use of the most salient DMs in the six extracts.

linguistic item used as a DM	location (extract/line)	functions
Ah	1/3	marks hesitation, stalling
Oh	1/7	frames sudden realization
I think	1/15	hedge, illocutionary force mitigator
Well	2/7	boosts the force of an ironical statement
aha	2/8	marks topic change
well	2/13	frames an interruption / self-selection
and	2/17,19,23,26, 27	framing devices: mark new points / developments in Melvin's rhetoric
OK, then	2/35	pre-closing / closing transaction
ha	4/2	interjection / surprise
in other words	4/13, 15	frames self-correction
I mean	4/23	frames self-correction
and	4/28	marks narrative evaluation
so	4/30	marks a new narrative clause in story structure / getting back to the main storyline after an evaluation
look	6/4	turn-taking device, marks an interruption, gets hearer's attention
OK?	6/7	elicits agreement
Now	6/12	frames topic change

In the above qualitative analysis I made an attempt to illustrate how fruitful discourse analysis using invented exchanges can be and to what extent it can be in accordance with the findings of the analyses of naturally-occurring language data.

It is my strong position that stretches of discourse taken from dramatised versions of communicative situations often lend themselves to linguistic analysis and may provide even better and more readily available examples for some of the sociolinguistic or pragmatic phenomena one is otherwise hard put to find. One practical application of such analyses can be the illustration of the above described concepts to students of the respective disciplines, an endeavour I have undertaken in my sociolinguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis classes at the University of Debrecen. Second language learners can also benefit a great deal from

teachers' use of dramatized dialogues in ESL classrooms, which, at the same time, might be a nice change from the artificial dialogues provided in most textbooks. This hypothesis seems to be supported by the findings of empirical research: Martínez-Flor's (2007) study (among others) proves that films provide "contextually appropriate input", which is a necessary condition for developing learners' sociopragmatic competence in the target language.

Finally, the four reasons Bell (1995: 23) gives for linguists' interest in media language apply to the study and discourse analysis of dramatised dialogues in films as well:

- they provide an easily accessible source of language data for research,
- they reflect as well as shape both language use and attitudes in a speech community,
- they are interesting from the perspective of how they construct their own images and their relationships to an unseen, unknown audience,
- media discourse in general and dramatised dialogues in films in particular are valid subjects of inquiry in terms of what they reveal about society and in terms of what they contribute to the character of society.

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Appendix – Transcripts of selected conversations in *As Good as it Gets* (© 1997 TriStar Pictures)

legend: ?   rising intonation followed by noticable pause
          ,   continuing intonation
          !   animated tone
          …   noticable pause or break in rhythm without falling intonation
          italics emphatic stress
          CAPS   very emphatic stress
          [two interlocutors talking at the same time (the place of [indicates the point at which the other comes in
(transcription conventions taken from Schiffrin: 1993)

(extract 1)

Simon: (1)   Mr Udall, have you, have you seen Verdell?
Melvin: (2)   What does he look like?
Simon: (3) Ah, … my dog.
          (4) You know (laugh) my dog with the little face,
          (5) lit.., little adorable face,
          (6) don't you, don't you know what my dog looks like?
Melvin: (7) Oh, I got it, you're talking about your dog.
Simon: (8)   [yeah
Melvin: (9) I thought it was the name of that coloured man, I've been seeing in the house.
Simon: (10) Which colour was that?
Melvin: (11) Ah, like, thick molasses, with a broad nose…
Simon: (12)   [Frank, Frank Frank Sachs, Melvin Udall.
Melvin: (13) How're you doin'?
Simon: (14) Frank shows my work Mr Udall.
          (15) I think, yeah, I think you know that.
Melvin: (16) What I know is
          (17) as long as you keep your work zipped up around me,
          (18) I don't give a rat crap
          (19) what or where you shove your show.
          (20) Are we done being neighbours for now?

(extract 2)

          (1) (knock)
Melvin: (2) Yes (furiously)
Simon: (3) Maybe this can wait.
Melvin: (4) (nod)
Simon: (5) I found,
          (6) I found Verdell, Mr Udall.
Melvin: (7) … Well, that's a load off.
Simon: (8)   [aha, did you, did you do something to him?
Melvin: (9) Do you realise that I *work* at home?
Simon: (10) … No, I wasn't aware.
Melvin: (11) Do you like to be interrupted when you're potting around in your little garden?
Simon: (12) No, no, I actually will turn the ringer off my phone and …
Melvin: (13)   [well, I work all the time,
          (14) so *never*, NEVER interrupt me, OK?
          (15) Not if there's a fire,

(16) not even if you hear the sound of a thud from my home
(17) and one week later there's a smell coming from there
(18) that can only be a decaying human body,
(19) and you have to hold a hanky to your face,
(20) because the stench is so thick that you think you're gonna faint.
(21) Even then, don't come knocking.
(22) Or if it's election night,
(23) and you're excited and you wanna celebrate
(24) because some fudge-packer that you date has been elected
(25) the first queer president of the United States
(26) and he's going to have you down the camp,
(27) and you want someone to share the moment with,
(28) even then,
(29) … don't knock.
(30) Not on this door.
(31) Not for any reason.
(32) … Do you get me, sweetheart?

Simon: (33) … Yes,
(34) it's not a … subtle point that you're making.

Melvin: (35) OK, then… (leaves)

(extract 3)

girl sitting at   (1) I just came out of there
"Melvin's table"   (2) and she was saying,
                 (3) if you love me the way you love your remote control
                 (4) I'm gonna switch every time you press one of my bottons.

Melvin: (5) People who talk in metaphors ought to shampoo my crutch.
                 (6) Come on, eat up.
                 (7) How much more have you got to eat?
                 (8) Your appetite's almost as big as your noses.

Girl: (9) What? (leaves)

Melvin: (10) They left.

Carol: (11) Yeah, what do you know
                 (12) …Brian says he doesn't care how long you've been coming,
                 (13) you ever act like this again, you're barred for life.
                 (14) I'm gonna miss the excitement but I'll handle it.

Melvin: (15) Three eggs…

Carol: (16) You're gonna die soon with that diet,
                 (17) you know that.

Melvin: (18) We're all gonna die soon,
                 (19) I will, you will,
                 (20) and it sure sounds like your son will.

(extremely long silence)

Carol: (21) If you ever mention my son again,
                 (22) you'l never be able to eat here again,
                 (23) do you understand?
                 (24) Give me some sign you understand or leave now!
                 (25) Do you understand me, you crazy fuck?
                 (26) Do you?

Melvin: (27) Yeah, yeah
      (28) (clears his throat) yes, yes.
Carol: (29) OK, I'll get your order.

(extract 4)

Melvin: (1) How old are you?
Carol: (2) Ha…
Melvin: (3) 'cause if I'm gonna guess by you eyes
      (4) I'd say you were fifty.
Carol: (5) If I went by your eyes,
      (6) I'd say you were kind,
      (7) so,
      (8) so much for eyes,
      (9) but as long as you bring up age,
      (10) how old are you?
Melvin: (11) I… I…
Carol: (12)   [you brought it up
Melvin: (13)   [in other words
Carol: (14)   [no, I'm curious
Melvin: (15)   [in other words
      (16) not that you're ugly
      (17) it's not what I'm saying
Carol: (18)   [easy, easy pal,
      (19) I can take the compliment,
      (20) but my knees start knocking
      (21) when you turn on the charm
      (22) full blast.
Melvin: (23) I mean,
      (24) what's, what's with the dark…
Carol: (25) (three sec silence) Dawn patrol.
      (26) Major dawn patrol.
      (27) My son had a full-blown attack,
      (28) and this time for extra fun,
      (29) they gave us the wrong antibiotics,
      (30) so I get him home… (trying to take his plate away)
Melvin: (31)   [no, no, no, no, no, no…
      (32) the dog,
      (33) the bacon's for the dog,
      (34) last week I was playing the piano for him,
      (35) he, he liked it,
      (36) so I decided I'm gonna make a little joke.
Carol: (37) So we're all set here.
Melvin: (38) Yeah.

(extract 5)

Melvin: (1) Hi,
       (2) (shouts) Help!
Dr Green: (3) If you wanna see me
       (4) you will not do this,
       (5) you will make an appointment.
Melvin: (6) Doctor Green,

<table>
<tr><td></td><td>(7) how can you diagnose someone as an obsessive compulsive disorder</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>(8) and then act as though I had some choice about barging in.</td></tr>
</table>

Dr Green: (9)There's not going to be a debate,
(10) you must make an appointment
Melvin: (11)   [you said you could help me,
(12) what was that?
(13) A tease?

(extract 6)

Publisher: (1) Yes, you write more than everybody else,
(2) yes, you make us a lot of money,
(3) but I think it's more appropriate to look at it…
Melvin: (4)   [look, look,
(5) I need this,
(6) just say, "Melvin, I'll try"
(7) OK?
(8) Hm?
Publisher: (9) (sigh) Melvin, I'll try.
Melvin: (10) Thank you,
(11) that's good.
Publisher: (12) Now,
(13) on a pleasanter note,
(14) my son,
(15) he just got accepted to Brown,
(16) my husband was dying…
Melvin: (17)   [yeah,
(18) good,
(19) nice,
(20) thrilled,
(21) exciting,
(22) you don't have to wait with me