The exchange in family discourse

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Abstract

The intimate genre of family discourse has traditionally posed problems for linguists because of the difficulty in collecting the data and the intimate nature of the genre. For obvious reasons, people view family life as intensely private and so are unwilling to allow linguists to intrude upon it. This, to a certain extent, would explain the paucity of directly relevant material available. This paper is an attempt to address this lacuna, and perhaps more ambitiously, to provide openings for further study. The paper analyses the structure of the exchange in family discourse in an Irish context. A traditional model of conversational exchange is applied to the data but is seen as unsuitable for the analysis due to factors particular to family talk. However, later work in the area of the exchange brings into relief a clear exchange structure in this discourse which, on the surface, appears dense and chaotic.

Introduction: the main characteristics of family discourse

A family is defined as 'a primary social group consisting of parents and their offspring ... one's wife or husband and one's children' (*Collins Concise Dictionary* 1995: 460). Some researchers (Watts 1989) have chosen to include close relations as part of the family group but in this paper they are not considered. In Table 1 (adapted from O'Keefe, McCarthy, Koester, and Prodromou 2000), the situational characteristics that distinguish one register from another (as outlined by Biber et al. 1999: 15-17) are applied to family discourse. *Participant roles* (see Ventola 1979: 268-269) has been added to the matrix because of the uniqueness of this characteristic in family discourse. These roles are unique due to the existence of a hierarchic power structure and fixed, pre-established speaker relationships. As the paper will show, these features have an important role to play in the discourse.

Table 1: The situational characteristics of family discourse

THE FAMILY	
Register	
Mode:	spoken, face to face
Interactive online production:	spontaneous, no advanced planning
Shared immediate situation:	the family home
Main communicative purpose:	personal communication
Audience:	private, immediate family members only
Participant roles:	hierarchic/asymmetrical — parents-children, sibling–sibling
	fixed/stable and pre-established speaker relationship — family — father, mother, brothers, sisters
Dialect domain:	local — base level dialect (Crystal 2000: 6)

Family discourse is located in the intimate genre. This genre represents the most private and personal of discourses, for instance, between married couples or very close friends (see Farr et al., this volume). Hopper et al. (1981) explored the intimate genre and the effect that it has on the language used by participants interacting within it. They interviewed 50 married individuals in order to explore the use of idioms among intimates. They found that within this genre the use of idioms seems particularly suited for relationship growth rather than maintenance functions (Hopper et al. 1981: 32). The relationship is pre-established, i.e. husband–wife, therefore the maintenance function is unnecessary and is replaced by a development function. This speaker relationship is one of the defining features of the intimate genre. Within this genre, speaker relationships are usually so fixed and stable that they have a significant impact on areas such as politeness and the use of relational language. Crystal (2000: 6) claims that the home dialect is the base dialect and, therefore, it could be said that family talk also represents a base level genre. A base level genre could be seen to embody critical levels of the linguistic features of politeness and relational language. These levels are the minimum needed for polite interaction and the development of interpersonal relationships.

The data

The data is located in a one-hour corpus of family talk (12,619 words) which forms a part of the Limerick Corpus of Irish English (see Farr et al., this volume). It occurs in the shaded area of the matrix of speech genres shown in Table 2. This is consistent with McCarthy's (1998: 10) assertion that 'intimate relations pertain between family members or close friends in private, non-professional settings'.

Table 2: The matrix of speech genres[1]

	Collaborative idea	Collaborative task	Information provision
Pedagogical	Group tutorial.	Individual tutorial; discussing student's work.	Lecture.
Professional	Collaborative office meeting.	Colleagues moving furniture.	Work presentation.
Transactional	Chatting with bank clerk.	Buying a stereo system.	Commentary by a library tour guide.
Socialising	Chatting with friends about shared experiences.	Assembling shelves.	Telling jokes.
Intimate	Discussing family matters.	Cooking together.	Relating story of film seen.

As can be seen from McCarthy's matrix of speech genres within each context-type of interaction, located on the left-hand side of the grid, there exists three goal-types; collaborative task, collaborative idea, and information provision. Collaborative idea is the 'interactive sharing of thoughts, judgements, opinions and attitudes' (McCarthy 1998: 10), whereas collaborative task features people talking about a task they are trying to accomplish. McCarthy (1998: 10) defines information provision as 'predominantly uni-directional with one party imparting information to the others'. He also suggests that while the role of information-giver may rotate between

participants in the conversation, the motivation for the talk always remains that of information giving (McCarthy 1998: 10).

All the instances of conversation were audio recorded by a family member. The family was told that the researcher was interested in comparing English in different parts of Ireland but was not told the specific focus. This gave them no opportunity to react to any given situation and adjust their speech accordingly. Table 3 details speaker information at the time of the first recording[2]. Other information such as the context in which the conversation took place is given before each extract.

Table 3: Speaker information

Name and family relationship	Age	Sex	Birthplace	Area Living	Occupation	Education
David (father)	50	M	Limerick	Limerick	Company Director	3rd level
Susan (mother)	48	F	Limerick	Limerick	Primary school teacher	3rd level
Tom (brother)	23	M	Limerick	Limerick	Student	3rd Level
Nora (sister)	22	F	Limerick	Limerick	Student	3rd Level
Kate (sister)	19	F	Limerick	Limerick	Student	3rd Level
John (brother)	14	M	Limerick	Limerick	Student	2nd Level

The exchange

Looking at Table 1 we see that the speaker relationships within the family are both fixed and pre-established. From this it can be reasonably surmised that the relational aspects of family discourse are also fixed and pre-established. Relational language is a necessary part of casual conversation as 'its effective use normally allows social and interpersonal relations to be maintained' (McCarthy 1998: 179). Within the family the building and maintenance of these relations is unnecessary in a formal sense. Speaker relationships have been fixed and established from the outset — the roles of father, mother, brother and sister remain unchanging throughout. Therefore, some features of relational language, e.g. phatic communion (Malinowski 1923), have only a small part to play in family discourse. Malinowski (1923: 151) claims that phatic communion

serves to 'establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship', however, in the family these bonds are already present between each family member. Families can therefore start a conversation less ceremoniously and get straight to the point because they know each other's background and personality. Also their relationship is one of kinship and so bonding at this level is often superfluous. Family talk that is structured and organized and containing features of this relational language such as phatic talk would perhaps be more suggestive of a family that hardly knew each other, or an extended family.

With this in mind, this paper will now address the structure of the exchange. Normally, because of the presence of relational elements in language, when one initiates a conversation one can reasonably expect to receive a response. A greeting of *How are you?* would usually receive a response such as *Fine*. This would give the exchange an Initiation → Response structure. However the relational elements of family discourse are different to the norm in casual conversation and this means that what is expected from the point of view of exchange structure is not always what happens.

The exchange: previous studies

According to Stubbs (1983: 146), Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) model of the structure of the exchange (Initiation → Response → Feedback) is most suited to what he calls 'relatively formal situations in which a central aim is to formulate and transmit pieces of information' and so is ideal when analysing the structure of classroom discourse, doctor-patient interaction, or service encounters. However, not all conversation is highly structured and the general aim of casual conversation could be said to be a phatic or social one rather than the transmission of information. Stubbs (1983), Hoey (1991, 1993), and Francis and Hunston (1992) took Sinclair and Coulthard's model and developed it from the point of view of analysing less structured casual conversation. They probed the limits of the exchange and suggested that the exchange in everyday, naturally occurring spoken discourse is potentially longer and more complicated than the three moves of Initiation → Response → Feedback originally envisaged (see also Coulthard and Montgomery 1981). Hoey (1991: 74) says:

Just as most naturally occurring sentences are complex, that is, constructed out of one or more clause, so also most naturally occurring exchanges are complex — the result of combining two or more simple exchanges. The simple exchange is characterised by having a single initiation and response, while complex exchanges have one or more of each.

Hoey claims that speakers combine exchanges and in doing so make discourse more complex and flexible. This complexity and flexibility is evident in family discourse. An example of this is when Feedback is treated as Initiation, that is to say the listener treats the Feedback as if a new exchange has been started. This 'double-labelling' of the parts of the exchange overcomes an often-levelled criticism of the Sinclair and Coulthard system that each utterance or part of an utterance has one and only one function (Francis and Hunston 1992: 149). This dual function of an utterance is demonstrated in (1) where the speakers are discussing whether or not you can use a steam cleaner to clean a car (for transcription conventions see the Appendix):

(1) [<$1> Tom, <$2> Susan]

<$1> Handy now if you had a what d'you ma call it? You know if you got a second hand car or anything like that.	INITIATION
<$2> You're not supposed to be able to use it on a car on the outside of a car.	RESPONSE
<$1> I mean on the inside of it.	FEEDBACK TREATED AS INITIATION
<$2> Oh yeah. It'd clean the inside of a car no bother. But it's supposed to be too hot for the outside of a car.	RESPONSE

Another way of combining exchanges is for a responsive turn to simultaneously function as an initiation. A participant in the conversation in turn responds to this new initiation.

(2) [<$1> David, <$2> John, <$3> Susan]
    [The family are putting up a Christmas tree]

    <$1> D'you see where my finger is? There
           I want you to stick it. Around the
           end.   INITIATION 1
    <$2> Oh right right. Do the lights go on
           first mam?   RESPONSE 1//
                                    INITIATION 2
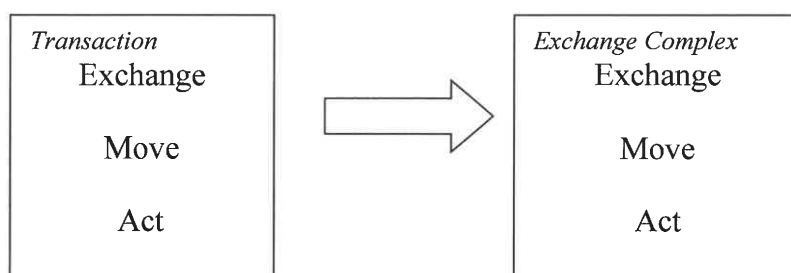   <$3> They do.   RESPONSE 2

On a structural level, Hoey (1993) says that these exchanges combine to form an 'exchange complex'. Therefore, the exchange complex exists above the exchange in the rank-scale and the 1975 model is adapted as in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Hoey's proposed changes to the structure of the exchange

Sinclair and Coulthard (1975)	*Hoey (1993)*

Hoey (1993) argues that Sinclair and Coulthard's transaction is unsuitable for the analysis of casual conversation. The reason for this becomes clear when you parallel discourse analysis and grammatical analysis. The exchange complex explains how exchanges, or clauses, combine to form sentences and so the text of interaction. In Sinclair and Coulthard's rank-scale the transaction represents the sentence, but Hoey (1993: 118) argues that transactions are 'characteristically rather large, whereas a sentence may be realized by a single clause'. 'The transaction', he continues, 'is best regarded not as a structural unit (i.e., with internal rule governed organization) but as an organising unit like a paragraph' (Hoey 1993: 136).

Adopting Hoey's exchange complex when examining the structure of the exchange in family discourse is necessary because topics in casual conversation tend to be extended over a number of exchanges (Hoey 1991: 73).

However, all approaches mentioned here are limited in their scope in that they mostly consider dialogic discourse and not multi-party discourse as is present in the data analysed for this paper. Furthermore, whether overtly or otherwise, they consider an important characteristic of casual conversation to be its symmetrical nature. Family talk differs from other casual conversation in a number of significant ways, not least due to the presence of a hierarchic power structure. This power structure is reflected in the amount of overlaps and interruptions enacted by the speakers. The speakers who enact the majority of overlaps and interruptions (in family discourse this is the parents, closely followed by the older siblings) can reasonably be assumed to have the most conversational power in that they dictate the topic and rate of conversational flow. From this perspective, in family discourse participation in conversation is by no means a simple, symmetrical matter.

The exchange in family discourse

Working from extracts (1) and (2) it can reasonably be expected that within family discourse exchanges of the structure [I R F/I R] and [I R/I R] will occur. However, the point has already been made that the structure [I R F] is a formal one, most suited to the classroom where the teacher is in a position that ensures a symmetrical relationship between initiation and response and where feedback may or may not occur. Family discourse is informal in the extreme and the speaker roles, although hierarchic, are less rigid conversationally than those of teacher and pupil.

From the point of view of information provision, Stubbs (1983: 133) states that this type of exchange e.g. a lecture, would have the structure [I (R)], where information is conveyed and the listeners may or may not respond. However, in this case the listeners would in effect be adopting a passive role in the conversation and not an active one as in extract (3).

(3) [<$1> John, <$2> David, <$3> Susan, <$4> Tom]

[The family are having a discussion about Nottingham at the dinner table. Inverted commas indicate where information is being read directly from a computer screen]

<$1> +Are you going to make a comment after every sentence? I'll show you this mam. <$= > "In the city <\$= > in the city are Nottingham castle eleventh century <$O1> rebuilt <\$O1> sixteen seventies"+

<$2> <$O1> Told ya <\$O1>. That's it. There's a castle in the middle of it.

<$3> It'll be very like <$O2> King John's Castle <\$O2>.

<$1> +<$O2> "Now housing a large <\$O2> gallery and museum"+

<$3> Do you know that?

<$4> What?

<$1> +"and several <$O3> theatres." <\$O3>

<$3> <$O3> It'll <\$O3> be very like King John's Castle cos it will have been built at the same time by the same person.

<$1> "Nottingham is the seat "+

<$2> Robin Hood.

<$3> No Prince John.

<$2> <$E> laughing <\$E>.

<$4> <$E> laughing <\$E>.

In Table 4 below, extract (3) has been broken down into individual utterances and each of these has been labelled in relation to its function in the exchange. The information provision goal-type accounts for Initiation 1 and the subsequent attempts at re-initiation, turns (4), (7), and (9). Only one of the speaker turns (1), (4), (7) and (9) receives a response, but this does not mean that the other participants are adopting the passive listener role. Instead each participant seeks to add initiations of their own in turns (2), (5), (6), and (8). From this it can be clearly seen that the structure [I (R)] is not present in this exchange complex. It is unlikely that this structure will be encountered in the intimate genre because it is fair to say that in the family it would be a rare occurrence for a participant to adopt the role of a passive listener.

On the surface of the exchange complex in Table 3 the structure [I R/I R] is present only once in speaker turns (1) to (3). This structure points towards a conversation that is reciprocal in nature, say

between two friends or two strangers, where, from a relational point of view, an effort is being made to keep the conversation going so that social relations may be built or maintained. In the family this effort is not necessary due to pre-established social relations. This affects the structure of the exchange from an organizational point of view.

Table 4: Proposed exchange structure for extract (3)

	Exchange	*Extract (3)*
(1)	Initiation 1	<$1> +Are you going to make a comment after every sentence? I'll show you this mam. <$= > "In the city <\$= > in the city are Nottingham castle eleventh century <$O1> rebuilt <\$O1> sixteen seventies"+
(2)	Response 1// Initiation 2	<$2> <$O1> Told ya <\$O1>. That's it. There's a castle in the middle of it.
(3)	Response 2	<$3> It'll be very like <$O2> King John's Castle <\$O2>.
(4)	Re-initiation of 1	<$1> +<$O2> "Now housing a large <\$O2> gallery and museum"+
(5)	Initiation 3	<$3> Do you know that?
(6)	Response 3// Initiation 4	<$4> What?
(7)	Re-initiation of 1	<$1> +"and several <$O3> theatres." <\$O3>
(8)	Response 4// Initiation 5	<$3> <$O3> It'll <\$O3> be very like King John's Castle cos it will have been built at the same time by the same person.
(9)	Re-initiation of 1	<$1> "Nottingham is the seat "+
(10)	Response 5	<$2> Robin Hood.
(11)	Response 5	<$3> No Prince John.
(12)	Feedback 5	<$2> <$E> laughing <\$E>.
(13)	Feedback 5	<$4> <$E> laughing <\$E>.

A closer look at the exchange complex shows that an overlapping and interweaving of basic exchanges occurs. When you remove the re-initiations (4), (7), and (9) from Table 4 then the exchange takes on the structure [I R/I R I R/I R/I R F], which is a well-organized exchange. The re-initiations are present because of the hierarchic speaker roles that result in speaker <$5>, the youngest sibling, having to constantly attempt to gain the speaker turn.

A move away from information provision to the goal-type of collaborative idea yields similar results to the ones outlined above, as seen in Table 5.

Table 5: Proposed exchange structure for extract (4)

[<$1> John, <$2> Tom, <$3> David, <$4> Susan, <$5> Nora]
[The family is sitting at the dinner table debating the advantages and disadvantages of owning a Dalmatian]

	Exchange	*Extract (4)*
(1)	Initiation 1	<$1> Ah we do cos then we can get a Dalmatian can't we Mam? Mam's goin getting us.
(2)	Response 1 // Initiation 2	<$2> You can't have a Dalmatian in a housing estate. You just can't do it like.
(3)	Response 2	<$3> No.
(4)	Re-initiation of 2	<$2> Cos they're too energetic.
(5)	Initiation 3	<$4> He's not serious Tom.
(6)	Response to re-initiation of 2	<$3> Too big.
(7)	Response 3 // Initiation 4	<$2> What?
(8)	Response 4	<$4> He's not serious.
(9)	Initiation 5	<$1> That's my fantasy world.
(10)	Feedback 4	<$2> Just in case he was.
(11)	Re-initiation of 5	<$1> Where I do actually have a big house in the middle of the country.
(12)		<$E> pause <\$E>
(13)	Initiation 6	<$2> Salt is good for you. Salt is good for you.
(14)	Response 6	<$5> Yes Tom.

Again in Table 5 there appears to be only one example of the structure [I R/I R]. Similar to Table 4 there is also only one feedback token. This suggests a relative infrequency of feedback from the exchanges and points towards low occurrences of the structure type [I R F/I R] (this claim will be further addressed in the concluding section). Table 5 also demonstrates the overlapping and interweaving of exchanges. This is evident from speaker turns (4) to (8) whose structure is [*R* I *R* R/I R].[3] This represents two exchanges:

the re-initiation → response exchange (in italics) overlaps with the initiation → response/initiation → response exchange.

In Table 6 the family is sitting together chatting when speaker <$3> starts a discussion that highlights the underlying structure of family talk.

Table 6: Proposed exchange structure for extract (5)

[<$1> John, <$2> David, <$3> Susan, <$4> Tom, <$5> Nora]

	Exchange	*Extract (5)*
(1)	Initiation 1	<$1> What's he working as Tom?
(2)	Initiation 2	<$2> When is he making the film?
(3)	Response to initiation 1	<$3> In McDonald's.
(4)	Response to initiation 2	<$4> We're supposed to be makin the film this weekend shur. I wouldn't say that's goin to happen either now.
(5)	Initiation 3	<$1> Go way. Go way from it.
(6)	Initiation 4	<$3> But shur or he could be working at the weekend you see.
(7)	Response 4	<$4> No he won't be.
(8)	Re-initiation of 1	<$3> And what's he going to be doing in there?
(9)	Response to re-initiation of 1	<$4> I think they're training him as a <$O1> trainee <\$O1> manager.
(10)	Response to re-initiation of 1	<$1> <$O1> Fryin </$O1>. Fryin chips.
(11)	Initiation 5	<$2> You mean he's fryin chips?
(12)	Response 5	<$4> Basically.
(13)	Feedback 5	<$E> all laugh <\$E>
(14)	Initiation 6	<$4> He says I'm goin to do everything. Fry chips and wait tables and stuff. Shur Patrick is no more able for that stuff <$O2> now <\$O2>.
(15)	Response 6	<$1> <$O2> Flippin <\$O2> the burgers over like.
(16)	Response 6	<$2> On his feet all day.
(18)	Feedback 6	<$4> Shur there's no way he'll be able for that like.

The overlapping and interweaving of exchanges is evident in the speaker turns (1) to (4). The structure of these turns can be represented as [*I1* I2 *R1* R2] where R1 (in italics) is the response to the first initiation (I1). The rest of the exchange complex has a straightforward structure whereby every initiation, except turn (5), receives a direct response. The feedback in turn (18) is of an evaluative nature offering an overall conclusion from the speaker who provided the details of the story.

Conclusion

The application of the concept of exchange structure to the phenomenon of family talk raises many issues in relation to the limitations of the exchange. One of these issues is the actual labelling of the constituent parts of the exchange. Many of the labels applied to utterances in the analysis section may be open to debate. For example, in Table 6 the utterance at turn (11) *You mean he's fryin chips?* is labelled as *Initiation 5* because it receives the response *Basically*. Similarly, this turn could be labelled *Feedback/Initiation* as feedback to the utterance *And what's he going to be doing in there?*. This debate is due to the difficulties in applying the [I R F] structure to family discourse. However, in the absence of a viable alternative to the Sinclair and Coulthard approach, the exchange is what must be persevered with. It is worth noting that as talk becomes more informal and less structured at a transactional level, McCarthy's (1998: 10) goal-types collaborative idea, collaborative task, and information provision become less exclusive, and the boundaries between them less defined. Similarly, and by extension, what constitutes an initiation, response, or feedback may become less certain and more open to interpretation, though of course the participants have no such problems interpreting them in real time. Family discourse does not conform to many of the rules governing casual conversation so there should be no surprise that it does not conform to the rules of the exchange.

The analysis also raises other issues in relation to the rules governing exchanges. Tables 4, 5, and 6 signal that family discourse is, like most casual conversation, reciprocal in nature, hence the presence of the exchange structure [I R/I R]. The differences between family talk and other casual conversation lie in the relational elements of the discourse. In casual conversation the norm is for

initiations to be followed by responses, and this ensures the upkeep of social relations. However from Tables 4, 5, and 6 it is clear to see that when a family member initiates, s/he may or may not receive a direct response. All three tables feature an initiation followed by another initiation. This is an aspect of the application of the [I R F] model that has not emerged in previous studies. Table 4 demonstrates that an initiation can be followed by a re-initiation of a previously ignored utterance as in turns (6) and (7). Table 6 shows that an initiation can also be followed by a response to a previous initiation: see turns (1)-(4). This is acceptable and unproblematic for the family because their social relations do not need to be formally maintained, due to the fact that they are already fixed and pre-established. This results in an overlapping and interweaving of exchanges which on the surface makes family talk appear confusing and disorganized but when examined more closely upholds Hoey's (1991: 79) assertion that 'exchanges do indeed combine into exchange complexes without losing their basic simplicity'. Devoid of much of the relational language, which is required once talk takes place outside of the stable family relationship, the exchange structure of family discourse appears even more dense and chaotic. However, this paper has shown that there is in fact an underlying structure to the exchange in family discourse.

In relation to future studies of family discourse, it would be interesting to see how the presence of the extended family affects the discourse (one hypothesis held here is that initiations would more than likely receive their responses!). Also, there exists the potential to move further up the conversational matrix and compare family discourse to, say, multi-party interaction between a group of very close friends. Finally, Malouf (1995) suggests that Clark and Carlson's (1982) Informative Hypothesis is an attractive alternative to Discourse Analysis for dealing with multi-party discourse and a comparison between these two approaches in the area of family talk would be a significant addition to the existing body of work.

Notes

1. The matrix of speech genres is taken from McCarthy (1998: 10) and in this table it contains examples of operationalized categories.

2. The family gave permission for the recordings to be used as long as their privacy was protected and accordingly the names used in the paper are fictional.

3. Re = Reinitiation.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

Symbol	Feature
<$1>, <$2>, <$3> etc.	Speaker numbered in order of entering conversation.
=	Incomplete words.
<$=>	Marks the beginning of an unfinished sentence, repeat, or false start.
<\$=>	Marks the end of an unfinished sentence, repeat or false start.
+	Used to mark the end of an interrupted utterance and the beginning of a resumed utterance.
<$O>	Marks the beginning of an overlap.
<\$O>	Marks the end of an overlap. The actual overlapping utterance is given on the next line. The number in the overlap symbol corresponds to the overlapping speaker.
<$G?>	Uncertain or unintelligible utterance where the number of syllables cannot be guessed.
<$G1>, <$G2> ... <$G5>	The number of unintelligible syllables can be guessed.
<$E> speaker two laughs <\$E>	Extralinguistic features (e.g. laughing, coughing, any significant background noise)
" ... "	Inverted commas mark the beginning and end of where information is being read aloud.
Capitals with single spacing and no full stops	Marks that a speaker is spelling out a word.

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