

Unit one

Introduction

Aims of this book

Conversation consists of spoken language. Not only do the features of spoken language differ from the features of written language, but the methods used to analyse conversation have to consider that conversation exists within a social context which determines the purpose of the conversation and shapes its structure and features. Though we are largely unaware of the rules that govern conversation, we operate daily using them.

It is obvious, therefore, that learning to speak also means learning to talk. Those who produce written texts such as novelists, poets and journalists are often given great respect for their ability to craft texts. Perhaps, because in conversation so much has to be taken on trust and is dependent on the speakers' sensitivity to both language and cultural expectations, we should give more respect to those who craft and use oral texts well.

By examining transcripts from a variety of conversations, the aim of this book is, therefore, to explore the complexity of conversation in an attempt to understand and appreciate it more.

What is conversation?

We communicate daily with each other by talking. It is 'the most basic and widespread linguistic means of conducting human affairs' (McArthur, 1992) but though we speak and operate regularly in conversation, it is only rarely something that we plan or analyse.

'Discourse analysis examines how stretches of language, considered in their full textual, social and psychological context, become meaningful and unified for their users' (Cook, 1989). This book deals

Introduction

with discourse analysis, but chooses to focus on naturally occurring spoken language or conversation rather than written texts and looks, therefore, at spoken language in use between speakers and listeners in a variety of social contexts. Conversation, therefore, is any interactive spoken exchange between two or more people and can be:

- ⊙ face-to-face exchanges – these can be private conversations, such as talk at home between the family, or more public and ritualised conversations such as classroom talk or Question Time in the Houses of Parliament;
- ⊙ non-face-to-face exchanges, such as telephone conversations;
- ⊙ broadcast materials such as a live radio phone-in or a television chat show.

What does conversation consist of?

Obviously, conversation is constructed with spoken rather than written language. Speech is usually spontaneous and, by its nature, temporary because it has gone as soon as it has been spoken. It can, however, be made permanent through recording and transcription, where transcription is an attempt to represent, in a written form, the sounds and words of the spoken language. The difficulty, however, of transcribing accurately clearly illustrates the differences between spoken and written communication. Conversation is obviously far more than words. Communication can take place through body language, through prosodic features such as intonation, speed, stress and volume and even through silence or laughter. It is worth exploring, therefore, the specific features of spoken language used as the building blocks of conversation.

To operate efficiently in conversation, however, our knowledge has to stretch far beyond an awareness of individual sounds or words. Instinctively, it seems, and usually without any formal training in the rules of conversation, we are nevertheless capable of structuring and building conversation appropriate to the situations in which we find ourselves. It seems that our early years of language acquisition and our subsequent years of talk have taught us all we need to know.

The f
teach
discu

- ⊙
- ⊙
- ⊙
- ⊙
- ⊙
- ⊙

Turn

- ⊙
- ⊙

The f
turns
turn.
consi
the r
parer
Levin
5% c
simul

the w
too €
Not t
as a c
with
expec
the q
answ
know
the p

Introduction

Activity

The following remarks are all likely to be spoken by parents attempting to teach young children the finer points of conversation. Consider them and discuss what rule of conversation they could be asking the child to learn.

- ⊙ Don't interrupt me while I'm speaking.
- ⊙ Speak when you're spoken to.
- ⊙ What's the magic word?
- ⊙ Don't tell me what to do.
- ⊙ Don't say that in front of your gran.
- ⊙ Don't say 'what', say 'pardon'.

Commentary

Turntaking and structure

- ⊙ Don't interrupt me while I'm speaking.
- ⊙ Speak when you're spoken to.

The first remark targets one of the basic rules of conversation: people take turns. In British culture, you need to know when to talk and how to gain a turn. Simply breaking into a conversation whenever you feel like it is not considered good conversational behaviour. It does, of course, occur (and the reasons for this are discussed later in this book) but for the young child, parents are often quite happy to explain that it is better not to interrupt. Levinson (1983), in fact, tells us that 'less (and often considerably less) than 5% of the speech stream is delivered in overlap (two speakers speaking simultaneously)'.

Parents are equally keen that their child should not remain silent at the wrong time. As teenagers well know, silence after a question can all too easily be interpreted as deliberately challenging or controversial. Not to answer the greeting 'Hello' with a similar response is also treated as a deliberate flouting of the rules and regarded as rudeness. Presented with the information that 'Tea is on the table', every self-respecting cook expects an acknowledgement and not receiving one is likely to produce the question 'Did you hear me?' These expected pairings of question and answer, greeting and greeting, information and acknowledgement are known as **adjacency pairs**. They are also often likely to provide much of the predictable structure of a conversation.

To analyse conversation, therefore, means we have to examine how and where we take turns and how these turns are built on to each other to structure the conversation as a whole.

Politeness and negotiation

- ⊙ What's the magic word?
- ⊙ Don't tell me what to do.

In a subtle process, probably unacknowledged by both parent and child, these two utterances are helping the child acquire the knowledge needed to operate politely. There are two main ways to get someone to do something for you. To get what you want, you can always ask politely or choose instead to issue a straight command. Placed alongside a request, the word 'Please' smooths its progress and often makes a favourable response more likely. Thought is always recommended, however, before the use of a straight command. Backed by the authority of parenthood and age, adults may risk giving children a straight command. Even then, as every child knows, this may not be successful. The opposite way round, a child issuing a straight command to a parent, is even more likely to be unsuccessful. Not only will the child not get what they want, they will probably also be told in no uncertain terms that their command-giving is not acceptable conversational behaviour. Conversation is, therefore, not just about passing on information or getting things done. It is also about the way speakers relate to one another and choose to co-operate or not to co-operate with one another.

Content and conditioning

- ⊙ Don't say that in front of your gran.
- ⊙ Don't say 'what', say 'pardon'.

Little by little, we are shaped to understand not only what is acceptable language to use, but also what are acceptable topics. What you do or don't say in front of your gran depends, of course, on the nature of your gran and, to some extent, on the situation where the conversation takes place. What gran might accept in public might be different from what she'd accept in the sanctuary of her own home with no other witnesses present. What you choose to talk about might also be conditioned by the type of family of which you are a member, your gender or even your class.

Purpose and context

What is also intriguing is how any conversation with gran or anyone else will alter according to its purpose. The purpose of a conversation is not always immediately obvious from the surface meaning of the words chosen. The intention behind an utterance can even mean that, as they are spoken, the words actually achieve something beyond what's being said. For example, the bride at a wedding ceremony saying 'I do' has the legal status of performing the act of marriage. These words perform a **speech act**. Speech act theory, derived from the work of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), refers to what is being done when something is said, for example, warning or promising. The speech act can be indirect if the apparent meaning is different from its underlying real meaning. The purpose of the utterance 'Can you pass the salt?', for example, is to try to get the hearer to do something rather than a request for information.

Understanding conversation properly, therefore, means looking at the purpose behind the words spoken. This is as important as looking at the words themselves. It is interesting to consider how many different purposes conversations can have. By what we say, by the way we say it and sometimes even by what we don't say we can influence or reflect the purpose or function of a conversation.

Activity

Go through your day and see if you can list some of the conversations you have had. Choose ten conversations and try to decide what their purpose was. What did you hope to achieve with these conversations? Consider what you most value conversation for.

Commentary

It's fascinating how many reasons we have to talk and how much we achieve through conversation. The linguist Halliday (1973) tried to separate conversations according to their purpose. Some conversations satisfy a practical need, either to service our relationships with others or to regulate their behaviour. Sometimes, we use conversations to learn either about our world or to learn about ourselves and express our personalities. Sometimes we use our imagination and conversations to entertain ourselves, represent new possibilities and propositions or to create imaginary worlds.

Looking back over the conversations you've held today, many of them initially seem unimportant and trivial. In fact, some of the conversations we hold are like islands of predictability. In most families, the morning grunting ritual is a 'safe', predictable conversation. So too are those ritualised exchanges when you bump into a friend who asks 'How are you?' Almost involuntarily, the predictable response is 'Fine. How are you?'

Some types of conversation are less predictable but also occur frequently. When a friend asks 'Guess what I did at the weekend', and then proceeds to tell us, as a listener, we are involved in storytelling. Many conversations do, in fact, simply involve an exchange of stories as we spend time listening to each other's stories and telling our own.

Conversation often provides people with the opportunity to evaluate and discover themselves. Not all people choose to use conversation in this way to explore personal topics but even in the discussion of impersonal topics such as sport, TV programmes or even the weather, a bonding takes place between speakers who keep the channels of communication open with one another. This can lead to interesting negotiations of ideas and feelings and a conversation can evolve using a structure and language that facilitates this.

In other conversations where we feel the people talking are not of equal status, often the function of the conversation can be different for each of the speakers involved. Parents and teenagers talking to one another can, for example, have different purposes in their conversations, as a parent tries to discover what their teenage son or daughter has been doing and the teenager tries to withhold this information.

Classroom conversation too, for example, is structured in a completely different way from the normal relaxed chat between friends. Both student and teacher, respecting the learning purpose behind talk in the classroom, know the conversational role they should play and structure the conversation accordingly. It seems that we have, in fact, produced a particular type of conversation to achieve learning in the context of the classroom.

Certain talk situations do tend to be repeated. We are bound, for example, to ask for services at a shop or restaurant more than once in our lifetime. As similar contexts and purposes for talk re-occur, it appears that we have developed a reasonably set method of talking or a conversational genre that covers that particular talk situation. We have created particular **speech events**.

Look at the following examples of spoken language. Decide what type of conversation or genre you feel the example has come from. Explain what language helped you define the nature of the conversation.

- 1 Guess what I did at the weekend!
- 2 Thank you very much for listening and if there are any questions, we'll just take them now.
- 3 I put it to you that, at the time of the accident, you were doing in excess of the speed limit.
- 4 Good morning. Barret Leisure Centre. How can we help you?
- 5 Hello number one, what's your name and where do you come from?
- 6 Right, we're going on, come on, shush please, we're going on today to look at
- 7 How do you do?

Guidelines for taping spoken language

The only way to conduct research on conversation is to tape it, but be sure to follow the guidelines given below.

- ⊙ You need to get permission from speakers before recording them.
- ⊙ Often, at the beginning of the recording, the speakers can be either nervous or very self-conscious. This can make the conversation appear to lack spontaneity. As the speakers warm up, however, they forget the tape recorder is present and relax into more 'normal' conversation.
- ⊙ We can never be entirely sure, however, what is 'normal' conversation. As soon as we attempt to record it, we experience what is known as 'observer's paradox', that is, we cannot be sure how far the observation of a conversation has influenced what has been said.
- ⊙ It would be easier, therefore, at times, to record conversation without people knowing that this was happening. In this situation, ask the person's permission to use the material recorded when the recording is over.
- ⊙ Preserve the anonymity of your speakers and change their names on the transcription.

Notes on transcription

Obviously, capturing spoken language in a written form can be a time-consuming and difficult process. The physical context of the conversation which can be integral to its understanding does not, for example, form part of a transcription. Nor does body language, such as gestures or facial expressions, though sounds such as laughter or swearing can be described in brackets, for example (*laughter*).

Different types of transcriptions capture different levels of the conversation. The prosodic features (speed, stress, volume and intonation) can be indicated.

The exact pronunciation of the speakers can also be indicated by the use of the phonemic alphabet: *pub*, for example, indicates the northern pronunciation of the word *pub*, *bæʊ* shows the short 'a' sound, again part of northern accent. Words are not always pronounced as individual, separate units, so *wanna* could indicate the informal pronunciation of 'want to'.

Pauses, silences and sounds, such as **voiced pauses**, e.g. *er* and *um*, where the speaker hesitates, should also be marked, as should overlaps, where speakers talk simultaneously.

In a transcription, normal punctuation does not apply, and the following principles have been adhered to in this book:

- ⊙ Prosodic features are not marked though question marks and exclamation marks have been used where helpful and indicate some change in intonation.
- ⊙ Noises which are not proper words but still communicate have been indicated, e.g. *argh* or *wow*, as have other sounds such as laughter. Where the tape has become inaudible, this too has been indicated.
- ⊙ Pronunciation has not been concentrated on. The phonemic alphabet has not been used, though informality is shown with words such as *yeah*.
- ⊙ Voiced pauses indicating hesitation or thinking time have been transcribed, for example, *er*, *erm* or *um*.
- ⊙ Brackets with a dot (.) indicate a brief pause but one which, for a particular speaker, is longer than the normal pause at the end of a grammatical unit. The number of seconds paused, e.g. (2), has been recorded in brackets for even longer pauses.
- ⊙ Where speakers overlap and speak simultaneously, this has been marked by underlining.
- ⊙ Where sources are not given, the data are from my own or my students' transcriptions of the conversation of family, friends and acquaintances.

Unit two

Features of spoken language and oral narratives

Aims of this unit

One of the most common ways to communicate is storytelling. This unit, therefore, examines various spoken stories. Starting with the examination of the one-sided discourse of joke-telling, first, the unit explores the features of spoken language and, second, by comparing spoken and written forms of the same story, we are able to highlight the features expected in a narrative. Because oral stories, however, appear in a different context from written stories and oral storytellers have to interact with their listeners to attract and keep their attention, the rest of the unit examines the use and structure of oral storytelling in two different contexts: a live TV show and a personal conversation.

Activity

In order to have relevant spoken data to analyse, students in a sixth form class were asked to record themselves telling a joke. The following joke was told and recorded in the classroom by 18-year-old Andrew Herterich. It was told to an audience, but they were not supposed to interrupt. This is the spoken version of a joke. Produce the written version of the same joke and discuss:

- ⊙ what features you left out;
- ⊙ why they were present in the spoken version.

If you would prefer to work on your own data, record a speaker telling a joke or story, transcribe it and then construct your own written version.

Text: Joke

right (.) three men sat in a pub (.) and er sat there having a quiet drink (.) and in walks this really drunken old man (.) and he staggers in and he's all over the place he's knocking drinks over (.) he's er standing on people's feet and (.) um all the rest of it and um he walks over to the bar this old man (.) and he orders a pint of lager (.) he er gets his pint (.) and downs it fast as he can in one (.) and then he staggers over to these three men (.) these three men are looking at each other nudging each other (.) right what does he want (.) and ur (.) this man walks over he says (.) I've had your mam I've had your mam and one of the men says (.) piss off! so (.) this this old man he staggers away and he goes to the bar and he orders another drink (.) another pint of lager and downs this even faster (.) he staggers back over to these three men (.) and he says I've had your mam I've put cream on her body and I've licked it off (.) guy stands up again he says look go away (.) so er this old man staggers back to the bar (.) all over the place he orders another pint (.) this one downs even faster and he comes and again again he comes back over to these three men (.) he says I've had your mam I've put cream on her body I've done things to her you wouldn't understand (.) well they've had enough so (.) one of the men stands up he says look dad you're drunk go home.

Commentary

Your written version will probably have involved several changes. The pauses (.) and voiced pauses (*er* and *um*) disappear. They provide thinking time in the spoken version which is necessary due to the spontaneous nature of spoken language and obviously unnecessary in the planned written version.

The written version will be divided into separate sentences and the heavy use of the co-ordinating conjunction 'and' in the spoken version will have been edited out.

There is frequent repetition in the spoken version. For example, 'this man this man' is repeated twice as the speaker hesitates and takes thinking time to sort out his ideas clearly. The repetition in 'another drink another pint of lager' occurs because the speaker wants to add extra information. The redundancy of this repetition also enables a listener to have the necessary time to understand the joke properly. In a written text, where the reader can refer back to the text and need not understand everything first

have been edited out as unnecessary.

The words 'right' and 'well', known as **discourse markers** because they indicate the structure of a spoken text, would no longer be necessary in a written text.

Some text will have been added to or modified in the written joke. The phrase 'guy stands up again' – will have been written as 'the guy stands up again'. Ellipsis or missing out odd words or phrases often occurs in spoken language where the situation or the speaker himself can make the meaning clear. The word, 'guy' and the expression 'he downs this in one', might have been considered too colloquial and they might have been changed for more formal vocabulary. Depending on the context of the written joke, the taboo language 'piss off' might also have been considered too challenging for a formal written text, and have been changed for a less taboo phrase.

Any dialect used will have disappeared. The words, 'three men sat in a pub', which open the joke, show ellipsis. This is the compressed form of the regional dialect 'three men were sat in a pub'. In the written version, this would appear in the Standard English past continuous, 'three men were sitting in a pub'.

The vague language 'and all the rest of it' would probably have been made more precise in the written version. Throughout the joke 'this' and 'these' have been used – 'this old man', 'these three men'. The original incident took place in the past and the use of 'this' or 'these' brings the characters to life making them more immediate and 'present' rather than distant and past. The words almost imply both speaker and listener can see the men being described. Written language, though, aims for complete clarity and may have rejected 'this' and 'these' as being too imprecise.

In a similar way, the written text would probably have edited out the liveliness and directness of the tense change in the spoken version where the past tense 'sat', at the beginning, changes to the present tense that the rest of the joke is then told in.

The reason for telling a joke is to entertain the audience and the person telling the joke has used spoken language to put on a performance for the listening audience. At times, the speaker has acted out the roles played by the characters in the joke. For example, he has imitated the way he imagines the drunken man would speak, saying 'i'vehadyermam'. These aspects of performance and the prosodic features of intonation, speed, stress and volume are very difficult to capture in a written text.

Activity

- 1 Design a chart that illustrates the differences between written and spoken language.
- 2 Can you write a list of features found in spoken language? (A checklist of these appears at the end of this unit.)
- 3 Can you list the features of a narrative?

What is a narrative?

A basic story or narrative consists of the following:

- ⊙ a plot – something interesting takes place;
- ⊙ characters;
- ⊙ chronological structure – references made to time;
- ⊙ an opening;
- ⊙ an ending which provides some resolution;
- ⊙ a setting in time and place.

Activity

The joke obviously displays the basic characteristics of a narrative. Can you now suggest ways in which the speaker has attempted to make his story more alive and vivid for his listener?

Commentary

You might have included the descriptive detail the speaker provides. For example, we are given several details of the drunken man. We are told he was 'knocking drinks over' and 'standing on people's feet'. In the same way, we know the three men he speaks to were 'nudging each other'. Even the use of the verb 'stagers' instead of the more commonplace 'goes' enables the listener to see the character more clearly. Often, description such as this is used to make a story more vivid.

The characters are also given dialogue. The speaker has made an attempt to imitate the drunken man's slurred speech, shown in the transcription by the way in which his words are blurred together 'I'vehadyermam'. The dialogue is direct and realistic: 'piss off', 'look dad you're drinky'

Jokes and chat show stories

The joke we've just looked at is quite stylised. It can be divided into three separate but repeated episodes which build to the final climax. The repetition of episodes allows the audience to share the joke more fully with the teller. As children enjoy the familiarity of a repeated episode in their bedtime stories, so in the same way a listener to this joke can 'predict' the story. The listener 'knows' what's coming next until he's finally surprised by the unexpected and, therefore, amusing end.

Activity

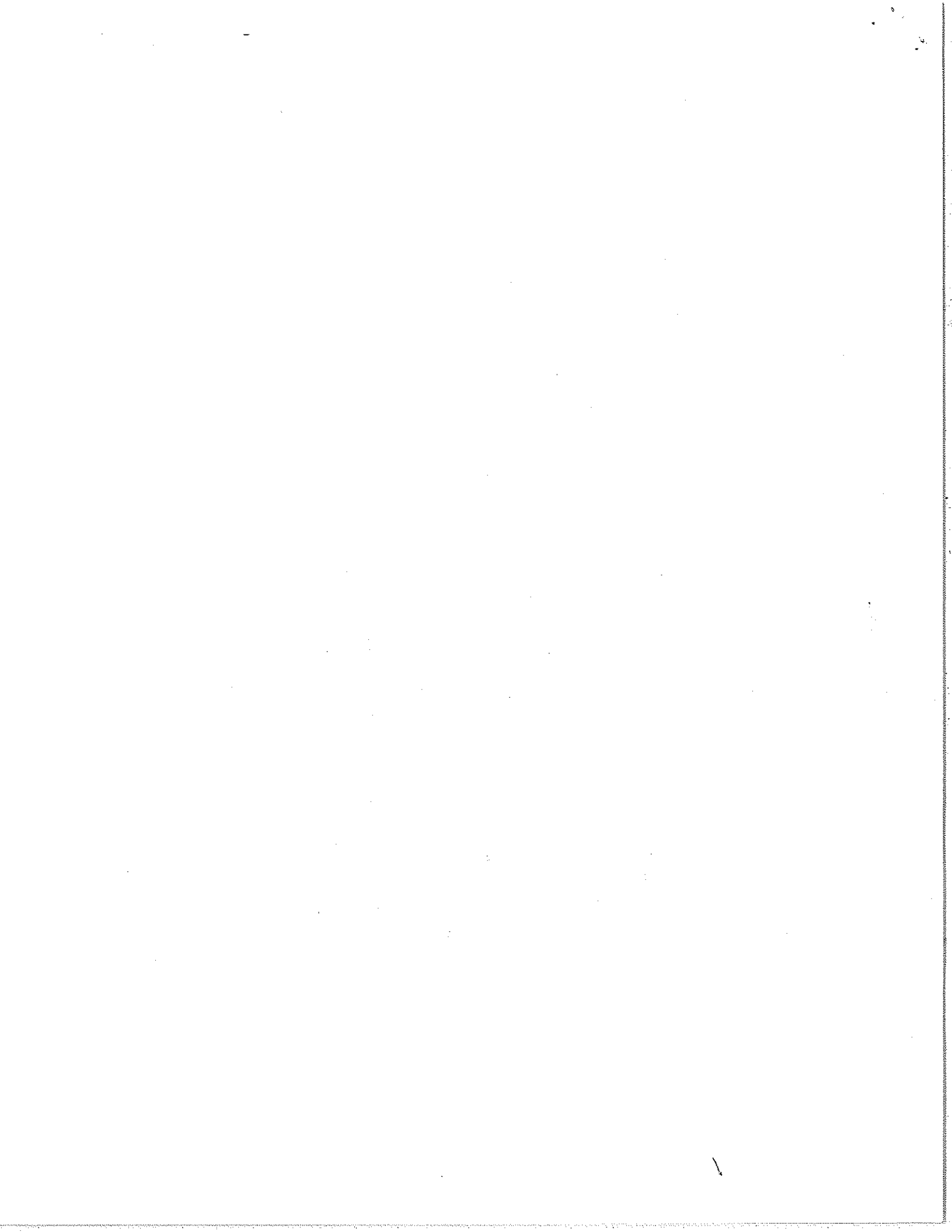
The following transcription is an extract from the TV programme *This Morning*, hosted by Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan. This magazine programme appears regularly on weekday mornings and is divided into several sections that deal with items such as fashion, cookery, advice giving and interviews with TV personalities. In this transcription, the hosts are talking to their expert psychologist Raj Persaud. They have been discussing how parents should deal with children asking questions. Raj has already said that parents should praise children for asking questions even if they don't know the answer to them. Read through the transcription and consider the following questions.

- 1 How does Richard signpost to his listeners that he is about to tell a story?
- 2 What function does the word 'right' play in the telling of this story?
- 3 How does Richard want us to evaluate the story?
- 4 Why does Richard tell the story?

Can you
his story

ides. For
e told he
he same
er'. Even
e 'goes'
cription

s made
n in the
together
ok dad



Text: *This Morning*

RAJ: and another good answer is I don't know the answer and let's go and find out together

RICHARD: I'll tell you one thing when we moved to London and we'd been here for about a month and we were just driving around looking at the sights and we were driving past Buckingham Palace right and Chloe's in the back of the car right this is so funny um and she said there it is there's Buckingham Palace woah woah oh we should open the window oh and the Queen lives there oh look the flag's up the Queen's in there now and she said is that the Queen's house then? and we said yeah she said ooh fancy building a palace next to the main road

RAJ, R & J: (*laughter*)

JUDY: on the main road (*laughs*) which is logical

RICHARD: which is very observant absolutely why did they do that she said and actually I couldn't think because the road was probably there when they built it although there wouldn't have been cars on it

RAJ: I hope you praised her for making a good point

RICHARD: well we fell apart

Commentary

Richard starts his story with the words 'I'll tell you one thing' a sign that

