

Book reviews

Jan Svannevig, *Getting Acquainted in Conversation: A Study of Initial Interactions*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999, 383 pp.

This book is about first conversations. It describes many an interlocutor's experience of 'hitting it off' with another almost immediately (p. 1). Svannevig goes on: '... the feeling of success is often explained by the participants as "vibrations" or "chemistry", or other factors beyond their control' (ibid.), which I think would be most difficult to describe scientifically. The aforementioned situation of 'hitting it off', or the 'good vibes' situation, has probably occurred to most of us on one occasion or another (romantically, with a new boss, meeting one's in-laws for the first time, meeting a new neighbor, etc.). In actuality, this has happened to me many times – something just 'clicks'. It is important to keep in mind, however, that new acquaintances have certain constraints on what they can talk about as well as to how a topic can be introduced into a conversation. Thus, the following conversation would be most awkward (and not occur) among newly-introduced persons: *'Hello.' 'Hi.' 'What's your name?' 'My name is Alan, and guess what I did last night?' Native speakers are usually very sensitive when meeting people for the first time, and like so much of language, knowing precisely what is appropriate to say (i.e., the sociolinguistic and pragmatic rules) is acquired at a very young age.

The introduction (pp. 1–6) comments on previous research in this domain. Very often, strangers who come into contact engage in 'small talk', the subject of a quoted book by Klaus P. Schneider (*Small Talk: Analyzing Phatic Discourse*, Marburg: Hitzeroth 1988). However, the author's informants used in this study 'are committed to extensive future interaction', and thus, Svannevig writes that small talk does not occur in the data collected and analyzed (however, see further below).

The author uses Conversation Analysis and linguistic pragmatics as the infrastructure for this study in Social Psychology (his exact wording, p. 4). Chapter 3, 'Methods for Analyzing Conversation' (pp. 63–89), explains the rich array of bases for analysis, which come from ethnomethodology, sociolinguistics, systemic functional linguistics, ethnography of communication, and social psychology (p. 63). The corpus for the research project reported on consists of five tape-recorded conversations in Norwegian¹ of 3 hours and 32 minutes among unacquainted individuals who had just met for the first time. Three of these took place in restaurants, one in a bar, and the last in a private home. Of course, there is the inherent problem of using microphones with informants while ask-