Puttng Flesh on the Bones: 
Ranulph Glanville’s Contributions to Conversation Theory

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Gordon Pask’s conversation theory stands as a major contribution to cybernetics, education and epistemology. Ranulph Glanville was Pask’s student. He made himself familiar with conversation theory and promoted it in his lecture and writings throughout his career. In doing so, he made significant contributions. I summarise some of these here. To set the scene, I briefly outline some of the main concepts of conversation theory. I also outline Glanville’s theory of Objects and discuss its relationship to conversation theory.

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Introduction

The UK cybernetician, Gordon Pask (1928-1996), was responsible for a large body of empirical and theoretical work spread over several decades. His core ideas were summed up in his theory of conversations (conversation theory [CT]) and his interaction of actors (IA) theory. IA theory refers to later elaborations of CT which I will not deal with separately here. My particular concern is with Pask’s classic statements of CT as set out in Pask, Scott and Kallikourd1s (1975) and Pask (1975b, 1976). As emphasised in his final paper (Pask, 1996), CT is concerned with the interactions of self-organising systems and the particular case where the systems in question are one or more human beings and an adaptive teaching machine.2 Pask sets out in detail the logic of these interactions, which he refers to as conversations, as a set of descriptions of what takes place when conversation can be considered to be fruitful and effective and as a set of prescriptions for how one can ensure that conversations are indeed fruitful and effective. Ranulph Glanville, to whom this paper is a tribute, was one of Pask’s students. Indeed, it is fair to say that he was one of Pask’s foremost students. He was the first student to gain a PhD in Cybernetics from Brunel University (in 1975) and did so under Pask’s tutelage. Glanville was studying with Pask at a time when Pask’s CT was coming to fruition as a coherent and technically complex set of concepts that, amongst other topics, addressed the dynamics of learning, individual differences in learning style and the structure of what Pask referred to as “conversational domains,” the bodies of knowledge that learners come to know and that teachers attempt to teach. In addition to his own original work that he carried out for his PhD studies (of which I will say more below), Glanville rapidly embraced and

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2. For an account of Pask’s extensive work on adaptive teaching, see Pask (1975a).


