Meeting IV
Discourse Structure
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Rank structure

- The idea of rank structure and its representation in tree diagrams can be borrowed from grammar and applied to discourse.

- Ex: Three –volume series of books as a complete discourse (see table 1)

- This rank structure can not be applied to all discourse but a structure specific to a particular discourse type
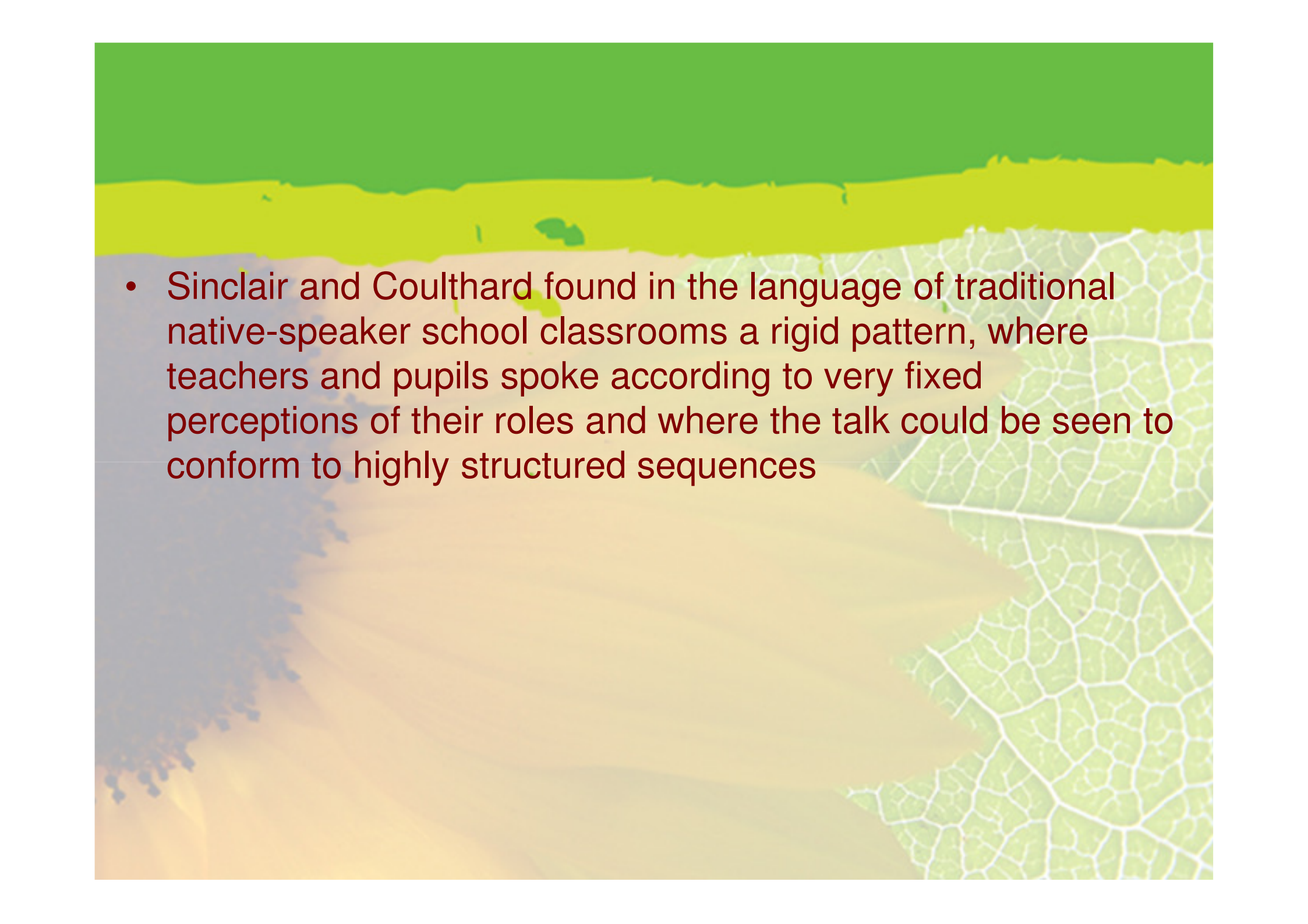
Task

- In many countries, a criminal trial has the following stages: indictment, prosecution case, defense case, summing up, verdict, sentence. The defense and prosecution cases are each made up of an introduction, testimonies of witnesses, and a summary. Each testimony consists of examination and cross-examination, and each of these consists of questions and answers.

Task

a. Draw up ranks and a typical tree diagram for the discourse type trial.

b. How much do you think the structure of discourse type varies between cultures?

Spoken Discourse

- One influential approach to the study of spoken discourse is that developed at the University of Birmingham, where research initially concerned itself with the structure of discourse in school classrooms (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975).

- The Birmingham model is certainly not the only valid approach to analyzing discourse, but it is a relatively simple and powerful model which has conections with the study of speech act.

- Sinclair and Coulthard found in the language of traditional native-speaker school classrooms a rigid pattern, where teachers and pupils spoke according to very fixed perceptions of their roles and where the talk could be seen to conform to highly structured sequences

An extract
(Sinclair & Coulhard)

(T = teacher, P = any pupil who speaks)

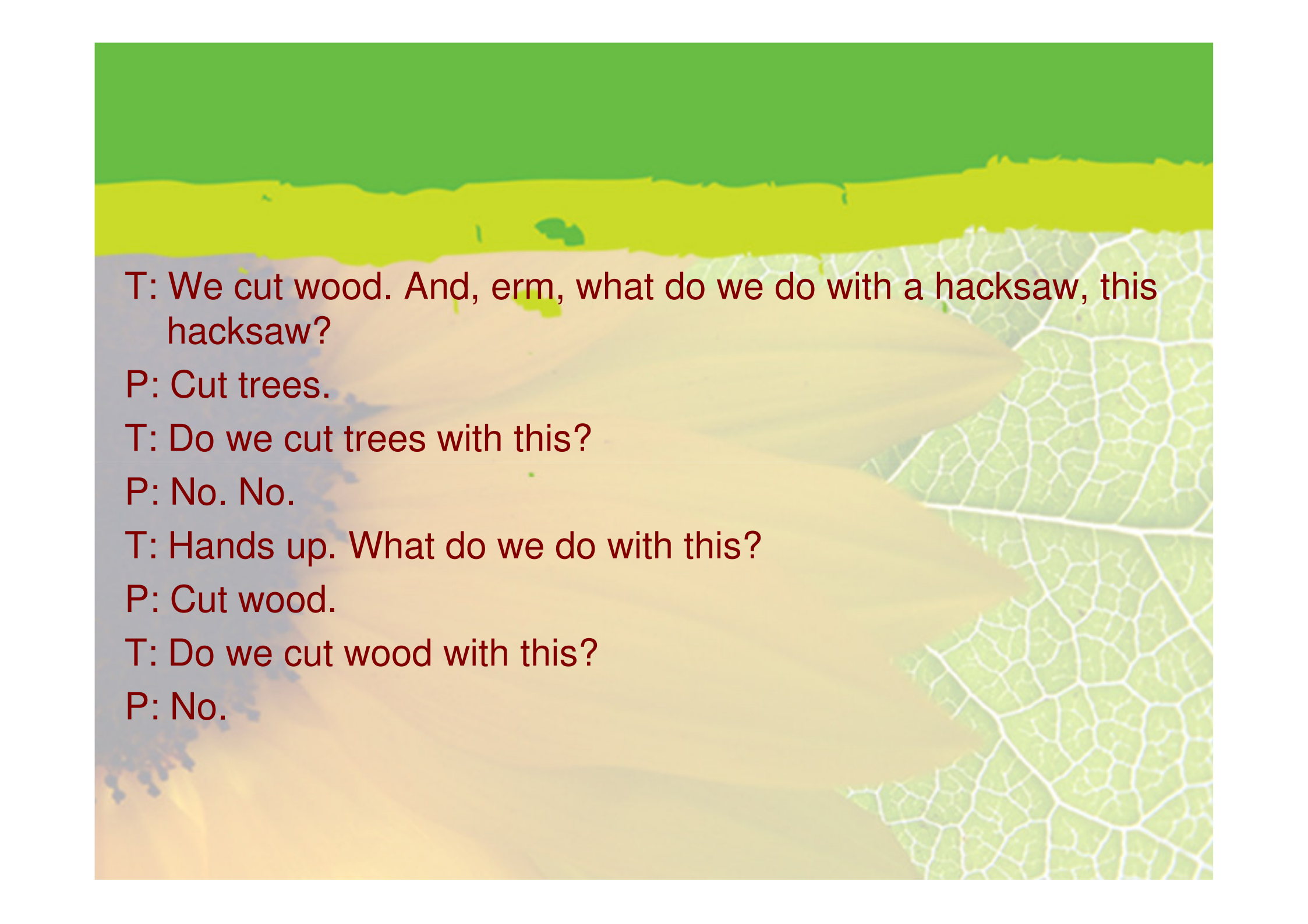T: Now then . . . I've got some things here, too. Hands up. What's that, what is it?

P: Saw.

T: It's a saw, yes this is a saw. What do we do with a saw?

P: Cut wood.

T: Yes. You're shouting out though. What do we do with a saw? Marvelette.

P: Cut wood

T: We cut wood. And, erm, what do we do with a hacksaw, this hacksaw?

P: Cut trees.

T: Do we cut trees with this?

P: No. No.

T: Hands up. What do we do with this?

P: Cut wood.

T: Do we cut wood with this?

P: No.

T: What do we do with that then?

P: Cut wood.

T: We cut wood with that. What do we do with that

P: Sir.

T: Cleveland.

P: Metal.

T: We cut metal. Yes we cut metal. And, er, I've got this here. What's that? Trevor.
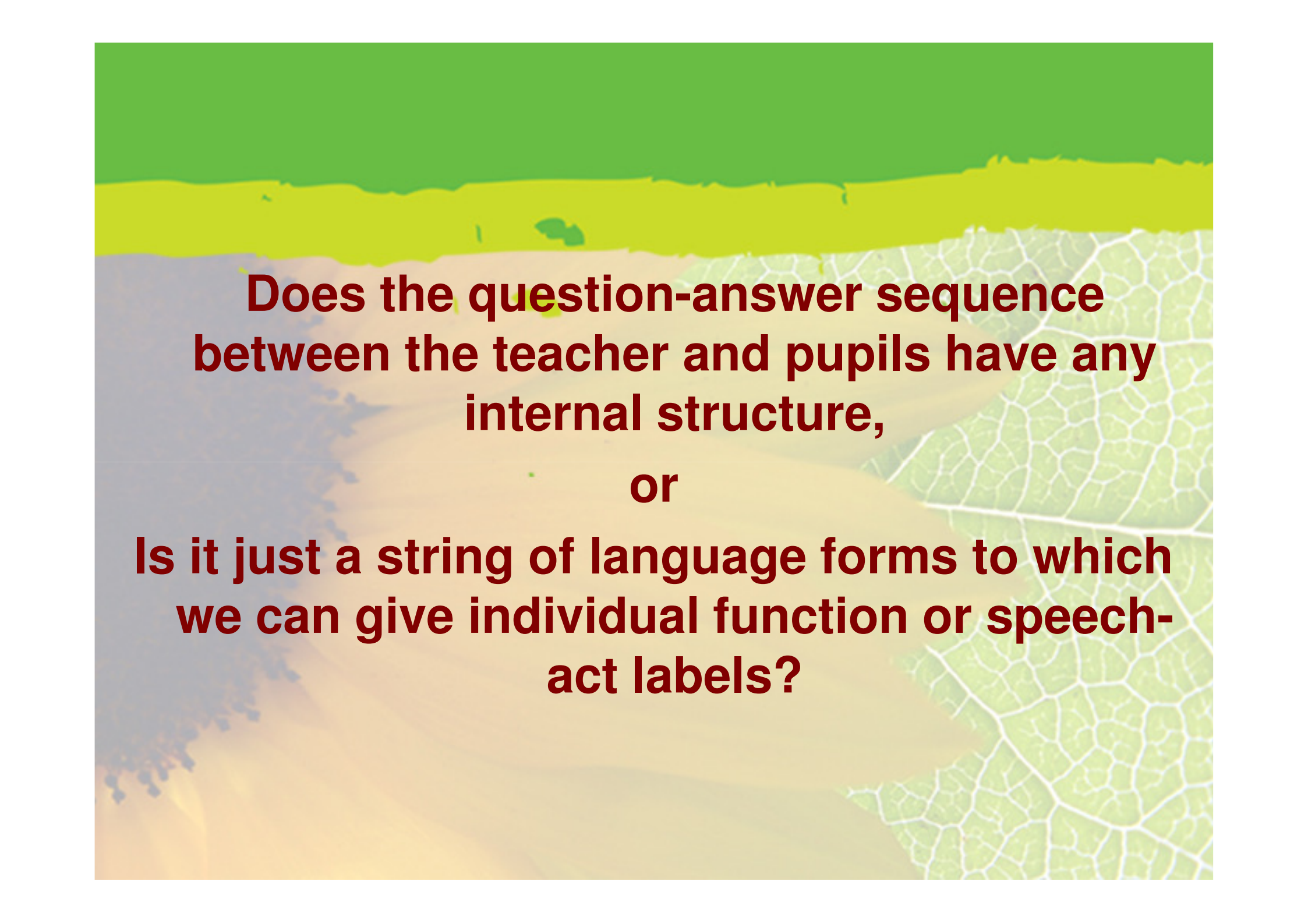
P: An axe.

T: It's an axe yes. What do I cut with the axe?

P: Wood, wood.

T: Yes I cut wood with the axe. Right . . . Now then, I've got some more things here . . . (etc.)

(Sinclair and Coulthard 1975: 93-4)

- This is only a short extract, but nonetheless, a clear pattern seems to emerge.

Does the question-answer sequence between the teacher and pupils have any internal structure,

or

Is it just a string of language forms to which we can give individual function or speech-act labels?

Sinclair and Coulthard show clearly that it does have a structure.

Discourse Structure

- Like the discourse type explored, the boundaries are clearly marked. Similarly the stages of a formal spoken discourse are also often clearly marked with utterances such as "I rest my case", "let me ask you another question", or "next witnesses".

- Sinclair proposed five ranks to handle the structure of classroom interaction:
  1. lesson
  2. transaction
  3. exchange
  4. move
  5. act

Discourse Structure

- Transaction have a structure, expressed in terms of exchanges
- Acts, the lowest rank in this scale, are speech acts.

Discourse Structure

- The boundaries of transactions are typically marked by frames whose realization at the level of form is limited to five words- "OK', 'well', 'now', 'right', 'good', uttered with strong stress, high falling intonation and followed by a short pause.

- A frame, indicating the beginning of the transaction, with a focus,

  ex:

  frame　　　: well

  focus　　　: today I thought we'd do three quizzes

Discourse Structure

- End the transaction with another focus summarizing the transaction

  focus : what we've just done is given some
   energy to this pen

  frame: now

- Transactions have a structure expressed in terms of exchanges-they begin and often end with a *boundary exchange*, which consists of a frame and/or focus, followed by a succession of *informing, directing, or eliciting exchanges*.
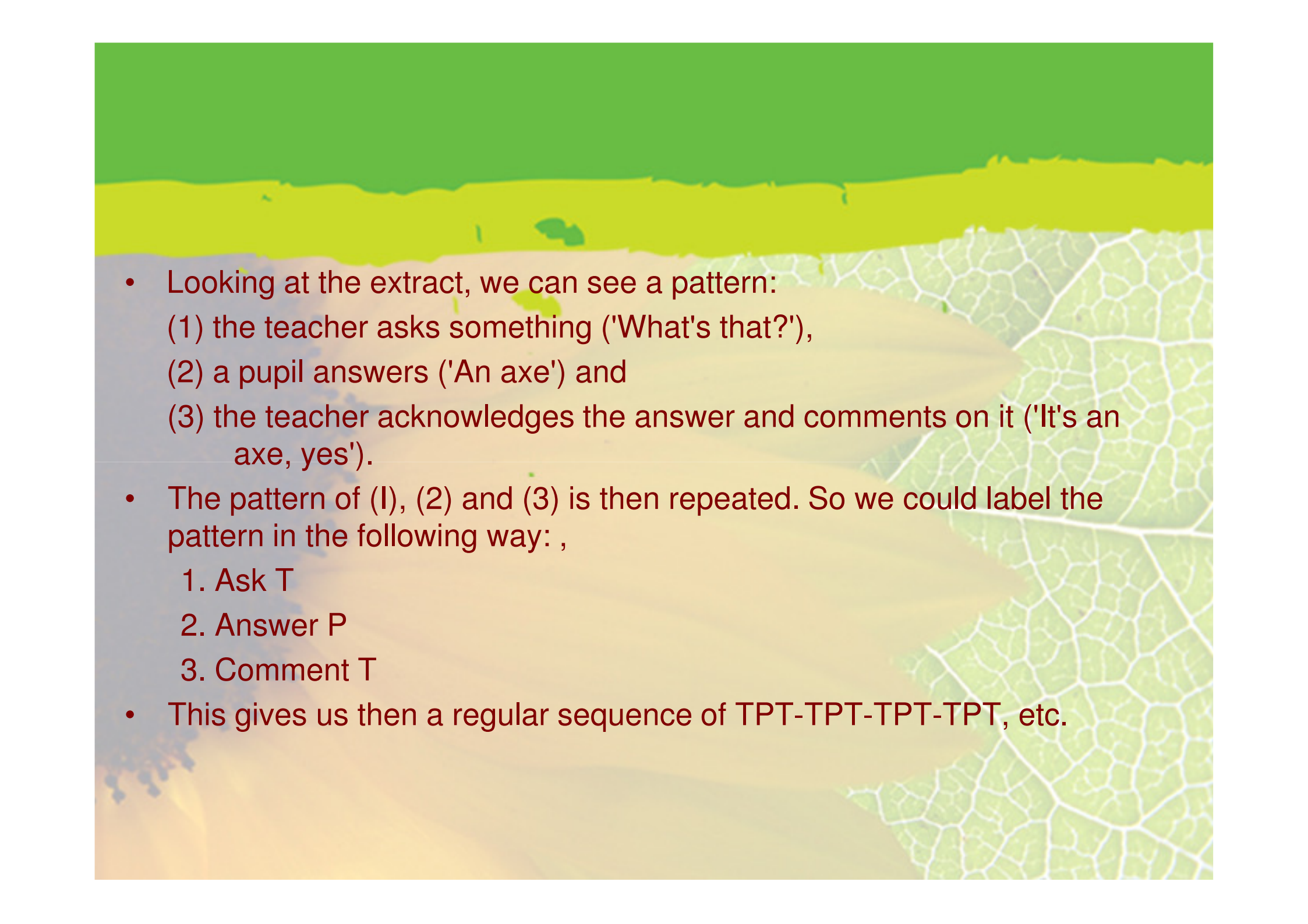
Discourse Structure

- Informing, directing, and eliciting exchanges are concerned with what is more commonly known as 'stating', 'commanding', 'questioning' behavior.

- The structure of exchanges are expressed in terms of *moves*.

- A three-move structure was proposed for exchanges-Initiation, Response, Follow-up.

Discourse Structure

- The three-move eliciting structure is the normal form inside the classroom, for two reasons;

    1. answers directed to the teacher are difficult for others to hear and thus the repetition, when it occurs, may be the first chance some children have to hear what their colleague said

    2. many of the questions asked are ones to which the teacher-questioner already knows the answer, the intention being to discover whether the pupils also know.

Discourse Structure

- Moves combine to form exchanges; and moves themselves consist of one or more *acts.*

- The basic building block of the lesson is the speech act (an utterance described in terms of its functions).

- Looking at the extract, we can see a pattern:

  (1) the teacher asks something ('What's that?'),

  (2) a pupil answers ('An axe') and

  (3) the teacher acknowledges the answer and comments on it ('It's an axe, yes').

- The pattern of (I), (2) and (3) is then repeated. So we could label the pattern in the following way: ,

  1. Ask T

  2. Answer P

  3. Comment T

- This gives us then a regular sequence of TPT-TPT-TPT-TPT, etc.

/=T/P/T   //=TPT//TPT//TPT

T: Now then . . . I've got some things here, too. Hands up. What's that, what is it? *I*
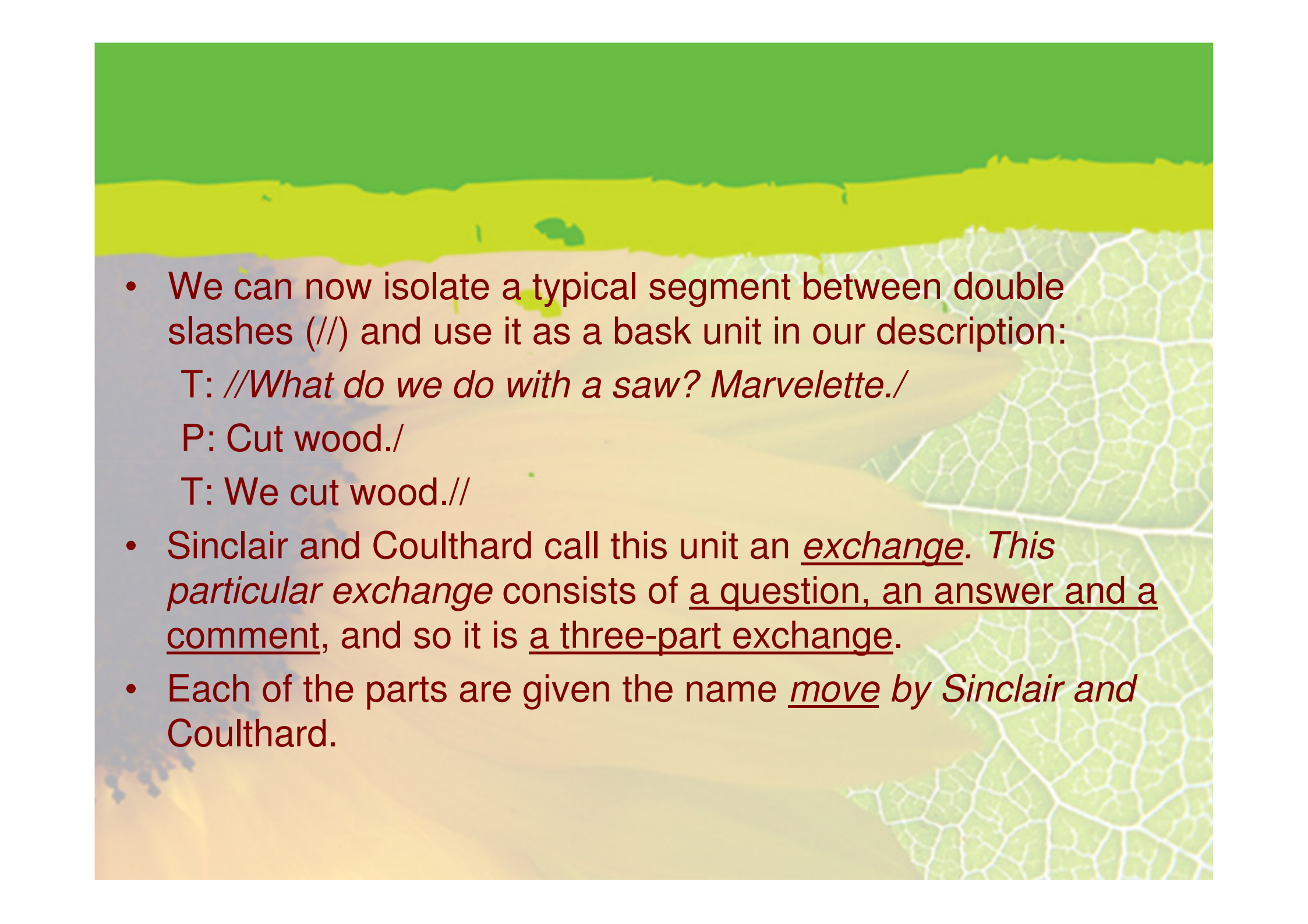
P: Saw. *I*

T: It's a saw, yes this is a saw. *//What do with a saw? /*

P: Cut wood. *I*

T: Yes. You're shouting out though. *// What do we do with a saw?* Marvelette. */*

P: Cut wood. *I*

T: We cut wood. *// And, erm, what do we do with . . . etc.*

- We can now isolate a typical segment between double slashes (//) and use it as a bask unit in our description:

  T: *//What do we do with a saw? Marvelette./*

  P: Cut wood./

  T: We cut wood.//

- Sinclair and Coulthard call this unit an <u>exchange</u>. *This particular exchange* consists of <u>a question, an answer and a comment</u>, and so it is <u>a three-part exchange</u>.

- Each of the parts are given the name <u>*move*</u> *by Sinclair and* Coulthard.

- Here are some other examples of exchanges, each with three moves:
  - (1)   A: What time is it?

    B: Six thirty.

    A: Thanks.

  - (2)   A: Tim's coming tomorrow.
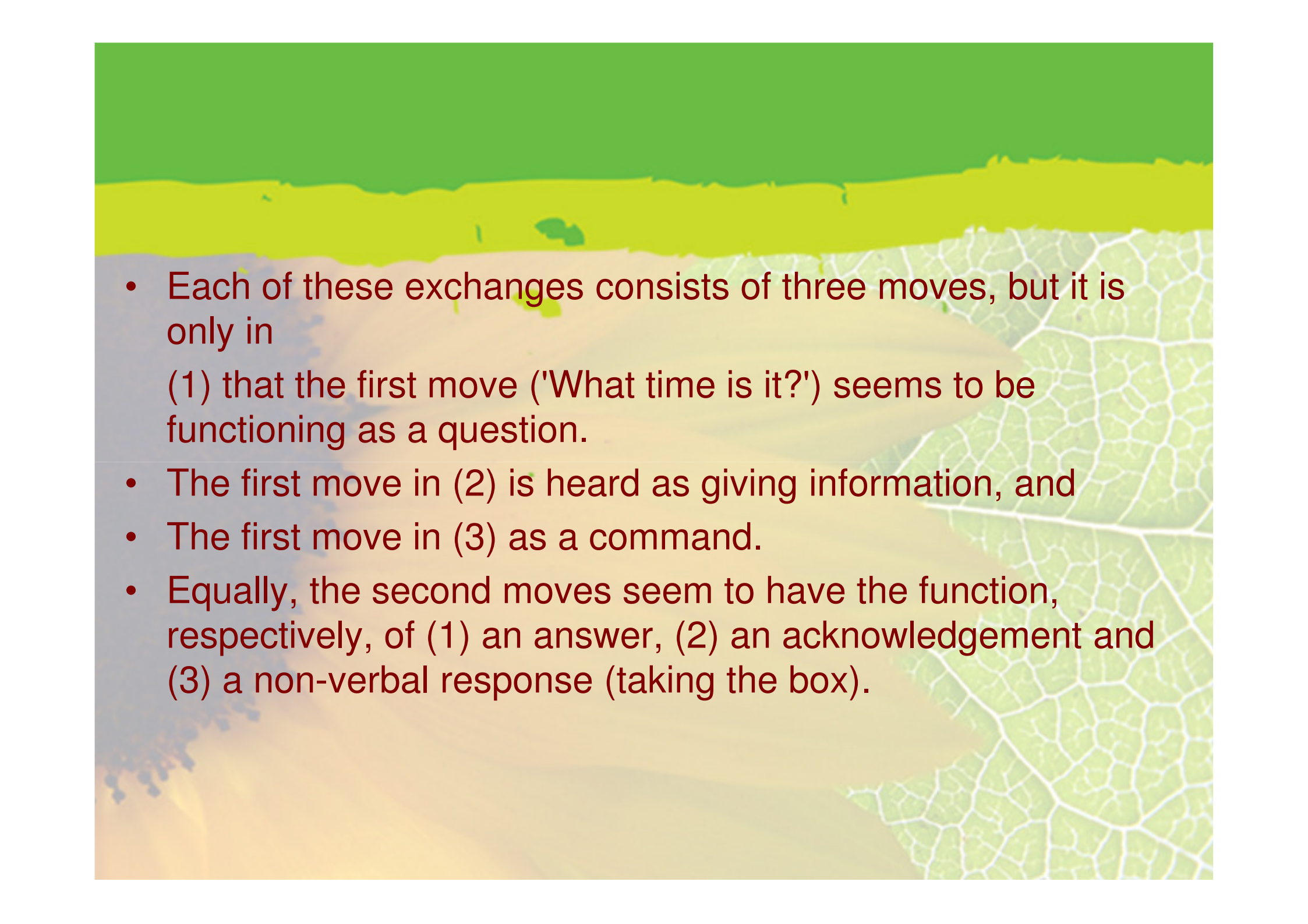
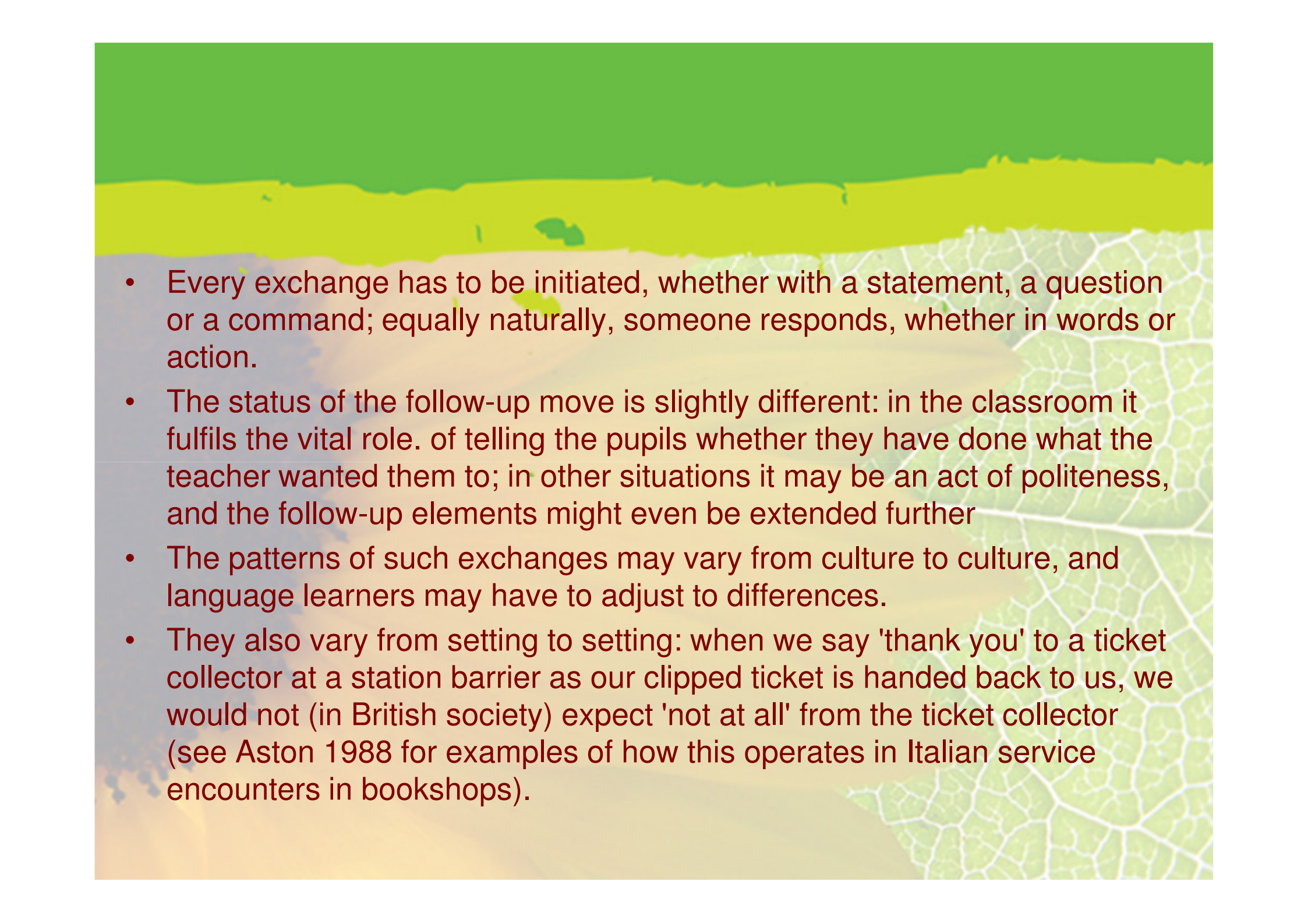   B: Oh yeah.

    A: Yes.

  - (3) A: Here, hold this.
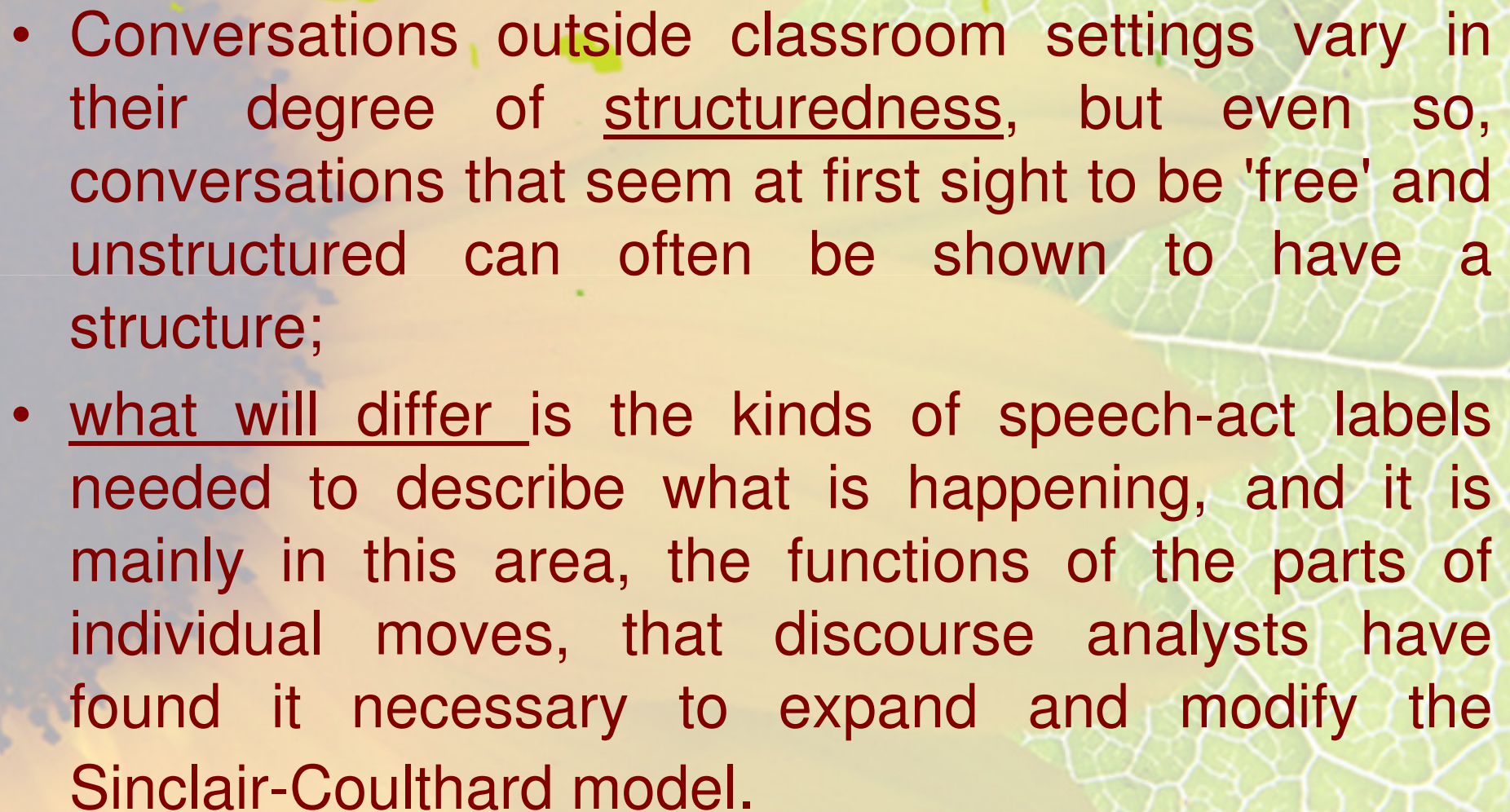
    B: (takes the box)

    A: Thanks.

- Each of these exchanges consists of three moves, but it is only in

  (1) that the first move ('What time is it?') seems to be functioning as a question.

- The first move in (2) is heard as giving information, and

- The first move in (3) as a command.

- Equally, the second moves seem to have the function, respectively, of (1) an answer, (2) an acknowledgement and (3) a non-verbal response (taking the box).
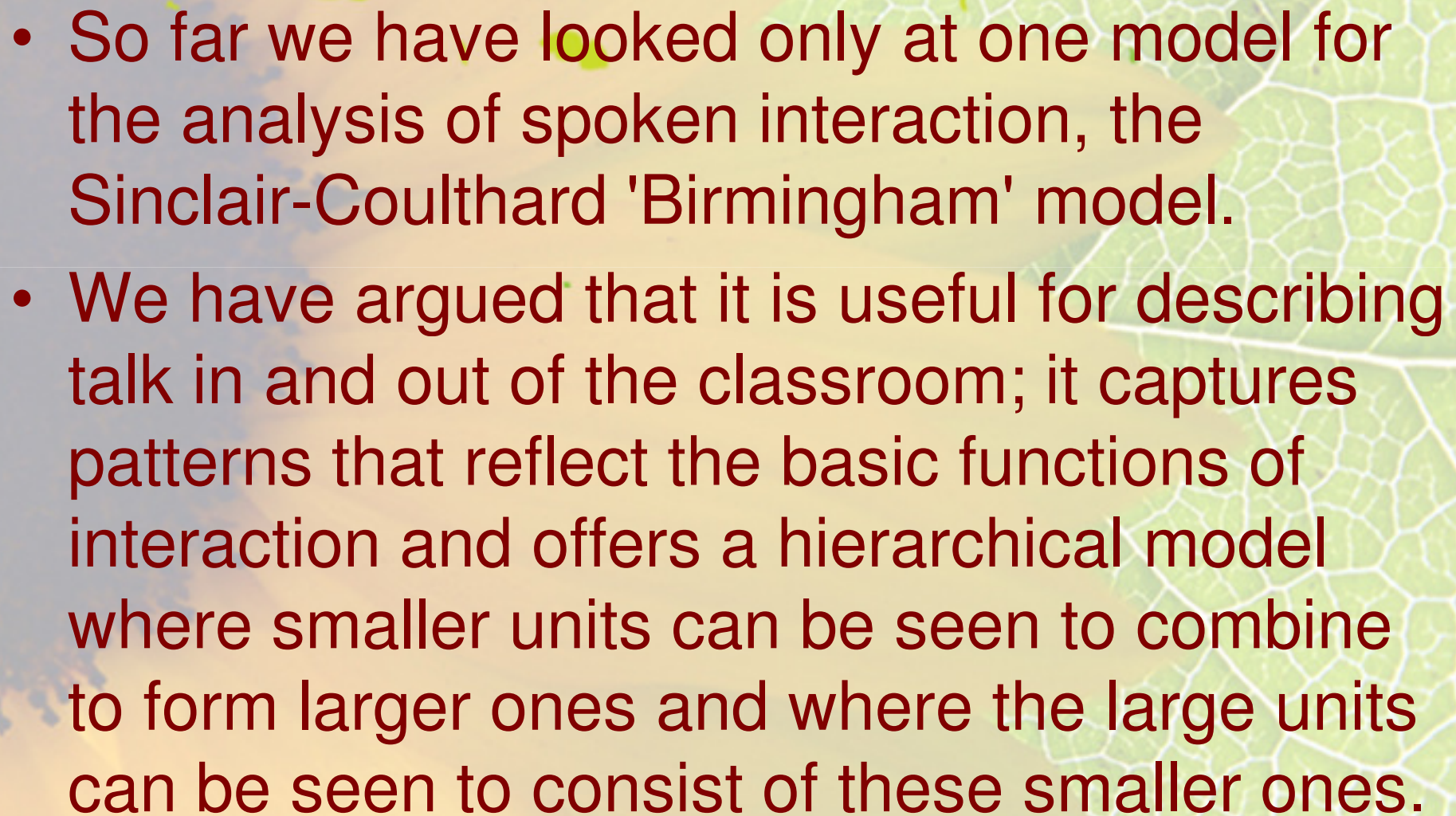
- In order to capture the similarity of the pattern in each case, Sinclair and Coulthard (1975: M 7) call the first move in each exchange an <u>opening</u> move, the second an <u>answering move</u> and the third a <u>follow-up move.</u>

- Sinclair and Brazil (1982: 49) prefer to talk of <u>initiation, response and follow-up.</u> It does not particularly matter for our purposes which set of labels we use, but for consistency, the three moves will be called initiation, response,

- Every exchange has to be initiated, whether with a statement, a question or a command; equally naturally, someone responds, whether in words or action.
- The status of the follow-up move is slightly different: in the classroom it fulfils the vital role. of telling the pupils whether they have done what the teacher wanted them to; in other situations it may be an act of politeness, and the follow-up elements might even be extended further
- The patterns of such exchanges may vary from culture to culture, and language learners may have to adjust to differences.
- They also vary from setting to setting: when we say 'thank you' to a ticket collector at a station barrier as our clipped ticket is handed back to us, we would not (in British society) expect 'not at all' from the ticket collector (see Aston 1988 for examples of how this operates in Italian service encounters in bookshops).

Conversations outside the classroom

- The classroom was a convenient place to start, as Sinclair and Coulthard discovered, but it is not the 'real' world of conversation.

- It is a peculiar place, a *place .where teachers ask* questions to which they already know the answer, where pupils (at least younger pupils) have very limited rights as speakers and where evaluation by the teacher of what the pupils say is a vital mechanism in the discourse structure.

- Conversations outside classroom settings vary in their degree of <u>structuredness</u>, but even so, conversations that seem at first sight to be 'free' and unstructured can often be shown to have a structure;

- <u>what will differ</u> is the kinds of speech-act labels needed to describe what is happening, and it is mainly in this area, the functions of the parts of individual moves, that discourse analysts have found it necessary to expand and modify the Sinclair-Coulthard model.

- So far we have looked only at one model for the analysis of spoken interaction, the Sinclair-Coulthard 'Birmingham' model.

- We have argued that it is useful for describing talk in and out of the classroom; it captures patterns that reflect the basic functions of interaction and offers a hierarchical model where smaller units can be seen to combine to form larger ones and where the large units can be seen to consist of these smaller ones.

- The bare bones of the hierarchy (or rank scale) can be expressed as follows:
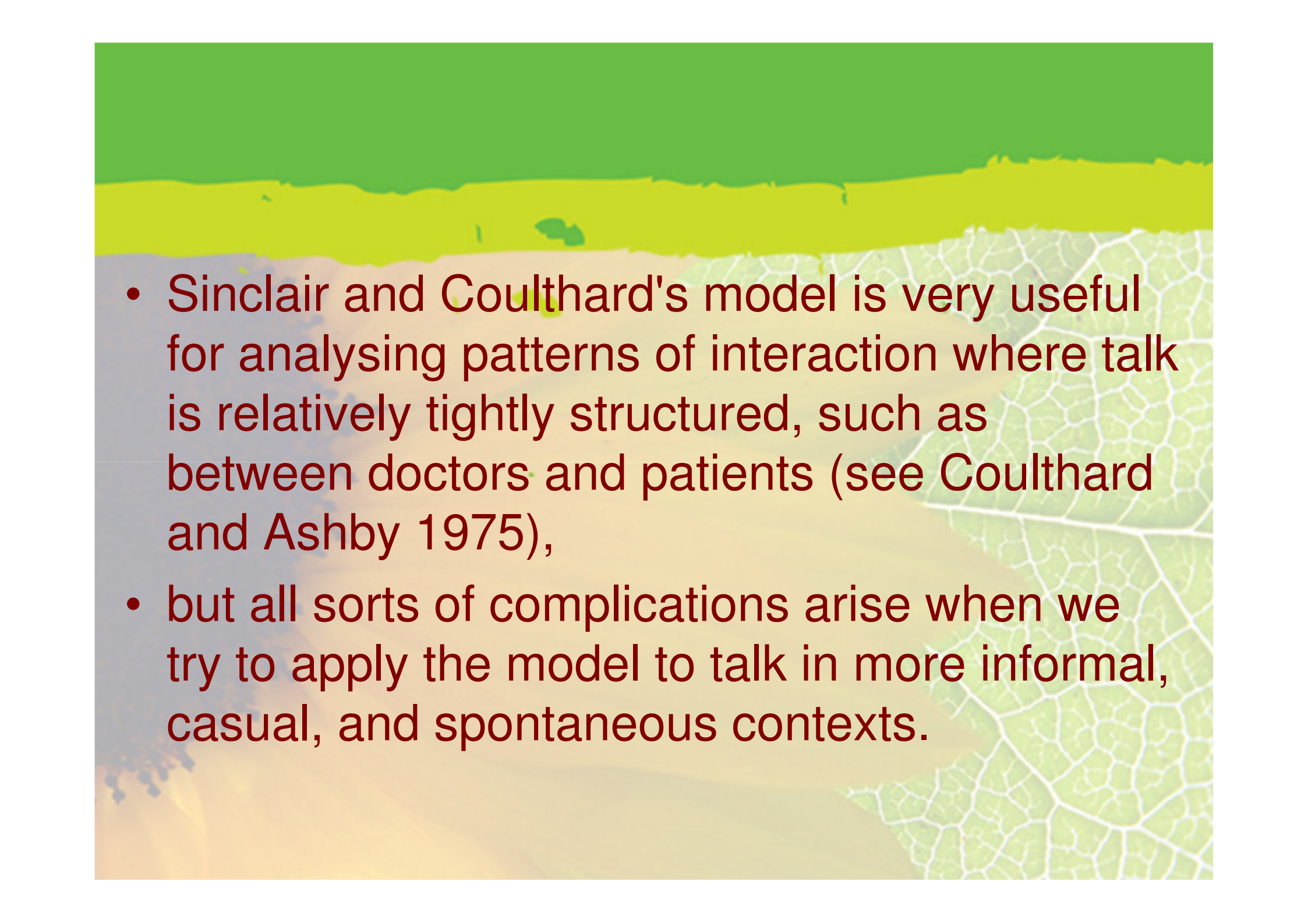
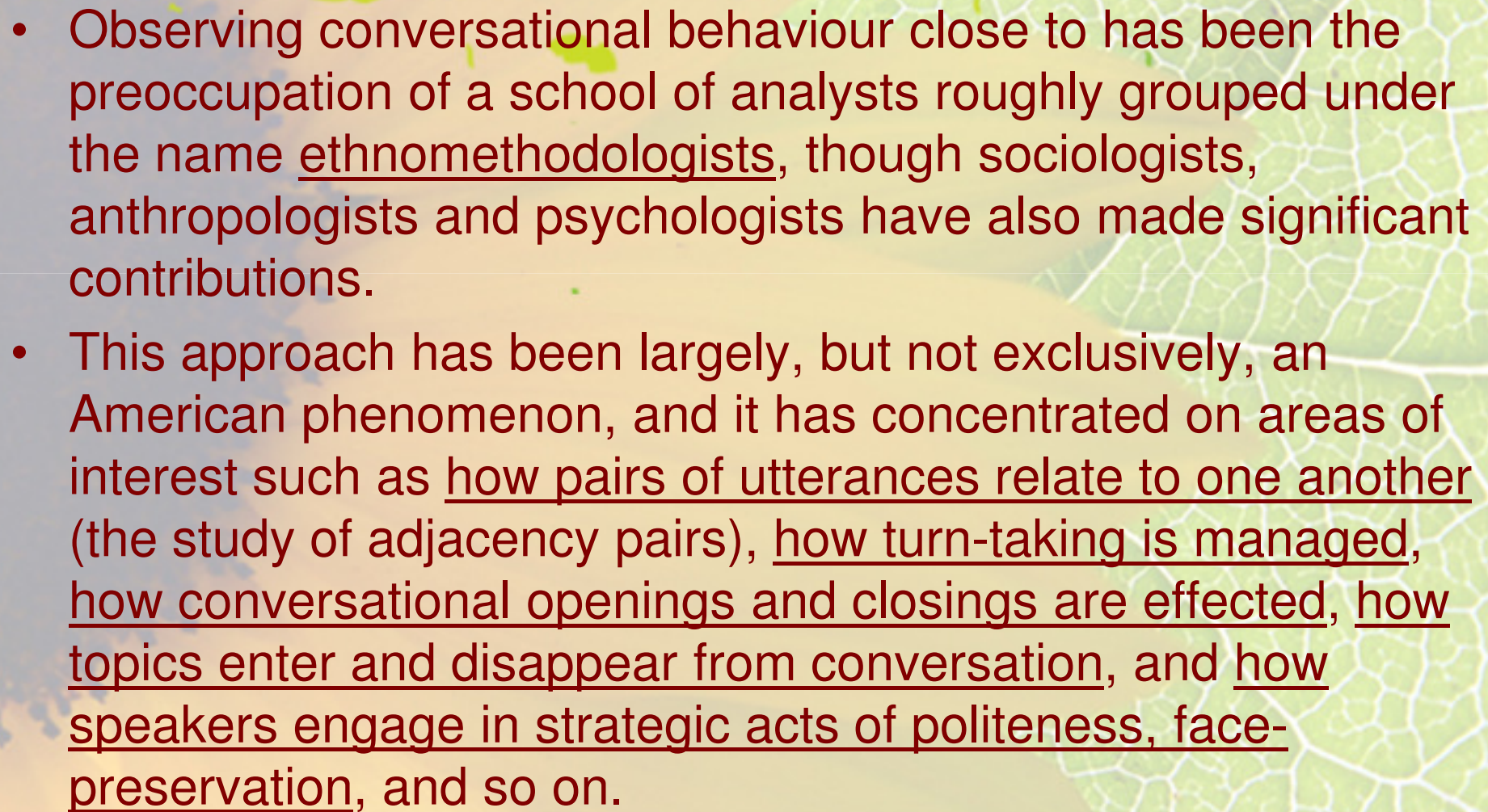**TRANSACTION**

↓

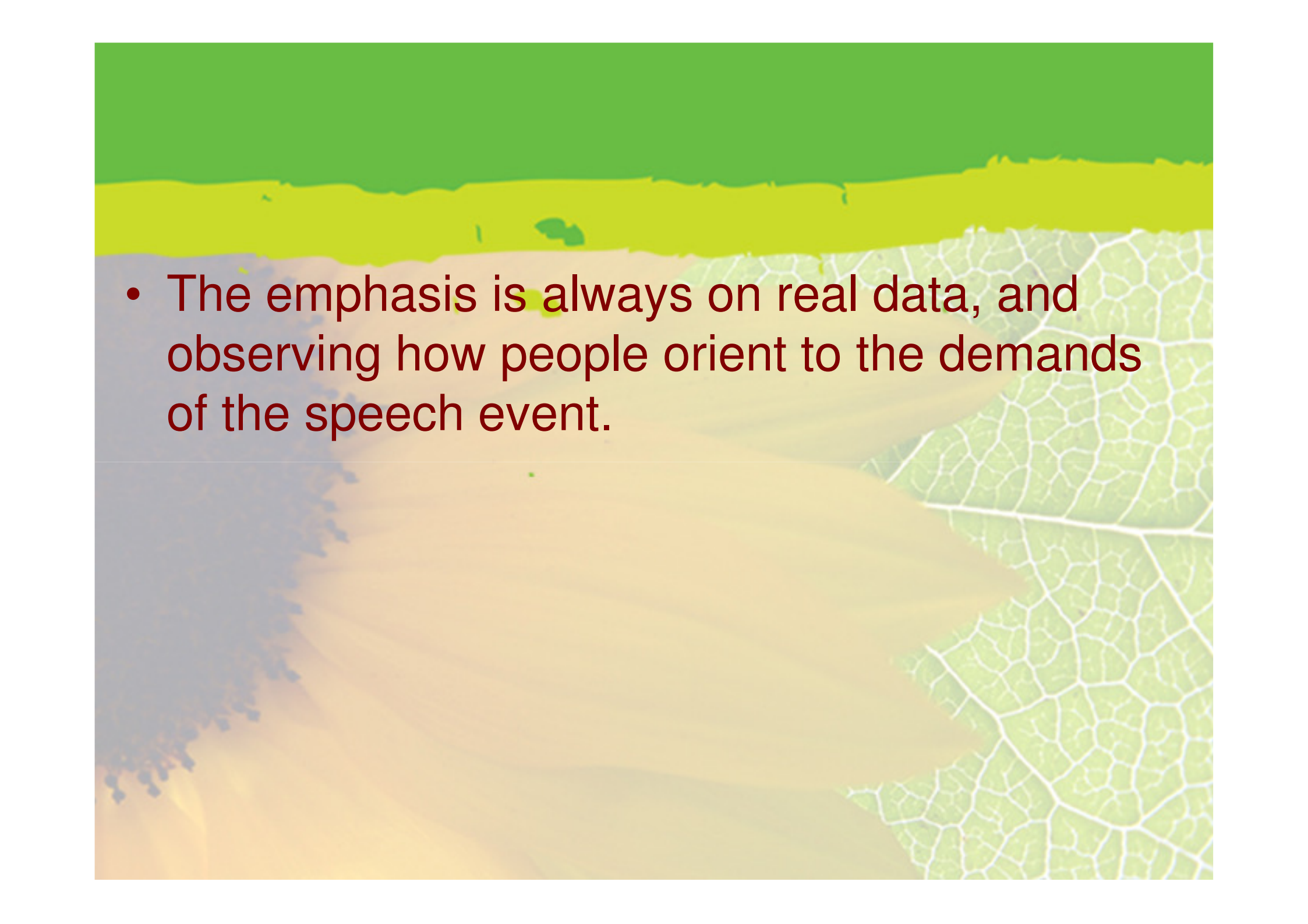**EXCHANGE**

↓

MOVE

↓

ACT

- Sinclair and Coulthard's model is very useful for analysing patterns of interaction where talk is relatively tightly structured, such as between doctors and patients (see Coulthard and Ashby 1975),

- but all sorts of complications arise when we try to apply the model to talk in more informal, casual, and spontaneous contexts.

Talk as social activity

- Because of the rigid conventions of situations such as teacher talk and doctor-patient talk, it is relatively easy to predict who will speak when, who will ask and who will answer, who will interrupt, who will open and close the talk, and so on.

- But where talk is more casual, and among equals, everyone will have a part to play in controling and monitoring the discourse, and the picture will look considerably more complicated

- Observing conversational behaviour close to has been the preoccupation of a school of analysts roughly grouped under the name <u>ethnomethodologists</u>, though sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists have also made significant contributions.

- This approach has been largely, but not exclusively, an American phenomenon, and it has concentrated on areas of interest such as <u>how pairs of utterances relate to one another</u> (the study of adjacency pairs), <u>how turn-taking is managed</u>, <u>how conversational openings and closings are effected</u>, <u>how topics enter and disappear from conversation</u>, and <u>how speakers engage in strategic acts of politeness, face-preservation</u>, and so on.

- The emphasis is always on real data, and observing how people orient to the demands of the speech event.