Nixon Tapes— Word by Word

The apparently aimless and disjointed conversations in the Nixon-era Watergate tapes actually contain a "dazzlingly regular and complex structure," according to two University of California researchers.

Computer analysis of segments of trancripts of tapes gathered in Richard Nixon's oval office reveals that conversations amomg Nixon, John Dean, John Ehrlichman, and Robert Haldeman follows a "tree-like structure" in the flow of ideas.

The conclusion came from Charlotte Linde, a visiting assistant professor of linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley, and Joseph S. Goguen, an associate professor of computer sciences at UCLA.

Excess wordage employed by the men who took part in the conversation concealed the underlying pattern to the conversations, the researchers said.

"Nixon has been criticized for rambling, but at least in his planning session he is very skilled," Linde said.

Lines of power as well as the closeness of the men were clearly revealed, they said.

Nixon and Haldeman were so close they often finished each others' sentences. "You can watch them tossing ideas back and forth like a Ping Pong ball," Linde said.

Both men, she said, were much more formal with and distant from Dean.

Linde said the lack of discussion of moral issues in the tapes is no surprise.

"A small group of close acquaintances rarely discuss morality. They know each other's values. The absence of moral discussion on the tapes is not sufficient to prove that they were not moral people."

Four major passages from the transcripts were studied, a massive project by linguistics standards. Using a computer language tailormade for the project, Goguen plotted the dialog on a tree-pattern showing how ideas were suggested, modified, killed, or adopted.

The project was not designed to shed new light on Watergate itself, but to help reveal how decisions emerge from a group mind.

In a paper summarizing their eight months of analysis of the tapes, the authors wrote:

"Presumably we could have looked at the tapes of a board meeting of a chewing gum factory, but in order to perform the massive amounts of detailed analysis it was important that the material be as absorbing as possible."

Eventually, it is hoped, linguistic patterns may indicate which suggestions in a conversation are eventually put into action, and which are abandoned, the researchers said.