

CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

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Conversation analysis (CA) is a method for investigating the structure and process of social interaction between humans. It focusses on talk as well as the non-verbal aspects of interaction. As their data, CA studies use video or audio recordings made from naturally occurring interaction. As their results, CA studies yield descriptions of recurrent structures and practices of social interaction. Some of these, such as turn taking or sequence structure, are involved in all interaction, whereas others are more specific and have to do with particular actions, such as asking questions or delivering and receiving news, assessments or complaints. CA studies can focus either on ordinary conversations taking place between acquaintances or family members, or on institutional encounters where the participants accomplish their institutional tasks through their interaction. CA elucidates basic aspects of human sociality.

CA was started by Harvey Sacks and his co-workers – most importantly Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson – at the University of California in the 1960ies. Sacks' initial ideas are documented in his lectures from 1964-1972 (Sacks 1992 a and b). Sacks worked in an intellectual environment shaped by Goffman's work on the conventions and rules guiding spoken interaction, and Garfinkel's ethnomethodology focussing on the interpretative procedures underlying social action. Using audio and video recordings as data, Sacks explicated these conventions, rules and procedures in a new level of precision (Schegloff 1992a).

Major Dimensions of Conversation Analysis

Three basic features are shared by CA studies: they 1) focus on *action*, 2) the *structures* of which they seek to explicate, and thereby, 3) they investigate the achievement of *intersubjective understanding* (cf. Schegloff 1991:46). As general research topics, these three would be shared by many "schools" of social science. The uniqueness of CA, however, is in the way in which it shows how "action", "structure" and "intersubjectivity" are practically achieved and managed in talk and interaction.

Action

Many CA studies have as their topics *the organisation of distinct social actions*. These include, for example, requests, questions, assessments, storytelling and complaints. For participants in conversation, recognisability of such actions is a persistent practical task: words, vocalisations and body movements are composed in ways that make them recognisable, for other participants, as distinct actions that call for distinct responses; CA studies investigate how this is achieved (Levinson 2012). Often CA studies have as their topic *actions that are typical in some institutional environment*. Examples include questioning and answering practices in cross-examinations, news interviews and press conferences, and diagnosis and advice in medical and pedagogical settings. CA studies examine the verbal and non-verbal composition of such actions and the responses to them.

Structure

In CA view, human social action is thoroughly structured and organised. In pursuing their goals, the actors have to orient themselves to rules and structures that only make their actions possible. Many conversation analytical studies focus on such structures.

Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) outlined *the rules of turn taking* in conversation. Current speaker is initially entitled to one *turn constructional unit* (smallest amount of talk that in its sequential context counts as a turn). The participants in interaction orient to the completion of such unit as a *transition relevance place* where the speaker change may occur. A current speaker may select the next; if (s)he does not do that, any participant can self-select at the transition relevance place; and if even that does not happen, the current speaker may (but need not) continue. The explication of these simple rules has massive consequences for the analysis of social interaction, because virtually all spoken actions are produced and received in the matrix provided by them. Many institutional settings involve specific applications of these rules (Drew and Heritage 1992).

Single acts are parts of larger, structurally organised entities. These entities can be called *sequences* (Schegloff 2006). The most basic and the most important sequence is called *adjacency pair* (Schegloff & Sacks 1973) consisting of two actions in which the first action (“first pair part”), performed by one interactant, invites a particular type second action (“second pair part”), to be performed by another interactant. Typical examples of adjacency pairs include question-answer, greeting-greeting, request-grant/refusal, and invitation-acceptance/declination. The relation between the first and the second pair parts is strict and normative: if the second pair part does not come forth, the first speaker can for example repeat the first action, or seek explanations for the fact that the second is missing.

Adjacency pairs serve often as a core, around which even larger sequences are build (Schegloff 2006). So, a *pre-expansion* can precede an adjacency pair; an *insert expansion* involves actions that occur between the first and the second pair parts and make possible the production of the latter; and in a *post expansion*, the speakers produce actions that follow from the basic adjacency pair.

Intersubjectivity

In CA studies, talk and interaction are examined as a site where intersubjective understanding concerning the participants’ intentions, their cognitive and emotional states, their relation, and their stances towards the talked-about objects is created, maintained and negotiated (Heritage & Atkinson 1984:11).

Co-presence involves a fundamental level of intersubjectivity: as Goffman already pointed out, the participants of conversation have mutual perceptual access and joint focus of attention, and are aware of that. Practices of interaction are fitted to this co-presence. For example, the direction of participants’ gaze is a key resource in conveying understandings regarding who should act next and what the next action should be about (Stivers & Rossano 2010).

A key facet of intersubjective understanding concerns *the understanding of prior action displayed by the current speaker*. As any turn at talk is produced in the context shaped by the previous turn, it also displays its speaker’s understanding of the work that the previous turn was engaged in (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974). For example, by producing a turn at talk that is

hearable as an answer, the speaker also shows that s/he understood the preceding turn as a question. Furthermore, the speaker who produced the “first” turn, has in his or her “third turn” an opportunity for correcting the understandings displayed by the second speaker in his or her “second turn” (Schegloff 1992b).

Intersubjectivity in interaction encompasses also the *referential worlds* that are invoked through the talk. The speakers systematically designing their utterances in ways that are facilitate the recognition of referents in their particular recipients. These, in turn, indicate that they have recognised the referents by routinely moving on in the joint action (Enfield 2012). Yet another important aspect of intersubjective understanding concerns the participants *relation and respective social identities*, which are displayed in the details of their talk. This is salient also in institutional interaction where the participants’ understandings of their institutional tasks are documented in their actions: for example in their ways of giving and receiving information and of asking and answering questions (Drew & Heritage 1992).

The Research Process

As their data, conversation analytical studies most often use *video- or audio recordings of naturally occurring social interaction*. Such recordings give the researcher direct access to the details of social action, and they make possible to scrutinise the data over and over again. The video or audio recordings are *transcribed using a detailed notation*. The notation of audio data was developed by Gail Jefferson and it includes symbols for wide variety of vocal and interactional phenomena. The transcription of visual data is less standardized, except for the notation for gaze direction (Rossano 2012). The transcript is not a substitute for the audio and video recordings: researchers recurrently return to the original recordings.

The analysis if the data proceeds from *case-by-case* examination of data, through creation of *collection* of phenomena that become objects of study, towards the explication of the structural features of the phenomena. In this process, a careful examination of *deviant cases* of or greatest importance.

Example

The conversation analytical transcription and some of its analytical concepts are exemplified in the following segment taken from Pomerantz (1980).

Extract 1 (Pomerantz 1980:195)

01 B: Hello::,

02 A: HI:::

03 B: Oh:hi:: ‘ow are you Agne::s,

04 A: Fi.ne. Yer line’s been busy.

05 B: Yeuh my fu (hh) .hh my father’s wife called me.

CA notation used in this segment includes:

- . Period indicating falling intonation at the end of an utterance
- , Comma indicating flat intonation at the end of an utterance
- : Colon indicating prolongation of sound

a _____ Underlining indicating emphasis
hh Row of h's indicating aspiration
.hh Row of h's preceded by a dot indicating inhalation
A Capital letters indicating louder volume than surrounding talk
For the full set of transcription symbols, see Atkinson & Heritage (eds.) 1984.

As Schegloff (e.g. 1986) has shown, the openings of North-American landline telephone conversations, as the one above, usually consist of four short sequences: (i) Summons (telephone ringing, not shown in the transcrip) and answer (line 1), (ii) identification / recognition (accomplished in lines 1-3), greetings (lines 2-3) and 'howareyou' sequence (lines 3-4). In a very dense form, these sequences establish the setting for the interaction and reinvoke the social relation between the participants.

B's answer to the "howareyou" is, in line 4, followed by her assertion that A's line has been busy. The assertion is about an event that the co-participant (A) has a privileged access to (as it was her line). Pomerantz shows how assertions of this kind serve as "fishing devices" which cast their recipient in a position where it becomes relevant for him or her to speak about the referred-to event. However, fishing takes place without the subject directly asking for information: the recipient, if he or she will speak about the event, will *volunteer* the information. That is what B does in line 4 where she tells who she was talking with. Pomerantz identified and explicated a particular form of social action that is recurrently resorted to in ordinary conversation. Subsequent studies have shown how this generic sequence can be made use of in eliciting clients' talk in institutional encounters in psychiatric and counselling settings.

Current Areas of Expansion

Non-vocal aspects of interaction have gained increasing attention in CA, in studies that investigate for example the role of gestures and physical objects in social interaction (Streeck 2009; Heath 2013). In recent years, the study of *epistemics* (Stivers, Mondada & Steensig 2011) and *deontics* (Stevanovic & Peräkylä 2012) has expanded, in studies that seek to show how participants negotiate their respective roles in terms of knowledge and rights to take action in the world. The interactional organization of *emotion* has also attracted much research (Peräkylä & Sorjonen 2012). Systematic *cross-language and cross-cultural comparisons* have started to unravel the universal and language/culture-dependent aspects of the organisation of interaction (Stivers et al 2009). The results initially arising from qualitative CA studies have been tested and elaborated through *experimental research designs* (Magyari et al. *in press*).

SEE ALSO

Ethnomethodology, Goffman,

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