

conversation analysis

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Conversation analysis (CA) is a method for investigating the structure and process of social interaction between humans. It focuses primarily on talk, but integrates also the nonverbal aspects of interaction in its research design. 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 that reside in talk, and it examines the ways in which specific social institutions are invoked in, and operate through, talk.

CA was started by Harvey Sacks and his co-workers – most importantly Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson – at the University of California in the 1960s. The initial formation of Sacks's ideas is documented in his lectures from 1964 to 1972 (Sacks 1992a, 1992b). CA was developed in an intellectual environment shaped by Goffman's work on the moral underpinnings of social interaction and Garfinkel's ethnomethodology focusing on the interpretive procedures underlying social action. Sacks started to study the real-time sequential ordering of actions: the rules, patterns, and structures in the relations between actions. Thereby, he made a radical shift in the perspective of social scientific inquiry into social interaction: instead of treating social interaction as a screen upon which other processes (moral, inferential, or others) were projected, Sacks started to study the very structures of the interaction itself (Schegloff 1992a: xviii).

Major Dimensions

There are perhaps three basic features shared by CA studies: (1) they focus on *action*, (2) the *structures* of which they seek to explicate, and thereby (3) they investigate the achievement of *intersubjective understanding*. 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

Some CA studies have as their topics the organization of actions that are recognizable as distinct actions even from a vernacular point of view. These include, for example, openings and closings of conversations, assessments, storytelling, and complaints. Many 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. Finally – but perhaps most importantly – many conversation analytical studies focus on fundamental aspects of conversational organization that make any action possible. These include turn-taking, repair (i.e., the ways of dealing with problems of hearing, speaking, or understanding), the general ways in which sequences of action are built, and the ways in which the participants of interaction manage their relation to the utterances through gaze and body posture.

Structure

In the CA view, human social action is thoroughly structured and organized. In pursuing their goals, the actors have to orient themselves to rules and structures that make their actions possible.

Sacks et al. (1974) outlined the rules of turn taking in conversation. A 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 a unit as a *transition-relevance place* where the speaker change may occur. A current speaker may select the next; if she 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 & Heritage 1992).

Single acts are parts of larger, structurally organized 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 of 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 built (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 state of knowledge, their relation, and their stance towards the talked-about objects is created, maintained, and negotiated (Heritage & Atkinson 1984: 11).

The most fundamental level of intersubjective understanding – one that constitutes the basis for any other type of intersubjective understanding – concerns the understanding of the preceding turn displayed by the current speaker. Just like any turn at talk is produced in the context shaped by the previous turn, it also displays its speaker's understanding of that previous turn (Sacks et al. 1974). Thus, in simple cases, producing a turn at talk that is hearable as an answer, the speaker also shows that she understood the preceding turn as a question. Especially in longer utterances, the recipient's understanding of, and stance towards, the co-participants' action can be displayed through vocal and nonvocal means during the production of that action, and this displayed understanding can inform the further unfolding of that action (M.H. Goodwin 1980). In cases where the first speaker considers the understanding concerning his talk, displayed in the second speaker's utterance, as problematic, the first speaker has an opportunity for correcting this understanding in his or her subsequent talk (Schegloff 1992b).

An important aspect of intersubjective understanding concerns the *context* of the talk. This is particularly salient in institutional interaction where the participants' understanding of the institutional context of their talk is documented in their actions (Drew & Heritage 1992). If the "institutional context" is relevant for interaction, it can be observed in the details of the participants' actions; for example, in their ways of giving and receiving information and asking and answering questions.

Research Process

As their data, conversation analytical studies use video or audio recordings of naturally occurring social interaction. Video and audio recordings give the researcher direct access to the details of social action, and they make it possible to scrutinize the data over and over again. The focus on naturally occurring data entails that the researcher investigates specimens rather than representations of the actual social action that he wants to understand. 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 a wide variety of vocal and interactional phenomena. The transcription of visual data is less standardized, except for a widely used notation for gaze direction developed by C. Goodwin (1981). The transcript is not a substitute for the audio and video recordings: researchers recurrently return to the original recordings. The analysis of the data proceeds from case-by-case examination of data, through creation of collections 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* is of greatest importance.

Example

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

01 B:	Hello::,
02 A:	HI:::
03 B:	Oh: <u>hi</u> :: 'ow are you Agne::s,
04 A:	<u>Fi</u> :ne. Yer <u>line</u> 's been busy.

05 B:	Yeuh my fu (hh) .hh my father's wife called me.
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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
<u>a</u>	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

As Schegloff (1986) has shown, the openings of telephone conversations, as the one above, usually consist of four short sequences: (1) Summons (telephone ringing, not shown in the transcript) and answer (line 1); (2) identification/recognition (accomplished in lines 1–3); (3) greetings (lines 2–3); (4) 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 5, 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 counseling settings.

Current Areas of Expansion

Since the early 1990s the study of institutional interaction has proliferated. Medical interactions and interactions in the media are currently among the most intensively researched settings; the study of technological working environments (Heath & Luff 2000) has also been strongly influenced by the CA method. Another area of intensive study is the interface between grammar and social interaction (Ochs et al. 1996), focusing on questions such as the construction of turns and repair. Yet another area of expansion involves the exploration of the uses of prosody (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 1996) and gesture (Goodwin 2000; Stivers 2008) in social interaction. Recently, efforts have been made towards a conceptual integration of CA findings and the psychological discussion on 'theory of mind' (Levinson 2006). There is an ongoing debate concerning the applicability of quantitative techniques, along with qualitative ones, in CA studies.

SEE ALSO: Conversation; Discourse; Ethnomethodology; Goffman, Erving; Quantitative Methods; Sacks, Harvey; Sociolinguistics; Symbolic Interaction

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