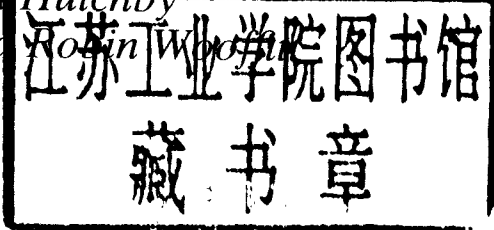# Conversation
Analysis

Ian Hutchby
and Robin Wooffitt

Conversation Analysis

PRINCIPLES, PRACTICES AND APPLICATIONS

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Polity

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Analysis

Transcription Glossary

The transcription symbols used here are common to conversation analytic research, and were developed by Gail Jefferson. A more detailed discussion of the use of these symbols and others is provided in chapter 3.

(0.5)	The number in brackets indicates a time gap in tenths of a second.
(.)	A dot enclosed in a bracket indicates a pause in the talk of less than two-tenths of a second.
=	The 'equals' sign indicates 'latching' between utterances. For example:

```
S1:   yeah September ⌈seventy six=
S2:                  ⌊September
S1:   =it would be
S2:   yeah that's right
```

[ ]	Square brackets between adjacent lines of concurrent speech indicate the onset and end of a spate of overlapping talk.
.hh	A dot before an 'h' indicates speaker in-breath. The more h's, the longer the in-breath.
hh	An 'h' indicates an out-breath. The more h's the longer the breath.
(( ))	A description enclosed in a double bracket indicates a non-verbal activity. For example ((banging sound)). Alternatively double brackets may enclose the transcriber's comments on contextual or other features.
-	A dash indicates the sharp cut-off of the prior word or sound.
:	Colons indicate that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound or letter. The more colons the greater the extent of the stretching.
!	Exclamation marks are used to indicate an animated or emphatic tone.

( )	Empty parentheses indicate the presence of an unclear fragment on the tape.
(guess)	The words within a single bracket indicate the transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance.
.	A full stop indicates a stopping fall in tone. It does not necessarily indicate the end of a sentence.
,	A comma indicates a 'continuing' intonation.
?	A question mark indicates a rising inflection. It does not necessarily indicate a question.
*	An asterisk indicates a 'croaky' pronunciation of the immediately following section.
↓ ↑	Pointed arrows indicate a marked falling or rising intonational shift. They are placed immediately before the onset of the shift.
a:	Less marked falls in pitch can be indicated by using underlining immediately preceding a colon:

S: we (.) really didn't have a lot'v cha:nge

a:	Less marked rises in pitch can be indicated using a colon which itself is underlined:

J: I have a red shi:rt,

Under	Underlined fragments indicate speaker emphasis.
CAPITALS	Words in capitals mark a section of speech noticeably louder than that surrounding it.
° °	Degree signs are used to indicate that the talk they encompass is spoken noticeably quieter than the surrounding talk.
Thaght	A 'gh' indicates that the word in which it is placed had a guttural pronunciation.
> <	'More than' and 'less than' signs indicate that the talk they encompass was produced noticeably quicker than the surrounding talk.
→	Arrows in the left margin point to specific parts of an extract discussed in the text.
[H:21.3.89:2]	Extract headings refer to the transcript library source of the researcher who originally collected the data.

Contents

Introduction

What do we do when we talk?

Talk is a central activity in social life. But how is ordinary talk organized, how do people coordinate their talk in interaction, and what is the role of talk in wider social processes? Conversation analysis (CA) has developed over the past thirty years to address these questions. The answers it provides, and more particularly the means by which it provides those answers (its assumptions, methods and procedures, together with the findings these enable us to generate), are the subject matter of this book.

Conversation analysis is characterized by the view that how talk is produced and how the meanings of that talk are determined are the practical, social and interactional accomplishments of members of a culture. Talk is not seen simply as the product of two 'speaker-hearers' who attempt to exchange information or convey messages to each other. Rather, participants in conversation are seen as mutually orienting to, and collaborating in order to achieve, orderly and meaningful communication. The aim of CA is thus to reveal the tacit, organized reasoning procedures which inform the production of naturally occurring talk. The way in which utterances are designed is informed by organized procedures, methods and resources which are tied to the contexts in which they are produced, and which are available to participants by virtue of their membership in a natural language community. The analytic objective of CA is to explicate these procedures, on which speakers rely to produce utterances and by which they make sense of other speakers' talk.

CA originates in the path-breaking lectures given by Harvey Sacks in the sociology departments of the University of California at Los Angeles, and later Irvine, between 1964 and 1972.

Sacks, who was killed in a car crash in 1975, was a highly original, often iconoclastic thinker whose ideas have, since his death, radically influenced researchers in fields as diverse as sociology, social psychology, linguistics (especially sociolinguistics and pragmatics), communication studies, human–computer interaction and speech therapy.

For many people, the present authors included, Sacks's work was first encountered in the form of mimeographed copies of the virtually unedited, typed transcripts which Sacks had made of his tape-recorded lectures. For a long time these mimeographs, circulated freely among those who (a) knew of their existence and (b) knew where to get them from, were the only means by which the great bulk of Sacks's work could be accessed. In 1992 this was changed when the lectures were edited by Gail Jefferson and published in book form (Sacks 1992).

Even so, in reading the book one still readily gets the frisson of excitement that emerged from those earlier, often scrappy A4 pages: a sense of the ongoing creation of a radically new form of social science. Like Saussure and Wittgenstein before him, two other revolutionary thinkers who had used the freer form of lectures in preference to the constraints of finished publications as the principal means for putting their ideas across, Sacks must have been well aware that the contents of his lectures constituted a break with the way things had been hitherto. In fact, Sacks's awareness of this was something that he did not try to hide. In many ways, this consciousness of his own originality is crystallized in the following remarkable exchange between Sacks and one of his students, which occurs late in the series of lectures. Sacks has been lecturing in his usual way, based around a fragment of recorded conversation. The student interrupts the lecture to ask a question:

> *Student:* I was just wondering if we're ever going to get around to topics of conversation.
> *Sacks:* That's an amazing question. I wouldn't know what you're- What do you have in mind?
> *Student:* I just think that we should get some content. I feel very frustrated about it.
> *Sacks:* ... What would be some content?
> *Student:* I don't know. I expected at least that you're going to analyse conversations ...

Sacks: Often you can do that kind of thing and figure
that it will work. But as weird as it may be,
there's an area called the Analysis of Conversa-
tion. It's done in various places around the world,
and I invented it. So if I tell you that what we're
doing is studying conversation, then there's no
place to turn, as compared to experimental psy-
chology where you can say 'I want to know what
the mind is like' and then you can choose to study
humanistic psychology or something like that.
There is no other way that conversation is being
studied systematically except my way. And this is
what defines, in social science now, what 'talking
about conversation' would mean. Now surely
there are other ways to talk about conversation.
But in social science there isn't. And people take
it that they have to learn from listening to the
sort of things I say, what it could possibly mean
to talk about a particular conversation, how a
conversation works, or how the details of conver-
sation work. Nobody has ever heard a characteri-
zation in that detail, with that abstractness, of a
fragment like that. It's just never been done. It's
been done here for the first time. (Sacks 1992,
vol. 2: 549)

To some, this may come across as mere arrogance. But what is
remarkable about these comments for us is the extraordinary
awareness Sacks shows of the originality of his thinking. As we
outline in chapter 1, it was in fact quite accurate at that point for
him to say that no one else in social science was studying conver-
sation systematically. In sociology, Sacks's 'home' discipline
(even though he had started off studying law), there was virtually
no interest in any aspect of language, let alone the mundanities
of everyday conversation. And though the focus on conversation
may suggest that Sacks would have most in common with
researchers in linguistics, we will also show that his particular
approach – especially the alluded-to focus on detailed, abstract
description of fragments of naturally occurring talk – distin-
guishes him from the predominant methodologies in that field
also.

In fact, CA lies at a unique interface between sociology and other major disciplines within the social sciences: principally, linguistics and social psychology. This interdisciplinarity has been a feature of CA from the beginning; it is reflected, for example, in the fact that the earliest major publications appeared not in sociology journals but in others such as the *American Anthropologist* (Schegloff 1968) or the major linguistics journals *Language* (Sacks et al. 1974; Schegloff et al. 1977) and *Semiotica* (Jefferson 1973; Schegloff and Sacks 1973). Throughout this book we will show that CA addresses a range of substantive issues, both theoretical and methodological, which readers from backgrounds in a wide variety of social sciences will be able to identify with.

For instance, CA's sociological lineage draws on affinities with Erving Goffman's explorations of the interaction order and with Harold Garfinkel's programme of ethnomethodology (we discuss this in chapter 1). One of the key sociological issues that CA, like these perspectives, addresses is that of intersubjectivity. How do we share a common understanding of the world and of one another's actions in the world? From Schutz onwards, various responses have been given to this question. CA's distinctive contribution, as will become clear in chapters 1 and 2, is to show that analytic access can be gained to the situated *achievement* of intersubjectivity by focusing on the sequential organization of talk: in other words, on the management of turn-taking.

A further issue is addressed by conversation analytic research on talk in institutional settings. This work makes a distinctive contribution to recent developments in the 'agency–structure' debate (Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981; Boden and Zimmerman 1991), which have sought to transcend the traditional sociological distinction between micro and macro levels of social order in order to reach a new understanding of how social action is related to social structures. In a similar way to some of Anthony Giddens's (1984) theories on this subject, CA takes the view that 'structure' should not be viewed as an objective, external source of constraint on the individual. Rather, 'structure' is a feature of situated social interaction that participants actively orient to as *relevant* for the ways they design their actions. Thus, while analysts may want to assert that some feature of social structure, such as class or power, is relevant for the way in which particular interactions are managed, the more difficult task proposed by CA is to show that such features are relevant for the participants

themselves, as displayed, for example, in the design of their talk (Schegloff 1991). This issue is discussed at length in chapter 6.

In the field of linguistics, CA is relevant for three main areas: the ethnography of communication, which has aimed to analyse the patterns of language in use and the ways in which these relate to social and cultural patterns (Gumperz and Hymes 1972); pragmatics, with its interest in how meaning is communicatively established (Levinson 1983); and discourse analysis, with its concern for the structural and sequential properties of spoken language (Brown and Yule 1982; Sinclair and Coulthard 1975). With these perspectives CA shares the view that everyday talk is a phenomenon that is worthy of analysis in its own right, rather than the disorganized and flawed manifestation of linguistic competence that Chomsky (1965) believed it to be. One of the most important contributions made by CA here is in terms of methodology. CA emphasizes that analysis should be based entirely on closely transcribed examples of actual talk recorded in naturally occurring settings, extracts from which are made available as part of published research. In this way, the claims of the analyst are open to test by the reader or other researchers on the basis of the data (or at least, a transcription of it: in chapter 3 we discuss the distinction between data and transcription). This stance has had a major influence on research in what is now known broadly as interactional sociolinguistics, leading to a move away from the reliance on intuitively invented examples of talk as data which typified some earlier work, especially in speech act theory (Schegloff 1988a).

A further contribution stems from the position conversation analysts take on the question of how talk is related to contextual and sociological variables. In line with its stance on the agency–structure debate in sociology, CA takes issue with the standard sociolinguistic notion that there is an intrinsic and causal relationship between language and the social contexts in which it is produced. Again, rather than assuming such a relationship exists, CA demands that the relevance of sociolinguistic variables for the participants themselves must be demonstrated on the basis of the data. This does not mean that variables such as gender, class or authority are irrelevant; but it does require the analyst to pay close attention to empirical phenomena and to begin from the assumption that participants are active, knowledgeable agents, rather than simply the bearers of extrinsic,

constraining structures. In chapter 6 this issue is addressed in
terms of interaction in institutional settings; but we also relate the
argument to more 'mundane' forms of talk in chapters 4 and 5.

Within social psychology, CA's contribution relates to similar
methodological and conceptual questions. For instance, a great
deal of research on interpersonal communication has been based
on data generated in experimental settings in which the
researcher seeks to control for certain variables, such as gender.
Once more, such an approach is criticized for paying too little
attention to the relevance of such variables among the partici-
pants themselves, effectively seeking to create a situation in
which the phenomena the researcher has decided are important
can be observed. Similarly, social psychological studies in which
interactional phenomena such as interruption are encouraged to
occur through experimental control, then quantified and corre-
lated with variables like the gender of the participants, run the
risk of generating invalid findings by categorizing certain events
as 'interruptions' when closer examination reveals that the par-
ticipants in fact may display no recognition that an 'interruption'
actually took place at all. This issue is discussed in chapter 4.

Conversation analysis also plays a role in the area of social
psychology known as discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell
1987). There is a difference between this and discourse analysis
in linguistics. While the latter is mainly concerned to develop a
theory of spoken discourse as a structured phenomenon, often
using the model of grammar as its basis (Sinclair and Coulthard
1975), discourse analysts in social psychology have been critical
of the ways in which their discipline has tended to treat language
as a passive or neutral means of communication. Drawing not
only from CA but also from ethnomethodology and semiotics,
they stress instead that language is both functional and construc-
tive; in other words it can only be seen as a medium which people
use to accomplish specific communicative tasks, and it is a vehicle
through which our sense of the world itself is actively con-
structed. Consequently, one of the main concerns has been to
develop a research programme in social psychology which takes
full account of the dynamic properties of language use, both spo-
ken and written. This issue becomes the focus of our attention in
chapters 7 and 8 when we discuss the design of people's accounts
of experience and their descriptions of states of affairs in the
world. What our discussions there suggest is that while there has

been much criticism of discourse analysis by conversation analysts, and vice versa, the two approaches actually have many similarities and may benefit from further serious cross-fertilization.

However, having made these points about contacts with other perspectives, our view is that conversation analysis has now developed to the extent that it represents a distinctive subdiscipline in its own right, with its own methodological and conceptual armoury, which owes no primary allegiance to any particular field. For this reason, our aim in this book will be to introduce the principles, practices and applications of CA in such a way as to be readily understandable to readers from whatever background, whether or not they have a working knowledge of any of the social sciences mentioned above.

This is only possible because Sacks's way of applying his vision did not result in an idiosyncratic, one-off body of work. Rather, Sacks invented a *method* by which others could take up and develop his findings, and, more importantly, generate new ideas and findings of their own. In short, conversation analysis is a generative method for the study of a wide range of aspects of the social world. Since Sacks's death, conversation analysis has continued to develop, and the number of practitioners has continued to grow, so that now the body of work within the field is truly diverse, both in terms of its substantive themes and of its increasingly global distribution. Conversation analysis, which began in the USA, is now being widely practised in the UK, and has a growing presence in Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Australia and Japan.

Moreover, practitioners do not just analyse the social organization of 'ordinary' conversation, the casual interactions in which we routinely engage on a daily basis; but also, through studying how people use specialized forms of talk, the nature of institutions and organizations, the properties of mass communication, the structures of conflict in interaction, as well as issues such as the role of gender differences, power, the importance of ordinary talk in legal and educational decision-making processes, and more.

Yet on a methodological level, that diverse body of work is recognizably consistent. This is because conversation analysis is an approach which incorporates general procedures for data collection and transcription, as well as techniques for data analysis. Part of our aim in this book is to introduce those general

techniques and basic procedures in such a way as to provide the reader with some of the practical tools for doing conversation analysis.

However, this is not a 'cookbook' which will provide rules and recipes for the easy production of a piece of conversation analysis. Although the procedures and techniques are quite general, they are not the same as the formulae which one might apply to data in statistical analysis. Conversation analysis, first and foremost, represents a distinctive sociological vision, a way of seeing the world and of approaching data, which derives ultimately from the exemplifications provided by Sacks in his original lectures.

In this book we emphasize both the methodological distinctiveness and social scientific applications of CA. We will focus not only on what CA is, and on how to do it, but also on what can be done *with* it. The book is designed to work on three interrelated levels:

- On the first level, we will present CA as *methodologically distinctive*. A major part of the significance of CA lies in its approach to the production of social scientific research, and in the practical research methods which are associated with that methodological perspective. The chapters of this book are intended both to explain and to exemplify that methodology.
- A second level of significance is found in what has been described as the *conversation analytic mentality* (Schenkein 1978): the distinctive way of seeing and thinking about the social world to which CA introduces us and which is essential to the application of its methods. Our approach to this will be to exemplify the CA mentality by practically working through examples of conversation analytic work, since an essential feature of CA is that concepts are developed from, and securely rooted in, empirical observations of recorded, naturally occurring talk-in-interaction.
- On a third level, we will introduce the range of *social scientific applications* which emerge out of CA research. A criticism that is often levelled against CA, as against other qualitative methods, is that it only deals with the 'small-scale' features of social life, the 'mere details' of interaction, and does not connect in any meaningful way with what are seen as the major questions of the social sciences. Linked with this is the view that CA has no practical relevance in the world beyond scholarly research.

However, as is suggested by the first few sentences of this introduction, one of our aims is precisely to demonstrate the relevance of CA for social science more generally, and to illustrate some of its practical applications.

In line with these aims, the early chapters of the book are designed to focus on the methodology of CA, while later chapters concentrate on the main applications of the conversation analytic method. In chapter 1 we provide an introduction to the intellectual and disciplinary context in which CA came into being, focusing principally on the early development of the field in Harvey Sacks's lectures. Chapter 2 goes on to give an account of the foundational studies in CA, with the aim of introducing some basic analytic concepts and their application. In chapter 3 we begin to introduce the reader to the analytic techniques of CA, by means of a detailed discussion of the key issue of transcription and its close relationship with the analysis of data. Chapters 4 and 5 continue this practical thread by demonstrating a number of analytic techniques used in CA, ranging from the analysis of large collections of data to the detailed study of single cases.

The remaining chapters concentrate on how these analytic techniques and perspectives can be applied to various problems in the social sciences. Chapter 6 discusses the analysis of interaction in institutional or organizational settings. Here we demonstrate the power of CA as a technique for analysing a whole range of forms of talk using a single method. Chapter 7 addresses the issue of how CA can contribute to the analysis of data produced in social scientific interviews. Here we discuss key methodological questions both for standard interview-based social science research and for CA itself in the form of how to analyse extended monologues such as interviewee responses in unstructured interviews. Following on from this, chapter 8 provides a discussion of the relevance of and techniques for analysing accounts of the 'facts' produced in settings ranging from interviews to everyday telephone conversations. Finally, in chapter 9, we provide an introduction to a number of other practical applications of CA, focusing on areas ranging from the persuasiveness of political communication, to the design of interactive computer systems, through to therapy for speech disorders.