

The Interactional Organization of Academic Talk

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Office hour consultations

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Transcript notations

The transcript notations used in this study are adapted from Gail Jefferson and slightly modified to meet the objectives of this study (cf. Atkinson and Heritage 1984: ix–xvi). The names of all speakers have been anonymized. Instead, ‘teacher’ and ‘student’ are used as general terms throughout the discussion when referring to the participants in the scenarios. The German transcripts have been additionally translated into English (*printed in italics*). All lines in the transcript are numbered in chronological order. The following notations are used to provide additional information about the delivery of participants’ speech and actions:

- [...] Square brackets indicate speech overlap. The left bracket marks the beginning and the right bracket the end of the overlap.
- = Equals signs refer to contiguous utterances; i.e., those utterances which are immediately latched to each other without any interval between them. The utterances can be produced either by different speakers or by the same speaker. In the latter case, they link different parts of a turn that has been carried over to another line.
- : A colon indicates an extension of the sound or syllable it follows. If more than one colon is used, it indicates a prolongation of the stretch of talk.
- °hello° A degree sign is used to indicate that a passage of talk is spoken with reduced volume. Two degree signs are used for very quiet speech.
- A black dot before the first syllable indicates an audible inhalation.
- (hhh) Three h’s in brackets refer to an audible exhalation.
- NO Capital letters are used to indicate a stretch of talk that is spoken at increased volume.
- hello Underlined text indicates that the speaker stresses the speech.
- <text> The ‘less than – greater than’ symbol is used to indicate that the enclosed speech was delivered more slowly than usual for the speaker.
- >text< The ‘greater than – less than’ symbol is used to indicate that the enclosed speech was delivered more rapidly than usual for the speaker.

- (0.5) A number in brackets indicates the length of an interval in the stream of talk during which no talk is produced. This pause can occur either within or between turns.
- (.) A dot in brackets indicates a micro pause of less than 0.2 seconds.
- ((*S enters*)) Double brackets with text in italics are used to describe additional nonverbal actions by the speakers. Sometimes, the text provides the equivalent English translation to a German word that is used by the participants (e.g., *Sprechstunde* – office hours).
- ((*throat*)) This notation indicates that the speaker clears his or her throat.
- {unusual} A word that is surrounded by curly brackets provides a correction of an English word that is misused by a German speaker. Sometimes, it is also used to add a word/phrase to the transcript in order to clarify the meaning of the speaker's turn.
- (he)/(ha) This notation indicates a burst of quiet/loud laughter attached to a stretch of talk.
- (h) An 'h' in brackets indicates a syllable of laughter within a word.
- (xxx) Several 'x's' in brackets denote a stretch of talk which could not be transcribed due to background noise or inarticulateness. Each 'x' stands for one word and three 'x's' are used for three or more unclear words.
- A period indicates falling pitch or intonation, usually found at the end of a turn.
- A comma indicates continuing intonation, often found at the end of a turn-construction unit (TCU).
- ? / ↑ A question mark (or an arrow pointing upwards) indicates rising intonation.
- An arrow pointing to the right is used to draw attention to a turn or turn constructional unit that is discussed in an excerpt.

Acknowledgments

This book is for all teachers and students who interact with each other face-to-face in the daily routine of university life. Its emergence owes much to the contributions of those faculty members and students who willingly participated in this project and who readily agreed to have their talk during these consultations recorded for research purposes. I would also like to express my thanks to the editor of this book series, Anita Fetzner, and to the publisher John Benjamins, especially to Isja Conen, for supporting me with all the editing business. The two anonymous reviewers have also done their share in turning the original manuscript into a scientific publication that will be of interest to researchers in different fields. Furthermore, there are a few people to whom I am personally very grateful and indebted: Ronald Geluykens and Neal Norrick for their support from the very beginning of this project; Deidre Graydon, who has spent precious hours of her time proofreading the manuscript; my family, in particular my parents Rita and Walter; finally and most importantly Kirsten, who has patiently endured my long working hours. All of you have supported me during this endeavor in many ways: with moral support, financial help, scholarly input, patience, good humor, and trust. What once started out as a proposal for a PhD project has now found its way into this book.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

That's the vague ineffable thing that's supposed to happen
in office hours – sometimes it's about defined intellectual topics –
but sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's about two people
who can learn from each other just by opening up a little bit.

(“How to talk to a professor”

Blog entry posted by Mel

<http://infavorofthinking.blogspot.com>

2005, Nov. 19)

University students perform a variety of activities and tasks in the course of their studies, each of which involves specific receptive and productive skills (reading, listening, writing, and speaking). Students are trained to write term papers, they listen to lectures, and read articles and books about research topics in their academic field. They also develop communicative competence in spoken academic registers, which enables them to interact effectively with their teachers and peers inside and outside the classroom. The development and honing of these skills are essential parts of the university's mission. Students acquire language skills throughout their university education with which they construct knowledge and apply it competently in their field. Among these skills, writing has for a long time been considered as the key to successful participation in the academic community (cf. Gilbert and Mulkay 1984). Speaking in an academic context, on the other hand, is also increasingly appreciated for its role in socializing students into the discourses and practices of the university (Mauranen 2003). The socialization process takes place through sustained involvement in different teaching contexts and through engagement in different interactional practices that occur outside of the primary learning environments.

The following book sets out to investigate a particular type of talk within the microcosm of university education, viz. the *academic office hour* or consultation hour. In addition to the typical teaching environments such as classrooms or lecture halls, office hours have become an established practice in academia for students to seek advice¹ and receive information from their professors, instructors,

1. On the conceptual distinction between advice and information see Chapter 7.

or tutors. The office hour setting provides a discourse platform for multifaceted exchanges between the teaching faculty and their student learners. It allows students to discuss academic concerns and receive help with educational issues and problems that they encounter during their studies. Unlike in class, students' academic performance is not assessed here by giving grades or credit points. Office hours also do not pursue any learning objectives (at least not systematically), and teachers usually do not employ a specific teaching method in order to achieve a particular learning outcome during a consultation. Its function in this institution is rather to support, guide, and supervise students' learning and research activities. This endeavor is, as much as any other form of interaction, primarily accomplished through language.

Whereas a great deal of research in this field has focused on written academic discourse, those studies that looked at spoken discourse at the university level have mainly investigated the classroom, i.e., both instructor and student discourse. The goal of this research, however, is to focus on a non-teaching environment and to analyze how participants organize as well as interactively construct talk in an office hour consultation. This research objective involves analyzing the individual stages of a consultation: beginning with the opening of the talk, the presentation of students' reason for the visit, followed by the treatment or discussion of their concern(s) until the stage when the talk is concluded. Several units of this talk are analyzed on the basis of participants' orientation to situated (verbal) activities performed throughout these consultations. An investigation of the individual parts of the talk reveals information about how an office hour consultation proceeds in order to reach an appropriate outcome. With the help of a data-driven method, this study seeks to demonstrate (a) *how* these academic exchanges are interactionally accomplished, especially given the variable circumstances distinguishing each student, and (b) *what* actions and activities² are routinely performed to handle student concerns. In doing so, we will see how university teachers go about informing, socializing, and advising students about general academic concerns and more specific problems during office hour consultations.

The analysis in this book draws mainly upon conversation analytic tools as established means of analyzing "talk-in-interaction" (Sacks et al. 1974: 720) within an institutional setting (cf. Heritage 2005). The micro-analytic description of turn-taking mechanisms is additionally refined with ethnographic background information, which helps to contextualize the subject matter of a particular

2. Activities "characterize the work that is achieved across a sequence or series of sequence as a unit or course of action – meaning by this a relatively sustained topically coherent and/or goal-coherent course of action" (Heritage and Sorjonen 1994: 4). Actions, on the other hand, are performed in a turn (i.e., they are utterance level).

talk and therefore makes the consultations more transparent to the reader (cf. Maynard 1989). This background information is also essential when describing and defining the office hour as a specific speech event in a university setting (see Chapter 2). Through the analysis of authentic data, this research seeks to demonstrate the applicability as well as the limitations of using a CA-informed approach for the study of academic interactions.

Data for this study were collected in the English department of two German universities. They include office hours from German and English-speaking faculty working in these departments. Office hour interactions were video-recorded, and the data were subsequently transcribed according to established conventions developed by researchers from the field of Conversation Analysis (see Chapter 3 and list of transcript notations for details). Excerpts of the transcripts are used throughout the analysis to visualize the discussion and support its line of argumentation.

Interest in office hour consultations as an object of linguistic investigation within the field of academic discourse is important both from a theoretical as well as applied research perspective. A large body of research has investigated phenomena of talk in ordinary conversations, and increasingly the focus has been turned to the analysis of talk in institutional or organizational settings. This study contributes to the latter strand of research in that it shows how talk in office hours is organized and interactionally achieved to address student concerns. With the help of a fine-grained analysis, this study will enhance our understanding and appreciation of the particularities of office hour talk. Different conversational and academic activities will be analyzed to illustrate how the office hour talk resembles as well as differs from ordinary conversation. We will be able to learn more about structures of verbal interactions in an academic setting and see how this counseling practice operates within the context of a university. Thus, the study offers findings and discussion points in the areas of institutional talk as well as ‘talk-in-interaction’.

Contrary to many other studies of institutional talk, this work investigates the discourse of an *entire* speech event, rather than focusing on an individual sequence or a stretch of talk that is relevant to an office hour consultation (cf. Heritage and Maynard 2006a). Office hours are viewed as a self-contained unit of interaction, situated within a larger socio-historical and institutional framework of faculty – student contact in academia. Adopting a comprehensive perspective on office hour consultations requires to take the talk apart and show what and, more importantly, how things ‘get done’ at certain stages of the talk. Teachers and students deal with routine as well as special academic concerns that are subject to the constraints and contingencies of seeking help from the teacher in a face-to-face environment. A promising outcome of such a research endeavor is that

we have a 'bigger picture' of office hour discourse, one which reveals the internal workings of an important academic support service.

Previous research on academic discourse has criticized the paucity of studies into forms of academic talk, particularly in tertiary education (Mauranen 2001; Biber 2006). This is surprising insofar as the value of contact with faculty in different environments on campus has been widely acknowledged, especially by research done in the field of education and communication studies (Fusani 1994; Nadler and Nadler 2000). Not surprisingly, other types of consultations that are more commonly available to the public have attracted a good deal of research attention (e.g., the doctor – patient consultation, Heritage and Maynard 2006a). An investigation of this specific discourse genre will not only offer a detailed view of the interactional management of face-to-face consultations in academia, but it will also contribute findings toward the existing literature on the discourse of consultations. Such an analysis helps us to locate the office hour consultation within a larger context of counseling practices that professionals and clients conduct in different areas of human life.

Furthermore, this study attempts to show how significant this talk is to both faculty and students on an academic as well as interpersonal level. University students face many issues and questions concerning specialized knowledge, academic assignments, or study regulations. The fact that these issues can potentially cause trouble for learners in this community makes it necessary that a formal arrangement exists that allows students to address their concerns and receive information relevant to their academic life. Apart from seeking individual help, office hours also allow students to give teachers feedback on their courses and inform them about more personal issues which the students feel are relevant to their learning situation.

Teachers, on the other hand, not only fulfill their academic duty by offering time for consultations. Office hours also provide a more detailed insight into their students, including figuring out what type of learner they are and what motivates their visit. A more individual appreciation of students may influence teaching practices and the way professors and instructors interact with their students. Such a perspective is not easily available in other environments in this institution, but may only be gained when examining a more personal form of talk.

Finally, practical recommendations can be offered which help to improve student – teacher conduct and make academic consultations more successful. By their very nature, studies of written and spoken academic discourse have some practical relevance for the community and its members. Apart from the theoretical and methodological issues raised by the analysis, this book also offers some practical suggestions concerning participants' conduct in this setting. Even though these implications are only briefly touched upon at the end of this book,

the analysis itself provides useful information for those who regularly conduct as well as take part in office hours or similar consultation practices. University teachers, students, educators and academic experts can use this work as a resource to learn more about the interaction during office hours and to receive insights about its structural organization as well as the discourse perspectives and interactional goals of the participants.

At the university, office hour interactions constitute a specific type of talk which is distinct from other forms of academic talk. The talk produced during this encounter brings to light student concerns, which range from trivial matters to intricate problems. At the heart of these consultations lies the task of the teacher to deal with these concerns and to mediate between the academic demands students are faced with and their individual skills as learners and novices in the community. Students are exposed to a variety of spoken and written discourses, many of which are not properly introduced in teaching or are simply taken for granted on the basis of what students have learned at school. The talk during office hours also performs an important function in socializing students into the procedures, customs, and requirements of the academic community. This dual task, consisting of concrete problem-solving and general academic acculturation, is not always easy to manage for university teachers.

Socializing students into the norms and conventions of the academic community presupposes a reciprocal exchange which goes beyond a mere transfer of information and know-how. Even though the talk during a consultation is primarily goal-oriented, office hours are also an important arena for identity management practices ('expert' vs. 'novice'; cf. Marková and Foppa 1991) and underlying 'face concerns' (cf. Goffman 1967). The pursuit of any primary academic goal automatically has implications for the personal as well as public image of the parties involved (see, e.g., Duszak 1994; Sabee and Wilson 2005). Creating a productive atmosphere as well as managing rapport in office hours are especially affected by the interpersonal goals of the speakers and the interactional norms of this practice.

The perception of how these encounters proceed and even what they are about may differ depending on who is asked (see Boettcher and Meer 2000). Teachers and students often have very different expectations of what constitutes a productive consultation as well as what the outcome of it should be. Similarly, (lack of) prior experience with academic office hours and other consultation practices can influence participants' situated conduct. Several different factors shape one's discourse behavior in this context, producing office hour consultations that are dynamic and complex in nature.

The epigraph at the beginning of this book has already indicated the two-sided and potentially hybrid character of office hour discourse. There is a mixture

of serious academic business with a social and more personal level of talk, which may influence speakers' production as well as interpretation of their actions. Two important questions that arise from this quote are to what extent the professional and interpersonal side of office hour talk is visible in the data at hand, and, secondly, what this result can tell us about the quality and efficiency of an office hour practice in the (German) university system.

Most universities have different organizations for student – faculty talk outside of class, which makes it difficult to distinguish between them from a discourse perspective. So far, not many studies have made a systematic distinction between office hours and a similar type of academic consultation, viz. the counseling or advising session. In Germany, these consultations are two separate speech events at the university, both having their own functions and serving different students. Even though they share many organizational features and interactional practices, it is useful to draw a distinction between the two related forms of academic talk. The analytical focus in this book is based solely on office hours as a self-contained academic practice. In addition, a first attempt is made at comparing office hours with general academic counseling sessions, especially since previous research has looked more closely at the latter discourse type (see Chapter 2).

1.1 Office hour opening: A preview

The following transcript presents a short excerpt from an office hour interaction between an instructor and a male undergraduate student. The example seeks to introduce the reader to the microanalysis of office hour talk and raise questions concerning its interactional achievement, which will be taken up later on in the analysis. The example reproduces the beginning of an office hour consultation, lasting 34 seconds out of 8:35 minutes in total.

The context is as follows: The teacher is a male British English instructor who teaches language courses in the English department and offers counseling for students on study abroad programs in the United Kingdom. The student comes to his office hours because he wants to go abroad and work as an assistant teacher. This program is quite popular among German students who are studying English because it allows them to gain work experience as a teacher in an English-speaking school while participating in a foreign culture (see also the Appendix for the complete transcript):