



**INTERCOMMUNICATION 3**

Series Editors: Howard Giles & Cheris Kramarae

# Conversation: An Interdisciplinary Perspective

Edited by

Derek Roger and Peter Bull

14375



**MULTILINGUAL MATTERS LTD**

Clevedon • Philadelphia

## Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Conversation: an interdisciplinary perspective  
edited by Derek Roger and Peter Bull

p. cm. — (Intercommunication: 3)

1. Conversation. 2. Interpersonal communication.

I. Roger, Derek. II. Bull, Peter. III. Series:  
Intercommunication (Clevedon, Avon); 3.

P95.45C664 1988 88-2977

001.54'2--dc19 CIP

## British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Conversation: an interdisciplinary approach.

—(Intercommunication; 3)

1. Interpersonal relationships. Conversation.  
Psychosocial aspects.

I. Bull, Peter, 1949– II. Roger, Derek

III. Series

302.2'242

ISBN 0-905028-87-2

ISBN 0-905028-86-4 Pbk

## Multilingual Matters Ltd,

Bank House, 8a Hill Road,  
Clevedon, Avon BS21 7HH  
England

& 242 Cherry Street,  
Philadelphia, PA 19106-1906  
USA

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Index compiled by Meg Davies

Typeset by Editorial Enterprises, Devon

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Short Run Press, Exeter

# Preface

In April 1984, the editors of this book organised a conference at the University of York on Interdisciplinary Approaches to Interpersonal Communication. The conference was intended to bring together academics from diverse disciplines sharing a common interest in the study of conversation, and led to the formation of the interdisciplinary Communication Studies Group at the University of York.

Several of the chapters in this book are based on papers presented at the conference; there are also some invited contributions. The chapters are organised around five principal themes, namely, Concepts of Interpersonal Communication, Methods of Observation, Transcription Procedures, Data Analysis, and Research Applications. These themes represent particular issues which must be addressed by any researcher working on conversation and are prefaced by linking sections written by the editors, which highlight the topic of each section and evaluate the different approaches represented by the individual chapters.

In this way, the book is intended to provide an integrated and structured approach to the study of conversation. It should fill an obvious gap in the available literature, since it focuses explicitly on the ways in which interpersonal communication is investigated by researchers from different academic disciplines.

# Acknowledgements

The Conference on Interdisciplinary Approaches to Interpersonal Communication, from which several of the chapters in this book were derived, was supported in part by financial contributions from the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences at the University of York and the Social Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society.

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# **SECTION 1:**

## **Concepts of interpersonal communication**

### **Introduction**

Researchers from different academic disciplines approach the study of interpersonal communication from widely differing theoretical perspectives. In this context, a major distinction can be drawn between the approach traditionally used by psychologists, which relies heavily on experimentation and quantitative techniques, and research which is based on naturally occurring situations, such as conversation analysis. This section contains two chapters which represent these contrasting theoretical positions: Bull & Roger present a psychological approach to the study of communication; and John Heritage reviews current trends in work on conversation analysis.

The final chapter of this section is written by Robert Hopper. Hopper describes his own field of research as 'speech communication', which in the United States is dedicated broadly to improving communication skills and the study of communicative competence. In this chapter Hopper, who is one of the few scholars to have used the techniques of both experimental and conversation-analytic research, attempts to make a direct comparison between the two approaches; his chapter has consequently been written with reference to the remaining sections of the book.

### **The experimental approach**

In Chapter 1, Bull & Roger outline the use of traditional psychological techniques in the study of interpersonal communication. The most important feature of this approach is a belief in the value of the experimental

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method, which in itself represents the distinctive theoretical perspective of psychology. The experimental method has a number of characteristic features, which are discussed below.

The first of these is that psychological research on communication is typically conducted in a laboratory setting, where the control and manipulation of variables can be systematically implemented. Associated with this is a belief in the importance of quantification and the value of inferential statistics for the analysis of the data. Hence, a second important feature of the psychological approach is that the significance of a particular behaviour rests on a statistical criterion, i.e. whether it occurs at a level which is significantly above what would be expected by chance.

A major implication of a quantitative approach to the study of communication is the need for categorisation. If the experimenter wishes to compare communication under different experimental conditions, he needs to establish independent categories into which different communicative events can be classified. Hence, another feature of the psychological approach to communication research has been a preoccupation with the development of scoring systems.

The belief in the experimental method has important consequences not only for the way in which psychologists carry out research but also for the particular aspects of communication which they choose to study. For example, there is an extensive research literature in experimental social psychology concerned with the effects of medium of communication on social interaction; an example of this is given in Section 5 in Derek Rutter's chapter on 'cuelessness and social interaction: an examination of teaching by telephone' (Chapter 13). This is the kind of topic which readily lends itself to psychological techniques of investigation, since it is relatively easy to compare communication under a number of different experimental conditions (face to face, over the telephone, or over a closed-circuit television link). Indeed, it might be argued that the popularity of this topic in recent years with social psychologists stems at least in part from its accessibility to traditional psychological techniques of investigation.

Another example of a traditional experimental approach to studying conversation is to be found in Section 2, Chapter 4 by Derek Roger. In the first experiment discussed in this chapter, the role of simultaneous speech in conversation was investigated by initially classifying all simultaneous speech as either interruptive or non-interruptive. The rate of occurrence of these events was then compared in three different conditions in which dominance predispositions of the dyadic partners had been manipulated on the basis of a prior administration of a personality questionnaire. In this

way, the use of experimental techniques made it possible to test predictions about the relationship between personality characteristics and interruptions.

One feature common to both of these examples is that they attempt to relate aspects of communication to features that are external to the communicative context: medium of communication in the case of the studies by Rutter, and personality in the case of the experiments by Roger. Duncan (1969) has called this the 'external variable' approach, and he maintains that this is typical of work carried out using traditional psychological techniques. Duncan contrasts this with what he calls the 'structural' approach, where behaviour is analysed in terms of its sequential and hierarchical organisation. A good example of a structural approach is conversation analysis, which is discussed below.

## Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis (CA) has developed over the past 15 years within the framework of ethnomethodology. The term 'ethnomethodology' was coined by Garfinkel (1974). In combining the words 'ethno' and 'methodology', Garfinkel was influenced by the use of such terms as 'ethnobotany' and 'ethnomedicine' to refer to folk systems of botanical and medical analysis. What is proposed is that any competent member of society (including the professional social scientist) is equipped with a methodology for analysing social phenomena; the term 'ethnomethodology' thus refers to the study of the ways in which everyday common-sense activities are analysed by participants, and of the ways in which these analyses are incorporated into courses of action. The most prominent development within ethnomethodology is undoubtedly that which has become known as conversation analysis, which examines the procedures used in the production of ordinary conversation. The influence of conversation analysis is being increasingly felt in disciplines outside sociology, notably psychology, linguistics and anthropology.

In Chapter 2, Heritage discusses the development of conversation analysis in relation to three fundamental assumptions made by exponents of this approach. The first of these is that all conversations are structurally organised according to certain social conventions; this means that social action and interaction can be studied independently of the psychological or other characteristics of the particular participants involved. The second assumption is that contributions to interaction are both 'context-shaped'

and 'context-renewing'. Contributions are said to be context-shaped in the sense that they cannot be fully understood without reference to the context in which they occur, especially the immediately preceding conversation. Since each utterance forms the immediate context for the conversation that follows it, each contribution is also said to be context-renewing. As a consequence of these two assumptions, Heritage argues that every detail of the conversation is potentially significant, and hence cannot be dismissed 'a priori as disorderly, accidental or irrelevant'.

Heritage then reviews recent developments in conversation analysis under five main headings: preference organisation, topic organisation, the use of non- or quasi-lexical speech objects, the integration of vocal and non-vocal activities and 'institutional interaction'. Preference organisation refers to the seeking or avoidance of alternative courses of action. For a variety of 'first' actions (e.g. invitations, offers and requests), there are 'second' actions (e.g. refusals, rejections and denials) which can be seen as 'dispreferred': these are routinely avoided, withheld or delayed in many different social contexts. The term 'topic organisation' is to some extent self-explanatory, referring to the initiation, maintenance and change of topic in conversation.

Heritage regards these two themes as significant guidelines for the organisation of conversation-analysis research. Of the remaining three topics, under non- or quasi-lexical speech objects he discusses the organisation of laughter and the use of what he calls 'response tokens' (e.g. 'mm hm', 'uh huh', 'yes', 'oh', etc.). The integration of vocal with non-vocal activities has been studied particularly with regard to the role of non-vocal cues (such as gaze) in the management of turn-taking. Finally, Heritage discusses the application of conversation-analysis techniques to the study of social interaction in different institutional settings, such as law courts, schools, and medical consultations.

## **A comparison of conversation analysis and the experimental approach**

Whereas conversation analysis is based on a number of assumptions about communication, psychologists typically start from a belief in the importance of experimentation and quantification, that it is only through the systematic control and manipulation of variables that a rigorous body of scientific knowledge can be established. Thus, research carried out using

traditional psychological techniques differs from conversation analysis in a number of important respects.

The first of these is that the conversations studied by psychologists are typically arranged to take place in a laboratory, where the control and manipulation of variables can be systematically implemented. In contrast, in conversation analysis every detail of interaction is regarded as potentially significant; hence, conversation analysts avoid manipulating variables and prefer to make their observations on the basis of naturally occurring situations. Indeed, a sceptic might say that conversation analysts will use any situation as a source of data with the exception only of experiments which have been carried out in social psychology laboratories! The advantages and disadvantages of different research settings are discussed in detail in the Introduction to Section 2.

A second feature of the experimental approach is a belief in the importance of quantification and the value of inferential statistics for the analysis of the data. By contrast, the approach in conversation analysis is essentially descriptive and qualitative. For example, in Section 2, Chapter 5, Paul Drew discusses examples of the way in which people respond to enquiries; each case is discussed individually and there is no attempt at any form of statistical analysis. In Section 4, Chapter 11, Tony Wootton presents a theoretical justification for why conversation analysts prefer to use this kind of qualitative approach.

A major implication of a quantitative approach to the study of communication is the need for categorisation. If the experimenter wishes to compare communication under different experimental conditions he needs to establish independent categories into which different communicative events can be classified. Hence, a third distinguishing feature of the psychological approach has been a preoccupation with the development of scoring systems; a number of such systems are discussed by Peter Bull in Chapter 7, which appears in Section 3.

A good illustration of the way in which experimental and conversation analytic approaches to transcription differ is to be found in the study of 'back-channels'. Yngve (1970) introduced this term to refer to brief utterances (such as 'mmm', 'uh huh', 'yes', etc.) which are used to signal to the speaker the continued interest and attention of the listener. Duncan (1972) identified five forms of back-channel — sentence completions, requests for clarification, brief phrases such as 'uh huh' and 'right', and head nods and head shakes. Duncan (1969), although critical of what he calls 'external variable' approaches, none the less makes extensive use of this classification of back channels as the basis for subsequent quantitative

analysis (see Duncan & Fiske, 1977). Heritage, in Chapter 2, takes issue with the conventional treatment of 'back-channels' as signals of continued attention, arguing that the role of what he calls 'response tokens' has been substantially underestimated by the use of this classification. Response tokens, Heritage maintains, may serve a whole variety of communicative functions, such as indicating a desire to shift topic (Jefferson, 1981b), acknowledging receipt of information (Heritage, 1984) or to promote the telling of 'news' (Jefferson, 1981a).

This disagreement over the functions of back-channels can be seen as stemming at least in part from differences in methodology. Psychologists studying communication typically classify events into discrete categories in order to provide a sufficient number of observations for reliable statistical analysis. Researchers working in the framework of conversation analysis are certainly not opposed to categorisation as such; however, since this approach is essentially descriptive and qualitative, there is not the same constraint of having to provide sufficient cell frequencies for the use of inferential statistics.

Both these approaches suffer from different kinds of problem. The categories used by psychologists in order to satisfy the requirements of particular statistical tests are often heterogeneous, lumping together a variety of different behaviours under the same label, which may lead to an oversimplified version of communication (as Heritage is clearly arguing in the case of back-channels). In the same way, certain events may perform different functions in different contexts. If the researcher is concerned solely with the frequency with which they occur, their functional significance may not be demonstrated by an overall statistical analysis. However, without any form of quantification, the interpretation put forward may rest on single idiosyncratic examples whose functional significance is clear but whose occurrence is rare.

In this sense, exponents of both approaches can be seen as having something to learn from each other, psychologists in refining the sensitivity of their classification systems, conversation analysts in avoiding the risks of generalising too much from single instances without sufficient justification for doing so. In this context, it is interesting that a recent paper (Heritage & Greatbatch, 1986) comprises an extensive quantitative analysis of the rhetorical formats identified by Atkinson (1984) in evoking applause during political speeches. The analysis is based on descriptive rather than inferential statistics; none the less it marks a significant shift from conventional conversation analysis.

In making these distinctions between conversation analysis and social psychology we are not suggesting that the two approaches are irreconcilable. Indeed, the editors' view (expressed both here and in subsequent chapters) is one of cautious optimism that practitioners of both conversation analysis and social psychology can learn a great deal from each other. However, as can be seen from Chapter 3, not everyone shares this cautious optimism. Robert Hopper argues that one must 'take sides'; his choice — and, by implication, the position taken up in his chapter — is clearly that of conversation analysis.

In making this comparison between conversation analysis and social psychology, Hopper tends, in the editors' view, to exaggerate their differences. He argues that the key distinction between them is that of repeated listening. Whereas conversation analysts continually re-examine their transcripts and their recordings, Hopper maintains that social psychologists, once they have coded conversations into appropriate categories, from then on proceed to ignore the recordings on which their codings have been based. In the editors' view, Hopper's comparison does not adequately reflect the diversity of approaches within social psychology itself. As one of the editors argues in a subsequent chapter (Chapter 7), the category systems used by social psychologists have been developed and refined over time: through repeated examination of transcripts and recordings (in other words, through repeated listening) the category systems become progressively more detailed and sophisticated. In this sense, the two approaches arguably have far more in common than Hopper acknowledges, in that they are both trying to develop adequate modes of description, which are progressively refined through repeated listening and analysis.

Whereas conversation analysis is based on a number of assumptions about communication, psychologists typically proceed from a belief in the value of a particular method. This in turn determines the way in which psychologists study communication, with a heavy reliance on laboratory-based experimentation, quantification and categorisation. By contrast, conversation analysts typically prefer to study naturally occurring situations, using qualitative methods of analysis. However, conversation analysis could benefit from the rigours of quantification and inferential statistics to avoid the risks of generalising too much from single examples, while psychologists could benefit from the rigours of close textual analysis in refining the sensitivity of their classification systems. It is the editors' contention that these different approaches are not necessarily incompatible; open-mindedness could be to the advantage of all!

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# 1 The social psychological approach to interpersonal communication

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## Introduction

The belief in the value of the experimental method is in itself the distinctive theoretical perspective of psychology, and this approach has characterised much of the work on interpersonal communication carried out by social psychologists. A typical psychological experiment comprises independent and dependent variables. The independent variables are those which are experimentally manipulated to produce two or more conditions, e.g. high versus low scorers on personality questionnaires, or male and female subjects. The effects of these manipulations are then observed on one or more dependent variables, such as interruption rate or speech hesitations.

Social psychological research on interpersonal communication is frequently conducted in a laboratory setting, where the control and manipulation of independent variables can be systematically implemented. Associated with this is a belief in the importance of quantification and the value of inferential statistics for the analysis of the data. Hence, another important feature of the psychological approach is that the significance of a particular behaviour rests on a statistical criterion, i.e. whether it occurs at a level which is significantly above what would be expected by chance.

A major implication of a quantitative approach to the study of