Research Methods: Conversation Analysis

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Abstract

Conversation Analysis Conversation Analysis (CA) is an interdisciplinary, inductive approach to studying talk and interaction 'in the wild' and in situations where the formal parameters, theories and models for interaction are unknown, premature, or where theories are currently undergoing revision. This chapter provides an overview of CA's research methods, materials, and standards of evidence, and provides the reader with key reference points for exploring current debates in the field.

This section introduces Conversation Analysis (CA) as a method of gathering data involving naturalistic conversational interaction, analyzing it systematically, and reporting on features of its structural organization. There are several recent primers (Heath, Hindmarsh, & Luff, 2010; Schegloff, 2007b; Sidnell, 2011) and a handbook dealing with current issues in CA (Sidnell & Stivers, 2012). This section will provide an overview of both canonical and more recent research, highlighting the aspects of CA and its background that may be unfamiliar to those not using it in their own research. CA is distinctive because it is not only a method for analysis, it also constitutes an active sub-discipline within many research areas that involve the empirical study of human interaction. CA has its own standards of evidence, some unusual collaborative research practices, and a rich literature spanning sociology, linguistics, anthropology, psychology, and communications. The outline of CA provided here should be used as a guide to contextualize the kinds of claims, arguments, and evidence readers may encounter in the CA literature. First, a straight forward description of how CA is used and what its key findings look like will provide enough background to introduce a practical example. Secondly, transcription and analysis of a fragment of video data will demonstrate the process of applying CA, along with some open-ended suggestions as to how that analysis might offer evidence for a research argument or hypothesis. Finally, the latter half of this section will provide a snapshot of current issues in CA and how these relate to its development both as a methodology and as a growing field of study. Because CA has not developed from within a home discipline as such, it is widely dispersed between many fields so it is likely that any researcher interested in spoken discourse will find a wealth of CA research within their area of specialism. The intention here is to encourage researchers to draw on core CA findings in their work, to find the CA research and researchers in their own field, and to learn to work with interaction data using these methods

So what is CA useful for? What kinds of questions can one ask with it? And what kinds of answers can be gleaned at different points in the research cycle? CA is especially useful for empirical research on interaction in naturalistic settings where established theories may be lacking or under revision. This is

because CA looks for detailed qualitative evidence of how participants work to organize their interactions endogenously within each specific situation. CA relies on a recorded event, utterance or gesture as analytic evidence only when the participants demonstrably use that event to organize their subsequent actions. On the one hand, this forces analysts to limit the generality of the questions they can ask and the claims they can make. For example, studies of interaction in doctor's offices, courtrooms, or at dinner parties tend to ask questions about how a specific action or utterance is produced in a particular social situation by specific participants. On the other hand, CA's evidential constraints have maintained it as a methodologically coherent field. By focusing analysis on the methods and events demonstrably used by participants to make sense of their own interactions, CA studies tend to be readily comparable with one another. Although individual studies are situationally specific, analysts can develop and test general findings cumulatively working in diverse settings and fields. Over the last 40 years the most robust and broadly tested finding that has provided a basis for many subsequent studies is the turn-taking system described by Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson (1974). Without the extended discussion these warrant, the rules of the turn-taking system can be summarized briefly to explain what kind of answers CA can offer.

1. For any turn at talk, at the first possible completion,

    a. current speaker may select next,

    b. next speaker may self-select,

    c. current speaker may continue.

2. If 1c occurs, the rules are re-applied at the next possible completion.

This describes the normative patterns observed in natural conversational turn-taking across contexts in the first decade of CA research. As a finding it provides a framework for further exploratory work in CA, and a strong empirical basis for theory formation and experimentation. As a research outcome, this exemplifies how CA can produce detailed, systematic descriptions from cumulative observations.

Alongside these longer-term results, the CA research cycle involves structured observation throughout the process of data gathering, presentation, and collaborative analysis of data within the scope of a single study. Current best practice for CA data gathering involve examining video of an interactional situation from multiple angles where all participants' gaze directions, gestures, body orientation, and talk are - ideally - available for analysis. Within relevant practical, and ethical constraints, it is useful to record whatever participants evidently pay attention to within the setting including objects, tools, documents, and screen captures from any smartphones or computers they may be using. Interaction mediated via text, audio, and video also constitutes viable data. However for a sequential analysis CA researchers should be aware that their analysis must take into account the same evidential and temporal contingencies and constraints as participants themselves. For example, phone calls provide ideal data for CA studies because participants and researchers alike can analyse the same audio events in the same order. In face-to-face interactions, however, analysts must be careful not to make assumptions about anything that occurs outside the frame of the video. In either case, analysts must recognize that since participants cannot pause, rewind or replay a live interaction, they should not base their analysis on analyst-oriented methods of accessing and processing the video data. Because a CA study may focus on very intricate details, a few seconds of a recording can yield data for a 'single case analysis', contributing to or questioning cumulative findings. Researchers also re-analyse data from previous studies, use examples from audiovisual corpora and data fragments from the CA literature, often as a foil for discussion.

Transcription is central to CA research as it involves repeatedly reviewing the data to build up an initial description that can be checked by others from an early stage. Variations on Gail Jefferson's transcription conventions[1] provide a level of detail that can be adjusted for the specific phenomena in question. Verbal interaction is typed out turn-by-turn, then symbols are added and arranged spatially to indicate temporal and production features of talk. For example, extract 1 depicts Paul and Anne's talk as their teacher sings a count of eight during a partner dance class. Links to online data are also provided where possible.

Extract 1 CADANCE:ex.1

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1   Paul:  N↑o⌈t ba::d, >°°not ba:d.°°<⌉
2   Anne:     ⌊ It's like be⌈ing GENuin⌋ely >able °to do it?°<⌉
3   Tchr:               ⌊      F   I   v   e      ⌋, (.)
4          s⌈ix? ( . ) ⌉ ↓five
5   Paul:   ⌊Ye::⌈p.   ⌋
6   Anne:        ⌊·hh ⌈aHhh ·Hhh
7   Tchr:            ⌊six se::ven eight?
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Video: http://bit.ly/CADA_SP01

Reading while listening to the audio should show how Jefferson's conventions are roughly intuitive : left and right braces show points of overlap, carats show talk speeding up, while colons indicate sound stretches. Because these conventions compromise between precision, detail, and readability there are also some inevitable ambiguities, for example punctuation indicates intonation rather than grammar, and turn-initial capitals mark transcriber hearings of turn-beginnings, but elsewhere they indicate loud talk. The purpose, however, is not analysis of the transcript. Rather transcripts provide a useful sketch to aid in more formal description, and a convenient way for analysts to refer to specific moments of the original video when pointing out and describing observable phenomena for instant peer review during a CA data session presentation.

In a data session, a researcher presents new data and transcripts for repeated viewings and extended analytical discussion amongst a small group of colleagues. Since CA relies on the linguistic and interactional aptitude of the analyst as an inductive guide for recognizing and collecting examples of naturally occuring patterns in interaction, regular data sessions provide an essential opportunity to revise transcripts and candidate analyses amongst peers. Details of the present data are discussed in relation to cumulative findings, and the implications of, or alternatives to, each analysis are proposed and challenged. Ideally, data sessions are both pedagogical and deliberative, where experienced and student analysts refine their observations and descriptions by picking out specific fragments of data, and contextualizing findings within the literature. Over time, researchers build 'collections' of data fragments such as extract 1, which forms part of a collection of 'count-ins', where people count up or down to coordinate joint actions—in this case during a partner dance class. A rough collection is a starting point for identifying a distinct social practice as a specifiable analytic phenomenon. Analysis then refines a collection in terms of how participants orient to the sequential organization of an action, and to its lexical, grammatical, and other structural features of composition and design (Schegloff, 1993, p. 121). For example, before the video clip of extract 1 starts, Paul and Anne have been evaluating their previous attempt at a dance move. The teacher's count starts with a loud, stretched "FIve", a short pause then a rising "six?", before both pitch and count re-sets to five and moves back up to a final, rising "eight?". At the onset of the

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[1]See the basic transcription conventions on Prof. Charles Antaki's CA tutorial website: http://ca-tutorials.lboro.ac.uk/notation.htm or the comprehensive account in Atkinson & Heritage (1984, pp. ix–xvi).
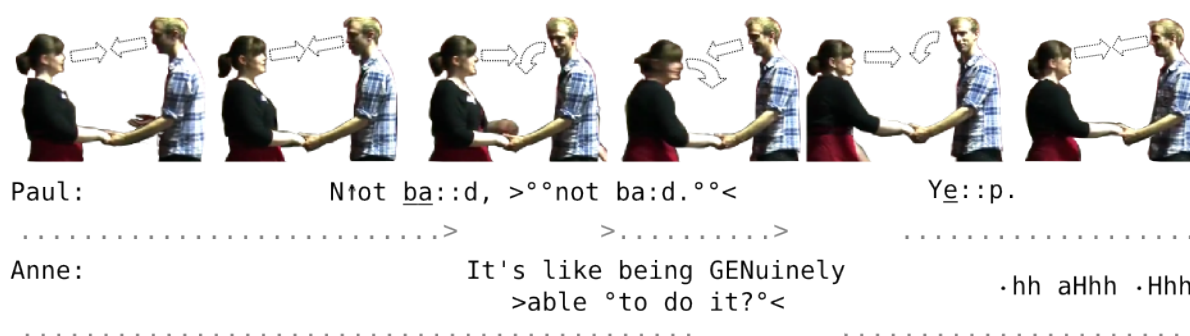
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Teacher: FIve, (.) six? (.) ↓five six se::ven eight?
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Paul:                   N↑ot ba::d, >°°not ba:d.°°<          Ye::p.
        .............................>        >..........>   .........................
Anne:                          It's like being GENuinely
                               >able °to do it?°<                   ·hh aHhh ·Hhh
        ............................................        .....................
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Figure 1: Paul and Anne's pattern of gaze orientation in extract 1

count, Paul's turns his head toward the teacher's and back to Anne, hushing his second "°°not bad°°". Anne also speeds up and softens her talk, turning her head towards the teachers then back to Paul as the count reaches its first "six". Paul's minimal "Ye::p." receipts Anne's assessment just as he briefly turns his head away from her again. Her laugh closes the sequence, and they re-establish mutual gaze as the count enters its final phase.

Forgoing more detailed description of the broader sequential context around Extract 1, this fragment provides a simple example of how talk-in-interaction can be presented. The embodied turn (Nevile, 2015) in the CA literature has led researchers to add more detail to transcripts of talk, often using illustrations (Laurier, 2014) to describe gesture and gaze direction as well as diagrammatic representations of, for example pitch tracks and phonological details. Figure 1 illustrates the temporal structure of talk and patterns of other-directed mutual gaze just before Paul and Anne start dancing.

In terms of cumulative CA findings, these details could be analysed alongside generalized CA work on how assessments implicate sequence closure in everyday conversation, and how patterns of mutual gaze work towards topic, focus, and activity shifts (Heath, 1986, pp. 128–148; Mondada, 2006; Rossano, 2012, pp. 227–308). In a more applied project, the way the dancers' turns at talk and gaze shifts match the phase structure of the teacher's count could be analysed in relation to ongoing research into how bodily-vocal group activities are organized in dance instruction (Keevallik, 2014). This fragment may be added to multiple collections including embodied closings' orcounting' as well as specialized sub-collections such as dance closings' andcount-ins'. CA findings are thus developed incrementally by documenting the detail of people's interactional practices in specific settings while contributing to a general understanding of everyday talk-in-interaction. This body of work in CA constitutes a super-set of clearly described copresent interactional practices in clearly recognizable ways and provides a baseline for researchers studying interaction in more specialized settings where institutional or practical contingencies may constrain everyday interactional practices such as in courtroom interaction, doctor-patient interactions or service encounters (Drew & Heritage, 1992) Identifying and fully describing a new phenomenon in relation to the existing body of CA work on everyday talk these terms may therefore require collection of hundreds of cases, but a single case analysis can still test an established finding, both within CA or in another field by demonstrating variations in how a particular interactional practice is conducted in a specific context.

CA can also be used in mixed-methods research and is especially useful in theory formation, experimental design, and evaluation processes. CA researchers may discover a systematic variation in patterns of situated action, sometimes as simple as an issue of lexical choice. For example, Heritage, Robinson, Elliott, Beckett, & Wilkes (2007) observed that doctors vary the ways they ask about patients' unmet

concerns during consultations. Their experiment asked doctors to request whether their patients had "anything else" or "something else" to talk about, and discovered that 78% fewer unmet concerns were reported in the latter condition. In this way CA's focus on interactional practices in natural settings provides systematic observations that can help design ecologically sound experimental variables and guide the formulation of falsifiable theories (Robinson & Heritage, 2014). In conjunction with more conventional social science methods, CA is useful in similar ways when it foregrounds the participants' orientations to the demand characteristics of the research setting itself. For example, CA studies of interviewing practices reveal how participants treat interviews as interactional situations (Potter & Hepburn, 2012), and these studies can contribute to methodological developments in survey research that are starting to incorporate the pragmatics of talk and the practicalities of survey technologies into a multi-method approach that takes into account an interactional analysis of the survey-taking procedure (Conrad, Schober, & Schwarz, 2013). Similarly, studies of methods that reply primarily on introspective self-report (Wooffitt & Holt, 2011) or CA's own practices of video recording (Hazel, 2015) are opening up new opportunities to address long-standing theoretical issues in psychology, sociology and linguistics as practical, observable issues that are observably managed via the endogenous organization of situated interaction. CA's early focus on talk-in-interaction has both influenced and drawn on the interactional respecification of core questions in linguistics and pragmatics (Levinson, 1983; Ochs, Schegloff, & Thompson, 1996), and psychology (Edwards & Potter, 2001; Tileagă & Stokoe, 2015), along with a wider shift in the social sciences towards posing empirical questions in terms of practical action (Button, 1991; Lynch, 1997). To use CA within a broader scientific context, however, it is necessary to clarify how its findings are primarily inductive and descriptive rather than predictive or prescriptive, and how CA must first be combined with experimental and deductive methods in order to develop and test formal hypotheses (Lynch, 2000, p. 522).

Recent studies in this vein based on corpus and experimental data use CA's turn-taking system as an observationally grounded model for exploring psycholinguistic phenomena such as turn-projection in relation to cognition (De Ruiter, Mitterer, & Enfield, 2006; Levinson & Torreira, 2015). These studies address phenomena that are central to neighbouring fields and have also led to significant new research that tests CA's most established findings in large scale cross-linguistic studies using quantitative methods (Kendrick, 2015; Stivers et al., 2009). Although the formal coding of interaction data is only recently becoming an established part of the CA literature (Schegloff, 1993; Stivers, 2015), it opens up opportunities for applying CA findings in research areas that primarily use hypothetico-deductive models. For instance, the rich tradition of detailed, descriptive CA work on interaction in healthcare (Heritage & Maynard, 2006) is having an impact in parts of the medical literature where explanatory conventions and standards of clinical evidence are typified by the randomized controlled trial (Robinson & Heritage, 2014), and this impact has been achieved over decades of work and through careful use of basic CA in specific phases of the research process (Heritage et al., 2007). Most applied uses of CA (Antaki, 2011), however take an exploratory approach, where the qualitative, ethnomethodological focus on participants' orientations is used to ask more fundamental questions that respecify the phenomena and methods of established theory, research, and practices (Garfinkel, 1967). For example, the earliest basic research in CA used recordings of telephone calls to explore how episodes of talk were opened and closed. As many of these recordings included calls to police lines or other services, these studies opened up new questions about how 'institutional talk' is organized in relation to more everyday talk. This program of research has since inspired a shift towards CA data and methods for the sociological study of how institutions such as the police, the courts and the medical profession are understood and oriented to in interaction (Drew & Heritage, 1992). Contemporary applications of CA have also built on these findings to intervene in service delivery and training (Hepburn, Wilkinson, & Butler, 2014; Stokoe, 2014). Similarly, early studies of interaction in specialized settings contributed to the use of CA to respecify the study of practices with large, theory-oriented literatures such as education and language learning (Seedhouse, 2005), court-

room interaction (Drew & Atkinson, 1979), and psychotherapy (Peräkylä, Antaki, Vehviläinen, & Leudar, 2008) from an interactional standpoint.

These studies also feed cumulative, descriptive findings back to 'basic CA', and can even challenge CA's basic assumptions and methods. For example, classic studies of interaction and communication impairments (Goodwin, 1995) built on pioneering work in CA focused on gesture, gaze, and bodily participation in talk (Goodwin, 1979). This work has not only informed a huge proliferation of CA research and applications in speech and language therapy (Wilkinson, 2014), it has also opened up new methodological challenges for CA. The 'embodied turn' in interaction analysis (Nevile, 2015) has emphasized the many interconnected systems involved in co-producing the organization of turns at talk (Rossano, 2012), contributing to calls for more a detailed understanding of CA's treatment of 'turns' as analytically viable units in face-to-face interaction (Ford, Fox, & Thompson, 2013). This points to some of the key challenges facing CA in building and expanding on its established body of research. The expansion of CA's focus from talk-in-interaction to the analysis of many more combinations of interactional resources threatens the coherence of its cumulative findings and methods. CA's primary focus on talk was initially a matter of convenience: of having access to data from telephone calls. Much of the more recent research that draws on CA refers to itself instead as 'qualitative video analysis' of 'embodied interaction' (Heath et al., 2010) to signal a move away from 'just talk'. This multimodal development in CA has been very influential in exploring workplace settings, and how peoples interactions can reveal their methods for making sense of complex technologies and technologically mediated environments (Heath & Luff, 2000). Studies in this vein emphasize the interactional organization of a far broader range of communicative resources including gesture, gaze, and body orientation, and incorporate broader spatial relationships and material objects (Haddington, Mondada, & Nevile, 2013) into the analysis. On the one hand, this achieves far greater levels of detailed description. On the other, the multifariousness of these systems makes cumulative, systemic findings far more challenging as an immediate analytic goal.

Because CA's detailed descriptions of the organization of everyday talk are becoming increasingly established as reliable research findings, they provide a cumulative basis for various forms of abstraction. This is both promising, and a significant challenge for future CA research. Long-standing descriptions such as the turn-taking system can underpin formal coding schemes (Stivers, 2015) and using these data for hypothesis formation and deductive analysis can provide experimental evidence that may expand the field. However, this approach may also underplay the relevance and detail of single cases, and more generally elide CA's traditional role as a takl-centric approach to the ethnomethodological respecification of theoretical questions in interaction research (Steensig & Heinemann, 2015). Even within CA's inductive, qualitative traditions, a highly influential program of CA work on 'epistemics' (Heritage, 2012a) is leading a new approach to long-held questions about how social actions are formulated and recognized (Levinson, 2012), and how asymmetries of mutual knowledge are managed in interaction (Stivers, Mondada, & Steensig, 2011). CA research into epistemics approaches relatively abstract issues of knowledge and information in terms of CA's relatively concrete descriptions of how participants deal with the practical organization of everyday talk (Heritage, 2012b). While this may facilitate CA's contribution to the larger body of research in psycholinguistics that addresses questions of shared knowledge or "common ground" as experimentally testable cognitive phenomena (Clark & Brennan, 1991), epistemics may also yield an overly abstract explanation for events that would otherwise prompt further detailed analysis (Drew, 2012). These methodological questions and challenges arise from the many new opportunities that have arisen in the last few decades of CA research to generate hypothetical abstractions based on CA's technical findings. These include many new ways to use CA to pursue research questions that are more central within CA's conventional host disciplines of sociology, psychology, and linguistics. For example, recent CA research on member categorisation analysis (Fitzgerald & Housley, 2015; Stokoe, 2012) addresses issues of broad sociological interest such as gender (Speer & Stokoe, 2009), race (Whitehead & Lerner,

2009), and the family by analyzing how participants themselves use and make an issue of these categories in everyday interaction, while being careful not to simply ascribe analyst-oriented meanings to these categories based on their apparent relation to research topics in teh social sciences (Schegloff, 2007a).

Long-standing tensions between attention to technical, qualitative detail and analytic abstraction have always been central to CA's development. These tensions have remained apparent within CA because of its success in maintaining a balance and continuing to do both. The ongoing methodological debates about the problems and opportunities of coding and quantification in CA (Schegloff, 1993; Stivers, 2015), and the threat of schism between CA and less talk-centric ethnomethodological approaches are a sign of a healthy field, and point to the growing scope, scale, and maturity of CA and its core methods and findings.

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