

Methods for Studying Discourse Process: Conversation Analysis

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2015

To appear as: Albert, S., Brown-Schmidt, S., Jones, M. Kaakinen, J., Kurby, C., & Schober, M. (In press), Methods for studying discourse processes State of the art and challenges. In M. Schober, D. N. Rapp & A. M. Britt (Eds.), *The Handbook of Discourse Processes*, 2nd ed. London: Taylor and Francis.

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, analysing it systematically, and reporting on features of its structural organisation. 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 are most specific to it, and 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 contextualise 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 a 'home discipline' as such, it is widely dispersed and consequently 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 organise their interactions sequentially in each specific situation. CA relies on a recorded event, utterance or gesture as analytic evidence only when the participants demonstrably use that event to organise 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 led to 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 on which much latter CA research has been based 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 summarised 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 for 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 involves video of an interactional situation from multiple angles where all participants' gaze direction, gestures, body orientation, and talk are - ideally - available for analysis. Within relevant practical, social, and ethical constraints, it is useful to record whatever participants evidently pay attention to within the setting including objects, tools, documents, computer, phone, and screen captures. Interaction mediated via text, audio, and video also constitutes viable data, however for a sequential analysis, participants and CA researchers should be able to access the same evidential and temporal contingencies and constraints. 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. 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 conventions¹ provide a level of detail that can be adjusted for the specific phenomena in question. Verbal

¹See the basic transcription conventions on Prof. Charles Antaki's CA tutorial website: <http://homepages.lboro.ac.uk/~ssca1/notation.htm> or the comprehensive account in Atkinson & Heritage (1984, pp. ix-xvi).

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

1 Paul: Ntoft ba::d, >°°not ba:d.°°<1
2 Anne: L It's like be'ing GENUinJely >able °to do it?°<1
3 Tchr: L F I v e J, (.)
4 s'ix? (.) 1 ↓five
5 Paul: LYe::'p. J
6 Anne: L·hh 'aHhh ·Hhh
7 Tchr: Lsix se::ven eight?

Video: http://bit.ly/candance_eg1

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 in a 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 heuristic instrument, 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 contextualise findings within the literature. Over time, researchers build 'collections' of data fragments such as extract 1: part of a collection of 'countings', where people count up or down to coordinate joint actions. 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 organisation of an action, and to its lexical, grammatical, and/or embodied 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 count, Paul's turns his head to the teachers 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 on the one hand, and the broader sequential context on the other, this fragment provides a simple example of how such data can be presented. The embodied turn (Neville,

Teacher: FIVE, (.) six? (.) ↓five six se::ven eight?

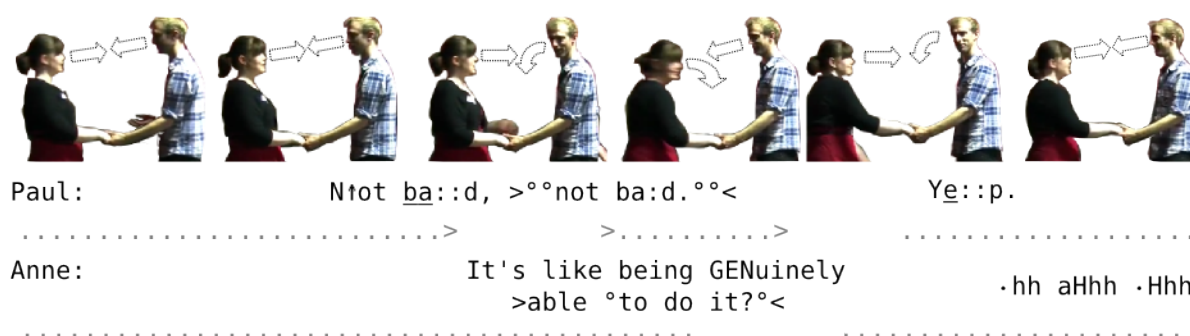


Figure 1: Paul and Anne's pattern of gaze orientation in extract 1

2015) in the CA literature has led researchers to add more detail to transcripts of talk, 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 generalised 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; F. 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 organised in dance instruction (Keevallik, 2014). This fragment may be added to multiple collections including 'embodied closings' or 'countings' as well as specialised sub-collections such as 'dance closings' and 'count-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 super-set of copresent interactional practices provides a normative basis for researchers studying specialised settings where institutional or practical constraints may constrain interactional practices (Drew & Heritage, 1992) Identifying and fully describing a new phenomenon in these terms may therefore require collection of hundreds of cases, but a single case analysis can still test, discuss, or suggest a finding by demonstrating its use in a specific context.

CA can also be used in mixed-methods research, especially in theory formation, experimental design, and evaluation processes. CA researchers may discover a systematic variation in participants' 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' interactional uses of the research setting. For example, CA studies of interviewing practices (Potter & Hepburn, 2012) contribute to methodological developments that are starting to incorporate the pragmatics of talk and the practicalities of survey technologies into a broader analysis (Conrad, Schober, & Schwarz, 2013). Similarly, studies of methods that use introspective self-report (Wooffitt & Holt, 2011) or CA's own practices of video recording (Hazel, 2015) are opening up new opportunities to approach theoretical questions across fields as prac-

tical, observable issues based on the endogenous organisation of situated activities. CA's early focus on everyday talk 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 broader 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 descriptive of normative structures in talk rather than predictive or prescriptive, and may be combined with other 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 detailed description of the turn-taking system as an observationally grounded model for exploring psycholinguistic phenomena such as turn-projection in terms of cognition (de Ruyter, Mitterer, & Enfield, 2006; Levinson & Torreira, 2015). These studies address phenomena core to neighbouring fields, but have also led to significant new work testing 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 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 randomised controlled trial (Robinson & Heritage, 2014) 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 ethnomethodological focus on participants' orientations asks more fundamental questions of established theory 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, the data opened up questions about how 'institutional talk' is organised in relation to more everyday calls (Drew & Heritage, 1992). Contemporary applications of CA have built on these findings to intervene in service delivery and training (Hepburn, Wilkinson, & Butler, 2014; Stokoe, 2014). Similarly, early studies of interaction in specialised settings has contributed to the use of CA to explore practices with large, theory-oriented literatures such as education and language learning (Seedhouse, 2005), courtroom 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 its 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 (R. Wilkinson, 2014), it has also opened up new methodological challenges for CA. The 'embodied turn' in interaction analysis (Nevile, 2015) has emphasised the many interconnected systems involved in co-producing the organisation of turns at talk (F. 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 an established body of research. CA's expanded focus from 'just talk' 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 talk-in-interaction. This development in CA has been hugely influential in exploring workplace settings, and how peoples interactions can reveal their methods for making sense

of complex technologies and environments (Heath & Luff, 2000). Studies in this vein emphasise the interactional organisation 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 organisation of everyday talk are becoming increasingly established as 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 (Stivers, 2015) and 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 in the ethnomethodological respecification of questions in interaction research (Steensig & Heinemann, 2015). Even within this tradition, a highly influential program of CA work on 'epistemics' (Heritage, 2012a) is currently leading a turn to long-held questions about how social actions are formulated and recognised (Levinson, 2012), and how asymmetries of mutual knowledge are managed in interaction (Stivers, Mondada, & Steensig, 2011). This approach articulates these abstract issues in terms of CA's relatively concrete descriptions of how participants orient to the normative ordering of alternative choices or 'preference structure' (Pomerantz & Heritage, 2013) in everyday interaction, and how this is reflected in the organisation of everyday talk (Heritage, 2012b). While this may facilitate CA's contribution to the larger body of research based on addressing such issues 'head on' as experimentally testable cognitive phenomena (Clark & Brennan, 1991), epistemics may also provide an overly abstract explanation for events that would otherwise prompt further detailed analysis (Drew, 2012). These challenges arise from opportunities to generate abstractions from CA's technical findings in addressing topical themes within CA's various core professional disciplines of sociology, psychology, and linguistics. For example, recent CA work 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 analysing how participants themselves use and make an issue of these categories in talk. However, questions remain as to the mutual and equivalent relevance of these broader abstractions to both participant and analyst (Schegloff, 2007a).

These long-standing tensions between attention to technical detail and analytic abstraction have been central to CA's development as a means for the pragmatic respecification of social theory. These tensions have remained apparent within CA because of its success in maintaining a balance. The structures of naturalistic talk-in-interaction that form CA's primary empirical material have provided such a stable analytic foundation (Sacks, 1995) that CA's cumulative descriptions can sometimes resemble prescriptive or predictive theories. These ongoing methodological issues with abstraction via coding and quantification (Schegloff, 1993; Stivers, 2015), and the threat of schism between CA and less talk-centric ethnomethodological approaches therefore all point to the growing scope, scale, and maturity of CA and its core methods and findings.

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