

Order in Institutional Telephone Talk: Three Observations

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Abstract

In this paper I introduce some features of conversation analysis through three actions. I do this, firstly, by displaying three observations of a telephone call to a local government council. Secondly, by invoking participants' capacities, skills and resources as social interactants to analyse this call. And thirdly, by commenting on how traditional approaches to psychology might explain the orderliness of the call. I then conclude the paper with some modest claims about how the communication choices made by professionals shape the quality of service interactions, and about the potential for conversation analysis to contribute to psychological research at USQ.

Introduction

The following transcript comes from a collection of 230 telephone calls made to a local government council. These telephone calls were made by members of the local community and were received, in the first instance, by a 'call taker' who is employed as the first contact point for calls to the shire council. The calls were collected by Linda Valmadre for her BSc (Hons) research project which was conducted at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) in 2003 and 2004.

One audio recording and its accompanying transcript will be used in this paper to display some observations about the serial and sequential nature of these institutional telephone calls. This paper was written to accompany a Psychology Colloquium which introduced some features of the orderliness of telephone talk to staff and students at USQ. This colloquium was presented to the USQ Department of Psychology in September 2005. It aimed to introduce some features of an observation and conversation analytic approach for examining telephone talk, and aimed to display these in ways that captured the interest and imagination of colloquium participants. Secondly, the presentation introduced an alternative way of treating language and studying naturally occurring conversations which challenges the research orthodoxy in Psychology. This was done, in part, to stimulate some discussion about how discursive analysis could feature in the teaching, research, and professional activities of the Psychology Department, various research centres, and customer relations units at USQ.

This paper is arranged in five sections. Following this introduction, I display a transcript of a single telephone conversation between CT and T taken from the data

corpus. I'll then follow this by presenting three observations that I argue are immediate and hearable in the original audio recording and displayed in the transcript of this call. Following this I'll make some brief comments about how these observations are typically treated in Psychology. These comments are presently cautiously, in part, to conform to the aims of this presentation and because they relate to some immediate observations from a single institutional telephone conversation. Finally, I'll conclude by offering some general comments about relations between orderly talk, conversation analysis, and service encounters.

Transcript

The following transcript is a verbatim transcription of the verbal exchange between the Call Taker (CT) at a local shire council and the Caller (C) from the outside community. In addition, the transcript includes some of the paralinguistic features displayed in the original call. These are displayed using the conventions established for conversational analysis by Gail Jefferson (see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). Readers should note that some personal characteristics that identify the speakers in this telephone call have been changed to maintain their anonymity as consenting research participants.

Transcript: T48¹

Participants: CT: Call Taker, C: Caller

- 0 ((call ringing))
 1 CT: good afternoon Local Shire Council Meg↑an speaking =
 2 C: = yes
 3 can ↑I speak to Kym Pitcher in Town Planning plea:se =
 4 CT: = I: 'll transfer you >through that section<
 5 just one moment =
 6 C: = thank you.

Call dispatched

Three Observations

In this section I present three observations of the data and its accompanying transcript. I argue that they are immediately recognisable by colloquium participants (and readers) as they can invoke their capacities, skills,

¹ This transcript has been structured so to more readily display adjacent pairs in order to help readers who are unfamiliar with reading transcripts that include Jefferson notation.

and resources as competent social interactants and then apply these to this modest analytic task.

Firstly the talk is orderly. This is hearable in the original call which colloquium participants heard repeated on several occasions. However this order is also displayed in the transcript: albeit that people who are unfamiliar with these transcript conventions may not initially recognise it.

An immediate feature of the call is a noticeable absence of interruptions and overlapping talk by the speakers. Instead CT and C perform an orderly series of turns at talk during this telephone conversation. Interruptions and overlaps display violations to the general conversational rule – ‘no more than one party speaks at a time’ - and this can signal some difficulties in conversation (Sacks 1992/1995). The presence of such interruptions and overlapping talk could signal conversational difficulties between CT and C. However overlaps, interruptions, hesitations, and repairs are noticeably absent in this talk.

Following on from this observation, notice that there are no gaps in talk and only minimal pauses in conversation. Instead, the call is characterised by a smooth and seamless flow of talk: with each segment of talk seemingly following the previous one in a coordinated and serial fashion. This feature is hearable in the original call and displayed in the transcript.

A closer inspection of this feature shows that both speakers latch the beginning of their talk onto the end of the previous speaker’s talk. This occurs consistently throughout the call and is displayed using equal (=) signs in the transcript. This latching occurs at transition points in the call: places where one speaker has finished and makes a turn to talk available to the other speaker. CT and C use downward intonation in their voice to signal a transition relevant place, and a full stop (.) sign is used to display this in the transcript. Latching helps to give this call its continuous and orderly character.

So the first observation is that this telephone call is orderly - both speakers contribute to this orderliness by taking alternate turns to talk, signaling these, and then latching their talk. CT and C employ these discursive practices to coordinate this orderly conversation.

The second observation is that the participants appear to make sense of this interaction and accomplish something in this, albeit brief, telephone conversation. This is an obvious point but nevertheless an important point to make explicitly. In this case it involves C making a request to speak with Kym Pitcher, which CT recognises as a request. CT signals this and replies to say that she will transfer the call to that section; a section, presumably, where Kym Pitcher can often be found. C then recognises this and signals with her gratitude and thanks. This accomplishment is immediately hearable in the original call and transcript and comes from the speakers’ own understandings of the call.

A third observation is that the talk appears to be organised in a sequential manner. That is to say, that the telephone call is more than just a series of turns at talk; say with CT beginning in Line 1, then followed by C, and thereafter CT and C alternating turns to talk. Instead the talk is organised differently, and turns at talk appear to be related in some way. This organisation is hearable by listening to the call with the transcript in sight. It shows that CT and C link their talk together to perform actions. This is first displayed in Lines 0-2.

Extract 1

0 ((call ringing))
1 CT: good afternoon Local Shire Council Meg†an speaking =
2 C: = yes

C begins the conversation by calling the local shire council and in doing so summons CT to answer the telephone. The telephone rings and CT begins her first turn to talk with ‘*good afternoon local shire council Megan speaking*’. This is her job and so it is not an unusual action, per se. However routine, it is nevertheless the first part of an action involving CT and C. C recognises this action and produces the second part of this action with her acknowledgement, ‘Yes’. This relationship is commonly called an adjacency pair (Sacks, 1992/1995; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973).

So what is sequential about this?

In the next section I will expand on this third observation and display how the talk is sequentially ordered in, at least, two senses. The first sense relates to the sequential order of adjacency pairs and is discussed in some detail. Whereas the second sense relates to the three sequences of action that are produced in this institutional call and provide for the call accomplishing an outcome.

Firstly, CT and C co-produce an action in Lines 1-2 that has a first-part then second-part order or sequence. It may seem obvious and slightly trivial to state this but it is significant that CT speaks first. Since CT chooses to speak first and C allows her to speak first. This does not appear to be a random or accidental occurrence in this corpus of 230 recorded telephone calls. It would be unusual, however, for C to begin by talking at Line 1 with ‘Yes’. That is, by taking up the first turn at talk.

The first turn at talk is a significant position for shaping the topic of conversation and the trajectory of a conversation. By taking the first turn, which C permits, the CT is in a strong position to shape this call. This occurs because the adjacency relationship between respective turns to talk is such a powerful device for relating utterances to one another in a conversation (Sacks, 1992/1995). A more detailed discussion of this practice is beyond the scope of this paper.

Furthermore, C’s utterance at Line 2 is hearable as a response to CT’s welcome and identification action performed in Line 1. ‘Yes’ is oriented to this first action

and to CT's first-part in producing this action. This second-part utterance contributes to the first action by giving meaning to it and thereby co-producing it as a welcome and identification action.

Of course other explanations about what C's response in Line 2 might be related to could be proposed. I acknowledge that 'Yes' could be argued as an ambiguous response, and not oriented to CT's opening utterance at all. However it would be reasonable to expect to see instances of troubled talk between CT and C occurring later in the telephone call as a consequence of such an alternative argument. However the first observation was that interruptions, overlaps, hesitations and repairs do not occur in this call, and there is an absence of troubled talk between CT and C. Therefore C's response is hearable as the second part of a co-produced welcome and identification action.

So the first action involves welcome and identification, and is co-produced by CT and C through an adjacency pair displayed in Lines 1-2. This first action is organised sequentially such that the second-part is produced in relation to the first-part and contributes to the meaning of this action sequence. Of course, welcome and identification is a provisional label that has been selected for the purposes of this colloquium presentation. While other labels may have been selected, the point of this discussion has been to show that this first-part second-part action is sequentially organised and jointly produced by CT and C in their respective first turns to talk.

We can observe other actions being performed in Lines 3-4 and Lines 5-6 by using a similar process and drawing upon the competencies, skills, and resources that readers have as competent social interactants. I will briefly elaborate on these to show how this talk is not simply serially organised in a stepwise fashion but rather that specific adjacent turns to talk have interrelated or sequential relations. A second action is produced in Lines 3-4.

Extract 2

3 C: can I speak to Kym Pitcher in Town Planning plea:se =
4 CT: = I: 'll transfer you >through that section<

C continues her first turn to talk with '*can I speak with Kym Pitcher in Town Planning please*' which is displayed in Line 3. Now this turn begins in Line 2 but C initiates a new action that is hearably distinct from the earlier welcome and identification action. CT latches her response on to C's talk, as shown in Line 4. It is through this response that we can understand some features of this second action.

CT responds with '*I'll transfer you through the section*'. Subsequently there is no troubled talk displayed between CT and C in the remainder of the call. Therefore it's reasonable to observe that CT has oriented to C's talk in Line 3 in ways that are acceptable to C. Otherwise C would have acted to

correct the misunderstanding. CT orients to Line 3 as a request for some help or service. Now again this particular observation is not terribly revealing, instead it seems hearable in the original call and the transcript. However it does reveal and help explicate three points about the organisation of this institutional talk. Firstly, a second action was initiated by C in Line 3. Secondly, this action had a first-part second-part sequential order. This is usually referred to as an adjacency pair. Thirdly, this analysis was shaped by how CT oriented to the C's talk in her next utterance in Line 4. Once again, while other explanations are possible they are not plausible given the absence of troubled talk as a signal of difficulties in understanding and meaning between CT and C. So the second action is a request that is co-produced by C and CT through an adjacency pair displayed in Lines 3-4. Moreover, this action is sequentially ordered. The third and final action is produced in Lines 5-6.

Extract 3

5 CT: just one moment =
6 C: = thank you.

CT continues her second turn to talk with '*just one moment*' which is displayed in Line 5. This initiates a new action that is hearably distinct from the earlier request sequence. However the burden of proof for such an assertion rests with how C orients to this talk, usually, in her next turn to talk. C latches her response on to CT's talk and says, '*thank you*' which is displayed in Line 6. CT then dispatches this call to another section in the local council, presumably the Town Planning section. This examination draws on our skills as social interactants to reveal three points. Firstly, CT initiates a closing sequence to this call in Line 5. Secondly, this action was composed of an adjacency pair that displayed a first-part second-part sequential order. And thirdly, C's talk in Line 6 displays how she oriented to the first-part of the adjacency pair and treated this as unproblematic. So the third action closes the call and is co-produced by C and CT through an adjacency pair displayed in Lines 5-6. Here also the action is sequentially ordered.

Therein a third observation is that this institutional telephone call displays a sequential order. That is to say that there are hearable and describable ways in which the turns to talk are linked together in a distinct sequence. The original call and the transcript display how adjacent turns to talk are linked as pairs with a discernable first part and second part order. These adjacency pairs appear to be performing particular actions. Three actions were observed in this call; welcome and identification, request, and closing. But these three actions are themselves a display of the sequential order of this institutional call. And it is this display that I refer to as a second sense of the sequential order of this call.

To briefly state this obvious point, the call is sequentially ordered in the sense that the welcome and identification action sequence precedes the request action: and this request sequence precedes the closing action. CT and C have accomplished something in this call by producing three actions that are performed in this action sequence. This is the overall organisation of this call. Of course, producing these three actions in any other sequence or order would have consequences for both speakers. Two consequences that are relevant to this paper would be a diminished understanding between CT and C, and a reduced chance that CT and C could accomplish something in this call. A further discussion of these institutional features of the call is beyond the scope of this paper.

In summary, by listening to the original call with the transcript in hand, and by invoking our capacities, skills and resources as competent social interactants we have been able to perform a modest and provisional conversational analysis of this telephone call. We can see that this institutional telephone call is organised in a sequential manner, and that C and CT accomplish an outcome by jointly producing three sequential actions.

Theoretical Explanations

How might we react, theoretically, to these three observations? While a detailed response to this question is beyond the scope and purpose of this paper, some brief comments can be made about the typical trajectory of a theoretical explanation.

A typical approach in Psychology would begin from two premises. Firstly, it would give primacy to perception. That is, it would treat this telephone call and the occurrence of order in this talk as a perceptual accomplishment by the speakers. It would treat this call as a perceptual event rather than a language event, and recognise both speakers for being able to capture the various transmitted sounds. Secondly, it would give primacy to the individual competencies of the speakers. That is, it would treat the order and accomplishments performed in the call as displays of competencies, skills and resources held by speakers, individually. These competencies, skills and resources are typically treated as attributes of individual speakers. This would be a sufficient rationale to approach understanding the call at the level of the individual speaker. That is, conversations are treated as products of individuals and should then be studied from this basis: rather than be treated as collective or joint accomplishments produced by both speakers and therefore studied as a collective or interactive event.

This would establish an explanatory trajectory for these observations that is familiar to many Psychologists. A preference for studying perception of social events at the individual level evokes a social cognitive metatheory whereby the orderliness of routine social events and the basis on which people perceive and take part in them is understood via perception-and-

action schemas, scripts and other inner mental processes. Edwards (1994) offers a more detailed discussion of cognitive script theory, and a critique of conventional script formulations for studying conversations, and this short discussion embraces some of these themes.

The central argument is as follows. The conventional approach to account for these observations typically employs cognitive schema, scripts, plans, and goals (Schank & Abelson, 1977) and refers to abstract knowledge structures held in long term memory that specify the conditions and actions for achieving a goal (Barsalou, 1992). However this appears to be an overly complicated mechanism for explaining this simple, everyday, and largely non-descript seven second institutional telephone call.

While it is tempting to adopt a cognitive explanation for these modest observations – tempting because it is a familiar explanatory framework and there is an intuitive ‘scripted character’ to this call – perhaps other simpler explanations should be considered. Alternative non-cognitive explanations for ordinary and institutional telephone talk have historical foundations in sociology, ethnomethodology, and linguistics. Although foreign to many Psychology Departments, these approaches could be considered.

Furthermore, alternative approaches could advance three concepts that may advance psychological understandings of human action. Firstly, that people produce talk for understanding. Secondly, that talk is imbued with linguistic and paralinguistic features which are the methods that listeners use to recognise, interpret, and understand what is being said. Thirdly, displaying recognition and understanding are normative features of talk, and are produced by speakers in their subsequent turns to talk as routine sequential actions (Heritage, 2001; Heritage & Atkinson, 1984). These concepts signal a shift in relations between discourse and cognition (see Edwards, 1997 for a review). This shift treats language as a domain of action in its own right rather than as an outcome of processes viewed through a perceptual-cognitive lens (Edwards & Potter, 2001).

Closure

In concluding this paper, I would like to restate three points made earlier and propose, and respond to, one question – so what? Firstly, the institutional telephone call featured earlier was an orderly verbal exchange between CT and C. I think that this point has been sufficiently demonstrated in this paper. In fact, the level of orderliness and sequential organisation even surprises this author.

Secondly, conventional approaches in Psychology for explaining orderliness in social events draw on hypothetical mental structures and perceptual-cognitive processes. This appears to be an overly complex explanatory framework for dealing with institutional talk like the case displayed here. Perhaps, and thirdly,

my colleagues in Psychology and those in various research centres and customer-relations unit at USQ might consider alternative approaches for examining institutional talk?

Finally, so what? What are some implications of taking up an alternative approach? My reply to this question is couched in a cautionary tone because the three observations presented here relate to a single data source. Perhaps an alternative approach could advance our understanding of human action by collecting evidence about the discursive practices that speakers actually use in naturally occurring social events. Perhaps, then, by examining social interaction on an individual action-by-action, case-by-case level we could better understand how interaction is managed (and mismanaged) by participants. These findings will have theoretical and practical implications. One example in relation to the call featured in this paper is to shape customer service education and training for the call centre industry according to evidence-based practices.

In closing, it is common to overlook the skillfulness of the call centre operator, like Megan, in a paper like this. Why? Because this social event is considered mundane, Megan's talk is considered routine, and because there is little interest in language as a performative social action in mainstream Psychology. In closing, I want to recognise Megan's skillfulness; however there is more than this on display in this paper. Rather the institutional telephone call, itself, is a skillful co-production performed by both speakers. We can contribute to understanding human behaviour by studying this social interaction using a conversation analytic framework. Perhaps there could be a place for a fine-grained analysis of naturally occurring social interaction in the Department of Psychology at USQ.

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Additional Information

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