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Conversation Analysis

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Conversation Analysis (CA) is a sociological approach used to investigate the culturally-methodic character of ‘talk-in-interaction’, which has had cross-disciplinary influence in linguistics, anthropology, and psychology. Harvey Sacks, together with his colleagues Emmanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, developed CA in a series of lectures in the 1960s (now collected in Sacks [1992]). His aim was to develop a thoroughly naturalistic, empirical social science, i.e., one that dealt with social events as they actually occurred – and not as captured in or portrayed by sociologically staged interviews, surveys, questionnaires, or documents (the traditional ways in which social science gets access to the social world).

The development of CA was, at least initially, strongly influenced by Harold Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology, the sociological study of the practical methods that members of society have to accomplish their everyday activities. Ethnomethodology drew on the work of Alfred Schütz who remarked that the social world that the sociologist encounters and tries to describe has already been described and interpreted by society’s members. For ethnomethodology, the central question therefore was not: What are the best *sociological* methods to find out about the social world? But rather: How do members of society *themselves* find out about their world (in a practical, ordinary manner as part of their conduct of the society’s everyday affairs)?

One of the challenges in the development of ethnomethodology was to access these ‘seen but unnoticed’, taken-for-granted ‘ethno-methods’. Sacks’s way of dealing with this issue was to rely on (audio) recordings of talk-in-interaction. This allowed for the capture of verbal activities as they occur in real time, and, through repeated listenings, the possibility of studying the gathered materials in ever closer detail – a feature that has been likened to the slow motion ‘instant reply’ of sport events. In that sense, CA is

perhaps one of the few examples in social science where technological developments (the availability of cheap and portable tape recorders) led to methodological innovations.

CA researchers typically produce detailed transcripts of the materials that they are investigating. The transcription conventions of CA have been developed by Sacks's collaborator Gail Jefferson and are designed to strike a balance between capturing the way that participants actually talk (highlighting prolonged sounds, stressed syllables, or overlap between speakers) and overburdening the transcript with so much detail that it becomes unreadable. The purpose of transcribing is two-fold. Firstly, during the analysis the very process of transcribing forces the researcher to pay detailed attention to the materials. Secondly, after the analysis has been written down, the inclusion of transcripts in reports allows readers to check whether what the researcher is saying about the materials is actually the case, thereby inviting readers to launch and document their own, alternative analysis. Technological developments (in particular, digitisation of audio- and visual materials) have led to an increasing availability of sound, or even video, samples themselves¹.

Although CA started with a focus on conversation, this was simply a result of the fact that talk could be easily recorded, replayed repeatedly, transcribed, and made available to other researchers. In this sense, the name 'conversation analysis' was misleading for Sacks's project, since the interest was not in conversation *per se*, but rather in the culturally-methodic character of social action and interaction, with conversation being only a convenient, but highly productive, case. The name 'conversation analysis' was not then meant to designate a new sociological technique (to study conversation), but rather to point to a topic: the study of the conversational analyses employed by conversationalists themselves (i.e., their real-time understandings of 'why that now?').

Early work in CA focussed on the ways in which conversationalists accomplish the fact that typically 'one person talks at a time'. The result was the landmark publication "A

¹ See, in particular, Schegloff's website: <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/schegloff/pubs/>

simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking in conversation” (Sacks *et al.*, 1974), in which a formal system was laid out through which participants collaboratively locate transition points and determine who speaks next. The most important methodological innovation lay in the fact that Sacks *et al.* not only demonstrated that the system could be used to describe the turn-taking of conversation, but that the system is locally and interactionally managed by participants themselves, who, for example, notice, interpret, and correct violations of it. To demonstrate this, Sacks *et al.* took advantage of the ‘interactional’ character of conversation: what participants do or say next depends crucially on their understanding of what another participant has said previously – and furthermore displays how those prior utterances have been interpreted. The fact that participants analyse each other’s conduct – and display their analysis of previous turns – was used as a ‘proof procedure’ for the sociological analysis.

Although the original focus was on ordinary conversation, or ‘talk-in-interaction’, CA has since developed in two rather different directions. On the one hand, there has been an interest in the institutional character of talk, i.e., the ways in which participants’ turns of talk enact institutional affairs (Heritage, 2005). Researchers have, for example, investigated how lawyers structure legal interrogation, how doctors deliver good and bad news, or how journalists aggressively question politicians while simultaneously displaying their political neutrality. On the other hand, researchers have tried to extend CA to analyse ‘non-verbal’ (‘visual’, ‘multi-modal’) aspects of interaction (Hindmarsh and Heath, 2007), for example, the organisation of gaze in relation to turns of talk, the timing of gestures in relation to the verbal utterances to which they are tied, or the various ways in which technology can structure work practices².

There seem to be two ways in which CA could fruitfully be used to study consumption or consumer culture, namely through investigating talk *about* consumption and through researching the various acts *of* consumption.

² The website ‘Ethno/CA News’ by Paul ten Have provides an up-to-date bibliography of CA studies: <http://www.paultenhavenl/EMCA.htm>.

Firstly, one could argue that ‘consumer culture’ is to a large part realised *through talk*, since people do not just ‘do’ consumption, but also talk ‘about’ consumption. Such talk has not been the explicit focus of CA, but one can find examples in various studies in which conversationalists display and use their knowledge of consumer goods. A good example is Goodwin’s (2006) study of conversation among adolescent girls, in which one can find instances of girls talking about shopping, going to a restaurant, or playing tennis – and how such talk (about what kinds of things you have bought or places you have been to) can be used to accomplish status differentiation (Chapter 5).

Secondly, CA can be used to study the sequential organisation of various ‘consumer’ activities. An obvious case is the buying and selling of various goods. Heath and Luff (2007) investigate how auctioneers seek to encourage competitive bidding by establishing two bidders and no more than two bidders at any one time (a ‘run’), while Clark *et al.* (2003) study how salesmen work verbally at working a rapport with their customers. Other studies have looked at the selling strategies of market pitchers (Pinch and Clark, 1986), the categorisation work in calls to a travel agency (Mazeland *et al.*, 1995), or the work of tele-negotiated mediation in business-to-business encounters (Firth, 1995).

In sum, by paying detailed attention to the sequential organisation of talk and embodied conduct, CA provides detailed access to the interactional accomplishment of various activities, including various aspects of consumption and consumer culture.

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