

## **COVID-19 Conversation Analysis**

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In this paper, I present the findings from an empirical project completed for a college-level Communication Analysis class. These findings, while containing scholarly terms and nomenclature, are highly applicable to any day-to-day interactions had between any multitude of participants. It is my goal, throughout this paper, to provide readers with a more in-depth look at the ways in which our words and actions convey our messages in ways we didn't even consciously mean.

To begin, I must provide background information for this recorded empirical data set. This data was transcribed from a video recording I captured as part of an assignment for a University of New Hampshire Communication seminar on Conversation Analysis methods. The video, and subsequent transcription highlight a conversation between three friends: me, my roommate Jake, and my friend Connell. We spend most of the time discussing Covid-19 quarantine as we all had contracted it around the same time. We all entered the University's Covid-19 quarantine dorm (which will be referred to as Adams Tower in the transcription) where Jake and I were lucky enough be paired as roommates. After we got out, we were able to get together in my apartment and chat, as per usual. The following data presents the conversation had during that video recording and highlights many applicable Conversation Analytic ideas and principles that I would like to share.

The conversation data is conveyed using the Jeffersonian Transcription method. This is a writing tool used in the study of conversation analysis to annotate dialogue when analyzing it for certain concepts or theories.

The first pertinent concept I found in my data is that of storytelling. As touched upon in a 2017 reading from University of New Hampshire Professor Danielle Pillet-Shore, participants tend to use their turn at talk to story tell when it is their goal to "make relevant a recipient display of

stance at story completion” (Pillet-Shore 2017 p. 14). What this means is that participants in a dialogue will use a storytelling sequence to add to the conversation, making sure that their story is “sequentially implicative” to the recipient. This is typically the most affiliating response, since it shows that the second storyteller is using the earlier-told, first story “as a source for triggered or topically coherent subsequent talk” (Pillet-Shore 2017 p.14; Jefferson 1978 p. 228). Present in my data is an example of storytelling in which Jake sequentially sets up and triggers his own storytelling sequence in the conversation. A “trigger”, in this context, is what Jefferson refers to as “something said at a particular moment in conversation [that] can remind a participant (speaker or hearer) of a particular story” (Jefferson, 1978 p. 220).

[Excerpt 1]

103 Jak: **Well** ↑**dude fer- at [first isolation was fo:urteen**  
 104 **days and now it's ten**  
 105 Con: [they were saying like three  
 106 months from then-  
 107 Luc: Ahiha I know how bout tha poor kids that got stuck  
 108 [doing fourteen in Bab- in Babcock dude?  
 109 Jak: [Yeah! my buddy was in there for fourteen days  
 110 Con: ohoheh  
 111 Luc: Imagine that?  
 112 Jak: J.R. was telling me he got stuck there for twenty  
 113 one [da:ys. He was there for twenty one [days in-  
 114 Luc: [.hhh [how?  
 115 Con: [no shot  
 116 Luc: [How?  
 117 Jak: [>Yeah dude< cuz he had to like- something to do  
 118 with like (1.0) he was around somebody who h:ad  
 119 [Covid  
 120 Luc: [Yeah  
 121 Jak: and so he quarantined for fourteen days because of  
 122 Th:at and then he got Covid like on like the  
 123 thirteenth day or sumthin like that- dude idon  
 124 [even  
 125 Luc: [s- so he was already in- wait he was [in Babcock?  
 126 Jak: [so-  
 127 for twenty ↑one days? Or just [in quarantine?  
 128 Jak: [He was in >Adam's  
 129 Tower< [cuz at that point it was over [winter break  
 130 Luc: [Oh [yeyayeah  
 131 Jak: so yeah dude somehow he lived there for like three  
 132 Weeks  
 133 Luc: J.R.?  
 134 Jak: Yeah cuz (.) lika dude like I ahah- it din happen to  
 135 me but >kinda happened to me<. I had been in  
 136 quarantine since Sunday but since my positive test  
 137 was on Tuesday, I had my quarantine got extended for  
 138 three days.

In this example, it is clear to see how Jake went about his storytelling sequence. Beginning at line 103, he speaks of people being quarantined for fourteen days. This triggered the memory of a shared experience and invited me and Connell to make remarks about the imagined horrors of spending two weeks in a run down, freshman dorm (Babcock Hall).

This is relevant to this specific conversation, because after receiving an irregular Covid test result, Jake spent one night in Babcock even though Connell and I were already staying in the more well-appointed Adams Tower. Jake's stay in Babcock Hall was not great, with a list of inconveniences that made the experience terrible. This newly gained knowledge of the abysmal state of Babcock Hall led Connell and I to exaggerate the way we felt about hypothetically having to stay there for two weeks, which in turn led to Jake telling a story about a mutual friend of ours.

Jake told us that this friend, J.R., had Covid woes worse than ours and explained them in a good amount of detail. It is clear that Jake knew even before he said it, that his utterance at line 103 would snowball into a conversation between the three of us that was centered on his own storytelling. We were all horrified by the idea of spending fourteen days in lockdown, because we had all just finished ten days of our own, which seemed like eternity. Jake used that common bond to start a storytelling sequence that he knew would result in coherent subsequent talk.

The next concept present in the data is third person reference. Emanuel Schegloff explains that this term is used "to refer to self or addressed recipient (in place of 'I' or 'You')" (Schegloff 1996 p. 447), meaning that it serves as a special indicator in dialogue. He goes one step further to explain that "one regular alternative to 'you' is a *third person reference form*, where the underlying issue may not at all be one of selection among alternative reference forms, but rather the choice of action which the speaker will implement and/or to whom the utterance will be addressed" (Schegloff 1996 pp. 447-448). This second delineation is most closely in line with the data I have recorded.

[Excerpt 2]

01 Luc:        ↑Dude, **he's** >in:verse, **he's** got (1.0) .hh **he's** got  
02                [two days-  
03 Con:        [four day weekend?  
04 Luc:        t'yeah no **he's** got [two days on, five days o:ff  
05 Jak:                                [I gat fi:ve days ah-  
06 Luc:        [hhh  
07 Jak:        [ahaha  
08 Con:        [uheh wha the fuck?  
09 Jak:        [eyauh  
10 Luc:        [**he's** got **he's** got Tuesday's=Thurs:day's in class,  
11                **he's** got a fucki:n↓  
12                (0.3)  
13                Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday.hih  
14 Con:        Haheh hh aha >doya jus< have fo:ur classes on  
15                Tuesday Thursday?  
16                (1.0)  
17 Jak:        >Dude<, not [e:ven haha like  
18 Luc:                                [I was jus thinkin- yeah, three [right?  
19 Jak:    [Cuz>one  
20                of my< cl:asses is once [a week for three ho:hihurs

Much like in the example used by Schegloff in his 1996 reading, I launch the telling of a story by Jake by use of third person reference. I start the transcription data by mentioning that “...**he's** >in:verse ...” (lines 01-04). Here, I am referring to Jake as though he is not even in the room. By referring to him as “he”, I am able to talk about Jake to Connell and expect to have Connell respond rather than Jake. By referring to Jake in the third person, I am almost subliminally granting myself permission to speak about his personal experience with his own class schedule. Because of the way I am using third person reference in this scenario, Jake knows that he is not the preferred next speaker, and that it is in fact Connell who should be responding to my statements about Jake. In this case, it is almost as if my word choice treats Jake's presence in the room as that of an object rather than that of a person capable of adding to the dialogue. Enfield also mentions that people have two preferences in the way they refer to others. Speakers need to refer to non-present others in a way that is economical, that uses the minimal amount of information to enable their recipient to recognize and pinpoint about whom they are talking. What this mean is that, in terms of minimality, “a speaker should prefer a formulation that consists of one and only one referring unit” (Enfield 2012 p. 6). When it comes to being recognized, “a speaker should prefer a formulation that will most readily lead to recognition, by the addressee, of the intended reference” (Enfield 2012 p. 6).

What this boils down to is most people are referred to by their first name. It is short and simple, it gets to the point and usually makes it quite obvious who is being addressed (unless, of course, there are multiple people present who share a first name). The data displays a great example of this “first name only” person reference starting at line 148.

[Excerpt 3]  
 148 Con: Umm so that's=why he got out at the same time as us  
 149 Luc: Because he just said- [↑wait so how'd he get wrapped  
 150 up in it?  
 151 Con: [Because- because **Max** listed  
 152 him. Max- he got po- he was positive  
 153 Luc: **J:ared** was?  
 154 Con: Yeah. And so **Max** spread it to (.) me and [him  
 155 Luc: [oh  
 156 >yeyeyeah<  
 157 Con: Umm (1.8) and then-  
 158 Luc: But he dint know about it till ↑after you guys  
 159 Jak: Ion getit  
 160 Con: Like he- he- he tested negative an then he tested  
 161 positive

This data excerpt presents multiple examples of person reference to two different people. Here, Connell and I speak of both “Jared” and “Max”, two of our friends who were also mixed up in the Covid fiasco. While trying to explain to me how we all got involved in it, Connell uses a specific person reference to talk about Max at lines 151 and 154. It is clear how useful person reference is when you notice the other example of it on line 153. I start to speak of our friend Jared and how he had tested positive. If Connell and I referred to both people simply as “he”, the conversation would make no sense. By using specific person references, we are able to trigger a quick recognition of the person we are trying to speak of.

The next concept of significance is that of repair. In this case, the example is one of self-initiated repair. When speaking of this variation of the topic, it is important to note that Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson employ the term “correction” interchangeably with “repair”. They explain that “[t]he term 'correction' is commonly understood to refer to the replacement of an 'error' or 'mistake' by what is 'correct'" (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1977 p. 363). When it comes to who does the repair in a sequence, they mention that “we should expect a social-organizational preference for self- over other-correction, a preference exhibited empirically by

the preponderance of self- over other-correction” (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 376). In layman’s terms, people would rather correct themselves than have someone else do it for them.

[Excerpt 4]

34 Luc: Yeah ↓well (0.4) hihih dude yajust’ave so much  
 35 free ↑time  
 36 Con: [Dude  
 37 Jak: [I know, yeah >definitely, definitely<  
 38 Luc: **How- was** it b:ad in Adam’s? (0.5) by yourself?  
 39 Jak: Ye::ah dude I- yep  
 40 (0.8)  
 41 Luc: >But dude so y:ou< >never gotta=roommate< though?  
 42 Jak: No  
 43 Luc: That’s [↑incredible  
 44 Con: [Really? [That’s- that’s clutch  
 45 Luc: [That’s crazy  
 46 Jak: [Dude because >I don’t think they<-  
 47 I don’t think like they’ll send in a ↓newbie? In  
 48 [there with someone who’s probably not contagious  
 49 anymore

In this example, I can be seen making a self-initiated repair at line 38. In this scenario, I was about to ask Jake “how bad was it in Adam’s?”, but I, for some reason, decided to change my utterance to “was it bad in Adam’s?”. This was interesting to see after the data was recorded because it is sort of inside joke that Jake and I share. Since we started rooming together freshman year, Jake and I always ask each other “how bad?” whenever we face a terrible scenario. It was fascinating that I inadvertently changed my wording in this scenario. I think this may have been because of Connell’s presence that I made a self-repair. Maybe subconsciously, I was trying to save Connell from being excluded from an inside joke, and therefore restarted and “repaired” the word “how” with “was” in my utterance.

Next, we turn to look at the concept of epistemics. Heritage defines epistemics as “the conveying of news to an otherwise unknowing recipient” (Heritage 2012: 30) and adds that speakers should not tell their recipients something they might already know (Heritage 2012: 30). Under this umbrella of perceived knowledge, Heritage identifies two subsets. He states that “speakers can position themselves in a relatively unknowing (or K-) position relative to

others concerning the matter at hand, thereby initiating sequences by inviting or eliciting information from a projectedly [sic] more knowing (or K+) recipient" (Heritage 2012: 33). In this data, it will be clear to see that Jake asserts himself as a K+ participant.

[Excerpt 5]

51 Luc: That's >wha um sa<- right? [Yeah.  
 52 Con: [Yeah  
 53 Jak: [And then like-  
 54 Luc: W:ell ↑thaswhat I's >thinking too<. Could that  
 55 Mess it up?=>Could that prol:ong your [if you-  
 56 Jak: [Yeah, I dunno  
 57 **because you're really like, (.) >you don't have< to**  
 58 **quarantine again but you're really n:ot suppose-**  
 59 **you can't really, <°shouldn't° be around people wh:o>**  
 60 **(.) ↑are positive bec:ause (0.8) you can still- they**  
 61 **don't know if you like >transmit=it< ah again, I**  
 62 **duneven know**  
 63 Luc: >I thought that's tha whole<- I thought we ↑could-  
 64 ↓well we still gotta wear a ma:sk everywhere [but  
 65 I mean  
 66 Jak: [There's-  
 67 there's a reason why we don't haftuh test [because  
 68 Luc: [so we can  
 69 but we can carry it still, ↑can't we?  
 70 Luc: [that's wha I dun understand  
 71 Jak: Dude [we [still have=it because it said you-  
 72 [onl:ine it says-  
 73 Con: [.no  
 74 Luc: [That's why we're not testing

In this case, Jake is presenting that he knows presumably more about Covid and the ensuing procedures than Connell or I do (which was most definitely the case). Throughout the data set, Jake displays his knowledge on the subject albeit in a discreetly humble way. Jake is always doing his own research on many things that may be the center of a conversation and Covid-19 certainly was no exception. Jake had read up on lots of Covid facts since we had been diagnosed. By the time we got out of quarantine, he was an amateur Covid expert and was keeping us up to date with current guidelines on what it meant for us, as former Covid sufferers. Jake asserts himself as a K+ participant on the topic of Covid throughout the transcript but remains humble as he always resorts to "I duneven know" or "I dunno" to try to lessen his role as a K+ participant as to not overstep his epistemic bounds. This may have been done because Jake knows that we all know that he's always digging around for obscure facts

about odd things, and he tried to hide the fact that he knew so much about the current Covid situation.

The final Conversation Analysis concept found in this data is what Schegloff refers to as continuers. In his 1982 reading, he explains the concept as being

“instances of the class [that] take the form of vocalizations such as ‘uh huh’, ‘mm hmm’, ‘yeah’ and others as well as head gestures such as nods. These, as well as other, bits of talk and behavior produced by other than the ‘main speaker’ are regularly discarded when discourses ... are extracted from the tangle of detail which composed their actual occurrence” (Schegloff 1982: 73-74).

This means that when employing a continuer, the speaker passes up the opportunity to take a more substantial turn-at-talk. This in turn allows another participant to “continue” their own utterance. Many of these ‘continuers’ are present in my data set, and I will discuss a few examples.

### Example 1:

[Excerpt 6]

117 Jak: [ >Yeah dude< cuz he had to like- something to do  
118 with like (1.0) he was around somebody who h:ad  
119 [Covid  
**120 Luc: [Yeah**  
121 Jak: and so he quarantined for fourteen days because of  
122 Th:at and then he got Covid like on like the  
123 thirteenth day or sumthin like that- dude idon  
124 [even

This excerpt shows a perfect example of a continuer at work in a dialogue. At line 120, I utter “yeah” in the middle of Jake’s story telling sequence. By doing so, I chose not to respond to Jake’s first utterance from lines 117-118, but instead use a continuer to signal that I am listening and allowing him to continue telling the story.

### Example 2:

[Excerpt 7]

154 Con: Yeah. And so **Max** spread it to (.) me and [him  
155 Luc: [oh



156 >yeyeyeah<  
 157 Con: Umm (1.8) and then-

Like the example first example, this is a classic instance of a continuer, in which I interject Connell's story only to add "oh >yeyeyeah<" at lines 155-156. I opt out of a fuller turn at talk and, in doing so, Connell is able to continue his sequence of storytelling.

### Example 3:

[Excerpt 8]

31 Jak: Say whayawa about my sch:edule thou:gh (1.2) its  
 32 fire dude like .hh  
 33 Con: .hhh  
 34 Luc: Yeah ↓well (0.4) hihih dude yajust'ave so much  
 35 free ↑time  
 36 Con: [**Dude**  
 37 Jak: [I know, yeah >definitely, definitely<  
 38 Luc: How- was it b:ad in Adam's? (0.5) by yourself?  
 39 Jak: Ye::ah dude I- yep  
 40 (0.8)  
 41 Luc: >But dude so y:ou< >never gotta=roommate< though?  
 42 Jak: No  
 43 Luc: That's [↑incredible

This example is one of a continuer *not* discussed by Schegloff. Here, I am assuming that Connell's use of the word "dude" at line 36 is acting in the same way as a more traditional continuer. What I mean by this is that Connell passes up the chance to add more to the conversation, and instead, allows me and Jake to continue our dialogue sequence. Connell uses "dude" as a sort of emphasis tool to show he is astonished at how much free time Jake has with a two-day class schedule. Nobody responds to Connell after this utterance, as we all knew what he was trying to accomplish with it.

To conclude, those are just a few of the analytical concepts I discovered while participating in my Conversation Analysis seminar. There is a lot of material covered and much of it is described in intricate detail by high level scholars. It is my hope that the way in which I analyzed the information in this paper will lead readers to a stronger appreciation for how these everyday interactional phenomena can be observed and experienced in all of our daily conversations.

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