

REVIEW OF *CONVERSATION AND TECHNOLOGY*

Conversation and Technology

Ian Hutchby

2001

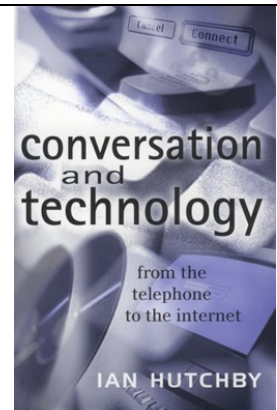
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Overview

Within the early pages of this volume, Ian Hutchby declares his intention to explore how a better understanding of "technologies *for* communication," as he terms them, can help us appreciate better the "relationship between forms of technology and structures of social interaction" (p. 2). As a sociologist, his interest lies primarily in "analysing the ways in which non-human technological artefacts can become important elements in the patterns of ordinary human conduct" (p. 5). While the volume is arguably targeted first and foremost at those working in the areas of communication studies, organizational studies, and cultural studies, and certainly not at those involved in language pedagogy, there is much that the discerning teacher and researcher of language learning can gain from this book. It provides an intelligent, insightful, and incisive discussion of the modern world of communication from the beginnings of the telephone to the emergence of the computer-based chatroom, and argues convincingly that it is important not only to consider what potential such technologies have to impact upon our social discourse, but also to understand the complex ways in which human beings mould the exploitation of these technologies to meet their own social ends. Reading the volume raises our awareness both of the potential of human-computer interaction and of the seemingly never-ending subtleties of human conversation. While all examples are based on native-speaker interaction, the volume would be useful as a reference tool and sounding-board for those working in related areas of native-non-native speaker interaction or non-native speaker interlanguage.

Hutchby's arguments in the course of the book, and indeed in each chapter, are particularly well sign-posted and structured. This, in conjunction with the admittedly rather sparse index, makes the volume extremely easy to dip back into on subsequent readings, but the cumulative nature of his main argument can only truly be appreciated if the reader takes the time to sit down and read the book from cover to cover.

Description by Chapter

The book is divided into 10 chapters. The brief introduction sets out the author's agenda and terms of reference, arguing strongly for a re-appraisal of both familiar and established technologies such as the telephone and more recent developments such as the Internet and its offshoot opportunities for interaction. As Hutchby suggests, "patterns of talk-in-interaction change as people adapt to developments in the circumstances and the possibilities for talk" (pp. 6-7) and therefore a fruitful approach might indeed be to draw on studies of such patterns as a way of identifying how such processes of adaptation can be seen to emerge. Thus, Hutchby argues for the need to bring research into the sociology of technology,

social interaction, and in particular conversation analysis to bear on an exploration of the "nature of the relationship between forms of technology and structures of interaction" (p. 10).

The remaining chapters can be grouped in two main sections, with chapters 2, 3, and 4 providing a discussion of theoretical issues which prevail in the areas of the sociology of technology, social interaction, and conversation analysis. The subsequent five chapters offer a series of case studies exploring the implications of these theoretical debates for different technologies, ranging from the telephone (chapters 5 and 6), video links (chapter 7), and computer-based enquiry services (chapter 8), to Internet Relay Chat (chapter 9), before, in the final chapter, Hutchby draws together the different threads of his evidence to lay out his final arguments and conclusions.

Within the first group of chapters, Hutchby explores the "complex interplay between the *normative structures* of conversational interaction and the *communicative affordances* offered by different technologies" (p. 13). He begins in chapter 2, by discussing the arguments for and against approaches which explore the relationship between social and technological change in terms of technological determinism, interaction, and socio-technical networks. He concludes that, with certain caveats, it is more useful to consider technologies as texts, "written" by all those involved in their development, production, and marketing, only then to be read and re-read by consumers and users. Thus, while any technology may be presented to the public as fulfilling specific needs in specific ways, it is ultimately the end-user who defines and interprets the most appropriate use to which the technology can be put, often in areas never previously conceived. It is in this light that Hutchby draws upon the psychologist Gibson's 1979 concept of "affordances," forwarding the argument that each technology possesses an inherent range of possibilities, not all of which will be apparent at time of production. As the social environment changes and new people with new perceptions come into contact with the technology, so new affordances, new possibilities for its exploitation, will become apparent. At each turn, however, a fine balance is maintained between technology and user, between the possibilities opened up by the technology for its use and the limits its affordances place on how humans can exploit it. The relationship between technology and user is neither totally open nor totally closed.

Chapter 3 explores the different metaphors which have been used to describe and explain this relationship between technology and user, arising from two main models of communication he terms the "computational" and the "interactional." This chapter, with its discussion of communication as transmission or as social interaction, is perhaps the least useful for language specialists, as it goes over old ground better covered elsewhere and interestingly fails to mention at all the work of Vygotsky in this field. Chapter 4, likewise, for those familiar with the work of Harvey Sacks and subsequent conversation analysts, offers little new, although there is an interesting final highlighting of Sacks' own use of the metaphor of a "technology of conversation." The purpose of this latter chapter in particular is, however, to introduce, or highlight, the argument that even apparently spontaneous language production and conversation are subject to certain underlying norms of interaction, of which users are consciously or subconsciously aware, and which are drawn upon to make such conversation progress successfully. To return to Gibson's terminology, one might argue that what Hutchby explores here are the "affordances" of Schegloff's 1987 "talk-in-interaction," although again one wonders why no reference is made to Giles, Coupland, and Coupland's 1991 work on communication accommodation theory.

In chapters 5 and 6, Hutchby draws on the techniques of conversation analysis to illustrate his arguments in the previous chapters, taking as his focus that technology which has become almost invisible in its ubiquity, the telephone. He explains how the social function of the telephone has changed since its introduction, creating an important means of social interaction which is itself shaped by the features afforded by the technology. New understandings of space, interactant roles, and identities are evidenced in close analysis of native-speaker conversations. Language specialists interested in similar analyses of cross-cultural comparisons and non-native speaker interaction will find supporting arguments for Hutchby's work elsewhere (see, e.g., Aston, 1995; Duncan, in press; Halmari, 1993).

In the chapter which follows, Hutchby consolidates his argument in relation to how interaction is afforded by the available technology by exploring examples of video-mediated interaction and by examining the challenge facing technological designers in trying to generate successful human-technology-interaction. While, again Hutchby's volume provides a stimulating discussion of the generic issues, those looking for more language-learning specific explorations of this field might look at Kinginger (1998), O'Dowd (2000), or Belz (2002). Chapters 8 and 9 go on to explore the affordances of human-computer interaction in more detail and question what new forms of interaction are afforded by computer-based virtual conversation. While work in relation to language learning has concentrated upon the potential of such virtual environments to improve motivation (Stepp-Greany, 2002), linguistic competence (Pelletieri, 2000), and intercultural competence (Thorne, 2003), less research has been carried out on whether, and how, the use of such media significantly alters the way in which the linguistic and cultural performance of language learners within such new learning environments impacts upon our understanding of models of second language acquisition.

Conclusion

Hutchby concludes that "technologies do not make humans; but humans make what they do of technologies in the interface between the organized practices of human conversation, and the technology's array of communicative affordances" (p. 206). If this volume is to be of value to language teachers and researchers, and I firmly believe that it is, our challenge lies equally in making what we can of the potential afforded by this interface between sociology, technology, and communication, and applying it to our own work. Hutchby's volume affords a clear mapping-out of a wide range of generic theories and issues which can act as an invaluable lens through which to (re-)examine existing and future language-learning research in the area of new technologies. Not least it might encourage us to look more closely at the innovative ways our students use such technologies to meet their own socio-cultural and communicative ends, which might not always match with our own as teachers!

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