

## Conversation Analysis

We live our lives in conversation, building families, societies and civilisations. In over seven thousand languages across the world, the basic infrastructure by which we communicate remains the same. This is the first ever book-length linguistic introduction to conversation analysis (CA), the field that has done more than any other to illuminate the mechanics of interaction. Starting by locating CA by reference to a number of cognate disciplines investigating language in use, it provides an overview of the origins and methodology of CA. By using conversational data from a range of languages, it examines the basic apparatus of sequence organisation: turn-taking, preference, identity construction and repair. As the basis for these investigations, the book uses the twin analytic resources of action and sequence to throw new light on the origins and nature of language use.

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# CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

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Imagination is not, as is sometimes thought, the ability to invent; it  
is the ability to disclose that which exists.

*John Berger*

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## Preface

As I write, conversation analysis (CA) has just marked the first half-century of its existence as an established domain of research since the first of Harvey Sacks's *Lectures on Conversation* in 1964. While CA emerged through sociology, it has a reach that goes far beyond, into anthropology, psychology, communication, cognitive science, evolutionary theory, education, clinical research and practice, and electrical engineering.

In particular, however, this book is for linguists: students of language who may be familiar with some approaches to the study of language, but less so with investigating its use in interaction. However, it is a testament to both the centrality of language in interaction and the growing influence of CA in linguistics that the groundbreaking paper of Sacks et al. (1974) on turn-taking is 'by far the most cited' paper to have appeared in *Language*, the journal of the Linguistic Society of America since 1924 (Joseph, 2003:463).

### The disciplinary scope of the book

As an overview of the methods and findings of CA, the format of the book may be unfamiliar to those expecting a textbook organised along traditional linguistic lines. So those areas within the standard linguistic compass, such as phonetics, morphosyntax and semantics, are not represented here in familiar guise, as subjects of 'top-down' investigation. Rather, in accordance with the 'bottom-up' methods of CA, interactional phenomena usually investigated within such domains are the focus insofar as they are implicated in the construction of *action*. Moreover, while the concern with action may be familiar to linguists, it is in the bottom-up methods of investigating action – in *sequences* rather than as discrete acts – that CA diverges from much familiar linguistic inquiry. A orientational overview with respect to the central concerns of CA, and its relationship to work in relevant linguistic territory, is provided in the first chapter. This makes it clear that, while CA's investigation of 'language in context' announces its obvious pertinence to semantics and pragmatics, its focus on the construction and recognition of action makes it relevant far beyond these domains. So, as we shall see in the chapters that follow, the concern with the construction of action is germane to

investigations of its phonetic, prosodic and morphosyntactic resources; and the focus on how action is recognised speaks to central questions in both psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics.

## Linguistic data

The vast majority of work in CA to date has been conducted on the data of English, and so the foundational expositions inevitably, and regrettably, reflect this linguistic bias. There is now a growing body of CA work on languages other than English, and many of the foundational arguments here could be exemplified in data from a variety of languages; however, in keeping with the primary expository function of the book, I have, for the sake of clarity, kept in the main to English exemplars. Where possible, however, cross-linguistic data are included to illuminate how linguistic variation is accommodated in the universal principles of interactional organisation. So in keeping with the design of the volume as an overview, the number of exemplars of each analytic point are here limited. This, it should be stressed, goes against usual CA conventions, which standardly require at least three exemplars to show that a practice is not idiosyncratic to a particular episode of interaction. Only one or two are generally used in this book for illustrative purposes, to keep the size of the volume under control. The excerpts themselves are transcribed according to the conventions developed by Gail Jefferson, and described in Chapter 2. In a few cases, where the source uses slightly different notation, the reader is referred to the source material for detailed information on conventions.

With respect to coverage of linguistic resources, the skewing towards morphosyntactic phenomena is representative of the research in the discipline as a whole. Sustained conversation-analytic engagement with phonetic and prosodic features of interaction has come late, relative to the development of the field. I have, where possible, included some of this work to indicate the scope of investigation in this field, aware that for some it will be nowhere near enough.

It should also be noted that, while work on phenomena such as eye-gaze and embodiment are increasingly the subject of analytic attention, consideration of those domains is here restricted, in keeping with the linguistic focus of the book. The same applies to a stream of work that has been termed ‘Applied CA’: that is, the examination of interaction in work or institutional settings, such as the clinical environment, courtroom interaction or broadcast interviews. Certainly, data from these contexts are employed in what follows, but their institutionality is not necessarily germane to the points they are illustrating.

These caveats are offered on the premise that the reader will be guided by the references and further reading suggestions below.

## A note on how to use this book

In aiming to introduce some of the foundational work in CA and present an overview of its core working methods, this book aims for a logical progression and coherence, such that each chapter presupposes familiarity with concepts introduced in earlier ones. Chapter 1 is an orientational overview for those who have some background in linguistics and approaches to language use. It aims to show how the ‘bottom-up’ analytic focus of CA has yielded insights inaccessible to top-down methods. It is not intended to be an overview of various approaches, but rather assumes some knowledge of them in order to stake out the distinctive territory of CA. Chapter 2, on the origins of CA, and the rationale for CA transcription conventions, is relatively self-contained, so readers wishing to move straight to findings may wish to go straight from the Introduction to Chapter 3 and pick up Chapter 2 later. However, like the Introduction, Chapter 2 unavoidably – and designedly – looks ahead to material in other Chapters. Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 do, in particular, nevertheless, assume progression; Chapter 7 less so. In some places, it is inevitable that examination of the data in an earlier chapter makes reference to phenomena in a later chapter. This is particularly the case for Chapter 7, on repair. In the same way that repair is potentially relevant at any moment – it occurs in the course of many exchanges throughout the book – so Chapter 7 may be potentially relevant at any moment. It is thus relatively independent and can be read for clarification regarding repair at any earlier stage. Chapter 8, the Conclusion, returns to the issues raised in the Introduction, Chapter 1. There is a certain amount of cross-referencing between chapters – data excerpts being examined in one chapter may include phenomena pertinent to discussion in another, and so in some cases, an excerpt in one chapter is re-examined with a different lens in another.

As an introduction to CA, this book does not aim to be comprehensive and has had to be selective. The references should provide a guide for further reading. The most useful collections of primary sources are Atkinson and Heritage (1984), Lerner (2004), Drew and Heritage (2006, 2013). Sidnell and Stivers (2013) is a collection of specialist overviews. With respect to specific topics, Schegloff (2007a) is the baseline resource for sequence organisation, and Hayashi et al. (2013) is a cross-linguistic collection of work on repair. Sidnell (2009) is a cross-linguistic collection on a variety of topics. Linguistically informed collections include Ochs et al. (1996), Selting and Couper-Kuhlen (2001), Ford et al. (2002), Hakulinen and Selting (2005), Szczepek Reed and Raymond (2013) and Thompson et al. (2015). Couper-Kuhlen and Selting (1996) and Barth-Weingarten et al. (2010) focus on prosody and Couper-Kuhlen and Ford (2004) on phonetics. For CA in institutional settings, Drew and Heritage (1992) and Heritage and Clayman (2010) are the places to start.

CA work appears in a number of journals, including *Language in Society*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Discourse and Society*, *Discourse Studies* and *Text and*

*Talk*, but its home base has become *Research on Language and Social Interaction*. There are two main international conferences where CA work is prominent: the International Conference on Conversation Analysis (ICCA), once every four years, and the biennial International Pragmatics Association Conference (IPRA), where CA represents a significant stream of work.

The International Society for Conversation Analysis (ISCA) is at: [isca.clubexpress.com](http://isca.clubexpress.com). ISCA is a professional association designed to serve the needs of researchers, both faculty and student, of language and social interaction across a variety of disciplines. In its own words, a major aim is to ‘encourage and enhance interdisciplinary research into the structure and dynamics of social interaction through the creation of a multi-disciplinary community of scholars’. The ISCA website contains useful links to other relevant professional associations, and to the academic journal *Research on Language and Social Interaction*. With respect to other online resources, there is a helpful CA tutorial established by Charles Antaki at <http://homepages.lboro.ac.uk/~ssca1/sitemenu.htm>.

The research materials databases originally set up by Paul ten Have have been an invaluable resource over many years and are continuously updated. These are the main page and bibliography pages for materials in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis: [http://emcawiki.net/Main\\_Page](http://emcawiki.net/Main_Page); [http://emcawiki.net/EMCA\\_bibliography\\_database](http://emcawiki.net/EMCA_bibliography_database).

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