

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31862-4 - Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis

Edited by J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage

Excerpt

[More information](#)

# 1. Introduction

JOHN HERITAGE

*University of Warwick*

J. MAXWELL ATKINSON

*University of Oxford*

The present collection adds to a growing range of studies that report on recent research into naturally occurring social action and interaction undertaken from a conversation analytic perspective. Foreshadowed by the investigative initiatives of Harold Garfinkel and Erving Goffman into the organization of everyday conduct, this perspective was extensively articulated in Harvey Sacks's privately circulated lectures and developed into a distinctive research literature in association with his collaborators, Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson.

The central goal of conversation analytic research is the description and explication of the competences that ordinary speakers use and rely on in participating in intelligible, socially organized interaction. At its most basic, this objective is one of describing the procedures by which conversationalists produce their own behavior and understand and deal with the behavior of others. A basic assumption throughout is Garfinkel's (1967:1) proposal that these activities – producing conduct and understanding and dealing with it – are accomplished as the accountable products of common sets of procedures.

This objective and its underlying assumption provide a basic means of analysis. Specifically, analysis can be generated out of matters observable in the data of interaction. The analyst is thus not required to speculate upon what the interactants hypothetically or imaginably understood, or the procedures or constraints to which they could conceivably have been oriented. Instead, analysis can emerge from observation of the conduct of the participants. Schegloff and Sacks have summarized the assumptions that guide this form of research, and the analytic resource thus provided:

We have proceeded under the assumption (an assumption borne out by our research) that in so far as the materials we worked with exhibited orderliness, they did so not only to us, indeed not in the first place for us, but for the co-participants who had produced

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31862-4 - Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis

Edited by J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 J. Heritage and J. M. Atkinson

them. If the materials (records of natural conversation) were orderly, they were so because they had been methodically produced by members of the society for one another, and it was a feature of the conversations we treated as data that they were produced so as to allow the display by the co-participants to each other of their orderliness, and to allow the participants to display to each other their analysis, appreciation and use of that orderliness. Accordingly, our analysis has sought to explicate the ways in which the materials are produced by members in orderly ways that exhibit their orderliness and have their orderliness appreciated and used, and have that appreciation displayed and treated as the basis for subsequent action. (1973:290)

Conversation analysts have tended to present their findings by showing regular forms of organization in a large variety of materials produced by a range of speakers. However, the explication of such forms is only part of the analytic process. Generally, the analyst will also take steps to demonstrate that the regularities are methodically produced and oriented to by the participants as normatively oriented-to grounds for inference and action. As part of this latter objective, the analysis of “deviant cases” – in which some proposed regular conversational procedure or form is *not* implemented or realized – is regularly undertaken. Integral to this analysis is the task of describing the role that particular conversational procedures play in relation to specific interactional activities. Beyond this task lie the wider objectives of describing, wherever possible given the current state of knowledge, the role that particular conversational procedures play in relation to one another and to other orders of conversational and social organization. The pursuit of these various aims has involved the formulation of a distinctive approach to data collection and of new attitudes toward its analysis.

### 1. The collection and analysis of data

Within conversation analysis there is an insistence on the use of materials collected from *naturally occurring* occasions of everyday interaction by means of audio- and video-recording equipment or film. This policy contrasts markedly with many of the traditional methods of data collection prominent in the social and behavioral sciences. Most obviously, it represents a departure both from the use of interviewing techniques in which the verbal reports of interview subjects are treated as acceptable surrogates for the observation of actual behavior and from the use of experimental methodologies in which the social scientist must neces-

sarily manipulate, direct, or otherwise intervene in the subjects' behavior. It also contrasts with observational studies in which data are recorded in field notes or with the use of precoded schedules. Finally, the empirical emphasis of the research program also breaks with those theoretical traditions in which native intuitions, expressed as idealized or invented examples, are treated as an adequate basis for making and debating analytic claims.

A number of factors inform the insistence on the use of recording technologies as a means of data collection over subjects' reports, observers' notes, or unaided intuitions. Anyone who is familiar with conversational materials or who examines the transcripts of talk used in this book will be vividly aware of the limitations of recollection or intuition in generating data by comparison with the richness and diversity of empirically occurring interaction. Virtually none of the data of this volume could conceivably be the product of recollection or intuitive invention, nor, as Sacks points out in Chapter 2, would such invented "data" prove persuasive as *evidence* relevant to the analysis of interaction. Data of this sort can always be viewed as the implausible products of selective processes involving recollection, attention, or imagination.

A parallel range of considerations emerges in connection with the use of experimentally produced data. Experimental procedures are generally successful to the extent that, through experimental manipulation, behavioral variation is limited to those aspects selected for investigation under controlled conditions. In this context, it is the experimenter who must determine the relevant dependent and independent variables, and the experimenter's formulation of these variables will tend to be restricted by what he or she can anticipate on an intuitive basis. Yet without previous exposure to a range of naturally occurring interactional data, the experimenter is unlikely to anticipate the range, scope, and variety of behavioral variation that might be responsive to experimental manipulation, nor will he or she be in a position to extrapolate from experimental findings to real situations of conduct. By the same token, while certain of the experimenter's data may or may not be artifacts of the more general experimental situation in which the data were produced, such influences (if any) can be determined only by systematic comparison with a large corpus of naturally occurring data. The most economical procedure, therefore, has been to work on naturally occurring materials from the outset. Naturally occurring interaction presents an immense range of circumstances – effectively amounting to a "natural laboratory" – for the pursuit of hunches and the investigation of the limits of particular formulations by systematic comparison.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31862-4 - Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis

Edited by J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 4 J. Heritage and J. M. Atkinson

A further, more general issue is raised by the previous observations. Conversation analytic researchers have come to an awareness that only the smallest fraction of what is used and relied on in interaction is available to unaided intuition. Conversation analytic studies are thus designed to achieve systematic analyses of what, at best, is intuitively known and, more commonly, is tacitly oriented to in ordinary conduct. In this context, nothing that occurs in interaction can be ruled out, *a priori*, as random, insignificant, or irrelevant. The pursuit of systematic analysis thus requires that recorded data be available, not only for repeated observation, analysis, and reanalysis, but also for the public evaluation of observations and findings that is an essential precondition for analytic advance. Therefore in both the original work and its collective assessment, the analytic intuitions of research workers are developed, elaborated, and supported by reference to bodies of data and collections of instances of phenomena. In this process, an analytic culture has gradually developed that is firmly based in naturally occurring empirical materials.

In sum, the use of recorded data serves as a control on the limitations and fallibilities of intuition and recollection; it exposes the observer to a wide range of interactional materials and circumstances and also provides some guarantee that analytic conclusions will not arise as artifacts of intuitive idiosyncrasy, selective attention or recollection, or experimental design. The availability of a taped record enables *repeated* and *detailed* examination of particular events in interaction and hence greatly enhances the range and precision of the observations that can be made. The use of such materials has the additional advantage of providing hearers and, to a lesser extent, readers of research reports with *direct* access to the data about which analytic claims are being made, thereby making them available for public scrutiny in a way that further minimizes the influence of individual preconceptions. Finally, because the data are available in raw form, they are cumulatively reusable in a variety of investigations and can be reexamined in the light of new observations or findings. Each recording necessarily preserves a very substantial range of interactional phenomena, and an initial noticing of any one of these can motivate a search through other data for similar occurrences which were previously overlooked or the significance of which had remained unrecognized. Such a research process is possible only by virtue of the fact that the data-collection procedure is not constrained by a specific research design or by reference to some particular hypothesis.

This approach to data collection and use is closely associated with significant innovations in the way everyday behavior is researched.<sup>1</sup>

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31862-4 - Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis

Edited by J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Rather than studying single utterances or actions as the isolated products of individuals having particular goals or communicative intents, the analyses presented in this book, without exception, focus on uncovering the *socially organized features of talk in context*, with a major focus on action sequences. Although the central research topic of these essays – conversational interaction – might seem to render this focus on sequence self-recommending, it represents a sufficiently substantial departure from accepted practices, both within linguistics and sociology, to require some further comment.

## 2. The focus on sequential analysis

The development of speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) in linguistics has greatly forwarded the view that utterances can be usefully analyzed as conventionally grounded social actions. However, this viewpoint has developed within a disciplinary matrix which gives analytic primacy to the isolated sentence, and in which sentence analysis is conducted in terms of syntactic and semantic features that are themselves treated as independent of discursive considerations.<sup>2</sup> The net result is an approach to speech acts that in the first place seeks to establish the act accomplished by an utterance considered in isolation – the “literal meaning” of the utterance – and then proceeds to account for variations in the meaning or uptake of the utterance according to variations of the circumstances in which it is uttered (Gordon and Lakoff 1971; Searle 1975).<sup>3</sup> This mode of analysis has been the object of sustained criticism within the literature of conversation analysis from Sacks’s earliest lectures onward.<sup>4</sup> Its many difficulties (Levinson 1979, 1981a, 1981b) ultimately derive, as Schegloff (Chapter 3) points out, from the failure of its proponents to grasp that utterances are *in the first instance* contextually understood by reference to their placement and participation within sequences of actions. For conversation analysts, therefore, it is sequences and turns within sequences, rather than isolated sentences or utterances, that have become the primary units of analysis. This focus on participant orientation to the turn-within-sequence character of utterances in conversational interaction has significant substantive and methodological consequences.

At the substantive level, conversation analytic research into sequence is based on the recognition that, in a variety of ways, the production of some current conversational action proposes a here-and-now definition of the situation to which subsequent talk will be oriented. Comparatively straightforward instances of this process occur when a current turn

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31862-4 - Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis

Edited by J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 J. Heritage and J. M. Atkinson

projects a relevant next action, or range of actions, to be accomplished by another speaker in the next turn – a phenomenon generically referenced as the “sequential implicativeness” of a turn’s talk (Schegloff and Sacks 1973:296). In its strongest form, this projection of a relevant next action may be accomplished by the production of the first-pair part of an “adjacency-pair” structure (*ibid.*), such as “greeting–greeting,” “question–answer,” or “invitation–acceptance/rejection.”

Once it is recognized that some current or “first” action projects some appropriate “second,” it becomes relevant to examine the various ways in which a second speaker may accomplish such a second, or analyzably withhold its accomplishment, or avoid its accomplishment by undertaking some other activity. If it can then be shown that the producers of the first action deal in systematically organized ways with a variety of alternative seconds (or a noticeably absent second), then it will also be demonstrated that the object of investigation is an institutionalized organization for the activity in question that is systematically oriented to by speakers.

These observations can be generalized outward from the comparatively simple adjacency-pair organization by remarking that virtually every utterance (excluding “response cries” [Goffman 1981] but including initial utterances) occurs at some structurally defined place in talk (see Schegloff, Chapter 3). Thus the vast majority of utterances occur as selections from a field of possibilities made relevant by some prior utterance, and in their turn project a range of possible “nexts.” Most utterances, therefore, can be analyzed as dealing with a prior in some way and, among other things, as indicating their producers’ preparedness to forward, acquiesce in, or resist the course of action aimed at by an earlier speaker. Self-evidently, considerations concerning the regulation of social relationships are raised by these issues (Goffman 1955, 1963, 1964, 1971). It follows, then, that just as the “literal meaning” of a sentence cannot be determined by reference to a “null context” (Garfinkel 1967; Garfinkel and Sacks 1970; Searle 1979, 1980), so too no empirically occurring utterance ever occurs outside, or external to, some specific sequence. Whatever is said will be said in some sequential context, and its illocutionary force will be determined by reference to what it accomplishes in relation to some sequentially prior utterance or set of utterances. As long as a state of talk prevails, there will be no escape or timeout from these considerations. And, insofar as unfolding sequences and their constituent turns are unavoidable analytic concerns for interactants, they provide a powerful and readily accessible point of entry into the unavoidable contextedness of actual talk.

All of the chapters in the present book deal with the systematically organized workings of interaction sequences. The particular activities studied vary widely from the organization of gaze and bodily comportment in relation to turns at talk (described in the chapters by Schegloff, Goodwin, and Heath); through the sequencing of laughter (Jefferson), particle use (Heritage), the structuring of sequences involving assessments (Pomerantz), proposals (Davidson), invitations (Drew), sequences in which topics are initiated (Button and Casey) or shifted (Jefferson); to the rhetorical techniques of public speakers (Atkinson). In all cases, however, basic structural forms for the activities in question are outlined, their logic is described and variations or more complex cases are discussed. Throughout, the authors show the normative organization of and orientation to the standard sequences as structures of activity and how particular sequential variations can be understood with reference to the ways in which they display a sensitivity to their interactional contexts (e.g., by being specifically designed for some particular recipient [Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974:727]). And, although a shorthand “intentionalist” language is employed in these chapters, the perspective focuses on the underlying structures informing the interpretation and treatment of a speaker’s action by a recipient and maintains, except in specific cases, a relatively agnostic stance on the question of how far the speaker consciously aimed at some particular interpretation. This agnosticism is consistent with the proposal that the objects of study are institutionalized structures of talk that are oriented to by speakers with varying degrees of reflexive awareness.

### **3. Sequential organization: methodological aspects**

At the methodological level, that speakers understand an utterance by reference to its turn-within-sequence character provides a central resource for both the participants and the overhearing analyst to make sense of the talk. A number of points can be made in this connection.

First, it is a general finding within conversation analytic studies that talk analyzably proceeds on a turn-by-turn basis and that “generally, a turn’s talk will be heard as directed to a prior turn’s talk, unless special techniques are used to locate some other talk to which it is directed” (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974:728). Moreover, given that each next turn at talk is heard as directed to the prior, its producer will generally be heard to display an analysis, understanding, or appreciation of the prior turn’s talk that is exhibited in his or her responsive treatment of it (see Schegloff, Chapter 3).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31862-4 - Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis

Edited by J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 J. Heritage and J. M. Atkinson

Thus in the following two sequences the same individual (J) is the recipient of information from different coparticipants about the recent arrival of furniture:

## (1) [Rah:B:1:(11):3:(R)]

- A: the two beds'v come this mo:rnɪŋ. the new  
be:ds. ·hɦɦɦ An:d uh b't o<sub>l</sub>nly one  
 J: → that wz °quick them comɪŋ.<sup>o</sup> [↑Ih b't that wz ↓quick  
 A: Not too ba:d. B't thez only one ma:tres ↓with it.

## (2) [Rah:B:1:(12):1:(R)]

- I: the things 'ev arrived from Ba:rkɜ:'n  
Stone'ou:se,  
 J: |Oh:::.  
 (.)  
 J: → O<sub>h</sub> c'n a<sub>h</sub> c'm rou:nd, hɦ  
 I: |A n ' |Ye<sub>s</sub>: [please] that's, w't=  
 |ha [h\_a] ·a : h]  
 I: =I wantche tih come rou:nd.

Here it can be noticed that while the two “informings” are rather similar in character, J’s subsequent treatment of them evidences quite different analyses of their implicativeness. Whereas she treats the first as the occasion for a comment about the speed with which an order was delivered, she treats the second as implicating that her informant wants her to come and inspect/admire the new furniture by preempting a (possibly) forthcoming invitation (see Drew, Chapter 6, for a discussion of this and related examples).

The point here, and it is a crucial one, is that however a recipient analyzes these informings and whatever the interpretative conclusions of such an analysis, *some conclusion will be displayed in the recipient’s next turn at talk*. Thus whereas J’s assessment of the events reported in the first informing treats the latter as plain news, her self-invitation in response to the second treats it as implicating her informant’s desire to have her come round. And these treatments of the prior turn are available and publicly visible as the means by which first speakers can determine how they were understood. Thus the sequential next-positioned linkage between any two actions is a critical resource by which a first speaker can determine the sense that a second made of his or her utterance. Schegloff and Sacks’s observations concerning paired utterances can thus be generalized to next-positioned utterances as well:



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31862-4 - Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis

Edited by J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

By an adjacently produced second, a speaker can show that he understood what a prior aimed at, and that he is willing to go along with that. Also, by virtue of the occurrence of an adjacently produced second, the doer of a first can see that what he intended was indeed understood, and that it was or was not accepted. Also, of course, a second can assert his failure to understand, or disagreement, and, inspection of a second by a first can allow the first speaker to see that while the second thought he understood, indeed he misunderstood. It is then through the use of adjacent positioning that appreciations, failures, correctings, et cetera can themselves be understandably attempted. (Schegloff and Sacks 1973:297–8)<sup>5</sup>

It needs only to be added that, just as a second speaker's analysis and treatment of the prior is available to the first speaker, so it is also available to overhearers of the talk, including social scientists. The latter may thus proceed to analyze turns at talk, together with the analyses and treatments of them that are produced by the parties to the talk, and employ methodologies that fully take account of these analyses and treatments. Students of talk are thus provided with a considerable advantage that is unavailable to analysts of isolated sentences or other "text" materials that cannot be analyzed without hypothesizing or speculating about the possible ways in which utterances, sentences, or texts might be interpreted.

This discussion can now be further generalized by the observation that the second speaker can subsequently, by looking to the next turn in the sequence, determine the adequacy of the understanding and treatment of a prior displayed in his or her own turn. This observation can be pursued by noticing, firstly, that one option pervasively open to the first speaker after any second turn is explicitly to correct or repair any misunderstanding displayed in the second speaker's turn. A rather clear instance of this kind of "third position repair" (Schegloff 1979c) is the following:

(3) [CDHQ:I:52]

- A: Which on::s are closed, an' which ones are open.  
 Z: Most of 'em. This, this [this, this ((pointing))  
 A: → [I 'on't mean on the  
       shelters, I mean on the roads.

In this case, Z's analysis of the prior question as referring to the shelters (as displayed in what he says and the direction pointed to) is explicitly

## 10 J. Heritage and J. M. Atkinson

corrected by the first speaker in an overlapping next turn. This example illustrates a general phenomenon, namely, that after any second action the producer of the first action has an opportunity to repair any misunderstanding of the first that may have been displayed in the second. Given the generic availability of this procedure, any second speaker may look to a third action to see whether this opportunity was taken and, if it was not, to conclude that the analysis and treatment displayed in his or her own second turn was adequate. Any third action, therefore, that implements some normal onward development of a sequence confirms the adequacy of the displayed understandings in the sequence so far.<sup>6</sup> By means of this framework, speakers are released from what would otherwise be the endless task of explicitly confirming and reconfirming their understandings of one another's actions.

Viewed in these terms, it can be seen that J's treatments of the informings instanced in (1) and (2) were confirmed as adequate. Thus in (1), her assessment is briefly (and downgradedly [see Pomerantz, Chapter 4]) corroborated by A, who subsequently goes on to detail a misadventure with the delivery of the beds (which was initiated, and then abandoned, in A's first turn). Although, as it turns out in the light of the subsequent detailing, J's assessment was produced a little prematurely, its treatment of the prior informing as plain news is nonetheless confirmed as adequate in the subsequent talk. Similarly, in (2), I's treatment of J's self-invitation confirms that J's "coming round" was indeed what was desired.

It may be added here that these observations concerning the maintenance of intersubjective understanding in talk do not simply apply to occasions in which a second speaker evidences an understanding of the activity (e.g., an invitation, complaint, accusation, etc.) accomplished with a prior turn at talk. They also apply to other aspects or dimensions of speakers' activities that also, in a variety of ways, display some analysis of the state of the talk. For example, when a speaker initiates a new topic or direction for talk that is disjoined from what precedes it, the speaker exhibits an analysis that "then and there" is an appropriate place for something new to be raised, something that may, once again, be confirmed or resisted in the next turn. And studies of such initiations will reveal systematic features to which they are oriented, alternative means of initiation, ways in which such initiations are worked at, and so on (cf. Button and Casey, Chapter 8; Jefferson, Chapter 9).

Although we have focused on the methodological value of sequential considerations in relation to the analysis of responsive utterances, the examination of sequences can also prove a valuable resource in investigating the design features of utterances that are initiatory of (or even