USING CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

for BUSINESS *and* MANAGEMENT STUDENTS

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UNDERSTANDING CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

In this chapter we explore CA's theoretical roots and outline its core theoretical assumptions. It is important that you understand these in order to:

- Decide whether CA fits with your research interests
- Ensure that CA's theoretical stance is consistent with your own perspective
- Ensure that, if you use CA, your analysis is consistent with the expectations of the intellectual community, including practising conversation analysts.

We will begin by explaining how the work of the sociologists Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel influenced the development of CA. We will then turn to consider the role of theorising in CA before outlining the key theoretical assumptions on which CA research is based.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

CA emerged in the late 1960s in an intellectual context shaped by the perspectives developed by the American sociologists Erving Goffman (1922–1982) and Harold Garfinkel (1917–2011). Harvey Sacks (like his close collaborator Emanuel Schegloff) was a sociology student of Goffman at the University of California, Berkeley and was influenced by Goffman's theoretical position in relation to the importance of everyday social interaction. Crucially, Sacks also had an ongoing intellectual and personal relationship with Garfinkel that began in 1959 and was sustained through the early

1970s (Schegloff, 1992d: xiii). As we indicated in Chapter 1, CA emerged to a significant degree through Sacks' engagement with Garfinkel's ethnomethodological studies of the practices and methods through which people render everyday social actions and activities intelligible. CA is widely regarded as an offshoot of ethnomethodology, although the relationship between CA and ethnomethodology has become less clear-cut over the last 50 years, as CA has evolved and cascaded across a range of academic disciplines and fields of study.

Erving Goffman: The Interaction Order

Erving Goffman was one of the most perceptive sociological observers of the dynamics of everyday life and his contribution to sociology is immense. Goffman's core achievement (see Goffman, 1955, 1983) was to establish that social interaction is a form of social institution in its own right that can be analysed like other social institutions, such as education, the family and religion. Goffman described the institution of social interaction as 'the interaction order', a body of largely tacit conventions (such as salutations) that members of society are normally expected to follow when interacting with each other in face-to-face situations involving two or more people (Goffman, 1983). For Goffman, these conventions (norms and rituals) constitute the grammar of social interaction in that they structure the relationship between the social actions of people who are in each other's presence. According to Goffman, social interactions are driven not by social actors' individual intentions and motivations but rather by their management of these situational conventions. Goffman (1967: 2) used the following dictum to summarize his stance: 'I assume that the proper study of interaction is not the individual and his psychology, but rather the syntactical relations amongst the acts of different persons mutually present to one another.' Goffman argued that the interaction order occupies a foundational status in relation to other institutions in society – including political, economic, educational and legal social institutions – because the operations of other institutions are largely transacted through the practices that comprise the institution of social interaction.

Goffman's brilliant insights influenced the early development of CA in that they provided legitimacy for the study of the details of everyday social interaction. His perspective remained distinct from CA, however. One reason for this is that Goffman's work primarily involved theoretical analyses, in which he used data/evidence in a rather loose manner to illustrate the conceptual schemes he devised for ordering the social world (Schegloff, 1988). This stands in marked contrast to CA, which emphasizes the importance of rigorous empirical analysis of real-time audio or video recordings of naturally occurring interaction and eschews a priori theorizing by researchers.

Another important difference between Goffman's work and CA is that whereas CA immediately made use of audio and video recording technologies, Goffman disavowed

both. Virtually none of his examples are transcripts of recorded interactions of naturally occurring talk-in-interaction, the major exception being his essay on radio talk (Goffman, 1981). Goffman continued to rely on observation, field notes and excerpted materials from reports of others, including journalists, novelists and playwrights. In some instances, he also used hypothetically constructed examples.

Harold Garfinkel: Practical Theorizing in Everyday Practices

As we noted in Chapter 1, Harold Garfinkel (1967) was the founder of ethnomethodology, an approach to studying social life that offers a distinctive perspective on the nature and origins of social order by focusing on the tacit shared methods of practical reasoning ('ethno methods') that social actors use to achieve shared understandings of the social world. Ethnomethodology rejects 'top-down' theories that explain the organization of everyday life in terms of larger overarching cultural or social structural phenomena. Adopting a 'bottom-up' approach, ethnomethodology focuses on the emergent achievement of social order that results from the concerted efforts of social actors within everyday encounters. This involves analysts revealing the multiplicity of tacit methods of reasoning (or procedures) that social actors use to produce and interpret social actions, situations, and structures and to thereby maintain shared understandings of the social world. As Heritage (2001: 913) observes: 'These methods are procedural in character, they are socially shared and they are ceaselessly used during every waking moment to recognize ordinary social objects and events.'

Social science is generally characterized by the adherence to particular research paradigms and general theories which are underpinned by distinctive philosophical assumptions regarding ontology (assumptions about the nature of reality), epistemology (how the researcher comes to understand that reality through the development of knowledge) and methodology (the specific methods that can be used to try to find out about the world). Box 2.1 below summarizes five common research paradigms in the social sciences.

Ethnomethodology is commonly regarded as a form of phenomenology or social constructionism, which can be located within the interpretivist paradigm. However, Garfinkel completely rejected this characterization of his approach to the study of everyday life, and he objected to all attempts to locate ethnomethodology within the mainstream research paradigms in the social sciences. Garfinkel adopted a principled agnosticism with regard to research paradigms and social theory, such as those included in Box 2.1; he referred to this as adopting an attitude of 'ethnomethodological indifference'. Garfinkel's aim was to elucidate the practices and methods through which people produce and interpret social actions and activities in particular settings without distorting them through the use of concepts, which a social theorist might bring to the analysis from outside those settings.

Table 2.1 Common research paradigms

Paradigm or philosophical framework	Ontology Assumptions about the status of social reality	Epistemology Assumptions about the grounds of knowledge	Methodology The way in which research is to be conducted
Positivism	Realist Assumes that there is an objective social reality 'out there' that is independent from human perceptual or cognitive structures	Representational Assumes people can objectively observe the social world	Hypothetico-deductive Assumes that science should focus exclusively on directly observable phenomena, without any reference to the subjective Generally involves testing theories and hypotheses, using quantitative methods
Qualitative neo-positivism	Realist Assumes that there is an objective social reality 'out there' that is independent from human perceptual or cognitive structures	Representational Assumes people can objectively or neutrally observe the social world	Qualitative Rejects two key aspects of positivism: the use of hypothetico-deductive methodology and the exclusion of the subjective as meaningless Involves the use of qualitative methods to investigate intersubjective cultural processes by gathering facts from what is purported to be a readily observable external social world
Interpretivism	Relativist Assumes that what we regard as social reality is a social construction built upon the perceptions and actions of social actors, although social actors are not generally aware of their role in these processes	Subjectivist Rejects the possibility of neutral observation and focuses instead on human interpretations and understandings	Qualitative Focuses on the interpretations and meanings individuals give to social situations
Critical Realism	Realist Assumes that there is an objective social reality 'out there' that is independent from human perceptual or cognitive structures	Post-positivist Assumes that our ability to apprehend social reality is imperfect and shaped by our cultural assumptions. Claims about reality may therefore be more or less accurate	Quantitative and qualitative Stresses the importance of multiple measures and observations and the use of triangulation across these multiple sources in order to develop descriptions that are as objective as possible
Critical theory	Historical/Relativist Assumes there is a social reality that is socially constructed and taken to be natural or real, which is shaped over time by ideological, social, cultural, political and economic forces and values	Modified subjectivist Assumes that knowledge is not value free. It is socially constructed and influenced by power relations from within society	Qualitative Oriented towards critiquing and changing society, using qualitative methods

From Garfinkel's seminal work, CA adopted the notion that people unavoidably use and rely on a range of tacit practices and procedures (ethnomethods) to produce and recognize mutually intelligible contributions to social interaction. Moreover, like ethnomethodology, CA adopted a 'bottom-up' approach to research and an aversion to a priori theorizing (Maynard and Clayman, 1991). However, the question of how closely CA and ethnomethodology are now connected is open to debate. The fact that CA is concerned with building a naturalistic, observation-based empirical science of human social interaction has attracted criticism from some ethnomethodologists who suggest that this is inconsistent with ethnomethodology's core principles. Moreover, the subsequent development of CA research suggests that it has evolved partially independently of ethnomethodology. As Maynard and Clayman (2003: 176) observe:

> Substantively, ethnomethodology's broad concern with diverse forms of practical reasoning and embodied action contrasts with the conversation analytic focus on the comparatively restricted domain of talk-in-interaction and its various constituent activity systems (e.g. turn taking, sequencing, repair, gaze direction, institutional specializations). Methodologically, ethnomethodology's use of ethnography and quasi-experimental demonstrations contrasts with the emphasis on audio- and videorecordings of naturally occurring interaction within CA.

Ten Have (2012: Abstract) summarizes the relationship between CA and ethnomethodology in the following terms:

> There can be hardly any doubt that ethnomethodology has been a major influence in the emergence of conversation analysis (CA) as a unique perspective in the human sciences. Gradually, however, the two seem to have drifted apart. The current situation is ambiguous: For some of its practitioners, CA is still part of the ethnomethodological movement, while many others treat it as an independent pursuit.

Regardless of the precise nature of the relationship between CA and ethnomethodology, as Maynard and Clayman (1991: 397) conclude, 'bonds between the two areas run deep'.

THEORIZING IN CA

In adopting a 'bottom-up' approach to research and theorizing, CA researchers argue against a priori speculation and 'premature' theorizing in favour of detailed examination of participants' concrete actions. As noted in Chapter 1,

the actual and immediate conduct of speakers is treated as the central resource out of which analysis should develop. CA thus backgrounds analysts' theoretical concerns and concentrates instead on participants' orientations. As Schegloff (1997, 1999a, 1999b) argues, from the perspective of CA all interpretations must be grounded first in the actual talk and practices of the participants. The aim of the researcher should be to avoid applying theoretical frameworks to understand and explain aspects of social interaction; instead the researcher should focus exclusively on those things that are demonstrably oriented to by the participants themselves. Thus, as Maynard and Clayman (2003: 176) observe: 'Although conversation analysts are not averse to advancing theoretical claims, often of a highly general nature (Wilson and Zimmerman 1979: 67), every effort is made to ground such claims in the observable orientations that interactants themselves display to one other.'

In CA research, then, analysis never begins with explicit theoretical engagement by the researcher. Moreover, CA practitioners only invoke social categories such as gender, race and ethnicity insofar as they are oriented to by the participants in their talk. In other words, the analyst treats as relevant only that which the participants themselves display as relevant in their interaction. For example, in an analysis of a conversation between an elderly disabled male and a young female, the social constructs of age, disability and gender would only be used if it could be demonstrated that the participants themselves are orienting to them in their talk and/or nonverbal conduct. The analyst would have to show that these considerations coincide with the actual orientations of the participants who are performing the social actions and using the interactional practices that are being studied.

In summary, CA researchers seek to:

- Develop theoretical claims on the basis of rigorous analysis of recordings of naturally occurring social interaction
- Ground theoretical claims in the observable orientations that participants themselves display to each other as their interactions unfold in real time.

CORE THEORETICAL CLAIMS

Early CA research developed three theoretical claims about the social organization of talk-in-interaction that underpin all CA research and are intimately connected with the research techniques that CA researchers use (Heritage, 1984 (Ch. 8); Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). These theoretical propositions concern: (1) the performance of social actions in turns at talk, (2) the structural organization of social actions in talk-in-interaction and (3) the creation and maintenance of shared intersubjective understandings through talk-in-interaction.

1. Talk is Action

CA is based on the empirically derived theoretical proposition that when people talk to each other they perform social actions. Readily recognizable examples of social actions accomplished through talk include asking and answering (or declining to answer) a question, agreeing or disagreeing with someone, complaining, apologizing, making an invitation, declining an invitation, praising someone, thanking someone, telling and receiving news, and so on. This theoretical proposition chimes with the insights of ordinary language philosophers (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; Wittgenstein, 1953) who argued that everyday language involves the performance of social actions; however, CA adopted it on the basis of empirical analysis rather than as a result of philosophical considerations.

2. Action is Structurally Organized

Through detailed studies of recordings of naturally occurring talk, CA researchers have shown that, in accomplishing social actions, participants orient to rules and structures that facilitate the production and recognition of intelligible social actions. These rules and structures mainly concern the sequential relations between actions that are accomplished through turns at talk. Single acts are parts of larger, structurally organized entities referred to as sequences (Schegloff, 1995). The most basic and important sequence is called an 'adjacency pair' (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973), which is a sequence of two actions in which the first action ('first pair part'), performed by one participant, invites a particular type of second action ('second pair part'), to be performed by another participant. Typical examples of adjacency pairs include question–answer, invitation–acceptance/declination and request–grant/refusal. The relationship between the first and second pair parts of adjacency pairs is normative: if the second pair part is not forthcoming, the first speaker may, for example, justifiably repeat the first action, complain or seek explanations for why the second action is missing (Atkinson and Drew, 1979: 52–7). As we shall see in Chapter 3, there are other types of sequential structure too. Basically, any current turn at talk (action performed by a speaker) sets the coordinates for the relevant choices for the next turn (Heritage and Atkinson, 1984: 6). Of course, current actions never determine the next action (e.g. asking someone a question doesn't guarantee that they will answer it), but the next action is always produced and understood by reference to its occurrence at its particular slot in the conversation (i.e. after the current action).

3. Talk Creates and Maintains Intersubjective Reality

CA studies have also revealed how participants create and maintain a framework of intersubjective understanding on a moment-by-moment basis as their interactions

unfold in real time (Heritage and Atkinson, 1984: 11). CA focuses solely on meanings and understandings that are displayed through conversational action, and remains 'agnostic' with regards to participants' inner feelings, plans, intentions, motivations and the like (Heritage, 1984).

The intersubjective understandings that participants create and maintain at the 'conversational surface' concern:

- The social actions that participants perform in their turns at talk: CA proceeds on the basis that each and every turn at talk displays some level of understanding of the preceding turn, which the first speaker may subsequently accept as adequate/satisfactory or, alternatively, incorrect or problematic (Schegloff, 1992c) – for example, by saying 'I didn't mean to criticize you, I was just explaining the situation I am in.'
- The current state of the talk (Heritage and Atkinson, 1984: 10): for example, speakers display their understanding of when it is appropriate to initiate new lines of talk or initiate closure of an interaction. They may also display their understanding that their interaction is taking place to accomplish institutional activities (e.g. a medical consultation, a job interview or a performance appraisal review) and shape their actions accordingly.

THE USE OF CA IN DISCIPLINES AND FIELDS OF STUDY

Although CA emerged within the discipline of sociology, as noted in the previous chapter, it is now used by scholars operating in a host of disciplines and subject areas, including linguistics, psychology and anthropology, human–computer interaction (HCI), computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW) and business and management, amongst others. This has meant that in some cases researchers who do not necessarily have a strong link with sociology or ethnomethodology have made use of CA in their research. Nonetheless, studies that present themselves as involving the use of CA are generally underpinned by the philosophical and theoretical commitments introduced in this chapter. This applies to most, if not all, CA studies that have been conducted in the field of business and management research. As we shall see in Chapter 5, while these studies are formulated in terms of key issues in business and management research, they remain committed to the underlying assumptions of CA. Indeed, it is the fact that they do so which leads to them offering unique insights into the issues that are of concern to business and management researchers.

If you do come across studies that are described as CA but do not seem to be entirely consistent with the theoretical and methodological considerations we have identified, you should take this into account when assessing the strength and relevance of the work in question. Specifically, you should ask: Are the data of naturally occurring interactions? How were they collected? How might restrictions related to

access and the sensitivity of the interaction being recorded impact on the analysis? Furthermore, and this is a common failing of researchers using CA for the first time, to what extent is the analysis foregrounding what is said and how participants orient themselves to each other's turns rather than ex ante conceptual considerations? As we have emphasized earlier, CA is grounded in the practices and understandings participants display through their respective turns at talk at the 'conversational surface'. Researchers using CA have to constantly ensure they are not moving to speculations about the internal motivations and cognitive states of the participants.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Within this chapter we have highlighted the following points in relation to the development of CA and the theoretical assumptions on which it is based:

- CA emerged out of ethnomethodology, which seeks to understand social life in terms of participants' own orientations and practices without recourse to theoretical concepts developed by social scientists outside the particular settings and situations that are being studied.
- CA is also indebted to Erving Goffman who established that social interaction is not only a social institution in its own right but also underpins all other social institutions. However, CA is distinct from Goffman's approach because it insists on the use of audio and video recordings of naturally occurring talk-in-interaction and eschews a priori theorizing by researchers.
- For CA, it is necessary to remain focused on the practices, orientations and understandings that participants in interaction use and display as their interactions unfold. The analyst should therefore avoid imposing or relying upon 'external' academic theories and concepts in order to explain what is taking place in an interactional context. The theoretical insights generated by CA are firmly rooted in empirical analyses.
- CA studies share at least three basic theoretical propositions, which emerged from rigorous empirical studies of recordings of naturally occurring social interactions:
  - Talk is a vehicle through which people accomplish social actions
  - Participants in interaction render social actions in talk intelligible by orienting to tacit structures of action, which are termed sequences
  - Participants create and maintain a framework of publicly displayed intersubjective understanding at the conversational surface.
- CA is unique in the way in which it reveals how 'action', 'structure' and 'intersubjectivity' are practically achieved and managed in talk-in-interaction.