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Discourse and Conversation

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Discourse and Conversation

A major area of study in the analysis of discourse is conversation analysis. Conversation analysis looks at ordinary everyday spoken discourse and aims to understand, from a fine-grained analysis of the conversation, how people manage their interactions. It also looks at how social relations are developed through the use of spoken discourse. This chapter discusses the principles underlying conversation analysis. It then outlines procedures in transcribing and coding data. The chapter gives examples of the kinds of conversational strategies speakers use as well as providing examples of these in a number of different kinds of conversational interactions. Conversation analysis is an approach to the analysis of spoken discourse that looks at the way in which people manage their everyday conversational interactions. It examines how spoken discourse is organized and develops as speakers carry out these interactions. Conversation analysis has examined aspects of spoken discourse such as sequences of related utterances (adjacency pairs), preferences for particular combinations of utterances (preference organization), turn taking, feedback , repair, conversational openings and closings, discourse markers and response tokens. Conversation analysis works with recordings of spoken data and carries out careful and fine-grained analyses of this data.

5.1 Background to conversation analysis

Conversation analysis originated in the early 1960s at the University of California, Los Angeles. It has its origins in the ethnomethodological tradition of sociology and, in particular, the work of Garfinkel (e.g. 1967) and Goffman (e.g. 1981). Following on from this work Sacks (e.g. 1992, 2007) and his colleagues developed conversation analysis as: an approach to the study of social action which sought to investigate social order as it was produced through the practices of everyday talk. (Liddicoat 2011 : 4) Discourse and Conversation 91 Sacks had a particular interest in the orderly nature of talk and the ways in which there might be systematic commonalities in spoken interactions that occur across participants and contexts (Liddicoat 2011). Conversation analysis started with the examination of telephone calls made to the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Centre. This work then continued with the examination of more 'ordinary' telephone calls and conversations and has since been extended to include spoken interactions such as doctor–patient consultations, legal hearings, news interviews, psychiatric interviews and interactions in courtrooms and classrooms. Conversation analysis takes less of a 'linguistics' view of spoken discourse than some other forms of discourse analysis. This draws from its interest, in particular, in how language goes about performing social action. Conversation analysts are interested, in particular, in how social worlds are jointly constructed and recognized by speakers as they take part in conversational discourse.

Issues in conversation analysis

A key issue in conversation analysis is the view of ordinary conversation as the most basic form of talk. For conversation analysts, conversation is the main way in which people come together, exchange information, negotiate and maintain social relations. All other forms of talk-in-interaction are thus derived from this basic form of talk. It is not the case that other

forms of talks are the same as ordinary conversation. They do, however, exploit the same kinds of resources as 'ordinary conversation' to achieve their social and interactional goals. A further key feature of conversation analysis is the primacy of the data as the source of information. Analyses, thus, do not incorporate speakers' reflections on their interactions, field notes or interviews as ways of gathering information about the discourse. In the view of conversation analysts, the use of this kind of data represents idealizations about how spoken discourse works and is, thus, not valid data for analysis. Conversation analysis, thus, focuses on the analysis of the text for its argumentation and explanation, rather than consideration of psychological or other factors that might be involved in the production and interpretation of the discourse. One of the aims of conversation analysis is to avoid starting with assumptions about analytical categories in the analysis of conversational data. Conversation analysts, rather, look for phenomena which regularly occur in the data and then make that the point of further investigation. Interest is, in particular, in fine-tuned analysis of the sequence, structure and coherence of conversations. In this view, conversation is seen as being 'context-shaped' and 'context-renewing' in the sense that 'anything anyone says in conversation both builds on what has been said or what has been going on. . . [as well as] creates the conditions for what will be said next' (Gardner 1994 : 102). Conversation analysts, thus, aim to demonstrate how participants both produce and respond to evolving social contexts, using conversational, rather than contextual data, as the source for the claims it wishes to make.

Transcribing and coding conversation analysis data

In conversation analysis, the transcription of the data is also the analysis. Texts are, thus, recorded (either on tape or by video) then analysed at the same time as they are transcribed. If a particular feature such as the use of increased pitch or particular sequences of utterances becomes apparent in the analysis, this then becomes the starting point for further analysis. The analyst listens and transcribes to see how frequently this aspect of the conversation occurs and, importantly, if speakers respond to it in the same way each time it occurs. In this way, the analysis aims to understand how speakers manage their conversational interactions.

5.2 Transcription conventions

Particular transcription conventions are used in conversation analysis. The extract from *Sex and the City* that was discussed in Chapter 2 is presented here, transcribed from a conversation analysis perspective. The transcription conventions that are used in this analysis are based on the work of Jefferson (2004) and are shown as a key to the analysis at the end of the conversation:

Charlotte: you're getting engag[↑]ed Carrie: I threw up I saw the ring and I threw up (0.5) that's not normal. Samantha: that's my reaction to marriage. Miranda: what do you think you might do if he asks. Carrie: I don't know. Charlotte: just say ye::s:: Carrie: well (.) it hasn't been long enough (0.5) has it? Charlotte: Trey and I got engaged aft er only a month= Samantha: =how long before you separated. Charlotte: we're together NOW and that's what matters. (.) when it's right you just know Samantha: Carrie doesn't know . Carrie: Carrie threw up= Samantha: =so it might not be right. (King 2001)

Key ↑ shift into especially high pitch NOW especially loud sounds relative to the surrounding talk :: prolongation of the immediately prior sound (.) a brief interval (about a tenth of a second) within or between utterances (0.5) the time elapsed (by tenths of seconds) between the end of the utterance

or sound and the start of the next utterance or sound now stress = latched utterances – no break or gap between stretches of talk ? rising intonation . falling intonation , unfinished intonational contour

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The analysis, thus, shows a rising pitch in Charlotte's exclamation 'You're getting engaged!' The . at the end of this utterance indicates an ending with falling intonation, as with most of the other utterances in the conversation. There is no delay between Charlotte's statement and Carrie's response. There is, however, a .5 second pause in Carrie's response before she adds 'That's not normal'. Another speaker could have taken the conversation away from her at the point of the pause but they chose not to, allowing her to comment on what she had previously said. Charlotte's lengthened vowel in 'Just say yes' emphasizes the point she is making before Carrie replies with 'well' followed by a microsecond pause which allows her to hold the floor in the conversation, and a further .5 second pause before she invites a response from the others with her use of rising intonation and the tag question 'has it?' The next two lines are examples of latched utterances. That is, Samantha adds her comment to Charlotte's statement without allowing anyone else to intervene. The underlining and use of capitals in ' NOW ' in Charlotte's response to Samantha indicates both loud talk and word stress. Charlotte's microsecond pause, again, enables her to hold the floor so that no one is able to intervene and she is able to complete what she wants to say. If she had not done this, one of the other speakers could have taken the turn from her as her completed syntactic unit, intonational contour and 'completed action' would have indicated a point at which another speaker could have taken the turn; that is, a transition- relevance place (TRP) in the conversation. The final example of latched utterances shows that Samantha is able to project, in advance, that a TRP is approaching as Carrie is speaking and takes the floor from Carrie with her consent, and without difficulty. This analysis, thus, shows how Carrie and her friends manage their conversation in a cooperative manner. They let each other continue with what they want to say, rather than compete for a place in the conversation. It also shows the strategies they use when they want to take a turn in the conversation, such as not letting too much time to lapse before speaking, in case another speaker should take the turn.

5.3 Sequence and structure in conversation

A particular interest of conversation analysis is the sequence and structure of spoken discourse. Aspects of conversational interactions that have been examined from this perspective include conversational openings and closings, turn taking, sequences of related utterances ('adjacency pairs'), preferences for particular combinations of utterances ('preference organization'), feedback and conversational 'repair'. Opening conversations

One area where conversational openings have been examined in detail is in the area of telephone conversations. Schegloff analysed a large data set of telephone openings to come up with the following 'canonical opening' for American private telephone conversations: 94

Discourse Analysis A study carried out by O'Loughlin (1989) in Australia found a similar pattern for opening telephone conversations, except that in the Australian data the caller most frequently self-identified in their first turn after they had recognized their recipient rather than in the second turn, as in the American data. In a study of telephone openings in Mandarin Chinese, Yang (1997) found the speakers in her study also began their calls with summons/answer and identification/recognition sequences. The

greeting and 'how are you' sequences found in American and Australian phone calls, however, were less common or even absent in her data. The majority of the telephone openings she examined went straight from the identification/recognition sequence to the first topic of the conversation. Below is a typical example of the opening of telephone calls in Chinese. The double brackets surrounding the ring of the telephone indicates a sound that is not transcribed: ((ring)) summons Recipient: Wei? (Hello) answer Caller: Jinghong (Jinghong) identification Recipient: Ei (Yes) recognition (Source: Yang 1997 : 25) The following example from a radio call-in programme illustrates a further way of opening a conversation: Announcer: For husband Bruce of twenty-six years Carol has this dedication (.) So how are things going. Caller: Absolutely wonderful. Announcer: That's great to hear you're still happy. Caller: Oh yes (0.5) very much so. Announcer: And what's your dedication all about for Bruce. Caller: Well:: we're going away tomorrow to the Whitsundays (.) and (0.5) umm:: I'm looking forward to it very much and I know he is too:: for a break. ((ring)) summons/answer sequence Recipient: Hello Caller: Hi Ida? identification/recognition sequence Recipient: Yeah Caller: Hi, this is Carla= greeting sequence Recipient: =Hi Carla. Caller How are you. how are you sequence Recipient: Okay.. Caller: Good.= Recipient: =How about you. Caller: Fine. Don wants to know .. reason for call sequence (Source: Schegloff 1986 : 115)

Discourse and Conversation 95 In this conversation the announcer opens the conversation by saying who is on the line and what the conversation will be about. That is, his utterance introduces the caller to the listening audience and readies the speaker for being on-air and for discussing the topic of the call. The middle stage of the conversation is devoted to the topic of the call, finding the dedication that the caller will make. The conversation ends when the caller has provided the dedication and all the information that was asked for, completed a syntactic unit and employs falling intonation as a signal that she has completed her turn. The announcer does not take the opportunity to take another turn but instead plays the music dedicated to the caller's husband as his way of closing the conversation. He, thus, constrains what the caller can say, excluding the possibility of her bringing up other things that would cause a delay in moving on with the programme (Thornborrow 2001).