

I

Origins and Orientations

In this chapter we will first examine the broader intellectual contexts in which conversation analysis and discourse analysis emerged. This provides some historical background, and allows us to identify just how novel and radical these developments were: they offered new ways of doing sociology, and placed the empirical study of communication at the heart of the social science enterprise. We start with conversation analysis.

Conversation analysis

The mode of analysis which subsequently grew into CA began with a puzzle.

The style of work which has come to be known as conversation analysis is associated with the pioneering research of Harvey Sacks. As Schegloff reports in his introduction to the published collection of Sacks' lectures (Schegloff, 1992a), Sacks had been examining a corpus of recorded telephone calls to the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center. One of the tasks of the Center's staff was to try to obtain the caller's name; and on many occasions, if they gave their name, they found that the callers would then identify themselves in reply. In many cases, however, the Center's staff had difficulty getting callers to state who they were: callers would either not say their name after the Center's staff had introduced themselves; or later, when explicitly asked for their name, they would refuse to disclose it. For the Center, then, the problem was getting callers to reveal their names.

Schegloff notes that for Sacks, however, a different issue became pressing. Displaying the original and distinctive approach that came to characterise his work, Sacks began to wonder 'where, in the course of the conversation could you tell that somebody would not give their name' (1992, vol. I: 3). With this puzzle in mind, Sacks became interested in the following opening section from one of the calls, in which the caller (B) seemed to be having trouble with the agent's name.

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(1.1) (Sacks, 1992, vol. I: 3)

- A: this is Mr. Smith, may I help you
B: I can't hear you
A: This is Mr Smith
B: Smith

(You will notice that in A's second turn, the word 'Smith' is underlined. This indicates that the speaker has emphasised or stressed this word. In conversation analysis, transcripts try to capture not only what was said, but also the way it was said. Consequently, a series of symbols, such as underlining, have been used to capture, amongst other things, the way words are pronounced. We will discuss the rationale behind CA's distinctive approach to transcription later in this chapter; but at this point, it is advisable that readers consult the Appendix, in which CA transcription symbols are explained.)

Sacks began to examine the caller's utterance 'I can't hear you'. Instead of treating it as a straightforward report of a communication problem, he examined it to reveal what it might be doing. In particular, he wondered if this utterance was produced so as to allow the caller to avoid giving his name, while not explicitly having to refuse to do so. With this question, Sacks raised the possibility of investigating utterances as objects which speakers use to get things done in the course of their interactions with others.

Sacks observes that there are norms concerning where in conversation certain kinds of activities should happen; and in conversation between strangers names tend to be exchanged in initial turns. Developing this, Sacks argues that the caller is using the utterance 'I can't hear you' to fill the slot in the conversation where it would be expected that he return his name. However, he has not had to refuse to give his name: instead he has used that slot to initiate what is called a repair sequence, which is a short series of turns in which some 'trouble' (in this case, 'not hearing') is resolved. By doing 'not hearing', the caller has been able to move the conversation on from that point at which he might be expected to give his name. In this case, then, the caller's expression of an apparent hearing difficulty is a method by which he could accomplish the activity of 'not giving a name' without explicitly refusing to do so.

Sacks was not claiming that on every occasion when someone says 'I can't hear you' they are avoiding giving their name; nor was he saying that doing 'not hearing' was the only method of avoiding giving a name. He was simply noting that it was possible to analyse how, in this instance, this particular utterance performed this particular activity in this particular slot, or place in the interaction.

It is important to focus on the idea that there are slots in interaction where specific kinds of actions are appropriate, or expected. This is because it allows us to grasp the idea that verbal interaction has a structure, an architecture, which can be formally described by reference to the relationship between the actions our utterances perform. To illustrate this further, think of the number

of utterance activities that seem to occur in pairs. As Sacks notes in his very first lecture, there are paired units such as greetings ('hi' – 'hi'); questions and answers; invitations and responses, and so on. We will discuss these paired units more formally in a later chapter, but the point to remember is that these paired actions seem to go together: answers seem appropriate responses to questions and so on. So much so that if a question has been asked and an answer is not offered, there seems to have been a minor breakdown in expectations which underpin interpersonal interaction. Look at the following data fragment which comes from a corpus of calls to the British Airways flight information service:

(1.2) (From Wooffitt *et al.*, 1997: 80. 'A' is the (female) British Airways agent, 'C' is the (male) caller, a member of the public. Modified transcript.)

- 1 A: British Airways flight information
 2 can I help you
 3 (1.3)
 4 A: hel↑lo
 5 C: hello
 6 A: can I help you at al-l sir?
 7 C: -oh yes (.) erm: I've got
 8 a note here to sort of find out about ehm:
 9 (1)
 10 a flight from Gatwick

The BA agent has offered a service ('can I help you?') and the response is an acceptance or refusal; and as the caller has called the flight information service one can presume that he or she requires some kind of service. But there is no immediate response. Instead, after a delay of 1.3 seconds, the agent speaks again, saying 'hello' with a rising intonation.

This 'hello' is an economical utterance, as it performs two actions. First, it acts as a check if the line is still live (as in 'hello – is there anybody there?'). But it also addresses the possibility that the line is live but the caller is momentarily distracted and has not realised they have been connected (as in 'hello – I'm here'). The subsequent exchanges suggest that the caller had not realised he had been connected: he responds with another 'hello' and then the agent reissues the offer of a service and the caller then produces the request for information.

This reveals a lot about the architecture of interaction, and the attendant expectations. The agent has performed the action of offering a service, and the expected next action is an acceptance of the offer: in this case, a request for information. But this response is not forthcoming. The agent does not, however, simply connect to another call, but actively seeks a response: her 'hello' is designed to check that the line is still working, or perhaps to signal to a distracted caller that they have got through. The agent's action demonstrates her assumption that her turn created a slot in the world for a particular kind

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of next action from the caller; and that its absence is a noticeable and accountable matter: something which requires investigation and resolving.

When we talk, we produce utterances which perform actions, which in turn invite particular next kinds of actions (or which at least limit the range of actions which can come next without seeming unusual). In this sense, verbal interaction exhibits a structure: the shape and form of the ways in which contributions to interaction form a connected series of actions. And one of the tasks of conversation analysis is to discover and describe the architecture of this structure: the properties of the ways in which interaction proceeds through activities produced through successive turns.

Now compare this to a 'common sense' model of language and communication (and one that held sway in academic research for many decades): that it is simply a medium through which we pass thoughts (ideas, intentions, directions, information) between each other. In this model, language is simply a mechanism which transports cognitive 'stuff' between individual brains, and which is therefore a relatively unimportant feature of this process. And this is why Sacks' insights were so extraordinary: his preliminary observations on activities conducted in the opening exchanges in the call to the Suicide Prevention Center indicated that language in interaction had a *social* organisation with formal properties which were independent of whatever information might be in transit between the brains of the participants.

Sacks' initial observations on interaction were drawn from his analysis of the calls to the Suicide Prevention Center and recordings of therapy sessions with juvenile offenders. However, he and his colleagues, Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, soon began to examine recordings of what might be termed mundane conversation. Their work began with the assumption that turns – lengthy utterances, phrases, clauses, or even single words – were systematically designed objects which performed some activities in interaction. The goal of analysis, then, was to investigate the nature of these objects – how they were designed, what they did, where in interaction they occurred, how they were connected to prior turns, and their implications for subsequent turns – and to describe the underlying organisation of the way interaction unfolded on a turn-by-turn basis.

The interest in how turns connected to each other led to a focus on *sequences* in interaction: regularities in the patterns of activities. To illustrate briefly we will examine the sequential organisation of two related kinds of events: starting and ending telephone conversations.

(It should be noted that what follows is taken from analyses of conversations on static or land line telephones, where the called party does not know who is calling. Some of the following observation, therefore, would not apply to interaction on mobile or cell phones, in which the handset identifies the caller by name or number.)

The following extract is taken from Schegloff's (1986) study of the stages in the openings of telephone interaction, and comes from a call between two friends.

(1.3) (From Schegloff, 1986: XXX)

- 1 (*Telephone ringing*)
 2 Nancy: H'Illo?
 3 Hyla: Hi:,
 4 Nancy: Hi:.
 5 Hyla: How are yuhh=
 6 Nancy: =Fi:ne how er you,
 7 Hyla: Oka:-y,
 8 Nancy: -Goo:d,
 9 (0.4)
 10 Hyla: .mkhhh -hh
 11 Nancy: -What's doin',

This extract illustrates what Schegloff (1986) calls 'core' phases of openings in telephone calls, each of which is organised around pairs of activities. First there is a summons-answer sequence (lines 1 and 2): the telephone acts as a summons and the called party responds accordingly. Then there is an identification–recognition sequence (lines 3 and 4), in this case achieved by voice recognition of the two 'Hi' components, thus obviating the need to state or check identities; and then there follows a sequence of reciprocated 'howareyou's', at which point the caller moves to the first topic of the conversation: 'What's doin'',. Schegloff shows how these paired units allow participants to deal with a range of business prior to moving into substantive topics. Moreover, he points out that this organisation provides an interpretative framework by which ostensible departures from these sequences can be accommodated by the participants.

Core sequences also inform the ways in which we negotiate an exit from telephone interaction (Button, 1987; Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). There is a pre-closing stage, in which participants each use items such as 'okay' in slots in which they could continue to talk (for example, by introducing another topic, or returning to an earlier topic), thus displaying they are passing on the opportunity for further contributions. Only when both participants have gone through pre-closing, do they move to terminal exchanges: reciprocated farewells.

(1.4) (From Button, 1987: 101–2)

- P: hhOh -well than:ks -any way
 V: -l:'m so -rry Pa:m

(.)

- P: Okay,= *pre-closing 1*
 V: =Okay= *pre-closing 2*
 P: =Bye: *terminal exchange 1*
 V: =Bye. *terminal exchange 2*
End of call

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The sequences illustrated by these data fragments are not unique to these calls, or to these particular participants. They are regular practices through which we negotiate a specific range of activities: entry to and exit from telephone interaction.

Sacks was not the only one who was interested in the actions performed by language. At the University of Oxford, the British philosopher J.L. Austin was developing his theory of Speech Acts at roughly the same time (although there is no indication that either was aware of the other's work). Austin focused on instances of specific types of sentences. He began by distinguishing between two types of utterances: constative utterances, which report some aspect of the world; and performative utterances, which perform a specific action. An example of a performative is 'I suggest you open the window', where saying these words is to perform the action of suggesting. Other examples are promises, warnings, declarations, and so on. He termed such utterances, speech acts. However, Austin made the distinction between performative and constative sentences only to allow him to show that it was untenable, which in turn allowed him to make the more substantial claim that there was a performative element to all spoken sentences. He then set about trying to describe the preconditions which would be required for a sentence to be said to have legitimately performed a certain kind of action (Austin, 1962).

Initially, it might seem that Austin and Sacks were developing much the same kinds of analytic concerns. However, there are significant differences. Scholars who built on Austin's Speech Act Theory tended to base their analysis on artificially constructed examples of sentences, whereas Sacks insisted on working on utterances (which may depart radically from properly formed grammatical sentences) taken from recordings of real-life interaction. But what was really distinctive about Sacks' work was that he was able to show the critical relationship between the kind of activity an utterance might be performing and its positioning in the flow of interaction. So, for example, Sacks' analysis of 'I can't hear you' was informed by an analysis of the normative expectation that, in conversations between strangers, especially in service encounters between representatives of a business or an agency and members of the public, names tend to be exchanged at the start. In that instance, 'I can't hear you' performed the activity of 'not giving a name' partly by virtue of its placement in a slot where reciprocal name exchange would be expected.

Sacks argued that intuition does not equip the researcher to anticipate the range of sequential contexts in which utterances might be produced. It was necessary, then, to study only naturally occurring data; and to examine the activities people perform with their utterances in the real-life situations. Audio-recording technology made collection of naturally occurring interaction relatively simple. Everyday speech, though, does not resemble fictional depictions of talk. It is not grammatically neat and tidy, but appears on the surface to be disorganised and messy. However, it was felt that it would be premature to decide prior to analysis which contributions were significant and

which could be excluded from analysis. All aspects of interaction – even those that seem on first inspection to be routine, ‘accidental’, or ungrammatical – had to be considered. This methodological principle transpired to be profoundly important: subsequent studies discovered that even the most minor or apparently irrelevant speech events may be interactionally significant, and exhibit a previously unimagined orderliness. However, it placed a burden on the transcription of data: it entailed not only transcribing the spoken words, but also including those dysfluencies and non-lexical contributions which might normally be filtered out in some form of ‘tidying up’ process. This does mean that CA transcriptions may seem daunting to the untrained eye, but they are extraordinarily valuable resources in the analysis of audio data because they capture details which might be interactionally significant, but which would be omitted from more traditional transcriptions which merely focus on the spoken word.

Gail Jefferson devised a system of transcribing which uses symbols available on conventional typewriter and computer keyboards. It is particularly useful for capturing aspects of speech production and the temporal positioning of utterances relative to each other. The system focuses on, first, the properties of turn-taking, such as the onset of simultaneous speech and the timing of gaps within and between turns; and second, it captures features of the production of talk, such as emphasis, volume, the speed of delivery and the sound stretching.

To illustrate why a detailed transcript is so important, consider the two following extracts (1.5a and 1.5b). These come from a study of verbal interaction in laboratory based ESP (extra-sensory perception) parapsychology experiments (Wooffitt, 2003). During an earlier phase of the experiment, the subject had to describe the images and impressions which appeared in her consciousness during a set period of time. In the phase of the experiment from which this fragment is taken, the experimenter is reviewing the images the subject had reported earlier.

They are two different transcriptions of the same section of the experiment. The first is a conventional transcript which merely records the words spoken; the second comes from a retranscription using conversation analytic conventions.

(1.5a) (From Wooffitt, 2003: 309. ‘E’ is the experimenter, ‘S’ is the subject.)

- E: Something red, looks like it might be a porcupine with lots of spines standing up. And then a frog, a frog’s face peering over something. A ghost coming out of a door or a chair like a mirror in a funny house. Shapes in this funny house and shapes look like bunny rabbits with weird ears. Then you said sheep lots of sheep.
- S: I didn’t know what it was
- E: Okay. Something in the ceiling
(*Continues*)

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(1.5b)

- 1 E: hh something re:d. ehm:: i- looks like it might be a
 2 porcupine with lots of spines standing hhh standing up
 3 S: yeah hh
 4 E: and then a frog=a frog's face peering over something
 5 (0.8)
 6 E: hh a ghost? coming out of a door: or a chai:r (0.5) like a mirror. (.)
 7 in a funny house,
 8 S: yeah=
 9 E: =hh shapes (0.3) ahr:: are in this funny house
 10 and shapes look like ehm ↑bunny rabbits with weird ears
 11 S: yeah (ch)hhuh huh hhhh
 12 E: then you said sheep lots of sheep
 13 S: hhhh (g)oads of sheep (pf)ah didn't know what
 14 it was (hi-) h-hhh (k)huh uh ((smiley voice))
 15 E: -ok(h)a(h)y ((smiley voice))
 16 (0.5)
 17 E: huh
 18 (3.5)
 19 E: okay hh something in the ceiling
 ((continues))

The CA transcript captures a range of detail missed by the more conventional transcript. For example, the subject's turns in lines 3, 8 and 11 are included. These kinds of ostensibly 'minor' contributions and non-lexical items may be interactionally significant: even a minimal turn consisting only of one word can signal the speaker's understanding of the on-going interaction, and thereby facilitate or constrain the range of possible next turns other speakers may produce. The transcript also includes records of audible breathing. These are important because a sharp intake of breath can be heard as indicating that the speaker is about to start talking. The transcript records non-lexical items such as 'er', 'erm' and their variations. Again, research has shown that these kinds of items can perform delicate interactional tasks: for example, they display that the current turn might be on-going, thus establishing continued speakership rights (Jefferson, 1984a; Schegloff, 1981). The CA transcript indicates the way in which words are delivered. This has clear interactional consequences. For example, consider how the experimenter says 'bunny rabbits': '↑bunny rabbits'. The first part of 'bunny' is emphasised and the onset of the word is marked by a clear rising or 'punched up' intonation. Its unusual delivery marks it out as something for the recipient's attention. The transcript attempts to capture laughter and words which are produced in conjunction with breathy bubbles of laughter. It also seeks to identify those words that sound like they have been delivered through a mouth forming a smile, as indicated by the 'smiley voice' characterisation. Finally, conversation analysts take great care in transcribing sections of overlapping talk: moments when more than one participant is speaking at the same time. Although there is no instance of this

in the fragment, there is overlapping activity. In line 14 the subject laughs at the oddness of the image she has reported. During this brief burst of laughter, the experimenter says 'okay', pronounced with a slight roll of breathy plosives: she is laughing at the same time. The use of the overlap bracket allows us to see that the onset of the experimenter's laughter begins just after the first contracted bubble of laughter in the subject's on-going turn. It is thus timed to coincide with the subject's laughter, and thus acts as a form of alignment and affiliation with the speaker's on-going talk (Jefferson *et al.*, 1987).

There are many other features of the revised transcript which could be discussed: the importance of timing periods of absence of talk; the significance of elongated or stressed words, and so on. But it should be clear that careful transcription of the detail of what actually happens in interaction is an important methodological procedure. It is important to keep in mind, though, that CA is not simply the study of transcripts: it seeks to make sense of those events of which the transcription is a representation. The transcript is merely an aid (albeit a valuable one) in the analysis of the events recorded on tape.

Sacks' work was disseminated primarily through transcripts of his lectures at the universities of Irvine and Berkely, which were distributed to scholars interested in his ideas. Although he did formally publish some of his work, his untimely death in 1975 meant that many of his ideas were only available from the lectures. Many of his lectures were prepared for formal publication by Gail Jefferson. Eventually, however, the lectures were published in their entirety (Sacks, 1992), and remain an invaluable resource for researchers.

Summary

- Conversation analysis developed from the work of Harvey Sacks.
- It examines language as social action.
- Talk-in-interaction is taken to be systematically organised and ordered.
- The primary data for research are audio (and, where necessary or appropriate, video) recordings of naturally occurring interaction. Transcripts assist the analysis of audio/video materials.
- The transcription system provides a detailed characterisation of 'messiness' of everyday interaction, focusing on speech production and turn-taking organisation.

Discourse analysis

The mode of analysis which subsequently grew into DA began with a problem.

Sociologists have had a long-standing interest in science and its relationship to wider society. They had studied a variety of topics: the organisation of the scientific community (Crane, 1972; Hagstrom, 1965); the norms of scientific practice (Merton, 1973); the relationship between science and public funding,

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and wider political developments (Sklair, 1973); and the processes which informed revolutionary developments in scientific knowledge (Kuhn, 1970).

Sociologists tended to adopt the view held in the scientific community that the content of scientific knowledge was a more or less accurate reflection of objective universal truths, and, therefore, unaffected by culture, context, the personalities or motivation of the scientists and so on. Thus sociologists did not try to analyse the reasons why scientists came to believe theories and findings which were taken to be true. It was assumed that failed or discredited scientific theories and findings did not reveal the objective properties of the universe; therefore, it followed that there must have been some other reasons why they were advanced or, indeed, initially supported. This is where the sociologists could be of use: they could discover the social factors which had led to scientists propounding unsound or false claims about the world.

During the 1970s, however, there was a radical development in the sociological study of science. Some sociologists began to argue that if they merely studied failed scientific endeavours, or rejected theories, then, inadvertently, they would merely be endorsing the scientific status quo, and not revealing how that status quo was established and maintained. Moreover, in the past scientific revolutions have occurred in which once-accepted paradigms are subsequently rejected; thus it seemed inappropriate and indeed hasty to accept the current state of scientific knowledge as the definitive account of the physical universe. Subsequently, many sociologists began to adopt a relativist position with respect to the factual status of the claims of the scientists. They wanted to explore the social dimensions which underpinned accepted or true scientific knowledge. This is not because as individuals they believed that, for example, claims about witchcraft and the laws of thermodynamics were equivalent. The relativist approach was *methodological* in that it allowed sociologists to study aspects of scientific work and knowledge production which had hitherto been regarded as beyond the scope of sociological investigation: everyday scientific practice, the production of scientific knowledge claims and their acceptance (or rejection) by the scientific community, and the ways in which scientific disputes were resolved (Collins, 1992; Collins and Pinch, 1982; Woolgar, 1988).

Although there were a variety of approaches within the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK), what united them was a concern to reveal the underlying social processes through which knowledge claims were produced and validated by the scientific community. This, however, was tricky: once the scientific community reached a consensus about a particular theory or empirical claim, and it became accepted as part of the store of knowledge and found its way into textbooks, those processes were lost to sociological analysis. Consequently, sociologists became very interested in scientific disputes where a consensus had not yet emerged, because the social processes which underpinned knowledge production were still in operation, thereby making them available for sociological investigation.

Nigel Gilbert and Michael Mulkay were sociologists interested in one such scientific dispute. This was in an area of biochemistry concerned with the ways in which chemical and other kinds of energy are created, transported or stored within cell structures. In particular, the dispute was about a complex molecule called adenosine triphosphate (ATP), which animals, plants and bacteria use to store energy within the cell. Two theoretical positions had emerged regarding ATP. One theory suggested that its production required the presence of chemical intermediaries. The other position argued that chemical reactions in the cell wall were responsible for energy transfer. This was a significant dispute: eventually the latter theory prevailed, and its leading proponent was awarded a Nobel prize. It also generated a substantial number of publications in scientific journals and presentations at academic conferences.

Gilbert and Mulkay collected various kinds of qualitative data. First, they tape recorded interviews with the leading researchers in the UK and the USA. They also collected approximately 400 articles from the research literature, plus the relevant sections of biochemistry textbooks. In addition to these formal materials, they also obtained a collection of private letters between the main figures working in the area.

At the outset of the project, they wanted to produce a single, definitive sociological account of the social processes which were at work in the way this community of scientists resolved this dispute. In the preface to the book they were subsequently to write, Gilbert and Mulkay described the genesis and original goals of their research.

The research reported in this book was conceived when a scientist friend showed us a copy of a letter written by a biochemist which seemed to indicate by its tone that there was a raging, and, so we thought, sociologically interesting controversy going on in an area of biochemistry called 'oxidative phosphorylation'. Like other sociologists of science ... we assumed that part of the job of the sociologist was to strip away the formal side of the debate, and show what was *really* going on ... (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984: vii; original italics)

But it was at this point that Gilbert and Mulkay recognised that they were facing a significant methodological problem: variability in the accounts. In their data, they observed that they had a variety of different versions of ostensibly the same things: different accounts of the importance of theoretical developments, and conflicting statements about the significance of experimental procedures and subsequent results. They also observed that there were different styles of accounts: some exhibited formal language and terminology, and emphasised the strict adherence to scientific procedure and its role in revealing an objective reality, while others employed a more informal tone, and focused on the relevance of such matters as scientists' biographies, personality and intellectual commitment. More significantly, it was not simply the case that different versions were produced by scientists in accordance with their membership of, or affiliation to, one side in the dispute: competing and

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conflicting accounts of social actions could be found in the discourse of the same scientists. Thus they found that

... chemiosmosis was both complex and simple. It was empirically grounded, yet based only on an aura of fact. Similarly, Gowan [a scientist involved in the dispute] was highly gifted scientifically yet incompetent in various respects, enormously industrious but also unwilling to make the necessary effort on a fundamental issue, putting forward criticisms of chemiosmosis which clearly showed that he did not understand the hypothesis yet which required much further experimental exploration before the inadequacy could be demonstrated. (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984: 73)

The very nature of their data, then, seemed to resist production of a single, harmonious sociological account.

Gilbert and Mulkay realised that the variability in interview accounts, and other kinds of textual or discursive materials, was not unique to their data, but was a feature of any sociological research which relied upon the use of accounts of action as an investigative resource. And indeed, even a cursory reflection will alert us to the extent of variability in everyday affairs. Our world is marked by dispute and disagreement: in courts, in television interviews, in political debate and in everyday social life. Mundane interaction is rife with arguments, accusations, rebuttal, blamings, criticism and complaint. It is a perfectly normal feature of everyday life that we engage in arguments with other people. And of course, argumentative activity often revolves around disputes as to what the facts are: Did we arrange to meet at 7 o'clock or 8 o'clock? Is the rail service in the United Kingdom run down because of the actions of previous Conservative governments or the policies of the present Labour government? Does the production of adenosine triphosphate require the presence of chemical intermediaries or not? And of course we are unable to resolve these kinds of disputes by reference to the facts of the matter because 'what the facts are' is precisely what is being disputed. The possibility of variation in and between versions of events is built into the fabric of everyday life. (See also Potter and Wetherell, 1987.)

So how do other qualitative studies which use discursive data yield coherent and definitive sociological accounts? Gilbert and Mulkay argued that a basic four-step procedure informs much qualitative sociological research and allows the analyst to overcome the problems posed by variability:

- 1 Obtain statements by interview or by listening to or observing. Patients in a natural setting.
- 2 Look for broad similarities between the statements.
- 3 If there are similarities which occur frequently, take these statements at face value, that is, as accurate accounts of what is really going on.
- 4 Construct a generalised version of participants' accounts of what is going on, and present this as one's own analytic conclusions.

(Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984: 5)

Moreover, they note that analysts tend to perform three distinctive analytic procedures when organising the kinds of accounts which are found in interview data. First, people's own accounts are subsumed under more general concepts. For example, they cite a study by Blisset (1972) in which he claims that scientists' discourse which addresses 'manipulation, influence and manoeuvring' in scientific work constitute a form of *political* activity. Second, in qualitative sociological work there is a tendency to generalise; accounts about particular social actors or social actions are generalised to wider classes of actors or actions. Finally, and most crucially, it is assumed that analysts are able to identify which accounts in their data are more trustworthy, reliable or informative and, therefore, of greater analytic value. Putting it crudely, it was assumed that a 'real signal' of accurate or sociologically credible versions could be detected in, or would emerge from, the 'noise' of sociologically irrelevant distortion, and self-serving reports. This in turn rests upon the assumption that some accounts accurately represent an underlying social reality.

Gilbert and Mulkay were not convinced by these solutions. They identified several problems. First, they were uncomfortable with the assumption that the social scientist possesses sufficient expertise to distinguish the accurate or objective accounts from those which were partial or distorted. Moreover, this simply fostered a dependence upon the analysts' own interpretative efforts, the basis of which were often obscure or unstated.

Second, they rejected the idea which informs much sociological research that if a sufficient number of people say the same thing, then those accounts can be taken as unproblematically representing an objective state of affairs. Drawing from Halliday's (1978) work on the relationship between language and social context, they argued that it is necessary to acknowledge that any particular account or version of the world will be intimately related to the circumstances of its production. This has important implications. Regularities in participants' discourse may be due to similarities in the context of their production: for example, an interview arranged as part of a social science research project. And this in turn suggests that we should be cautious about treating regularities in discourse as literal descriptions of social action.

Third, Gilbert and Mulkay argued that conventional sociological research rests on a naive view of language in which it is assumed that any social event has one 'true' meaning. Alternatively they suggest that social activities are the 'repositories' of multiple meanings, by which they mean that the 'same' circumstances can be described in a variety of ways to emphasise different features. We can illustrate this important principle by considering Schegloff's discussion of some of the issues which inform how speakers in ordinary conversation formulate locations, or 'place'. He points out that any particular location may be described in a potentially inexhaustible variety of ways.

Were I now to formulate where my notes are, it would be correct to say that they are: right in front of me, next to the telephone, on the desk, in my office, in the office, in Room 213, in Lewisohn Hall, on campus, at school,

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at Columbia, in Morningside Heights, on the upper West Side, in Manhattan, in New York City, in New York State, in the North east, on the Eastern seaboard, in the United States, etc. Each of these terms could in some sense be correct ... were its relevance provided for. (Schegloff, 1972b: 81)

This illustrates an important point: whenever we produce a description or refer to a place, object, event or state of affairs in the world, we invariably select from a range of possible words and phrases. In everyday interaction, this does not trouble us: we produce descriptions which are adequate for the practical purposes at hand. This further undermines sociological approaches which treat discourse as an unproblematic reflection of social or psychological reality. Descriptions, anecdotes, stories, comments, accounts – the kinds of linguistic events that occur in interview data – are constructions which not only depend upon the context in which they are produced, but will also reflect the functions they have been designed to perform. Consequently, 'it follows that discourse can never be taken as simply descriptive of the social action to which it refers, no matter how uniform particular segments of that discourse appear to be' (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984: 7).

Gilbert and Mulkay argued that it was inappropriate that social scientists should ignore this feature of the social world just because it hampered the production of neat, coherent sociological stories. The complexity of accounting practices should themselves be addressed in sociological analysis, and not regarded as a problem to be resolved via various methodological practices. Indeed, they argued that it was necessary to give analytic prominence to variability in discourse, and the conditions which give rise to it, and to abandon the traditional social scientific goal of providing an account of 'what really happened'. Consequently, as an alternative to traditional sociological approaches which overlooked or obscured the variability and context dependence of accounts, Gilbert and Mulkay advocated discourse analysis: a method of analysis which focused entirely on participants' language.

Summary

- Discourse analysis emerged in the sociology of scientific knowledge.
- It established a departure from realist accounts of scientists' actions to a study of scientists' accounting practices.
- DA proposes that language is used variably. Accounts are constructed from a range of descriptive possibilities, and are intimately tied to the context in which they are produced and the functions they perform.

Language use as topic: interdisciplinary implications

CA and DA suggest that the ways we use language can be studied in its own right, but for different reasons. For Sacks, ordinary language can be analysed as

a vehicle through which we perform interpersonal actions; moreover, these actions are organised socially: that is, they display regular patterns which emerge out of the contributions of different participants. For Gilbert and Mulkay, the focus on language was a consequence of their argument that accounts and descriptions cannot be treated as neutral representations of an objective social reality. In this section, I want to highlight the radical nature of these arguments by comparing them to the kinds of assumptions about language and communication which have had a powerful influence in linguistics, psychology and sociology.

Linguistics

A key strand of linguistic research developed from the writings of Noam Chomsky (Chomsky, 1965). He argued that there were two features to language. First, there is linguistic *competence*, a term he used to refer to the innate rules which inform the production of grammatically correct sentences. Second, there is linguistic *performance*: the actual use of our linguistic competencies. He argued that the goal of linguistics should be to study underlying linguistic competencies: the rules which inform the production of grammatical sentences. And the best way to do this was to rely on our own expert knowledge and intuition about language. This is because, first, we intuitively know that certain relationships between nouns, clauses, verbs, etc., are 'right', and others are 'wrong' or nonsensical; second, and more important, he argued that the performance of language – everyday speech – was chaotic and disorganised, and offered no insight to the underlying rules of language.

Linguistic theory is concerned with an ideal speaker-hearer in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. (Chomsky, 1965: 3)

For Chomsky, then, the focus was on the underlying structure of language; actual speech was viewed as disorderly, and therefore not worthy of serious study.

Sacks' key insight – and a clear finding from his studies and subsequent work in CA – is that ordinary mundane speech exhibits an extraordinary level of orderliness. Moreover, this orderliness is not determined by innate *cognitive* structures of language (although formal grammatical considerations clearly inform the design of utterances) but reflects a *socially organised* order of interpersonal action. Indeed, knowledge of underlying linguistic competence seems ill-equipped to allow us to understand the observable orderliness of everyday interaction.

Our linguistic competence clearly tells us that certain sequences of words do not belong to the English language: for example, the following data extracts

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come from Schegloff's (1987a) study of a phenomenon he identifies as 'recycled turn beginnings':

'I don't think they grow a I don' think they grow a culture to do a biopsy.'

'The school school book store doesn't carry anything anymore.'

'She teaches she teaches a course at City College in needlecrafts.'

In each case there is a short sequence in which a word or phrase is repeated: 'I don't think they grow a I don' think they grow a', 'school school', and 'she teaches she teaches'. Intuitively, we might assume that such instances are the product of some mistake or speech error – a corruption of our underlying speech competence. However, Schegloff's analysis shows that these recyclings are not random, nor errors of pronunciation. Rather, speakers produce these forms of partial repeats when a spate of someone else's talk overlaps with their own talk. The recycled component of the turn (the repeated word or phrase) invariably occurs just at the point at which the overlapping talk has stopped. For example, the first case comes from a conversation about the participants' sick friend.

(1. 6) (From Schegloff, 1987a: 75. Terminal overlap brackets added.)

- R: Well the uhm in fact they must have grown a culture, you know,
they must've- I mean how long- he's been in the hospital
for a few days, right? Takes a -bout a week to grow a culture-
- K: -I don't think they grow a - I don'
think they grow a culture to do a biopsy.

So, these apparently ungrammatical features of language use do actually exhibit orderly properties. But basis for this orderliness is not to be found at the level of language competence, but in language performance: in particular, the performance of language in specific interactional circumstances.

Psychology

In psychology, there are two broad approaches to language. Some psychologists study the social use of language. And, as we shall see in later chapters, this has become more common since the emergence of discourse analysis. But the dominant perspective in psychology mirrored the Chomskyan approach, in that it stressed the importance of cognition, particularly, the study of physical structures in the brain which are associated with specific speech activities. So for example, in her excellent introductory textbook, Hayes (2000) illustrates psychological interest by discussing the cognitive operations which underpin an imaginary piece of social interaction:

The operation of these language areas [in the brain] can be visualised by imagining what happens if you are reading a letter which you have just

received. A companion asks: 'Who's that from?' 'Oh, it's from Jane,' you reply, scanning the letter. 'She's moving house.' ... When you were reading the letter, the visual information from the page went to the visual cortex, and then to the angular gyrus and supramarginal gyrus for interpretation ... *From there it would go ... to Broca's area where you would formulate the speech plans and words which would express what you were wanting to say;* and then on to the motor cortex which would direct the muscular movements of your lips, tongue and larynx. (Hayes, 2000: 303; italics added)

Earlier in this chapter I contrasted Sacks' approach to language and interaction with a view which treats speech as a mere conduit for the exchange of information. This quote fleshes out some of the assumptions which inform this 'conduit' view of language use. For example, it suggests that spoken language works merely to deliver particles of information; moreover, it implies that these packages of information are preformed and complete before they are despatched via language into someone else's head. To paraphrase Schegloff (1989), language is assumed to have the same relationship to information or meaning that telephone cables have to the conversation conducted through them.

The problem with this view is that it diverts attention away from the subtle social activities which we conduct through talk, and indeed, for which our talk is designed. To illustrate this, let's return to Hayes' imaginary dialogue. It is important to state that both CA and DA strongly resist the analysis of artificial data, but in this case it allows us to focus on the differences between the psychological and social perspectives on language. So for this occasion only, we will pretend that the dialogue was a real exchange between real people.

We can reproduce the dialogue in the same way that naturally occurring data is written.

- A: Who's that from?
B: Oh, it's from Jane. She's moving house.

In the psychological model, 'Oh, it's Jane' is merely a vessel which acts as a carrier service for the information: 'Jane sent this letter'. But there is more to it than this. First, presumably Jane has a surname, and a title. These are equally relevant things which B could refer to when stating who the letter comes from: 'Oh, it's from Ms Smith' or 'Oh, it's from Jane Smith'. And we can presume that the sender and the recipient have some sort of relationship; so B's response could have been 'Oh it's from a friend' or 'from my friend Jane'. There is, then, variability in the kinds of ways even the most routine utterance could be constructed. But this raises an interesting question: what issues informed B's utterance in this way on this occasion? And to answer that we need to explore not the operations of neurons and blood flow in Broca's area, but the interactional tasks for which it has been designed.

Utterances are designed for a particular recipient, or group of recipients, in this case, A, B's 'companion'. B uses a single name reference to refer to the

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author of the letter. There is no further information to facilitate recognition: 'Jane from York', for example. Nor is there any indication that there might be lots of people called Jane who may have written the letter. This means that B's use of a single name presumes A will know who Jane is such that no further identification is needed other than 'Jane'. Moreover, it tells A that this person someone *s/he should* be able to recognise from the single name referent. And this is a powerful method by which B can invoke and establish the nature of the relationship with A. By relying on a single word referent she can be seen to be invoking 'common knowledge' between them. So whatever the formal or legal status of the relationship is between B and A, this utterance invokes and thereby maintains level of co-familiarity, and, therefore, intimacy.

Of course, this is not real interaction, but the point holds: the cognitive or neurological correlates of verbal interaction do not in themselves account for the form and shape of the utterances we use, and offer no insight as to the social context in which they are used, and the specific interactional tasks for which they are designed. Indeed, conversation analytic research suggests that the precise design of utterances is shaped by the requirements of the moment, rather than micro-neurological events in the head.

Sociology

Sociology is an empirical discipline concerned with the social organisation of individual and collective human action. One of the defining features of humans is that we possess sophisticated means of communication, of which the most important is the ability to talk. Our communicative competencies facilitate the intricate and complex interrelationships which sociologists seek to understand, whether these occur in the context of the family, at work, in education; or whether they concern class, gender or ethnic relations, and so on. Given the importance of communication, then, it might be expected that the study of language is at the heart of the sociological enterprise. But it is not, and never has been.

Despite being the disciplinary home of conversation analysis and discourse analysis, the sociological study of talk in interaction has not yet emerged as one of the central core topics of the discipline. Indeed, it would be fair to say that language has been largely invisible to the sociological eye. It is likely that 'people talking to each other' is so commonplace and taken-for-granted that its relationship to the 'self evidently' important issues have not been explored. Indeed, language has often been treated as a canvas onto which are projected the effects of sociological factors, such as the participants' relationship, class, gender, status, and so on.

While language and communication have not been a *topic* of sociological research, it has been a central *resource* in the research process (an observation associated with the ethnomethodological critique of sociology; e.g., Zimmerman and Pollner, 1970). Sociologists routinely rely on verbal data for their studies: people's accounts and narratives are collected in semi-standard and informal

interviews, and from focus group discussions; they are recalled and written down by ethnographers in the field; and discourse is culled from printed and written sources, such as newspapers, autobiographies and archives. And it is here that Gilbert and Mulkey's argument begins to bite. Put simply it is this: so much of what counts as sociological knowledge is produced from analysis of verbal and textual accounts. By and large, sociologists have treated these accounts as 'good enough' representations of either an external social reality, or an inner mental realm of attitudes and opinions. But if these accounts are not accurate indicators of the social world – indeed, if, as Gilbert and Mulkey claim, language is not a representational medium at all – we have to wonder about the status of sociology's knowledge claims. How can we trust a scientific endeavour that has misunderstood the nature of so much of its data?

Further readings

Texts on conversation analysis

Because this book is not exclusively focused on conversation analysis, it is not possible to discuss some key areas of CA research, such as preference organisation and repair; even those topics which we will consider, such as turn-taking and sequential organisation, can only be dealt with briefly. It is, therefore, advisable for readers to familiarise themselves with more in-depth introductions to CA. Good comprehensive accounts can be found in Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998) and ten Have (1999). Psathas (1995) offers a succinct guide. Short, sophisticated chapter-length introductions can be found in Drew (1994) and Heritage and Atkinson (1984). Heritage (1984a) offers an excellent introduction to CA in his superb account of ethnomethodology and its origins. An accessible introduction to Sacks' work can be found in Silverman (1998). A short but useful discussion of the relationship between CA, Goffman and Garfinkel can be found in Heritage (2001).

In this book we will not discuss in any detail the relationship between conversation analysis and ethnomethodological studies of sense-making practices. Those interested in the relationship between CA and ethnomethodology should first consult Garfinkel (1967) and Heritage (1984a); Clayman and Maynard (1995) offer a shorter account of the relationship.

Nor will we explore how the origins of CA were influenced by Goffman's studies of the moral and social order of everyday life. For those interested in Goffman, a key (early) text is Goffman (1959) which outlines his powerful use of dramaturgical metaphors in the study of mundane social life. Manning (1992) offers a very good overview of Goffman's work. Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998) provide a brief introduction to the relationship between Goffman and CA; an extended and focused treatment can be found in Schegloff (1988a).

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Texts on discourse analysis

The best argument for and overview of discourse analysis can be found in Potter and Wetherell (1987). The following also offer useful introductions: Gill (1996); Potter (1996b, 1997, 2003c); Willig (1999, 2001b) and Wood and Kroger (2000). A more advanced account of DA which is grounded in a critique of social psychological studies of attributions, can be found in Edwards and Potter (1995). An advanced account which traces its relevance in the sociology of scientific knowledge can be found in Mulkay, Potter and Yearley (1982). The collection of papers in Gilbert and Abell (1983) is a useful overview of the rationale for discourse analysis, and indicates the range of critical responses to its arguments.