

Explanations in Pedagogical Interaction: Introduction to the Fall Forum

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As a method and a framework, conversation analysis (CA) has been used to uncover the tacit methods participants use to accomplish a variety of social actions, such as offering, promising, giving advice, complaining, and disagreeing. This forum explores one such action, explaining, within the context of pedagogical interaction due to its ubiquity and relevance to the project of teaching and learning. While every discipline seems to have developed critical and extensive guidance (e.g., in the form of manuals, textbooks, and curricula) on *what* should be taught and, by extension, explained, CA is uniquely positioned to shed light on the “how” of explanations as it shifts the analytical spotlight to how participants (e.g., students and teachers, tutees and tutors) make sense of and respond to each turn of talk. After all, teachers and tutors are not simply delivering a laundry list of facts; they are addressing the here and now, unplanned demands of learners as they arise in interaction. This forum thus aims to draw more attention to the moment-to-moment work that participants engage in when producing such explanations.

Starting in the 1960s, interactional researchers have been investigating the role explanations play in accomplishing social action (Scott & Lyman, 1968; Sacks’ lecture on “accountable actions,” 1992). Conversation analysts have since conceptualized explanations in two distinct ways: (1) accounts for non-compliant action, such as arriving late to a meeting or accidentally bumping into someone on the subway (Antaki, 1988, 1994, 1996; Buttny, 1993; Buttny & Morris, 2001; Heritage, 1988, Robinson, 2016; Waring, 2007) and (2) elaborations that make talk clearer (Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Kääntä, 2021; Kääntä et al., 2018; Lazaraton, 2004; Lee, 2004; Matsumoto & Dobs, 2017; Myhill, 2003; Smotrova, 2017; Stoewer & Musk, 2019; Tai & Khabbazzbashi, 2019; van Compernelle & Smotrova, 2017; Waring et al., 2013). The former has been investigated in primarily everyday contexts, while the latter has mostly focused on pedagogical interaction, the context discussed in all papers for this forum. Several practices that make talk clearer in pedagogical interaction have been identified: exemplifying a concept (Lee, 2004; Myhill, 2003), definitions in the form of “X is Y that X” (Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Kääntä, 2021; Kääntä et al., 2018), providing a translation (Stoewer & Musk, 2019), and embodied illustrations of the form, meaning, or use of linguistic concepts, such as pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary (Lazaraton, 2004; Matsumoto & Dobs, 2017; Tai & Khabbazzbashi, 2019; van Compernelle & Smotrova, 2017; Waring et al., 2013). These practices represent a diverse toolkit for “doing” explanations, and the papers in this forum aim to further develop this toolkit.

A notable characteristic of explanations that make talk clearer is that they are sequentially organized (Koole, 2010; Merke, 2016; Tai & Khabbazzbashi, 2019; Waring et al., 2013) into a

three-part structure that Fasel Lauzon (2015) describes as consisting of an opening, core, and closing. Briefly, openings involve the problematization of talk, cores offer a candidate solution to that problem, and closings involve the acceptance of that candidate solution. This breakdown acknowledges the contingent nature of explanations, highlighting how information is not delivered in a vacuum, but rather, it responds to the demands of interaction. The papers in this forum continue to showcase the contingent nature of explanations in pedagogical interaction by illustrating how these explanations are jointly accomplished by all participants.

The three papers in this forum use conversation analysis to examine explanations in different pedagogical settings. Cicely Rude examines a class discussion in an adult ESL classroom, analyzing how repair initiations elicit unplanned learner explanations. Rude's analysis particularly explores the intersection between explaining information and negotiating believability. Mark Romig explores explanation openings in a virtual adult ESL classroom, showing how a teacher can ensure that students orient to the grammatical focus of the explanation. Kelly Frantz analyzes explanations in writing consultations, examining how a peer writing tutor uses intertextuality to manage her authority when explaining a writing concept.

These papers contribute to our understanding of explanations from a conversation analytic perspective by demonstrating the variety of settings and topics available for study. Together, these studies showcase the diverse ways explanations are structured, adapted, and negotiated in response to the specific demands of pedagogical contexts. By highlighting both the interactional work of explanations and their contextual particularities, these papers invite further exploration into how teaching and learning are co-constructed in interaction.

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