Applying Conversation Analysis to Real-world Concerns

Catherine DiFelice Box
Teachers College, Columbia University

A few weeks ago, I sat in the audience of an atypical professional panel at an uplifting conference. The panel and audience members, all enthusiastic alumni and students of my alma mater's English Department, were discussing the career paths they had (or had not) chosen since college graduation. There were contributions from two lawyers, two English teachers, a global corporate chairman, and a few graduate students, as well as a smattering of undergraduates who were eager and anxious to learn more about possible job opportunities. Despite our diverse backgrounds and at times contentious conversation, we left that conference room having agreed on at least one thing: successful professionals are exceptional analysts. Someone who builds a principled argument in the courtroom, the boardroom, the classroom, or any other room, will go a long way. I had remarked that knowing how to analyze hinges on not only being able to build arguments, but also on being able to break them down. In order to critically engage with or respond to a piece of text, one must understand it in a deep sense, and mull over the connections within or between the lines. From intricate exploration comes enlightening analysis, no matter the context. As a student who entrenches herself in Conversation Analysis (CA), I find this conclusion heartening, for often in social encounters with fellow scholars, teachers, friends, or family members, I must publically wrestle with the following questions: *Why do you analyze talk? What, exactly, do you do, anyway?* And of course, the dreaded: *Seriously, Catherine, who really cares about this stuff?*

Conversation Analysis (henceforth referred to as CA) demands that the researcher engage in a close relationship with texts. The first half of this term, in fact, might be a bit of a misnomer. Certainly, we students of CA have read seminal work that draws from the "mundane" conversations of everyday social encounters (see, for example, the famous telephone conversation transcripts between Ava and Bee in Schegloff, 2007). However, a burgeoning field of research within CA looks not at conversation *per se*, but in the interactions that occur within specific contexts such as the classroom (Hellermann, 2003, 2007; Markee, 2000), the courtroom (Atkinson, 1992), and the medical examination room (Heath, 1992; Clemente, 2007) Although the term *conversation* may not accurately reflect all that CA researchers study, there is no doubt that all of us are *analysts*. Through a thorough examination of not just *what* is said but *how* something is said and *how* someone else orients to that which is said, we gain a deeper understanding of the interaction at hand. We may even be able to extend our findings to say something about the way in which people tend to talk in certain contexts. Thus, if the ability to perform strong analysis indeed makes for better lawyers, businesspeople, teachers, doctors, and parents, then conversation analysts might be "useful" by showing their readers how those in such roles do what they do, and how others respond to what they are doing. If we gain insight into how talk shapes our positioning in play, at work and at home, we might become better communicators in all of these settings and more. For these reasons, we analyze talk, and for these reasons, we all should care.

The reflections presented in this edition of the forum are a foray into the application of CA to particular contexts, in an attempt to wrangle with the issues that arise in them. We begin with Drew S. Fagan's and Sarah Creider's considerations of the talk of teaching and learning. Drew focuses on the way in which a teacher handles a surprising learning contribution in the

classroom, finding that incorporating ethnographic data with CA aids in arriving at even richer findings. Sarah, on the other hand, looks at a one-on-one session between a tutor and a preschooler, investigating the way in which play is interweaved into mathematical instruction. Trudy Milbourne and Nancy Boblett apply CA to work environments. Trudy analyzes a line of talk to illustrate the ways in which one speaker attempts to manage discussion during a strategic planning meeting. In Nancy's data, one speaker attempts in vain to gain the floor, and effectively blocked through several interactional strategies. She examines this moment by combining CA with Goffman's (1974) notion of participation frameworks. Maria McCormack utilizes CA to explore a spate of talk between a therapist and a child with high functioning autism, noting that CA may deepen our understanding of quantitative data, as well as tell us more about how children with autism communicate. Finally, with CA to guide my interpretation, I discuss the ways in which I handle the needs of my children as they engage in bathtime interactions. Each of us has transcribed verbal exchanges based on Jefferson's notation (Atkinson & Heritage, 1999, see appendix). Non-verbal conduct is in italics, enclosed in double-parentheses. When non-verbal and verbal conduct occur at the same time, we follow Waring (2009), which encloses the two actions in curly brackets, marking the beginning and end of the simultaneity.

The six of us have come together for this forum to contribute our works in progress. In fact, other than a genuine appreciation for each other's thoughts and feedback, there is not much that bands us all together. Some of us are experts in quantitative measurement, while others are more qualitatively oriented. Some of us are graduate students, while others have established academic careers. Some of us are teachers, some are parents, some are administrators, some are authors, and many of us are a combination thereof. Yet, all of us have found CA enriching to our work, as we hope is made clear here.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

APPENDIX

Brackets indicate overlapping utterances:
[talk]
[talk]

'=' denotes one person latching talk onto that of another's:
talk=
=talk

Pauses between or within turns are timed to the tenth of a second and enclosed within parentheses: (time) .
A less than a tenth of a second pause, called a micropause, is marked as (.).

Words that are underlined or in CAPS show emphasis.

Vowels followed by a colon indicate a lengthening of a vowel. The more colons, the longer the lengthening: wo:rd, for example, or wo::rd

Phrases surrounded by 'less than' signs were uttered more quickly than other words: >these words here are spoken faster compared to the speaker's typical speed<.

Words enclosed in single parentheses signal an uncertain transcription: (not sure of word)

Words surrounded by dollar signs denote a smiley voice: $word or words$

COMMENTARIES