

Digital Conversation Analysis: The Case of Text-Messaging Introduction to the Special Issue

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INTRODUCTION TO DIGITAL CA

Over the past half century, conversation analysis (CA) has illuminated the fine-grained organization of talk-in-interaction, from turn-taking (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) to action formation (Levinson, 2013) and sequence organization (Schegloff, 2017). While CA has traditionally focused on face-to-face interaction, as communication increasingly shifts to digital platforms, such as text messaging apps and social media, researchers have extended CA's foundational insights to these new modalities (Meredith et al., 2021).

Digital CA builds on the premise that interaction is not limited to synchronous, co-present spoken talk. Text messaging is treated as forms of conversation in its own right, with participants oriented to accountability, sequential organization, and mutual understanding. Even in asynchronous exchanges, participants manage turn-taking, design turns for specific actions such as requests, invitations, or refusals, and engage in practices of repair and clarification (e.g., Meredith & Stokoe, 2014). Text-based interactions remain deeply sequential, though their temporalities and technological affordances differ from face-to-face talk (Meredith, 2017).

Despite its growth, digital CA remains a relatively young field. It draws both on the rigor of conversation analysis, which was originally developed to analyze synchronous spoken conversation, and on insights from computer-mediated communication studies (Herring, 2013; 2019). Indeed, some of the earliest CA work focused on technologically mediated talk, such as telephone calls (Schegloff, 1979), recognizing that technologies reshape but are not independent of the sequential structures of interaction. Around the turn of the century, researchers began extending CA systematically to the internet (Hutchby, 2001), analyzing modalities ranging from instant messaging to discussion forums and social media.

In recent years, conversation analysts have turned their attention to online interaction (Giles et al., 2015), exploring how participants adapt conversational practices to digital settings. Studies have examined how modality shapes interaction by comparing online and face-to-face talk (e.g., Meredith, 2014; Garcia & Jacobs, 1999), how repair operates in chat forums and text messaging (Schönfeldt & Golato, 2003; Meredith & Stokoe, 2014), and how social actions are accomplished in environments such as discussion boards and comment threads (Paulus & Lester, 2013; Stommel & Koole, 2010).

Digital communication poses distinct challenges for CA. Unlike face-to-face talk, it is not always synchronous; it may be asynchronous or quasi-synchronous, with delayed or overlapping responses shaped by platform design. In an important review, Meredith (2019) outlines the state of digital CA by examining how core organizational features of conversation (e.g., turn-taking, sequence organization, repair, openings, and embodied conduct) apply in digital contexts. She highlights three particular challenges for the field: questions of terminology (whether concepts developed for spoken talk can be directly applied), the diversity of platforms (and whether

findings can be generalized across platforms), and the multiple analytical levels introduced by digital affordances.

Recent scholarship has broadened both the empirical and methodological scope of digital CA. Researchers have investigated diverse practices, including the use of GIFs (Tolin & Samermit, 2016), laughter in WhatsApp conversations (Petitjean & Morel, 2017), and assessments in WeChat (Pan & Gan, 2022). Others have examined turn continuations in instant messaging (Spagnolli et al., 2021), repair in online chats (Meredith & Stokoe, 2014; Collister, 2011), and how participants extend prior posts in text-based interactions (Tudini, 2015).

As this body of work demonstrates, digital CA is a vibrant and expanding field. It retains the methodological rigor of CA while flexibly adapting its analytic tools to the evolving landscape of communication technologies. By examining how participants accomplish actions, manage sequences, and navigate platform affordances in digital contexts, digital CA continues the central project of conversation analysis: uncovering the systematic practices through which social interaction is organized.

THE SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue contributes to this expanding body of work by examining digital communication as a site where participants draw on both linguistic and technological resources to accomplish social actions. It brings together conversation analytic studies that examine how participants open, structure, and respond within text-based interactions across Mandarin Chinese and English messaging platforms. By focusing on naturally occurring data, these studies demonstrate how digital affordances, such as emojis, tapbacks, and quote-and-reply functions, mediate how participants open conversations, manage sequences, and achieve social actions. Together, these studies illuminate both the affordances of digital media and the enduring relevance of sequential analysis. This issue speaks to a growing recognition within CA that technologies do not merely transmit messages but fundamentally shape the organization of interaction.

The issue begins with Lily Linai Zu's investigation of text message openings in Mandarin Chinese. Zu analyzes how participants use the phrase 在吗 (*zaima*, 'are you there?') to begin conversations and found that, as potential methods of managing various interactional contingencies, some producers of *zaima* wait for a go-ahead response before proceeding to their main purpose, while others launch into their topic immediately. Weiting Yuan then analyzes the written laughter 哈哈 (*haha*) in Chinese WeChat conversations, revealing how it can mitigate disalignment, manage failure or misconduct, and display minimal engagement in TCU-initial, TCU-final, and standalone positions. Zhuolei Li's study next demonstrates how the "slightly smiling face" emoji in WeChat (😊) can signal sequence-closing, mitigate dispreferred actions, and convey disaffiliation without explicit disagreement. The use of platform-specific features distinct from emojis is taken up by Leanna Rudin, who shows how iMessage tapbacks (quick-react symbols such as 👍, ❤️, and !!) serve as sequence-closing seconds of various kinds: thumbs-up to acknowledge directives, hearts to express appreciation for commissives, and exclamation points to affiliate with tellings. Finally, Yajing Yang investigates the quote-and-reply function in WeChat, demonstrating its diverse range of uses in managing sequence jumping, facilitating responses, and highlighting prior texts.

Taken together, these articles accentuate the diversity of practices and interactional resources in texting, reminding us that while technologies change, participants' orientations to sequential organization, action formation, and accountability remain central. We hope this issue inspires further research into the rich terrain of digital conversation across languages and platforms.

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