**INTRODUCTION TO CONVERSATION ANALYSIS**

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| **Introduction** |

**Purpose**

Conversation analysis is a qualitative approach, often applied to analyse social interactions between people in various settings. The fundamental purpose of conversation analysis is to understand how people use conversation to achieve social goals, called social actions. That is, conversation analysts characterize how people use language and speech to influence other individuals rather than explain why individuals demonstrate these tendencies. Examples of social actions include attempts to

* change an opinion or attitude that someone espouses
* seek redemption after committing an offence
* persuade someone to complete some favor and so forth

**Methods**

To understand how people use conversation to achieve social goals, rather than interview or survey participants, proponents of conversation analysis observe, and then scrutinize, a variety of actual conversations in natural settings. That is, rather than ask two people to discuss some topic, researchers prefer to record a conversation in a natural setting or seek to access previous recordings of conversations—typically recordings that include both audio and video footage. Next, they analyse key features of these natural conversations, such as

* how people decide who should speak during a conversation, called turn taking
* how people resolve problems in conversations, such as misunderstandings, called repair
* how specific words tend to elicit particular responses
* how people utilize and respond to pauses or other moments of silence, and so forth,

**Varieties of conversation analysis**

Initially, this methodology was applied to examine features of everyday conversations, such as families during dinner. Since this time, however, conversation analysis has been utilized to study conversations in institutions—such as conversations with doctors, lawyers, police, salespeople, coaches, or teachers. These studies in institutions thus explore how characteristics of these institutions shape the conversation. Furthermore

* originally, Harvey Sacks, the key pioneer of conversation analysis, applied this technique primarily to understand how people use language to perform social actions
* subsequently, however, researchers have utilized this technique to generate practical insights on how individuals could converse more effectively to achieve their goals.

This document presents only a brief introduction to conversation analysis.

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| **Analysis of transcripts** |

To conduct conversation analysis, researchers construct a transcript of the conversation. But, rather than merely transcribe the words, researchers also utilize symbols to transcribe many of the features of the conversation, such as interruptions, pauses, accentuation, prolonged syllables, variations in pitch, speed, or volume, and smiles—to interrogate the data more closely. This technique is sometimes called Jeffersonian transcription, because many of the symbols were recommended by Jefferson (2004). The following table illustrates and explains this notation.

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| Sample transcript | | Explanation of notation |
| HDR convenor | Why did you contact me? | Underline indicates the word was stressed |
| Candidate | .hhhh I needed to see you | A dot and several hs indicates the person inhaled |
| HDR convenor | $ Yeah, but why? | $ or a pound sign indicates smiling |
| Candidate | I need to discuss my supervisor |  |
| HDR convenor | Do you have a problem with your supervisor? ((Looks stern)) | (( )) refers to notes from the researcher |
| Candidate | My supervisor (.6) is one with the problem | (). The number in brackets indicates the number of seconds the individual paused. In this instance, the pause was .6 of a second. |
| HDR convenor | O::kay | The colon indicates the sound, in this instance the “Oh”, was prolonged. Researchers tend to include more colons if the sound was especially prolonged. |
| Candidate | I mean, my supervisor is COMMITTED TO MY PROJECT= | Words in uppercase letters were louder than surrounding words—and may indicate shouting  The two = signs imply no pause between these two utterances |
| HDR convenor | =How would you (.) know? | A dot in the brackets indicates a very short pause—probably within one tenth of a second |
| Candidate | hhhh I just ↓ know | A row of hs indicates the person exhaled. Longer exhalations correspond to more dots.  ↓ Indicates a drop in pitch  ↑ Indicates a rise in pitch |
| HDR convenor | But what do you mean by not committed to your project- | - indicates the speech was interrupted |
| Candidate | >He’s uncommitted?< | Speech within < > is slower  Speech within > < is faster  ? implies a rising intonation, like when people ask a question |
| HDR convenor | ° That’s just the same thing | ° Indicates the following words are soft |
| Candidate | Well, I don’t know [what to say (…)] | [ ] refers to instances in which two or more people speak at the same time  (…) refers to unintelligible fading away |
| HDT | [I can’t do] anything unless you give me more evidence |  |

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| **Examples of insights** |

Researchers, after transcribing a conversation, will then attempt to uncover patterns and insights. These researchers assume, and have since confirmed, that conversations do indeed conform to many regular patterns and are not as random as they might first seem. To illustrate these attempts, the following table presents some examples of excerpts from transcripts and the interpretations that researchers proposed. Typically, however, researchers derive insights from many excerpts that demonstrate similar patterns or features.

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| Transcript | Example of an interpretation or insight |
| Doctor Do you have any other questions  Client Well (.4) No. | * The word “any” often implies to the other person the default answer is no rather than yes * The client considers another answer and then seems to stifle this consideration |
| Helen Would you like some more ↑ cake?  Fred Yeah, thanks | * The word “some”, in contrast to “any”, often elicits the answer “yes” |
| Client Did you enjoy your holiday?  Lawyer Oh (.2) yeah thanks | * Responses that are prefaced with “Oh” seem to imply the question was unexpected and thus perhaps inappropriate or uncommon in this setting |
| Psychologist You said you like sports? Do  you feel anxious when you play  sport?  Client: Sometimes, when I feel that… | * When practitioners precede a question with “You said that…”, the client tends to articulate a longer reply |
| Psychologist How do you show frustration?  Client I hit things  Psychologist Do you ever hurt yourself?  Client ° Sometimes | * To broach the subject of self-harm or suicide, practitioners may gradually progress from less personal to more personal matters |
| Ian while speed dating Are you divorced or | * When people inquire about the relationship history of a date—or other relatively sensitive questions—they often end the question with the word “or”. * This “or” diminishes the extent to which the question is designed to bias the outcome. * Deviations from this pattern tend to elicit resistance in the other person. |
| Retailer Does you think this service will help?  Client (.7) Well | * Long pauses—significantly beyond .1 of a second—often indicate doubt. In this example, the client is unlikely to respond favorably to the offer. |
| Salesperson But, you’d be willing to [help if]  Donor [Of course], yeah. | * When salespeople imply or propose that a customer is willing to engage in some desirable act, customers tend to emphasize they are willing—often before they are certain of which act they are supposedly willing to undertake (see Stokoe, 2013b) |

These insights can generate important practical implications. To illustrate, after discussing one problem, doctors tend to ask “Is there anything else I can help you with today?” However, conversation analysis has shown the word “any” tends to elicit a “no”. To override this tendency, doctors could adapt the sentence, such as “Is there some other issue I can help you with today?”

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| **Terms used in conversation analysis** |

To clarify how you can analyse transcripts to generate vital insights, you should first learn the common terms that proponents of this methodology often utilize. The following table defines and then illustrates these terms.

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| Term | Illustrations |
| Adjacency pair: Typically, two consecutive utterances, in which the second comment is a response to the first comment. | Doctor How are you?  Patient Good. |
| Disjunct marker: An utterance that shift the conversation, often including phrases like “by the way” or “oh” | Husband Can you buy something for James  Wife Oh (.2) remember to call James tonight |
| Embedded repetition: An utterance in which the first few words repeat the phrases of a previous utterance to demonstrate continuity | Candidate Can you tell me how to read better?  Teacher To read better, you need to practice |
| Latching: Instances in which no discernible pause separates one utterance from the previous utterance, signified by an = | Candidate I mean, my supervisor is  COMMITTED TO MY PROJECT=  HDR convenor =How would you (.) know? |
| Overlap: Two or more people speak concurrently—usually a transgression of turn-taking rules |  |
| Preference organisation: An adjacency pair in which the first utterance is designed to elicit or skew the second utterance | Carl great party, don’t you reckon  Donna sure is  If the second person does not respond as anticipated, the utterance is called a dis-preferred action. This second utterance is typically qualified, justified, or delayed.  Carl great party, don’t you reckon  Donna well (.5) I’m a little bored (.) but that  could be because I ↓ did not sleep well |
| Repair: Utterances that highlight or correct errors—such as incorrect words or stammers. | People might highlight or correct the errors they commit or the errors someone else commits. People may also initiate these corrections themselves or respond to an utterance from someone else. |
| Sequence organisation: During more conversations, the speaker will normally relate their utterances to the previous utterance. In addition, the speaker will imply or prompt the next action from other speakers. |  |
| Speech exchange system: Refers to the extent to which one person is granted more right than is the other person to speak. | To illustrate, lectures tend to be one-sided: The lecture is granted more right to speak. Everyday conversations, in contrast, tend to be more even. |
| Story preface or preface: An utterance in which one person seeks the right to produce an extended, but interesting story or response. In response, after a short pause, the other people signal this prolonged story is acceptable | Adam Do you want to hear what happened to me yesterday?  Betty (.) sure |
| Turn taking: Rules that help individuals determine who should be speaking | Examples of these rules are   * The person speaking tends to identify who the next speaker should be—both verbally, such as “What do you think John” and nonverbally such as a head nod in particular direction * If this speaker is not identified, anyone can interrupt   Furthermore, within each conversation is a   * transition relevance place—a place within a conversation in which one person begins speaking as the other person stops speaking |
| Vocal sounds: Vocalisations that are not words, such as um. These vocalisations are recorded because they can affect the meaning of utterances but also indicate the rhythm of a conversation | * um: used by the speaker to maintain their turn, sometimes called a holding mechanism * mm, mm: used to signify agreement * eh: indicating doubt * heh, he: implying laughter |

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| **Analysis of data** |

After researchers transcribe a conversation, they need to analyse the data to extract insights about how people use conversation to achieve social goals and perform social acts. That is, they need to distil patterns. Most scholars maintain that researchers cannot apply a standard algorithm or procedure to extract these insights. They need to immerse themselves in the transcripts and compare similar conversations. Nevertheless, a few scholars recommend that researchers undertake the sequence of activities that appear in the following table.

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| Activity | Details |
| Identify the social actions | * That is, clarify the goals the individuals are striving to achieve, such as to apologize, to acquire information, to request a favor, and so forth |
| Identify relevant turn-taking sequences | * That is, identify sequences of utterances—called turn-taking sequences—that correspond to each social action |
| Examine the details of each turn-taking sequence | For example, the researcher might   * consider the meaning and effect of specific words—sometimes called lexical choice * consider deviations from the rules that underpin turn-taking—such as how an individual circumvented a question |
| Identify broader patterns from these details | For example, the researcher might   * identify similar features in different conversations, such as the tendency of children to offer longer answers to hypothetical questions * examine the order in which various adjacent pairs evolve; to illustrate, doctors might tend to ask factual questions and then personal questions * consider the overall structure of conversations; to illustrate, in medical clinics, doctors first clarify the problem, collect data, diagnose the problem, and then consider treatments, usually in the same order. |
| Collate many examples of the patterns or insights then identified |  |
| Develop a narrative or account to explain this pattern |  |

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| **Implementing conversation analysis** |

Every study that utilizes conversation analysis—including the aim, setting, and methods—is unique. Indeed, even the paradigm that underpins conversation analysis can vary. Many proponents of conversation analysis espouse ethnomethodology: the study of methods that people utilize to understand and shape their social environment. But, some proponents of conversation analysis espouse other paradigms or theoretical perspectives, such as feminist ideologies (Kitzinger, 2000; Speer, 2002). Nevertheless, despite this variety, many studies that utilize conversational analysis entail a similar sequence of activities. The following table outlines these activities.

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| Activity | Example |
| **Read the literature** about a topic of interest, but refrain from generating specific hypotheses | * An example might revolve around how children persuade their parents |
| **Formulate plans** on how to collect recordings of relevant conversations | * You might record conversations in the future or seek archival footage. * Consider which equipment and software you might use to record and transcribe conversations. * You might, for example, use InqScribe, Transana, or other alternatives to facilitate transcription. |
| **Seek ethics approval** to record or obtain these recordings |  |
| Collect extensive data | * Researchers often accrue between 10 and 100 hours of recordings |
| **Watch these recordings** to decide which topic or phenomenon to explore in more detail—that is, which topic or phenomenon seems interesting, important, or conspicuous | * For example, the researcher might decide to focus on circumstances in which the child requests unhealthy food or conversations in which the child cried |
| Assemble excerpts of recordings that are relevant to this topic or phenomenon | * You might, for instance, collate 30 short excerpts that are relevant to this topic |
| Transcribe these excerpts | * See previous notes about transcription symbols |
| Analyse these excerpts to identify patterns | * See previous notes about analysis |
| Validate your conclusions | To illustrate how you can validate conclusions   * if you conclude the word “any” sways people to answer “no”, count the number of times this hypothesis was supported or refuted in your data * if “oh” implies the question was inappropriate, check the number of times the person who asked the question feels the need to justify this question |

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