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Conversation analysis

Esa Lehtinen

Abstract

Conversation analysis is primarily a method for the study of spoken interaction. It is most of all concerned with the sequential organization of interaction, but it is also interested in the inferential frameworks people use in making sense of each other in interaction. It was originated by Harvey Sacks in the 1960's, and it is influenced by the ethnomethodological sociology of Harold Garfinkel. In religious studies, it can be used for the microanalytic study of various kinds of religious activity types. With the help of the method, the analyst can both explicate the central religiously relevant tasks the participants accomplish in these activity types and uncover the interactional methods they use in accomplishing them. Mostly, conversation analysts use video- or audio-recordings of naturally occurring interaction as data, but written interaction, such as discussion in social media, can also be analyzed with the method. Conversation analysis can be productively combined with ethnographic methods.

Biographical note

Esa Lehtinen is Professor of Modern Finnish at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. In his dissertation, he investigated ways of talking about Bible texts in Seventh-day Adventist Bible study. Since then, he has studied discourse and interaction in different kinds of settings, including religious, medical and organizational.

Chapter summary

Conversation analysis

- Conversation analysis is a method for the analysis of the sequential organization of social interaction.
- It is also interested in the inferential frameworks people rely on in interaction.
- It is influenced by ethnomethodology.
- The main area of application in religious studies is the microanalytic study of religious activity types.
- It can also be used for investigating how religion is talked about in any kind of interaction.

- A conversation analytic study can explicate the interactional problems participants grapple with in religious activity types.
- The data of conversation analysis usually consist of video- or audiorecorded instances of naturally occurring interaction
- While the recordings are used as primary data, the data is also transcribed for the purposes of analysis and publication.
- Analysis entails choosing an interactional phenomenon, collecting instances of the phenomenon from the data, and comparing them in a detailed way
- In religious studies, conversation analysis can be combined with ethnographic methods.

1. What is conversation analysis?

Conversation analysis (henceforth CA) is primarily a method for the analysis of spoken interaction, but it can also be used to study mediated forms of interaction, for example discussions in social media (Arminen *et al.* 2016). It is, most of all, concerned with the **sequential organization** of interaction (Schegloff 2007). That is, it seeks to explore how actions and turns of talk follow each other in a systematic way.

An important case of sequential organization is the **adjacency pair** (Schegloff and Sacks 1973; Schegloff 2007). The adjacency pair is a term for a pair of actions that belong tightly together, such as question and answer, invitation and acceptance/rejection, greeting and greeting. When a speaker produces a first pair part, e.g. a question, it is the normative obligation of the next speaker to produce a second pair part that fits with the first pair part. The normativity of the adjacency pair means that the next speaker can be held accountable for not producing the second pair part. He/she may furnish a justification or a justification may be asked for by the speaker of the first pair part.

CA studies have also shown how sequential organization may be constrained in a special way in institutional encounters (Drew and Heritage 1992: 37-42). For example, questions and answers often have institutional functions. This means, first of all, that in many institutional encounters, e.g. courtrooms, turns are pre-allocated in that one party, usually the professional, asks questions, and the other answers them. Secondly, in many institutions there is a special kind of a third turn attached to the adjacency pair, e.g. the teacher's evaluative turn in classroom discourse.

There are three other important concepts that are closely connected to sequence organization: turn-

taking, preference and repair. **Turn-taking** (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974) is concerned with the question of how speaker change is accomplished in talk-in-interaction. **Preference organization** (Schegloff 2007; Pomerantz and Heritage 2012) refers to social and structural features of actions. For example, an invitation may be either accepted or declined. Accepting is the socially preferred response, and declining is dispreferred. Dispreferred responses usually include, e.g., delays, mitigations and justifications. **Repair organization** (see Schegloff *et al.* 1977; Kitzinger 2012) refers to interactants' methods for solving problems of hearing and understanding.

All of the foregoing can be seen as part of the 'sequential order' of interaction. However, CA is also interested in the 'inferential order' of interaction (Hutchby and Wooffitt 2008). In institutional encounters, in particular, there are specific 'inferential frameworks' at work (Drew and Heritage 1992). One way to analyze **inferential frameworks** is what Harvey Sacks (1992) called **membership categorization analysis**. For him, the starting point of membership categorization analysis was the idea that a person can be categorized in numerous ways. For example, a single person may be categorizable as a male, husband, father, middle-aged, white or Catholic. Thus, when a categorization is used in interaction, it is always a product of a choice. Sacks wanted to find out how categorizations are selected, used and understood in actual interaction. Thus, he was interested in the situated use of cultural resources (Hester and Eglin 1997).

2. Theoretical background

Although CA is nowadays practiced in a multitude of disciplines, e.g. linguistics, communication studies, psychology and education, originally it is rooted in sociology. It was originated by the sociologist Harvey Sacks in the 1960's. He was, most of all, influenced by the ethnomethodological sociology of Harold Garfinkel (1967; see Heritage 1984). There is not space here for a thorough description of **ethnomethodology** (henceforth, EM). I will, however, introduce some aspects of EM that are particularly important for CA.

EM studies 'ethnomethods', that is, people's ordinary ways of, on the one hand, organizing their day-to-day activities and, on the other hand, making them intelligible to others. As Garfinkel (1967) says, people should not be thought of as cultural or psychological 'dopes', actors who blindly follow rules. People do use different cultural resources in doing what they do, e.g. rules, habits and background expectancies, but rules are never enough: each action is situated in a particular context,

in which the actor her/himself makes the action intelligible. Garfinkel also stresses the accountability of action. This means that when norms or routines are broken, an actor can be expected to produce a justification. But it also means that even when no norms are broken, actions are produced as accountable for the participants of the setting. They are accomplishments that rely on intersubjectivity between participants.

CA is also influenced by Erving Goffman's idea of the '**interaction order**' (see Heritage 2001). This meant, for Goffman (1967), that social interaction can be treated as an institution itself, like other institutions such as family and religion. He recommended that interaction order should be approached through studying 'syntactical relations among the acts of different persons mutually present.' Goffman's 'syntax' can be seen as a predecessor of CA's focus on sequence organization.

Table 1. Conversation analysis could be a suitable method for you if

- you are interested in what happens in actual instances of religious activities
- it is possible for you to get permission to video- or audiotape naturally occurring activities, or collect written interactions
- you are interested in how people communicate with each other
- you would like to learn to do detailed analysis of language use and embodied activities

3. Conversation analysis in religious studies

The main area of application for CA in religious studies is the microanalytic study of religious **activity types**. Following Levinson (1979), activity types can be defined as culturally recognizable bounded events that set constraints on the participants. In any religious community there is a multitude of recurring activity types. If we take as an example a community that I have studied, Seventh-day Adventism, there are worship services, Bible study groups, youth meetings, religion lessons in Seventh-day Adventist schools, family worship, grace before meals, different forms of proselytizing, internet discussion forums etc. Any of these events could be analyzed with CA methods. So far, CA studies of a variety of religious activity types have been published; e.g., prayer in different Christian settings (Capps and Ochs 2002), Bible study groups (Lehtinen 2005, 2009a, 2009b; Nissi 2013), Christian church services in Bosavi, New Guinea (Schieffelin 2007), Mormon proselytizing in the Czech Republic (Sherman 2007), student-teacher interviews in a Zen monastery (Buttney and Isbell 1991), and master-student dialogues in a Bektashi Muslim community (Trix

1999).

Another type of application of CA to religion has been to study how religion is talked about in activity types that are not, per se, religious. In particular, membership categorization analysis has been used in this sense to analyze how categorizations are used in argumentative contexts in both conventional and social media. For example, Clifton (2014) has analyzed how islamophobia is talked into being through category work in political debate in the talk radio, and Pihlaja (2014) has shown how different categorizations of Christians are used in argumentation in Youtube. Finally, it is possible to apply CA to religious writings. An example is Person's (1996) work on the book of Jonah. He examines how adjacency pairs are described in the biblical book.

In the following I will give two examples of CA studies of religion. The first of them is on Mormon proselytizing (Sherman 2007), the second on Bible study sessions arranged within Lutheran student mission movements (Nissi 2013). They are different in that Sherman studies interaction between a representative of a religious group and an outsider, while Nissi studies religious in-group interaction.

Sherman (2007) has studied 'first-contact public proselyting situations' of Mormon missionaries in the Czech Republic. These are situations where the missionaries approach strangers. As Sherman shows, there are many things the missionaries need to accomplish during a short exchange for it to be successful. The most important ones are the following two: they need to initiate a conversation with a stranger, and they need to conduct that conversation in a way that makes it possible to establish further contact. The topic of faith need not necessarily be raised in the first encounter. Sherman describes how the missionaries accomplish their task step by step.

In the following I will concentrate on two aspects of this task: initiating contact and category work in the beginning of the conversation. Extract 1 (Sherman 2007: 79) is a typical case of initiating contact on the street. Sherman bases his discussion on Harvey Sacks' (1992) idea of different kinds of conversationalists. If, for example, two people are friends, they are, because of that, 'proper conversationalists'. That is, they 'have a right' to talk to each other, and they usually begin their conversation with greetings. When, however, strangers meet, they are 'non-proper conversationalists', and they have a right to talk to each other only if they, or one of them, produces a '**ticket**', a socially acceptable reason for a conversation. Such conversations, instead of beginning with greetings, begin with tickets. Thus, the missionary's first and actually quite difficult problem is

to find and produce a ticket that makes it possible for him to have a conversation with a stranger. He does so by producing a slightly ambivalent turn in which he asks the stranger whether he can speak with him. The recipient (line 2) shows that he or she interprets the missionary's initial turn as a pre-request and asks what the missionary 'needs'. A **pre-request** (Schegloff 2007) is a turn that projects an upcoming request and asks the recipient for permission to produce it. The recipient grants permission on line 2. To have a request would, of course, constitute a ticket to talk to a stranger. However, on line 3, the missionary rejects this interpretation, and produces instead an identification. It turns out (see line 9) that for the missionary the turn on line 1 is a pre-offer, not a pre-request. We can see, however, how producing a turn that is interpretable as a pre-request is suitable for his purposes: with it he gets the attention of the recipient and produces at least the appearance of having a ticket.

Extract 1. Mormon proselytizing (Sherman 2007: 79-80; translation provided by Tamah Sherman)

- 01 M1: prosím vás můžu mluvit s vámi na chvíli?
excuse me can I speak with you for a little while?
- 02 C7: no: co potřebujete?
yeah: what do you need?
- 03 M1: nic jenom my jsme tady jako dobrovolníci,
nothing just we're here as volunteers,
- 04 C7: no
yeah
- 05 M1: a tady my učíme zdarma angličtinu,
and we teach English for free here,
- 06 C7: no
yeah
- 07 M1: a dnes my snažíme mluvit s lidmi o tom,
and today we're trying to speak with people about it,
- 08 C7: no
yeah
- 09 M1: já nevím jestli máte zájem? nebo jestli znáte někoho?
I don't know if you're interested? or if you know someone?

The second issue that I want point out in Sherman's study is the use of categorizations. This can also be seen in Extract 1. In the beginning of a conversation between strangers, the interlocutors need to come to an understanding of what they are to each other. This is important in determining whether the conversation is worth continuing. Thus, Sherman conducted a careful comparison of how the missionaries described themselves in their encounters with strangers. Her main finding is that there is a certain order in which the missionaries use categories (Silverman 2007: 128). They use vague categories before more specific ones, categories that can be perceived as more agreeable

Kommentout [EL1]: Sherman, not Silverman

before less agreeable ones, and familiar ones before less familiar ones. This can be seen in Extract 1 where the missionary first uses a vague category ‘volunteer’ (line 3), and only afterwards invokes the more specific category ‘English teacher’ through describing the activity ‘we teach English’ (line 5). Also, the supposedly less agreeable religious categories like ‘missionary’ and ‘Mormon’ are not (yet) used.

Nissi’s (2013) study was conducted on Bible study sessions arranged by student mission movements in the Evangelical-Lutheran church in Finland. The Bible study groups meet weekly to read the Bible together and discuss their views of the texts. The meetings are non-hierarchical in that there is no pre-assigned instructor in them. As Nissi (2013: 788) notes, “the core institutional task of these encounters is to generate meanings for the text”, to explore the text from different perspectives. One method for accomplishing this exploration is **disagreement**. From a CA viewpoint, disagreeing can be seen as an interactional activity that displays an oppositional stance with regard to the previous utterance. This oppositional stance can be done in variable ways. Extract 2 is an example of what Nissi calls a **contradiction**.

The discussion in the extract concerns the following verses in 2 Thessalonians:

⁸nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. ⁹It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. (2 Thessalonians 3: 8–10, English Standard Version).

The extract begins with Marc’s comment on the text (lines 1–6), in which he presents an interpretation of the text; he sees it as an example of and an appeal for ‘work ethic’ (line 1). On lines 2–6 he then reads the part of the text that, in his view, supports his interpretation. The expression *työihanne* ‘work ethic’ is interesting in two ways. Firstly, it is an expression that would not be used in the Bible. Rather, it connects the text to the life-world of the participants. Secondly, as it is an expression with a positive connotation, it implies a positive assessment of Paul’s message.

Extract 2. Bible study in Lutheran student mission (Nissi 2013)

01 Marc: *täältä muum muassa löytyy tämä <työihanne>? (1.7)*
one finds for example this <work ethic> here? (1.7)

02 eli nää itse (0.8) †kahdeksan. (1.3) me emme
so they themselves (0.8) †eight. (1.3) nor

03 syöneet ke- ilmaiseksi kenenkään leipää vaan
did we eat a- anyone's bread without paying for it but

04 teimme työtä ja uurastimme työtä päivää. (2.2)
with toil and labor we worked †night and day. (2.2)

05 olisihan meillä ollut siihen oikeus mutta
it was not because we do not have that right but

06 halusimme olla teille esimerkkinä?
to give you in ourselves an example to imitate?

07 (1.8)

08 Lea: mut se oli tosi julmasti et seuraavassa jakeessa
but it was really cruel in the next verse

09 @jos joku ei suostu tekemään työtä hänen †ei
@if anyone is not willing to work let him

10 pidä myöskään syödä@. (2.4) \$pois kaikki
†not eat@. (2.4) \$away with all the

11 leipäjonothh(h)h\$.
bread queueshh(h)h\$.

On lines 8–11 Lea produces a contradiction. It has the typical structure of a contradiction: it starts with the word *mut* ‘but’ that indicates some kind of a contrast, and pinpoints something in the text that is potentially discrepant with the previous interpretation of the text. In this case Lea draws attention to the next verse in the text and provides a negative assessment of the text. In her view, the advice presented in the text is ‘cruel’ (line 8). This assessment contrasts with Marc’s positive assessment of the text. In the end of her turn, she laughingly shows where such advice would lead in her life-world: ‘away with all the bread queues’. Even though she softens her stance with the laughter, this imaginary scenario strengthens her claim that there is something problematic in the text.

All in all, we can see in the example how the participants explore the meaning of the text, taking into account different interpretations of the text. And it is not just the meaning of the text per se that interests them, but rather what the text means for them, in their life-world. Disagreeing is important in conducting this task. Through disagreeing, the participants display to each other that they are interpreting the text together, exploring alternative ways of coming to terms with the text. Contradictions are well suited for this activity: with a contradiction a speaker can bring forth an alternative interpretation of the text without explicitly refuting the first one. It leaves open the possibility that both interpretations can be true at the same time.

It can be said that in both the cases described above, the analysis explicates a problem the

participants of a religious group need to solve: how to initiate and continue a conversation with a stranger, and how to explore the meaning of a Bible text together. Both of these problems are, at least in retrospect, quite obvious to anyone who knows these religious groups (see, Livingston 2008). The main contribution of conversation analysis is, first of all, to show how these problems are interactional and situational in nature: they consist of choices the participants continually need to make in particular sequential positions. Secondly, conversation analysis can uncover the interactional methods that participants of religious groups use to carry out these tasks, answering the question of how religious tasks are accomplished in practice.

4. Practical issues: How to do conversation analysis?

Conversation analysts insist on investigating naturally occurring interaction (Mondada 2012). This means that field notes or interviews are not considered as sufficient data. In CA the analysis needs to come to terms with minute details of actual interaction, and such detail is difficult if not impossible to remember afterwards. Thus, CA data consist of recordings of actual interactional encounters, or, in some cases, specimens of written interaction in e.g. social media. Both audio- and video-recordings are used, but video-recordings are preferred, since they can catch the embodied aspects of interaction such as gaze, facial expressions, postures and gestures. This way of recording data may create problems with access. There are religious groups among which it is impossible to obtain permission for recording. In these groups other methods need to be used.

The decision of what to record, of course, depends on what the researcher is interested in. In a CA study of religious interaction, the broad research interest usually has to do with the interactional organization of particular religious activities in a given community. The researcher will, then, record specimen of an activity type where those religious activities are routinely realized. For example, if you are interested in how the Bible is studied in interaction, or how baptisms are organized, you will, respectively, record a set of Bible study sessions or baptism ceremonies.

Table 2. Steps to take in conversation analytical research

- formulating broad research questions
- deciding type(s) of data to be recorded
- video- or audiorecording of data

- transcription
- delimiting analytic focus to a specific interactional phenomenon
- making a collection of cases
- comparison of cases
- determining the religious significance of the phenomenon

There are also ethical questions in recording interactional data. Participants are identifiable in the raw data, and the content of the talk may also include personal information. Thus, data protection and privacy issues are crucial. In most cases it is necessary to obtain written informed consent from all participants. They need to be informed about the purpose of the study and data management procedures: e.g. where and how the data will be stored, who will have access to the data, where the data will and will not be shown, whether and how it will be archived after the research project. In transcribing, the usual practice is to protect the privacy of the participants through changing all names, places and other details that make identification possible¹. If video stills are used in publications, they can be anonymized through, e.g., blurring. The researcher also needs to be aware of data protection laws in the country where the research is conducted.

In CA the recordings are always used as the primary data, and they should be used in all stages of the analysis. However, for the purposes of both analysis and publication, the data also needs to be **transcribed** into written form. Since CA research is interested in detail, the transcripts are usually also very detailed. For example, pauses, overlaps, intonation, laughter, restarts and acknowledgement tokens are usually marked (Jefferson 2004). These phenomena are important in studying, e.g., turn-taking and repair. When the study has to do with embodied aspects of interaction, their features are also documented in transcripts (Mondada, 2007). It is important to note, however, that no matter how detailed the transcript is, it is always a product of selection. Thus, different versions of transcripts are always needed for different purposes. In the beginning stages of the analysis, a more or less rough version may be adequate. When the analysis focuses on particular phenomena, more detailed versions will usually be prepared on relevant clips of the data. In these transcripts, features that are relevant with regard to those phenomena will be highlighted. In publications, a version of the transcript that takes readability into consideration is needed.

Table 3. An example of transcription symbols (Lehtinen 2009b, modified from Jefferson 2004)

¹ In the extracts in this article, all the names have been changed.

Kommentoinut [MO2]: Doesn't one start with the search and then proceed to record?

Kommentoinut [EL3R2]: Good point. My original formulation here, and in the text as well, may have been difficult to understand. Phenomena don't, of course, come out of the blue. I added something here, and in the text, about broad research questions and choosing type of data with regard to that. What I was trying to say here, and hope to say it better now, is that, in CA, the specific interactional phenomenon can't often be known beforehand, before really looking at the data. Hopefully this is clearer now.

.	falling intonation
,	slightly falling intonation
?	rising intonation
↓	fall in pitch
↑	rise in pitch
spe <u>a</u> k	emphasis
>spea <u>k</u> <	faster pace than surrounding talk
<spea <u>k</u> >	slower pace than surrounding talk
°spea <u>k</u> °	quiet talk
SPEAK	loud talk
sp-	word cut off
spea:k	lengthening of the sound
.hhh	inbreath
hhh	outbreath
.speak	word spoken during inbreath
#speak#	creaky voice
andspeakand	trembling voice
\$speak\$	smile voice
@speak@	unanalyzed change of tone
sp(h)ea <u>k</u>	word produced through laugh
hehe	laughing
[beginning of overlapping talk
]	end of overlapping talk

Kommentout [EL4]: &-signs are really used in the transcripts, so should not be replaced with "and" here

In the preliminary analysis of data, it is important to delimit the analysis to specific interactional phenomena. With regard to this phase, conversation analysts sometimes talk about 'unmotivated looking' (Sacks 1984). This means that the researcher should be open to going where the data leads and look for the interactional patterns that are central in the data.. 'Unmotivated' does not, however, mean that the data should be approached without any systematic method. For example, if one has a particular type of a religious encounter, e.g. a worship service or a prayer meeting, my advice is to start with one instance of it, and analyze it systematically, paying attention to its sequential structure. One should identify the actions that are performed, in their order, and look at how the

different actions are performed. Through such preliminary analysis, one should decide on the phenomenon one wants to focus on. Usually the phenomenon is a particular type of turn or sequence of turns such as question and answer or request and response (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998: 94).

When the object of analysis has been identified, the researcher should go through the data systematically and collect all instances of the phenomenon. Then the cases in the collection should be analyzed in a detailed way, especially paying attention to how the different actions are performed, and how the participants of the interaction themselves demonstrably interpret each other's actions. This means, for example, that one should not analyze questions without taking into consideration how they are answered. The goal of the analysis is to uncover recurrent patterns of interaction in the activity type one studies.

It is also important to analyze the collections of cases in view of the inferential frameworks observable in them. This is especially important in determining the religious significance of the sequential patterns one studies. The researcher should ask what religious tasks the participants of the interaction accomplish and what religiously relevant 'problems' they solve through their actions. Thus, CA research can shed light on what religion is like – and what different religions are like – as practice through showing what kinds of practical problems practitioners of religion grapple with in their daily lives and how they solve them.

There is computer software available for the transcription and analysis of interactional data. It is important that the software one uses makes it possible to link clips of data to the transcription and make collections in which the link is preserved (ten Have 2007: 112-113). Transana and CLAN, for example, have been widely used by CA researchers.

5. Strengths, limitations and challenges

CA involves a detailed microanalysis of data. This is both a strength and a limitation of the method. The main strength of the method is that it comes to terms with what actually happens in religious interaction. Also, since CA is concerned with sequential analysis, it can explicate how the participants themselves interpret each others' actions. This is done through examining how actions are treated in the next turn. Thus, CA can shed light on what religious practice looks like from the

standpoint of the practitioners.

However, since the analysis is so detailed, a conversation analyst must usually concentrate on just one type of a religious encounter. Thus, it can be argued that CA results give a limited picture of any religious community. Also, particularly when researchers study a religious community they are unfamiliar with, they need cultural knowledge of the community to understand the inferential frameworks involved (Arminen 2000). To attain such knowledge, ethnographic observation of the community needs to be conducted. Thus, a combination of ethnographic and conversation analytic methods can deliver excellent results. The best possible scenario would be to put together a research group of ethnographers and conversation analysts. The ethnographers could concentrate on giving a holistic picture of the speech community, while conversation analysts could concentrate on specific kinds of speech events (Lehtinen 2009a).

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Key concepts

adjacency pair: a sequence of two adjacent utterances in talk-in-interaction that are normatively tied to each other, e.g. question and answer.

inferential framework: a set of cultural resources in a speech community that participants of interaction use in order to understand each other

membership categorization analysis: a mode of analysis originated by Harvey Sacks that seeks to explicate how members of a culture categorize each other in situated ways in interaction

preference organization: the practices participants of talk-in-interaction use to display their orientation to the social acceptability of actions

repair organization: the methods participants of talk-in-interaction use to deal with problems of hearing and understanding

sequence organization: the systematics in the ordering of actions in talk-in-interaction. According to conversation analysis, turns that follow each other sequentially are linked to each other in an orderly way.

transcription: conversion of video- or audio-recorded data into written form. Conversation analytical transcription tries to capture both what is said and how it is said.

turn-taking organization: the methods participants of talk-in-interaction use to construct their turns as complete and accomplish speaker exchange