A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO CONVERSATIONAL ANALYSIS

Methodological Report

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1 Introduction

The origin of this report lies in the question of how to observe the actual functioning of conceptual constructs such as "didactic contract" or "intersubjectivity" in the classroom. How does the researcher empirically locate instances of the construction, elaboration and negotiation of constitual elements of the social organization of the classroom?

Conversation has recently come under attention as being one of the primary social practices which contribute to the construction of reality (see, for example, Gergen & Davis 1985, Harré 1987). If talk does play an important role in the creation of mutual realities, then a detailed analysis of conversation in the classroom could offer clues to the understanding of didactic interactions. As language usage reflects normative rules and implicit knowledge, an attempt to explicate the social achievement of communication in the classroom could become heuristic means for situating and identifying the functioning of conceptual constructs in the mundane accomplishments of the day-to-day activities of education.

But how to study talk? The following report is a brief presentation of one method (among many others) whose aim is the understanding of ordinary talk: conversational analysis. Emphasis is placed on the practical details of this particular methodology in order to contribute to a "hands-on" approach to the analysis of communication. It is thus hoped to contribute to the demystification of qualitative methods.
2 Definition of Conversational Analysis

Conversation analysis can be looked upon as a research method for the study of communication aimed at understanding the structures of conversational action and interlocutors' communicative practices. It can be characterized as essentially qualitative method given its emphasis on descriptive detail rather than on experimental method. The method could be said to have stemmed from ethnomethodological studies (eg. Garfinkel 1967) in sociology as well as from research in pragmatics (eg. Levinson 1983) and sociolinguistics (eg. Sudnow 1972, Ervin-Tripp & Mitchell-Kerman 1977, Ervin-Tripp 1979), borrowing from social psychology along the way.

Heritage (1988) gives the following definition of the objective of conversational analysis:

"The objective is to describe the procedures by which speakers produce their own behaviour and understand and deal with the behaviour of others. The central resource for analysis is interaction itself. Interaction forms such a resource because during its course the parties, whether intentionally or not, implicitly display their understanding and analysis of what is happening, as it happens. These implicit displays are embedded in participants' own actions." (p.128-9)

Levinson (1983) differentiates conversational analysis from discourse analysis by stressing the fact that researchers using the latter method are more inclined to search for statistical relationships among their data (recorded speech which has been coded into categories) whereas conversational analysis "resists finalized categorization in favour of continuing to add details to description" (Hopper et al. 1986) in the hope of preserving nuances of interaction that would be lost in coding operations.
In francophone linguistics, we find Moeschler (1986) distinguishing between what he calls "analyse conversationnelle (AC)" and "analyse du discours (AD)" on the following points:

"i) Alors que AD envisage l’approche de la conversation en termes linguistiques (analyse en constituants, relations fonctionnelles entre ces constituants, détermination de règles de bonne formation discursive, règles d’interprétation, etc.), AC envisage la conversation sous l’angle interactionnel: la conversation n’est pas un objet linguistique, mais relève de la théorie de l’interaction, donc de la sociologie;

ii) alors que AD envisage la conversation sous l’angle de sa structure (et donc de ses règles de production), AC envisage les faits conversationnelles (règles présidant les tours de parole, règles gouvernant la réalisation des demandes, etc.)

iii) alors que AD a pour objectif l’élaboration d’une modalité formelle de la conversation (établissement de règles ou principes de composition et de règles d’interprétation), AC procède d’une stratégie inductive et empiriste: la description de micro-mécanismes interactionnels est prioritaire par rapport aux généralisations et aux formalisations;

iv) alors que AD fait intervenir une analyse externe (on distingue soigneusement ce que fait l’analyste de ce que font les locuteurs) AC implique une position interne de l’analyste: il s’agit de mettre en place des règles qui concernent les activités des sujets parlants plutôt que des règles relevant du modèle théorique élaboré par l’analyste".

Moeschler’s distinctions between conversational analysis and discourse analysis are mentioned here out of interest. However, a comparison of conversational analysis methods to other methods of analyzing speech in conversation used by non-anglophones (including so-called conversational analysis) remains to be done.
3 Topics of Conversational Analysis

A predominate interest in conversational analysis concerns how participants in conversation encounter and deal with problematic speech. For example, some specific questions posed by conversational analysts are:

1) How do participants in conversation achieve turn-taking?
2) How do partners accomplish utterance sequences across turns?
3) How do speakers coordinate talk with gaze, movement, and other non-verbal action?
4) How do participants identify and repair problems in social interaction?
5) How does conversation function in particular contexts, such as interviews, classroom interactions, therapy sessions, etc.?
6) How is meaning interactionally negotiated among participants?
7) How does conversation transform meaning?
8) How are role and status established in talk?

3.1 Conversation in Institutional Settings

In recent years, there has been an increasing number of studies of various forms of institutional interaction, i.e., interaction within clearly defined contexts with recognized social roles and norms. Talk in classrooms, courtrooms, hospitals, clinics, etc. has been analyzed with the aim to uncover the patterns of conduct characteristic of these settings.
The underlying assumption of these studies is that the significance of participants' communication is contextual: that is, talk is context shaped as well as being context renewing (cf. Heritage 1985). Interaction cannot be adequately understood without taking into consideration the context in which it occurs. This "contextualization of utterances" becomes the basis on which interactants rely in order to make sense of what they hear. Since every utterance will itself form part of the immediate context of interaction, it will contribute to the framework of interpretation. In this sense, every utterance functions to renew (i.e., maintain, adjust, alter, etc.) the context.

Thus institutional settings are particularly suited to the study of the display of 'public' understandings of prior utterances as reflected in responses, etc. For example, Mehan (1979), in his analysis of talk in the classroom has examined adjacency pairs (i.e., pairs of utterances in which the second utterance is a response to the first) in didactic interactions between teacher and pupil as a means of continuous updating of intersubjective understandings.

4 Methods of Conversational Analysis

4.1 Recording

The primary data source in conversational analysis are tape recordings as any analysis of interaction cannot proceed without complete material. Any note taking or on-the-spot coding of responses not only prevents recovery of the details of the original interaction but is also already an analysis in itself. While naturally occurring speech interactions are preferred (telephone conversations are often studied), conversations have been recorded in artificial situations; for example, Brenneis & Lein (1977) asked children to role-play
arguments and recorded and analyzed these conversations. Accompanying
video recording is highly recommended to provide additional non-verbal
dimensions of the interaction. (One reason telephone conversations are
popular as data is that audio recordings capture most of the details
available to participants.)

4.2 Transcriptions

Perhaps the feature that most distinguishes conversational analysis
from other methods of communication study is its transcribing
conventions. The transcribing system as developed by Jefferson (see
Sacks, Scheglof & Jefferson 1974) aims at a very detailed and precise
replication of speech as a skillfully crafted transcription is seen as
being essential to analysis. As Sacks (1984) and other conversation
analysts have shown, the detail that is edited out and/or lost in
reconstruction is extremely rich and often vital for a full
understanding of what is going on.

The following example is an extract from a transcription of a
conversation (between two American speakers) transcribed using this
system:

01 John: I gave. I gave up smoking cigarettes:::=
02 Don: =Yeah.
03 (0.4)

As we can see from this example, the transcripting system is
particularly attentive to pitch, loudness (as indicated by
underlining), stress (by colons), speaker overlap (= signs) and pauses
(time of pause in tenths of seconds in parentheses). Buttny (1987) has
shown the importance of taking into consideration stress patterns in
his analysis of accounts in couple therapy. A phrase such as "I felt
the need for more interaction" can be understood as an implicit
allocation of blame (hence change the interpretation of the speech
(1) if one takes into consideration the intonational emphasis on "I felt".

An example showing the importance of transcribing speaker overlap is the following extract taken from a telephone conversation (Hopper 1987):

19 K: oh yea-- (. ) pt hh I'm sorry uh yeah was just telling
20 that John Moore is on the phone about Sperry maintenance,
21 hh that twenty-two month thing
22 M: okay
23 K: Can I call you back?
24 M: sure.
25 K: okay=
26 M: kay bye bye
27 K: let me do that. Thanks. Bye.

In this brief extract, the speaker K offers an explanation as a warrant for having to hang up but does not seem to hear speaker M's acceptance and thus continues the explanation (line 21-22). The identification of misunderstandings and miscommunications can often offer insights into how communication functions.

Conversation exchanges which deviate from normative requirements (for example, not answering a question) can also provide insight into the normal pattern of interaction. Heritage (1988) presents a case in which S has announced a disastrous examination result which will prevent her from entering law school. Her interlocutor, G, asks her if she will take the examination again using a question form which presupposes that she will:

01 G: So yih g"nna take it again?=
02 S: =nNo.
03 (0.5)
04 G: No:?
05 S: No.
06 (0.3)
07 'G: Why no:t=
After S's initial and unjustified reply, G waits a full half of second (a long time in a conversational context) for some explanatory elaboration before prompting it with a query of S's announced decision (line 04). S's next response (line 05) is also inelaborate and G waits for a further period before initiating an overt request for an explanation (line 07). Thus, the pauses exhibited by G could be taken as evidence of her expectation that an explanation is due in this context. S's apparent reluctance to volunteer one, in effect, manoeuvres G into overtly asking for one.

Transcripts used for conversational analysis differ from other transcripts in their attention to the precise moments that utterances begin and end. The timing with which speakers take turns, interrupt one another, or speak in overlap is considered important to the construction of meaning and intersubjectivity in the interaction. Attention is also given to the correct transcription of response tokens (such as 'mm hm', 'yes', 'oh' etc.) as it has been found that they are not undifferentiated 'back channel' utterances, but are systematically differentiated in terms of their placement, valences and tasks (Jefferson 1984). It would be interesting to undertake a comparison of different transcription methods and the resulting inferences about talk.

The actual process of transcribing involves repeated listening to recordings. As Hopper et al. (1986) describe it:

"If you were to listen to a tape without transcribing, this might be like flying a helicopter across the countryside. Transcribing is more like crawling across the countryside...Transcribing forces you to listen for the precise sounds that were said, rather than just noting the sense of what you thought you heard".
In this sense, transcribing is already an analytical process in that it aids researchers in locating the intricacies of conversation. As Hopper et al. (op. cit.) put it: "Transcription blends into analysis".

### 4.3 Analysis

Analysis is obviously the main activity in conversational analysis, yet its procedures are quite difficult to describe. The technique seems to be passed on from researcher to researcher in the oral tradition. Hopper et al (op. cit.) maintain that "you simply must experience these parts of the process for yourself. There is simply no describing it."

We can, however, briefly describe here the typical actions of the conversational analyst armed with his recordings and his precise transcription of the conversation.

The key to analysis seems to be multiple listenings to recordings with the aid of transcripts. Attention is focused on very brief segments (perhaps 5 seconds long) and is listened to for 20 or more times, taking notes while listening. What does the researcher listen for? While there is no "correct" way to listen, some questions which the researcher could be asking himself while listening are the following:

1) What is going on in this segment?
2) What are the participants accomplishing here? (or what is being accomplished by speech?)
3) How do the details in speech demonstrate what participants are doing?
4) What could a speaker might have said but didn't? Or seemed to start saying then changed it?
5) What could the pauses be significant of?
6) What could have triggered the interruptions observed?
7) How are conversational practices establishing context?
8) What normative rules are governing conversation in this context? etc.
Listening to recordings is often done in groups (this activity itself would be worthy of analysis!). The following are some procedures for a two hour group listening session:

1. Group members listen to a segment of a recording (approximately 2 minutes), familiarizing themselves with the transcript.
2. After about the fourth listening, a brief segment (about 2 to 5 seconds) is selected for more detailed listening.
3. The brief segment is played repeatedly until members are satisfied (perhaps a dozen repetitions).
4. Members individually write their observations for 10-15 minutes.
5. Members present their descriptions to the group.
6. Members discuss the segment, formulating points of disagreement and agreement, building analysis, and so on.

It is important that any claim about the data be grounded in details in the recording. For example, if it is claimed that a given speaker seems "hesitant" as he begins to speak, attention should be focused on the single line of the transcript where the observed "hesitancy" occurs, specifying the precise moment of the display of hesitancy. Any claims should be able to be tested against recordings in a way that other researchers should be able to validate the claim by listening to the recording.

The questions that the researcher poses faced with his data leads to the issue of the role of theoretical preconceptions in the analysis of interactions. There are two possible approaches to the interpretation of talk: 1) data-driven analysis, and 2) theory-driven analysis. We will briefly present a simplified description of the two approaches (see Mehan & Griffin (1980) for further discussion of this heuristic dichotomy):
The data-driven approach (often associated with certain participant-observation schools of sociological and anthropological research) is (ideally) devoid of theoretical preconceptions. Analysis emerges from patterns in the data itself and is not dependant on a priori theoretical frameworks. The researcher is characterized (or often caricatured!) as a naive empiricist. The obvious problem with this idea is the impossibility of any researcher to be "background-free". No researcher is a tabula rasa. He brings with him into the investigative context a wealth of social and professional experience not to mention a complex representational system.

Yet rather than automatically dismiss this method as being impossible to realize, its proponents have used this approach as means of restricting the boundaries of analysis in systematic and controlled ways by restraint of the initial imposition of a priori preconceptions.

Mehan (1979), discussing research in educational contexts, states that "this constitutive ethnographic approach is taken in order to limit the use of dispositional properties and background factors (such as socioeconomic status) as explanatory devices when their influence cannot be located in the interaction". He continues:

"We need to avoid promiscuous speculation if we are to make well-grounded connections between social interaction and social structure. When the limits of the immediate context have been reached through a constitutive analysis of events, principled reasons are provided for considering the influence of factors that existed prior to and surround the assembly of particular events. On the one hand, increasing the boundaries of the analysis in systematic and controlled ways means classroom events will be placed in the larger context of the society. On the other hand, social structure, past history, school organization will be located in the day-to-day interaction of
participants in educational settings. The overall result will be to show the ways in which social interaction and social structure inform one another" (p.121).

It is therefore hoped that by refraining from imposing a priori concepts on the data, the data may reveal how those concepts might be located in situ.

4.3.2 The theory-driven approach

The theory driven approach contrasts with the preceding approach in several respects. Instead of denying or limiting the a priori theoretical frameworks and professional experience, the researcher openly admits them. The researcher takes a concept of a given theoretical framework, derives an empirically testable method of investigation and applies it to his data in order to explicate or illustrate the concept. Thus, the theory orients the research. The risk of this approach is the narrowing of the scope of analysis, resulting in the neglect of the rich information available in the data as the researcher strives to empirically prove his hypotheses. However, close attention to the data corpus often leads the researcher to issues beyond those that he initially aimed to study.

As one can see, any description of the theory-driven and data-driven approaches involves a false dichotomy and an oversimplified portrayal of the research process. In actual practice, the link between theory and data is a two-way street.

Let us refer to remarks made by Hopper (1987, personal communication) to briefly sum up this section on the methods of conversational analysis: "I think the main thing is repeat listening and work on transcribing. I realize it doesn't seem to lead anywhere at first, but it builds a fund of empirical experience about conversation that slowly alters and improves your insight about talking". 
5. Concluding Remarks

Some of the main points of this presentation of conversational analysis can be summed up as follows:

- Conversational analysis attributes much importance to the activity of transcribing conversation, an activity often used in research. It underlines the importance of careful attention to the nuances and details of conversation. These are details which usually pass unperceived in most transcripting and could change the interpretation of the functioning of conversation.

- The link between transcription and analysis has been stressed by considering the act of transcription as an analytical process in itself. Any attempt at transforming verbal behaviour into written form necessarily involves choices as well as interpretation and inference.

- Conversational analysis also stresses the importance of grounding inferences about talk in the actual data. The act of specifying the precise moment of the display of a given concept could be illuminating for the inferential processes of researchers themselves.

- This report has raised the question as to the boundaries of analysis: how does the researcher avoid "promiscuous speculation" yet at the same time place his analysis of conversation in a larger context linking social interaction and social structure?

To conclude, the aim of this paper has been to briefly introduce the reader to conversational analysis as practiced by our American colleagues. Its emphasis has been primarily on its methodology in view of providing a "hands-on" practical approach to the analysis of talk and eliminating some of the mystery and vagueness often surrounding
qualitative analyses of conversation. It is hoped that it can contribute to an heuristics for explicating the fine details of social interaction and to new sorts of understandings about human behaviour and communication.
6 Bibliographical References

Note: The following bibliography includes a number of references which are not cited in the text. Although it is by no means exhaustive, it is intended to give a few examples of literature in the field of conversation analysis.


LISTE DES DOSSIERS DE PSYCHOLOGIE (DISPONIBLES)

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