

# Encyclopedia of Case Study Research

## Conversation Analysis

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Conversation analysis is the study of talk-in-interaction. It is a methodological approach that grew out of phenomenology and ethnomethodology and is concerned with uncovering the rules and structures of everyday, mundane social actions as captured through verbal (and nonverbal) interactions. Conversation analysis takes as its starting point that all interactions are meaningful to those who produce them and that there is an underlying pattern of orderliness to even the most routine interactions.

## Conceptual Overview and Discussion

Conversation analysis views social actions as ongoing practical accomplishments worthy of in-depth examination. At the heart of these social actions is order/organization/orderliness that can be discovered, described, and analyzed to produce formal terms that capture the underlying order. George Psathas discusses seven basic assumptions of conversation analysis, reinterpreted here as four assumptions.

First, order is *produced* by those who engage in social action. Ordered patterns of interaction are determined by the individuals who engage in social action; order is not the result of the researcher's preformed theoretical concepts. Conversation analysis is always an exploratory process and it requires the researcher to approach each interaction (no matter how mundane or brief) open to unique patterns of orderliness.

Second, order is both *context sensitive* and *context free*. It is context sensitive in that each interaction is subject to its own order, that is, patterns of order do not necessarily transfer across situations. At the same time, however, order *can* be repeatable and recurrent across situations. Order is context free in that the particularities of the individuals involved (e.g., personal histories, gender, occupation, type of social action) do not determine the underlying rules and structures of the orderliness. Ethnography is not required to uncover the orderliness of talk-in-interaction. It is important to note that some conversation analysis researchers argue that ethnography is an important complement to their work.

Third, conversation analysis is grounded in description. It is the task of the researcher to discover, describe, and analyze the produced orderliness of talk-in-interaction. Once the

rules and structures of social action are determined, formal terms can be employed to capture the ordered patterns of interaction.

Fourth, conversation analysis is not concerned with generalizability. Generalizability and the frequency and scope of social interactions are second to the discovery, description, and analysis of the structures through which order is produced.

**[p. 239 ↓ ]**

Henry Sacks is considered the founder of conversation analysis. Dalvir Samra-Fredericks and Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini note that Sacks's early research with Harold Garfinkel, as well as the research of Emanuel Schegloff, Gail Jefferson, and Anita Pomerantz form the groundwork for the development of the field, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s. George Psathas argues that Erving Goffman's work on the study of interaction in everyday situations also played a critical role in creating space for the development of conversation analysis.

It was through Sacks's employment and case study research at the Suicide Research Center in Los Angeles that conversation analysis as a methodological approach was developed. Sacks began to audiotape telephone calls to the Center to examine the interactional interchanges between Center employees and callers. The recorded tapes allowed him to review the talk-in-interactions over and over to uncover the orderliness of the interactions. Recording talk-in-interaction is now integral to the research design of conversation analysis.

Sacks concluded that initial exchanges between employees and callers were symmetrical in nature and that there was a recurrent aspect of opening sequences. He coined these sequences "units." He noted that these units appeared to occur in turns of two; the first turn was produced by speaker one and the second turn was produced by the second speaker; the context of the first turn of the unit was relevant to the context of the second turn of the unit; and the second turn was related to the context of the first turn of the unit. As a result of this research, Sacks revealed that the seemingly mundane of everyday life was subject to formal description and structures. Talk-in-interaction was comprised of methodical utterances. Later research focused upon uncovering the complexity of turn taking of talk-in-interaction. Sacks's research, and that

of the other founders of conversation analysis, revealed that at the heart of everyday social action, sequential structures of action could be discovered and that these units of action were truly interactional in nature because they involved more than one person.

Order is assumed in conversation analysis methodology and patterns of orderliness are understood to be dynamic and processual in nature. The researcher's task is to discover, describe, and analyze the orderliness of interaction. The researcher does not usually set out with a predefined focus of discovery and already conceived theoretical categories. Conversation analysis is exploratory in nature. Psathas notes that the early stages of such research are characterized as "unmotivated looking." Data should be naturally occurring and not produced for the purposes of the research study. As noted in Sacks's early research, recording of data (audio or video) is critical to conversation analysis research so that interactions can be replayed and transcribed. The recording of data also facilitates the collection of a broad scope of interactions, to be narrowed later in the transcription process.

In case study research (e.g., a specific organization, occupational group, ethnicity), it is common that the scope of interactions collected will be varied and the number of interactions large. The transcription process is not about turning the spoken word into text so that it can be analyzed into more meaningful concepts. The transcription process encompasses the process of discovery, description, and analysis to uncover the rules and structures of ordered patterns of interaction. The transcription process aims to preserve the authentic "talk" of the interaction, rather than drawing out underlying meanings of the talk-in-interaction (e.g., [ring] 1.A: h'llo:? 2.C:hHi:, 3.A: Hi:?). Transcribing interactions requires the use of a system of symbolic notations. Gail Jefferson's transcription symbols are commonly used as a guide through the transcription process (e.g., ? = rising intonation, *underlining* or *italics* = emphasis).

Conversation analysis requires researchers to include transcripts of data in their written forms of the research so that others can examine and interpret the description and analysis process directly. Generalizability is not the goal of the conversation analysis researcher. An instance of something is an occurrence, and the frequency of the occurrence is not important in uncovering the order of that occurrence. At the same time, once the unit is discovered, the researcher may examine additional material to find further instances and develop a collection of instances. Psathas notes that a collection

of instances may form rich discoveries revealing that the original unit is more complex than first noted or that the second instance is different from the first.

Intrinsic case study research aligns particularly well with conversation analysis methodology. The [p. 240 ↓] intrinsic case is often exploratory in nature, and the researcher is guided by interest in the case itself, rather than extending theory or generalizing across cases. In this way, since the intrinsic case study researcher does not start with a preformed theoretical lens, conversation analysis can facilitate the uncovering of ordered patterns of interaction unique to the case under study.

## Application

Marjan Huisman presents an interesting application of conversation analysis that draws upon case study research from four Dutch organizations. She sets out to discover the rules and structures of talk-in-interaction that characterize decision making. She views decision making as an emergent, incremental activity in which members move forward step by step toward the decision. A decision is defined as a “commitment to future action.” Adopting a conversation analysis approach allows her to identify patterns of interactions and uncover the “structures” of how individuals create meaning in decision making.

The data for the research come from two studies involving four different Dutch organizations. The data from the first study include 12 management meetings videotaped at three different organizational settings: a senior management team of an information and communications technology company, a management team of a service department in a university hospital, and a board of directors of a higher professional education institution. The data from the second study include an audiotope of one key meeting of teaching staff at a Dutch high school. She supplements the transcriptions with interviews and participant observation. As advocated by conversation analysis, Huisman includes her transcription symbols—for example, [DIM] = untranslatable diminutive, (.) = pause of less than 0.4 seconds, cut o- = word cut off—and the English transcribed episodes as well as the original Dutch transcribed episodes.

In the discussion of her findings, Huisman presents four decision-making episodes to highlight three key conclusions: The past, present, and future play a role in decision making, and decision making is interactional in nature; the specific interactional procedures that contribute to a “decision” will depend on the cultural norms of a group (or organization); and decision making is subjective in nature, whereby the identity of participants contributes to the specific pattern of interactions that emerge.

In episode one, Huisman highlights how decision making is collaborative and interactional. A decision is not captured in one specific utterance. In order to understand the rules of how the decision is made, an analysis of the whole episode of talk-in-interaction is required. Both verbal and nonverbal talk-in-interaction contribute to the achievement of a future state of affairs. In episode two, Huisman argues that decision making is emergent and that often a decision is not explicated as a “decision”; rather, it just happens through talk-in-interaction. In this second episode, the future state of affairs is negotiated. One speaker proposes, then another speaker rejects, then an alternative is proposed, and then the future state of affairs is confirmed. Not every attempt to arrive at a future state of affairs will result in a decision. A decision-making episode can end without a decision.

Episode three highlights how it can sometimes be unclear whether a decision has been made or not. A lack of clarity of the talk-in-interaction may mean that we will not know from a single episode if a decision has been made. We may have to wait until the future state of affairs happens in order to know if a decision had been made in the studied sequence. Moreover, Huisman also notes that what counts as a decision will be largely dependent upon the norms and patterns of behavior of the particular group or organization under study; that is, decision making is context sensitive.

Finally, in episode four Huisman draws attention to how the speaker's subjectivity contributes to the procedures of a particular decision. First, the speaker's interpretation of the past influences how it is told in the present. Therefore, talk-in-interaction is not neutral. Second, the identity of the speaker contributes to the patterns of interactions that are uncovered in talk-in-interaction. Speakers' roles, goals, and interests will inform the underlying orderliness of the interaction. Third, an utterance may have different meanings for different people, even when they are all present during the same episode, making the talk-in-interaction rather complex to discover, describe, and analyze.

Overall, Huisman concludes that decision making [p. 241 ↓ ] is not only bounded rationally, as argued by Herbert Simon, but also socially and linguistically.

Dalvir Samra-Fredericks employs both conversation analysis and ethnography methodologies in her exploration of how strategy is accomplished through the everyday talk of senior managers. She argues that a focus upon the naturally occurring talk of strategists (in real time) provides a richer understanding of the mechanics of how strategy happens, more so than through an analysis of strategists' reports (e.g., through interviews) of how it happens. It is through talk that strategists establish and negotiate meanings and articulate their perceptions of the organization, its stakeholders, and its competitive positioning. It is also through talk-in-interaction that the possibilities of the organization are made sense of and accomplished. In this piece, Samra-Fredericks focuses upon how one strategist (S1), in interaction with five others, effectively persuades the others of his view of the past and future. Through S1's talk-in-interaction tactics, he effectively sets in motion a series of decisions and specific outcomes.

Samra-Fredericks's data come from a private sector organization in which she had access to managers' talk over time (12 months) and space (e.g., over lunch, in meeting rooms). She also draws upon ethnographic experiences over a 12-month period to contextualize organizational level particularities that she argues ground the episodes of talk that occurred over this extended period of time. The larger story is one of "go for growth" by the six strategists. Two organizational weaknesses, as constructed by S1, are the backdrop for the four strips of interaction that she presents: the expertise gap in information systems and the inability of managers to think strategically.

She selects episodes of interaction that are brief but important turning points in terms of the two weaknesses. The four episodes also effectively illustrate what she discovers as six features of relational-rhetorical skills critical to S1's successful talk-in-interaction: emotion is a tactic of expression; the past is spoken of in routine talk of today and the future; a knowledge of when and how to let go, ignore, or question is critical; knowledge needs to be spoken; mitigation and observation of established norms of human interaction are important; and metaphors are used. She includes a simplified set of transcription symbols (e.g., [signals interruption, (.) signals a brief pause, *italics* signal emphasis). Overall, Samra-Fredericks's approach to understanding how strategy happens in real time combined the benefits of conversation analysis and that of

ethnography to link micro (e.g., human interaction) and macro (e.g., industry conditions) organizational perspectives.

## Critical Summary

Early criticisms of conversation analysis stemmed from its focus on micro sequences; the discovered structures of patterns of interactions were often isolated to single utterances. The discovered orderliness of the micro disregarded how it informed macro-structures and processes. A study of talk-in-interaction, however, can uncover how individuals, through interaction, produce and reproduce social structures. Conversation analysis's attention to detail demonstrates how organization work is accomplished and how individuals are producing the character of the organization in an ongoing matter.

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*See also*

- [Ethnomethodology](#)
- [Generalizability](#)
- [Intrinsic Case Study](#)
- [Phenomenology](#)

### Further Readings

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