

CONVERSATION ANALYSIS AND SECOND LANGUAGE INTERACTION

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Abstract

This article will first sketch out key analytical principles in conversation analysis. After that, it will review studies that have adopted a conversation analytic approach to examining second language (L2) interaction and L2 interaction in pedagogical settings. It will also discuss studies that have demonstrated the relevance of multimodal resources in L2 interaction. Based on the review and discussion, this article will conclude with key implications for L2 learning and teaching.

Keywords: conversation analysis, L2 interaction, L2 learning, L2 teaching

I. *Conversation Analysis*

Conversation analysis (CA) originated in the mid-1960s within sociology as an empirically-based approach to describe the sense-making procedures that make orderly and meaningful social interaction possible. In other words, CA is an approach that aims to “describe, analyze [,] and understand talk as a basic and constitutive feature of human social life” (Sidnell, 2010, p. 1). In the late 1970s, CA drew increasing attention from researchers in a variety of scientific disciplines as a methodological lens through which to study “institutional order in interaction” (Heritage, 1997). In particular, language researchers have utilized CA to understand the dynamics of both ordinary conversation and institutional interaction.

From a CA perspective, interactional order is achieved both *sequentially* and *temporally*. This order is based on the premise that each turn at talk demonstrates the speakers’ understanding of what the preceding utterance aims to accomplish. The goal of CA, then, is to reveal and explicate the *sequential* and *temporal* order that members use to maintain intersubjectivity within a given situation. For example, a prior turn (request) sets the frame of reference for the speaker’s next action (acceptance). By producing an acceptance turn, the speaker shows that he or she has understood the prior turn as a request. In this regard, CA is used to uncover how participants orient to the sequentially emergent turns at talk and collaboratively form action sequences.

The organization of adjacency pairs (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973) provides a robust demonstration of how turns at talk are sequentially organized. Basically, an adjacency pair (e.g., question-answer, greeting-greeting, offer-acceptance) forms a block unit and consists of at least two turns. The first pair part projects the corresponding second pair part to be conditionally relevant; as a result, the absence of the second pair part, or an unfitting responsive action, is recognized as interactionally noticeable. The speaker of the first pair part may then assess the

recipient's action and pursue a reason to account for the incongruous response. As to the second pair part, speakers can design it as preferred or dispreferred (Pomerantz, 1984), depending on the kind of action the turn is performing. Adjacency pairs thus constitute a powerful sense-making mechanism for participants to systematically sustain mutual understanding with each other and negotiate their expectations of the actions that follow.

The construction of adjacency pairs can also be used as a means for participants to determine whether they have reached mutual understanding within the given interaction. As Schegloff and Sacks (1973) explain:

[B]y an adjacently positioned second, a speaker can show that he understood what a prior aimed at, and that he is willing to go along with that. Also, by virtue of the occurrence of an adjacently produced second, the doer of a first can see that what he intended was indeed understood, and that it was or was not accepted. Also, of course, a second can assert his failure to understand, or disagreement, and inspection of a second by a first can allow the first speaker to see that while the second thought he understood, indeed he misunderstood. (pp. 297–298)

Schegloff and Sacks' observations show that when current speakers display their understanding of the prior turn, the prior speakers will attend to the current turn to determine how they were understood and whether the current speakers' displayed understanding is in need of repair. Therefore, mutual understanding is displayed through the ways speakers construct their turns and select which action to perform in a given turn.

In discussing how participants utilize the turn-by-turn nature of talk, Heritage (1984) writes:

Through this procedure the participants are thus released from the task of explicitly confirming and reconfirming their understandings of one another's actions. Mutual understanding is thus displayed, to use Garfinkel's term, 'incarnately' in the sequentially organized details of conversation interaction. Moreover, because these understandings are publicly produced, they are available as a resource for social scientific analysis. (p. 259)

The constant display of how the current speaker understands the prior talk attests to an "intrinsic motivation for listening" (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974, p. 727) that is built into the turn-taking system of conversation. In other words, prospective speakers need to listen to what the ongoing turn is doing and reveal their understanding of that in the next turn. Macbeth (2011) puts it succinctly: "[T]o take a turn is to *evidence* understanding" (p. 440). This understanding is not determined by participants' individual mental states, but by their observable orientations to the sequential organization of interaction (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008, p. 14). The turn-taking system underlines intersubjectivity as sequentially and temporally unfolding practical actions that are locally managed by participants and publicly displayed in social interaction.

Sacks et al. (1974) explain that "the display of those understandings in the talk of subsequent turns affords both a resource for the analysis of prior turns and a proof procedure for professional analyses of prior turns—resources intrinsic to the data themselves" (p. 729). Therefore, the next turn proof procedure (Sacks et al., 1974, pp. 728–729; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008, pp. 13–15) not only makes it possible to analyze displayed understanding, but also affords analysts a resource to ensure that their analytical claims about cognitive phenomena are

grounded in participants' manifestations of understanding in interaction. When commenting on the necessary elements for an "empirically grounded account of action," Schegloff (1996) emphasizes that one essential element is to demonstrate that the participants in the data have understood, experienced, and oriented toward the social action in question (p. 172). In this regard, any phenomena that CA analysts are looking for should be based on the talk observed and made relevant by the participants *within* the talk itself.

In this section, I discuss key practices in CA. In the next section, I briefly review studies that have applied CA in L2 contexts as a means of addressing concerns about second language acquisition (SLA).

II. *Conversation Analysis and L2 Interaction*¹

With the increase of global communications, most speakers are multilingual, engaging in interactions with languages other than their first language. This fact has not gone unnoticed by sociological CA literature. Researchers have argued for a more situated understanding of language learning and proposed a respecification of SLA research (Firth & Wagner, 1997). Over the past twenty years, there has been a steep increase in book-length publications (Seedhouse, 2004; Sert, 2015), edited volumes (Gardner & Wagner, 2004; Hall, Hellermann, & Pekarek Doehler, 2011; Markee, 2015; Nguyen & Kasper, 2009; Pallotti & Wagner 2011; Richards & Seedhouse, 2005; Zhu Hua et al., 2007), and journal articles (Brouwer, 2003; Carroll, 2000; Hosoda, 2006; Kurhila, 2006; Markee & Kunitz, 2013; Mori & Markee, 2009) applying CA to understand the characteristics and organization of L2 interaction. This line of inquiry, also known as CA for SLA (Markee, 2000), aims to uncover CA's potential in analyzing L2 conversations (Schegloff, Koshik, Jacoby, & Olsher, 2002) and in informing SLA research from a socially oriented perspective (Kasper, 2009; Kasper & Wagner, 2011; Markee, 2008, 2011; Markee & Seo, 2009).

While some CA for SLA work focuses on describing L2 speakers' interactional practices (Gardner & Wagner, 2004), others attempt to reconceptualize cognition and learning as social phenomena situated in L2 interaction (Kasper, 2009; Markee, 2008, 2011; Markee & Seo, 2009). What these studies have in common is that they reject a deficient view of L2 speakers, which measures L2 speakers' competencies against the benchmark of idealized native speakers. Instead, these studies acknowledge L2 speakers' status as competent communicators in interaction and explicate the wide range of interactional resources that L2 speakers employ to participate in social practices (Firth & Wagner, 1997; Kasper & Wagner, 2011; Wagner & Gardner, 2004). For example, Carroll (2004) effectively demonstrates that novice L2 learners are attuned to the fine details of talk (e.g., pauses, gazes, overlaps, restarts, body movements, etc.) and are thereby able to use seemingly disfluent false starts and other micro-adjustments to skillfully construct their participation in interaction. His compelling analysis yields an empirically-grounded understanding of "disfluency" and debunks the myth that novice language learners are deficient communicators and unable to pursue interactional goals. Consequently, CA for SLA research investigating L2 speakers' interactional competence offers us a renewed

¹ I use L2 interaction to refer to interaction that involves not only the use of a second language, but also the use of multiple languages.

profile of L2 speakers and a microscopic view of their interactions.

1. CA Studies of L2 Interaction in Pedagogical Settings

Shifting the focus from L2 speakers to L2 learners, a number of CA studies have examined how interactional practices are organized in pedagogical settings, revealing a recurrent pedagogical order and the particular workings of “classroom talks” (Markee & Kasper, 2004). As Sert (2015) puts it, classroom talks are “the collection and representation of *socio-interactional* practices that portray the emergence of teaching and learning of a new language through teachers’ and students’ co-construction of understanding and knowledge in and through the *use* of language-in-interaction” (p. 9). By taking a sequential approach to L2 classroom discourse, CA research has described in fine detail what actually happens in a diverse range of language learning activities, including language tutoring (Markee & Seo, 2009; Seo, 2008, 2011), language play (Bushnell, 2009), vocabulary explanation (Lazaraton, 2004; Mortensen, 2011), rapport building (Nguyen, 2007), teacher questions (Lee, 2006, 2007, 2008; Waring, 2012), teachers’ positive feedback (Waring, 2008, 2009), writing conferences (Koshik, 2002; Waring, 2005), computer-mediated interaction (González-Lloret, 2008, 2009), language proficiency interviews (Kasper, 2006; Kasper & Ross, 2007; van Compernelle, 2011), classroom guest speakers (Mori, 2002), and small group work (Hauser, 2009; Hellermann, 2006, 2007, 2008; Hellermann & Pekarek Doehler, 2010; Markee, 2005, 2007; Mori, 2002, 2004). These findings have revealed the local and contingent properties within various language learning activities and show L2 classroom interactions to be dynamic and fluid (Seedhouse, 2011; see also Seedhouse, 2012 for a review on CA and classroom interaction). Most importantly, these studies’ analyses document students’ and teachers’ actual performances in the aforementioned activities, which enable language teachers to reflect on their pedagogical decisions and thus refine instructional practices (Wong & Waring, 2010).

2. CA Studies of Multimodal Resources in L2 Interaction

When CA emerged in the 1960s, audio recording was the only methodological option available for studying the situated nature of interactions. However, with the availability of video recording, it became possible, and, in fact, highly recommended, to include vocal as well as nonvocal details in transcripts, as CA principles dictate that no interactional detail should be dismissed *a priori* as insignificant. In other words, within CA studies, both vocal and nonvocal behaviors are treated as constitutive parts of an ongoing interaction. As Heath (1986) notes, “[M]ovement performs ‘locally’ and gains its significance through its coordination within the moment-by-moment progression of action or activity, be it vocal, visual, or a combination of both” (p. 10). Indeed, video-based CA studies have illustrated the delicate coordination between language and co-occurring embodied practices (i.e., gazes, gestures, body movement) and the relevance of embodied practices for the organization of social actions (Enfield, 2004, 2005; Deppermann, 2013; Goodwin, 1981, 1986a, 1986b, 2000; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1986; Hayashi, 2003, 2005; Hayashi, Mori, & Takagi, 2002; Heath, 1986; Lerner, 2002; Schegloff, 1984; Streeck, 1988, 1993, 1994; Streeck et al., 2011; see also Heath & Luff, 2012). Much can be gained from utilizing such a multimodal perspective, as it allows one to examine how participants coordinate their vocal as well as nonvocal behaviors to sustain, manage, and

negotiate their participation in temporally unfolding interaction (Stivers & Sidnell, 2005).

Recently, multimodal resources in L2 interaction have received increasing analytic attention from a few CA researchers. This incipient endeavor yields exciting insights on how participants orient toward nonvocal details and their physical environment as resources for organizing their L2 interactions. For instance, Carroll (2004) empirically demonstrates that novice Japanese L2 learners use gaze as a resource to secure reciprocity from the intended addressee. In another study, Mortensen (2009) describes L2 learners' sensitivity to their co-participants' gazes, a form of engagement display, highlighting it as a crucial resource for establishing mutual orientation in interaction. Lazaraton (2004) and Mortensen (2011) pay close attention to the embodied resources that teachers deploy in teaching vocabulary, while Olsher (2004) and Mori and Hayashi (2006) investigate how participants complete sequential actions and achieve intersubjectivity through the deployment of gestures or other embodied displays. Focusing on the use of gesture in repair sequences, Olsher (2007) and Seo (2008, 2011) provide concrete evidence that L2 learners orient toward nonvocal behavior as locally relevant resources to foster their construction of lexical knowledge. Mori and Hasegawa (2009) document how L2 learners simultaneously utilize different kinds of semiotic resources—talk, gaze, body orientation, and textbook—to organize their language learning activities. More recently, Sert (2015) has demonstrated how a teacher uses multimodal resources (mainly hand gestures) in repair and correction sequences to create learning opportunities for students. Sert further illustrates a visible moment of vocabulary learning when a student orients to learning through the use of talk, gaze directions, deictic gestures, and classroom artifacts.

This line of research has shown that L2 interaction, like other face-to-face interaction, is fundamentally multimodal. Participants in L2 interaction use different modalities, such as facial expressions, gestures, postures, and artefacts (i.e., printed materials, backboards, etc.), to co-construct knowledge and coordinate engagement in teaching and learning. To advocate the necessity of incorporating nonvocal information into L2 research analyses, Markee (2004) presents two transcripts of the same sequence, one *with* and one *without* information about embodied actions and gaze behavior. In doing so, Markee convincingly argues that multimodal resources in L2 interaction provide compelling evidence to address and respecify established SLA topics, such as comprehensible input and the role of noticing in L2 learning.

III. *Implications for Second Language Learning and Teaching*

1. **CA and Second Language Learning**

Following its ethnomethodological origin, CA seeks to explicate the sense-making procedures by which members manage and achieve intersubjective understandings in interaction (Markee, 2011; te Molder & Potter, 2005). From a CA perspective, talk-in-interaction is by itself co-constructed by participants in a moment-by-moment fashion. The word “co-construction” implies a joint and collaborative effort by speakers and recipients in a dynamically unfolding interactional process (Jacoby & Ochs, 1995). The term emphasizes the importance of viewing participants as active agents who employ a range of multimodal resources to modify their participation in concert with each other. In addition, CA highlights the significance of interaction as the fundamental locus of knowledge construction. Constructs that

are predominantly conceptualized as intrapsychological matters, such as understanding, attitude, and motivation, become publicly observable in participants' practices through the displaying and ascribing of participants' cognitive states in interaction (Potter & Edwards, 2012).

Central to CA is the concept of a coherent framework for the recurrent achievement of common understanding, which can be traced and described in behavioral terms. Understanding-display devices (Sacks et al., 1974), such as the organization of repair and the turn-taking system, are built into the structures of interaction, making visible "the embeddedness, the inextricable intertwinedness, of cognition and interaction" (Schegloff, 1991, p. 152). The aim of CA is, therefore, to detail the interactional organization of "cognitive order" (Schegloff, 1992, p. 1296) and to document the "micro-moments of socially distributed cognition" (Markee, 2000, p. 3) that are available for inquiry through members' observable interactional conduct.

A number of CA studies have applied this understanding of cognition to L2 learning so as to illustrate moments of *doing* learning and provide evidence of the cognitive displays that learning builds on, especially displayed understanding (Kasper, 2009; Kasper & Wagner, 2011; Markee, 2000, 2008, 2011; Markee & Seo, 2009; Mori & Hasegawa, 2009). Specifically, the analyses of these CA studies present a detailed account on the following issues: (1) how participants employ various semiotic resources to organize language learning activities; (2) how participants embody their cognitive states (i.e., claims of insufficient knowledge, displays of understanding, (un)willingness to participate) in interaction; and (3) how socially-distributed cognition and the interactional organizations of language learning activities are mutually dependent. The analyses demonstrate CA's capacity to illustrate visible moments of language learning as processes constructed locally and managed publicly in L2 interaction.

2. CA and Second Language Teaching

By addressing the contingent processes of L2 learning in empirical cases, CA research enables language educators to uncover different levels of complexity, constraints, and order that are often unique to each L2 interaction (Lee & Hellermann, 2014). The turn-by-turn analysis also allows language educators to understand how particular actions are understood and accomplished by participants in L2 interaction. This empirically grounded understanding of L2 interaction is integral to effective instruction. Lee (2013) provides a compelling argument for using CA's sequential analysis to adequately and sufficiently describe the interactional details in L2 use. He concludes by suggesting how such adequate descriptions of L2 use can inform language teaching:

Educators are thereby provided with insightful observational resources for their pedagogical gazes to make sense of why things happen the way they do in their respective educational settings. In this fashion, research can enable teaching professionals to make their own independent judgment (cf. Dewey, 1902/1990) about what is pedagogically relevant and what triggers misunderstanding, an ability of central importance for competent teaching. (p. 864)

In addition to informing and improving language educators' instructional practices, CA's line-by-line analysis of naturally occurring interaction constitutes a valuable resource for materials development and language instruction. Wong and Waring (2010) published a CA guidebook for ESL and EFL teachers, specifically focusing on the direct application of CA in

language pedagogy. They argue that the strength of CA-based materials reside in CA's capacity to make "what is otherwise intuitive and elusive explicit, teachable, and enriching for second language teachers and their learners" (p. 12). With a solid understanding of the sequentiality of conversational structures, teachers are better equipped to teach students how particular interactional practices (i.e., telephone openings, refusals, requests) work in real situations (Félix-Brasdefer, 2006; Filipi & Barraja-Rohan, 2015; Huth, 2006, 2007, 2010; Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006).

In sum, the endeavor to employ CA as a tool to understand L2 interaction is still growing considerably as a result of its capacity to inform language learning and teaching. Integrating CA into SLA research will continue to provide researchers with essential tools to reveal what is actually happening in L2 interaction and how participants engage in teaching and learning through multimodal resources. The research findings can then form an empiric basis for reforms in language teaching, teacher training, materials development, and education policies.

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