

8 Conversational Analysis and Stylistics

Conversational analysis originated in the *ethnomethodological* tradition of American sociology which studies procedures ('methods') and rituals underlying ordinary social activities and interactions which are used by the members of a society (Gr. *ethnos*) themselves in order to produce and make sense of their own social interaction. As an empirical and inductive discipline CA focuses specifically on the verbal interaction which is a pervasive social practise playing a prominent role in the (re)production of social reality. In contrast with DA, CA avoids theoretization (it concentrates on how speakers themselves interpret each other's turns) and, by analysing detailed transcripts of authentic ordinary speech events (i.e., conversations in the broadest sense) attempts to identify systematic recurrence of patterns (turns, pairs of turns, exchanges) which give conversational interactions elaborate architectural design.

8.1 Turn-taking

One of the essential observations of CA is that, when conversing, participants obviously switch their roles of speaker and hearer, i.e., they take *turns* (cf. Move, 7) in the process named turn-taking. How the **system of turn-taking** (TT) operates (see, e.g., Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974) however, is far from obvious: interlocutors use a variety of **turn-taking strategies** to indicate that they are ready to 'yield the floor'. **Turn-yielding clues** include various verbal, nonverbal and paralinguistic signals (e.g., completion of a basic turn-constructive unit (clause), (re)establishment of eye-contact, lowering the distance, termination of gestures, lowering the pitch, pause) and occur (preferably) at the **transition-relevance places** (TRP, i.e., borders of syntactic, intonational, functional and thematic units). **Turn-beginning clues** are realized, for example, by the beginning of syntactic units, overloudness, gesturing, audible inhalation, etc. TT enhances the basic requirement of efficient communication, viz. that only one party talks at a time (cf. linearity of linguistic sign, or simplex communication system permitting communication in only one direction at a time); this, however, does not completely prevent a possible **overlap** of two/more turns (simultaneous talk) from occurring. **Latching** takes place when there are no gaps in transitions between participants' turns – these are tightly timed. A difference has to be made between *overlap*, a 'byproduct' of TT occurring at or near TRP, and **interruption** of turn by a partner (whereby s/he loses the floor); while overlaps are common and 'neutral' in cooperative behaviour since they may signal interest and involvement (e.g., in heated debates), interruptions may be considered as undesired violations of the 'etiquette of speaking' (unless motivated by urgent situations).

8.2 Adjacency Pair and Preference Organization

The next phenomenon studied under the rubric of CA is **adjacency pair** (AP) - a paired sequence of turns in which the second turn is **conditionally relevant** on the first (cf. Exchange, 7), e.g., *question-answer (Q-A)*, *greeting-greeting*, *request-accept/turn down*, etc. What is more, the occurrence of the second pair part is expected and its 'official' absence is marked and given some (conventional) interpretation (e.g., ignorance, bad manners). Some APs provide two alternative options as to their second pair part, e.g., *invitation-accept/decline*; these options are, however, not equal as one of them is 'preferred' (*accept*) while the other one is 'dispreferred' (*decline*). The notion of '(dis)preferredness' is based on the observation that preferred

alternatives are structurally simpler (hence unmarked) while dispreferred ones are structurally more complex (hence marked). For example, a decline of an invitation (e.g., *Maybe we could go to a movie*) would commonly consist of the following steps: thanking for the invitation (*Thanks for the invitation*), refusing it (*I am afraid*), giving reason why one cannot comply (*I'm busy tonight*) and suggesting an alternative (*How about tomorrow night?*). Also, a decline would typically be accompanied with hesitation (*well*) and pauses. In contrast, an accept would be much shorter (*Yes, let's*). The procedure enabling speakers to differentiate between preferred and dispreferred alternatives, i.e., **preference organization**, is a standard part of the inventory of CA (cf. axiological concept which regulates preference behaviour of the speaker in Dolník 1995).

8.3 Local and Overall Organisation

Besides the features of **local organisation** of talk (i.e., those which operate across two neighbouring turns, viz. AP and TT), CA also studies the **overall organisation** of speech events, viz. their **openings, main bodies** and **closings**. Of special significance is the **summons-answer** AP which forms a standard preface to many types of interactions: *summons* as an attention-getting device (e.g., *Anybody there?*, telephone ringing, or knock on the door) requires an adjacent *answer* (e.g., *Yeah?*) after which a summoner is obliged to fill in the *first topic slot*, i.e., provide the topic (i.e., announcement of the reason for the summons). A standard part of the opening section is also a reciprocal exchange of **greetings**; participants also have to solve the problem of mutual **identification** and **recognition**.

It should be noted that one single turn usually performs several overlapping functions, e.g., greetings normally offer sufficient clues for identification (e.g., *voice signature* in telephoning, see Individuality, 3.2.2). Since the provision of the 'topic' is the summoner's obligation, the TT system is temporarily suspended (see also Narration, 6.3.1) and resumed only after the summoner has signalled that s/he has done so. The main body of the interaction is then structured around the first (i.e., 'privileged') topic; in the chain-like series of turns participants collaboratively develop the coherent 'content' of the event. New topics can be introduced via topical associations, often producing marked topic 'jumps'.

Closings are technically as well as socially delicate stages of interaction (see Goffman's Ritual constraints, 3.3.2) - both parties need to demonstrate their consent to close the undertaking and they do so in such a way that no one's face is threatened. Their readiness to terminate the contact is announced via a **pre-closings** sequence or AP (e.g., A:*Okay?* B:*Okay*) some time before the actual closing (i.e., exchange of greetings A:*Bye*, B:*Bye*) takes place.

Conversation analysts identify several other types of sequences. Participants can check whether conditions for the realization of some APs are valid by the initiation of **presequences**. For example, before an act of invitation takes place (*Maybe we could go to a movie*), a participant may open a question-answer AP (*Do you have any plans for Saturday?*) to check partner's availability. In case s/he is unavailable (*I'm afraid I'm busy on Saturday*), the act of invitation is not realized. This procedure enables the participants to protect each other's face (see Face, 10.5) by withdrawing dispreferred options.

8.4. Repair and Insertion Sequences

Repair sequences allow participants to solve potential problems (lack of quality information (cf. Noise, 3.1.3), slip of the tongue, error) and prevent misunderstanding; since repairing others

(*other-repair*) is socially a very sensitive activity with potential destructing effects on partners' face, it is generally preferred to repair oneself (hence *self-repair*). **Insertion sequences** are actually embedded in other sequences (e.g., Q₁-Q₂-A₂-A₁), **side sequences** realize thematic digressions (cf. Bracket signals, 3.3.1).

8.5. *Membership Categorization Analysis*

Another major activity in which conversationalists are engaged is the categorization process whereby they assign various categories to each other (social, professional, confessional, ethnic, political, gender, age) and/or to the phenomena talked about (love affair vs. adultery, crisis vs. war). Of special importance is the social categorization which is the source of an individual's social identity (cf. Face, 10.5); at various points of conversation different categories may be invoked (e.g., parent, teacher, colleague, nationalist; cf. also Role strain, 9.1). Categories are 'inference-rich' since they are associated with certain assumptions (e.g., stereotypes, or expected ways of behaviour). Membership categorization, which is intertwined with TT and thematic organization of conversation, represents a bulk of conversational activity of participants (cf. Nekvapil 1998, 2000a).

To sum up, some of the principal findings of CA are that conversations have elaborate structure, that they are constructed through the mutual effort of all the participants (hence they are collaborative ventures, e.g., collaborative turn completions whereby participants attempt to help each other complete their turns), and that there is little complex preplanning; rather than that, conversations are **locally managed**.

CA methodology offers innumerable possibilities of stylistic observations of naturally occurring talk having the character of casual (e.g., individual conversational styles, conversational styles of men and women, cf. Tannen 1990) or institutional interaction, such as job interviews, service encounters, interviews, mass media (e.g., the study of sequential structures in media 'dialogical networks', Nekvapil and Leudar 2002, interactional strategies in radio phone-in talk shows, Ferenčík 1999a, 2002a).