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BOOK REVIEW

Anthony J. Liddicoat: *An Introduction to Conversation Analysis*. London and New York: Continuum, 2007, ISBN 0-8264-9115-4, 319 pp.

Conversation analysis (CA), originating in the ethnomethodological tradition of sociology (Garfinkel, Goffman) in the 1960s, has been one of the main approaches to the study of spontaneous conversation in modern linguistics. Since its beginnings, CA offered scholars – mainly in the USA – an alternative to the more formal approaches. In contrast, for instance, to much of linguistics in the Chomskyan paradigm, CA went on to develop some of the fundamental precepts of early American descriptivism, which tried to explain the system of language with reference to its role in society, pointing out its structured and social character (e.g., ‘anthropological linguistics’). There is an underlying functional notion that language is not merely a decontextualized object of study: it is a social phenomenon which is used by people to achieve certain aims.

In his recent book, Liddicoat follows one of the main proponents of CA, Harvey Sacks, in viewing conversation precisely as such a goal-oriented activity: people use language in order to accomplish certain things in their interactions. Conversation is orderly because participants in conversation use sets of procedures in order to achieve orderly and ordered interactions. The orderliness in conversation is both patterned and generalizable: conversation may, thus, be studied in terms of regularly recurring structures that are produced by the participants themselves. The ‘social world’ in the ethnomethodological sense is constructed by speakers through what Liddicoat refers to as the “machinery of talk”, which achieves that “talk is designed and recognized as orderly” (12).

These basic theoretical issues are outlined in Chapter 1, which also deals with the development of the discipline and its main methodological considerations. Chapter 2 follows with an extensive introduction to the transcribing conventions of CA. It is rightly pointed out that transcripts are not neutral but rather subjective representations of talk; additionally, they need to represent other linguistic and paralinguistic phenomena (non-standard pronunciations, prosody, laughter, pauses, etc.). Following Goodwin (1979, 2003), Rendle-Short (2002) and others, Liddicoat also describes transcription systems for representing non-verbal elements of talk, such as eye gaze, nods, hand and body movements, etc. This multi-layered approach – which eventually incorporates visual information into the transcript – clearly proves that transcripts are selective constructs reflecting the needs of the researchers. It is shown that there is hardly anything like a universally applicable transcript of the social activity of conversation, where meaning is obtained in many ways, often multi-modally.

The five subsequent chapters, mainly following the canonical studies by Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson and others, deal with the ‘machinery of talk’: the sets of procedures which participants follow and use in order to communicate effectively in conversation. Chapter 3 starts with the turn-taking mechanism, which is locally organized and interactionally managed. The discussion of the contextually-dependent turn constructional units (TCUs) is supplemented with the notion of completeness (actual and possible) and its various levels (e.g., syntactic or grammatical / intonational /

pragmatic). Once again, Liddicoat does not fail to mention studies which approach turn-completion in a more complex way, as a combination of gaze and syntax in conversation. Turn constructional units, transition relevance places (TRPs) and turn allocation are described in connection with the rules which link them with one another and in connection with the ways participants in conversation actually manage their turns and TCUs.

Chapter 4 extends the discussion to the role and management of gaps and overlaps in turn-taking. The notion of TRP is considered in relation to a 'transition space'. The manipulation of the transition space, in which transitions may occur, is likely to result in the occurrence of gaps and overlaps. While increased transition space may lead to silences (attributable and non-attributable), reduced transition space results in latching and overlap. It is shown that overlapping talk is not an act of mistiming: rather, it is an interactional achievement that can serve a number of functions, e.g., to show understanding/enthusiasm or disagreement/rejection of prior talk (85–6).

Chapter 5 introduces the concepts of adjacency pairs and preference organization, which are crucial for understanding conversation as a rule-governed activity performed by the participants. Sequence organization derives from the finding that understanding talk in terms of topic may be problematic. Instead, the notion of 'action' (cf. the speech act theory) is much more useful: this is where adjacency pairs come in, since they are actually articulations of the "idea that some actions make other actions relevant as next actions, which are in turn seen as being occasioned by the prior action" (106). Minimal sequences, consisting of first pair and second pair parts (FPPs and SPPs) as well as their extensions, are outlined, as is the organization of sequences in terms of preferred and dispreferred actions. Particular actions, such as invitations, assessments, requests, etc., establish trajectories that call for the deployment of particular preferred seconds. It is shown that dispreferred actions are typically performed with a delay, prefaced or qualified, accomplished in a mitigated or indirect form, and routinely accounted for (116–7).

Chapter 6 deals with the issue of expanding sequences. Relative to the position of the expansion with respect to FPPs and SPPs, three types of expansion sequences are distinguished: pre-expansion, insert expansion and post-expansion. While pre-sequences are often used to gain the attention of a recipient (as in summons-answer) or produce a pre-invitation / pre-request / pre-offer / pre-telling (to make sure that an actual invitation / request / offer / telling may – in the absence of a dispreferred response – actually be made), insert sequences accomplish "necessary work that needs to be done for a base sequence to be accomplished successfully" (151), e.g. in cases of self-repair. Post-expansion may be minimal, i.e., consisting of sequence-closing thirds (SCTs) such as the tokens *Oh* and *Okay*, assessments, and composite SCTs, with each having a particular interactional function and contributing to a successful closure of conversation. Non-minimal post-expansion occurs in post-second repair, SPP rejections, FPP reworkings, post-completion musings, etc.

Chapter 7 provides a detailed overview of various types and positions of repair, based on the classification originally proposed by Schegloff et al. (1977): self-initiated self-repair, self-initiated other-repair, other-initiated self-repair and other-initiated other-repair. The book provides ample examples of various repair initiators, such as the turn-initial *no*, *well*, *huh?* and *what?* It is noted how corrections can be subtly indicated in conversation without the participants going explicitly 'on record' about the problematic nature of their ongoing interaction. Repair is certainly not accidental: it is a complex system that is used by speakers in the highly structured format of conversation. It is an interactionally sensitive phenomenon: self-repair is preferred, and other-repair is typically mitigated.

Chapters 8 and 9 are concerned with a somewhat different kind of structural issue: the opening and closing of conversations. None of these simply happens; they must be "interactionally achieved" (213). Unlike the previous chapters, which deal with conversation in general, the chapters that consider opening and closing are based almost exclusively on analysis of telephone conversations. On the one hand, it is a pity that the book limits its scope in this respect. On the other, the inclusion of conversational openings and closings in contexts other than telephone conversations would necessarily lead to an inevitable increase of the book's size, possibly beyond a reasonable limit. Moreover, it might also be difficult to isolate generalized patterns across the variety of discourse situations in which conversations are opened and closed (which essentially includes all dialogic

discourse), because face-to-face conversations are not as strictly ordered as telephone conversations. Nevertheless, the author – once again – decently summarizes most previous research on the topic, mainly Schegloff's and Sacks classic studies into interlocutor identification, greetings, pre-empted opening sequences, terminal sequences, closing implicative environments, etc.

A truly fascinating topic is taken up in Chapter 10: story-telling in conversation. Noting that the organization of conversation makes it difficult to complete some actions (such as the telling of stories and jokes) in a single TCU, the author describes how interlocutors create a space in which the telling is achieved collaboratively. It is shown how the legitimacy of a story for a current conversation is established and how stories are constructed as coherent with prior talk. Ends of stories are also “sequentially implicative”: they serve as sources for topically coherent talk and contain various techniques for displaying links between the story and subsequent talk (289–90). Stories may even give rise to the telling of second stories, which may be a way of showing an understanding of the preceding story. Interesting interactional work also occurs when there are two or more participants in a conversation and both act as tellers of stories of shared experience. Such tellers – who are simultaneously knowing recipients – may, for instance, “claim knowledge and involvement by correcting details of the telling” (298). All this serves to show that stories are not “self-contained generic units but are interactionally accomplished events” (301).

In summary, Liddicoat's book provides a thorough and systematic overview of CA. Despite the necessarily technical vocabulary, all concepts are clearly introduced, illustrated and explained. It is a rule that explanations of concepts actually come in the form of discussions of actual language data from authentic conversations. The book is likely to prove an indispensable manual to students and scholars focusing on the analysis of conversation, because it systematically brings together issues that are otherwise to be found scattered in various publications. As such, it is essential reading for students of linguistics on the undergraduate and graduate levels. However, since many modern approaches to the study of discourse are, by necessity, multi-disciplinary in nature, the book will also be very useful to anyone who – even without a significant theoretical background – needs to approach conversational data and make insightful comments on it. Although CA is not the only approach to the study of conversational language, some of its notions have become such an inseparable part of general linguistic theory that it is nowadays almost impossible to study dialogic discourse without applying some of the categories described and intensively studied by CA.

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