

## Conversation Analysis Versus Other Approaches to Discourse

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Review Essay:

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**Abstract:** This review discusses a recent book by Robin WOOFFITT in which conversation analysis (CA) is confronted with some other analytic approaches to "discourse." The author uses the term discourse analysis in a rather specific way, as a label for an analytic tradition that has become prominent in (social) psychology in the UK. Two other traditions, critical discourse analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis are also discussed later in the book. The major criticism raised in the review is that the book's usefulness is limited by its restriction to approaches currently *en vogue* in Britain and its selective treatment of CA. In an Epilogue the issues raised in the book are discussed in a wider perspective.

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## 1. Conversation Analysis and Discourse Analysis

There are many ways in which a particular approach in the social sciences can be introduced and explained. One of these is through explicative contrasts with somewhat similar approaches. This is the way chosen by Robin WOOFFITT in his latest book. It is written as a student-oriented introduction to *conversation analysis* by contrasting it with some variants of *discourse analysis*. [1]

The term "conversation analysis" (CA) is by now quite firmly established as the name for a particular paradigm in the study of verbal interaction that was initiated in the 1960s by Harvey SACKS, in collaboration with Emanuel SCHEGLOFF and Gail JEFFERSON. In CA the focus is on the procedural analysis of talk-in-interaction, how participants systematically organize their interactions to solve a range of organizational problems, such as the distribution of turns at talking, the collaborative production of particular actions, or problems of understanding. The

analysis is always based on audio or visual recordings of interaction, which are carefully transcribed in detail. The research should be "data-driven"—in the sense that concepts and hypotheses should be based on careful consideration of the data, recordings and transcript, rather than drawn from theoretical preconceptions or ideological preferences. While originally conceived from a sociological perspective, CA gained a wide-spread reception in many parts of the world by researchers from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, including: psychology, anthropology, communication studies and a variety of linguistic sub-disciplines. As part of this development, there now are quite a number of introductory texts, both as book chapters and books (such as PSATHAS, 1995; HUTCHBY & WOUFFITT, 1998; TEN HAVE, 1999; MAZELAND, 2003). In the current volume, Robin WOUFFITT has written one which is quite distinctive in its confrontational character. [2]

The term "discourse analysis" is much less clear than "conversation analysis," or rather, it is used in many different ways by different people, in different countries and in different contexts. On the one hand, it can serve as an overall blanket term for any and all efforts to analyze "discourse," texts, talk and so forth. But many people in the U.K., including the author of the book under review, use it to indicate one particular, although diversified, research tradition which, nowadays, finds its most prominent expression in a branch of social psychology which is called "discursive psychology" and is associated with people like Derek EDWARDS and Jonathan POTTER at Loughborough University in the UK. By in large, it is this kind of "discourse analysis" (DA) that WOUFFITT uses as a "sparring partner" for his discussion of CA. In later chapters, he also discusses "critical discourse analysis" (CDA), associated with people like Norman FAIRCLOUGH, Teun VAN DIJK and Ruth WODAK and what he calls "Foucauldian discourse analysis" (FDA), which represents a British approach more or less inspired by the writings of Michel FOUCAULT and Jacques DERRIDA. [3]

## **2. Outline of the Book**

"The book is organized in three parts. Assuming no prior knowledge, the first four chapters introduce students to the way in which conversation analysis has transformed our understanding of how people interact when they are talking" (WOUFFITT, p.2). In each of these chapters, the introduction of aspects of CA is accompanied by a parallel treatment of DA, in the sense chosen by the author. These chapters offer a useful overview of the development and character of the two approaches, a discussion of two "key studies," a chapter on methods and a confrontation of similarities and differences. They are written with uninitiated undergraduate students in mind and end with suggestions for further reading. [4]

The rest of the book that follows presupposes a basic familiarity with CA and DA. The second part is comprised of three chapters and continues and elaborates the contrast between DA/CA. Chapter 5 focuses on the ways in which language is used to produce a factual account, while Chapter 6 discusses the use of DA in discursive psychology, especially its study of a psychological vocabulary and the

invocation of "mental states." In Chapter 7 the DA/CA contrast is enlarged to include critical discourse analysis and (a UK version of) Foucauldian discourse analysis. In each instance, the author starts with discussing the approach of the DA alternative to CA on a particular theme and then represents the CA point of view and its response to various DA criticisms. So, in the second part, the picture becomes more complicated and the text more demanding for students. [5]

In the third and final part, the author selects two themes from the various critiques of CA: that CA's method is unnecessarily restrictive and that it is unable to address more traditional social science themes, like power and inequalities in society at large. The first charge is countered by a critique of the methods of the critics and the second by demonstrations that CA can, according to the author, indeed address issues of power and inequality in everyday life, suggesting that a number of British feminist researchers have indeed turned to CA methods, for example (cf. SPEER, 2005). [6]

### 3. Major Arguments

The core idea of the book, as I understand it, is that CA offers a unique perspective on the organization of "talking together," whether done "just for fun," to exchange information or to transact some kind of business. Essential to this perspective is the focus on the ways in which talk is organized as strings of mutually oriented actions. Anything said in interaction can be understood as doing this *vis à vis* the other participants and is designed for that purpose. The task that CA sets for itself is to explicate the means and methods used for the organization of talk-in-interaction. On any occasion, participants display an orientation to the specifics of the situation, including who they are in relation to each other. Nonetheless, at the same time, they use means and methods which are, to a large extent, shared and conventional. In other words, when talking together people show a double orientation, to the situation-at-hand and to conventional ways to handle situations-like-this. It should be noted that "situation" in these phrases refers both to what might be called the overall situation, the "occasion" of the talk, as well as the situation at-any-moment, what is being said and done just now. [7]

CA's unique perspective developed in the 1960s from two kinds of considerations and experiences. On the one hand, SACKS and his colleagues were dissatisfied with the then current ways of doing social science, both methodologically and theoretically. On the other hand, they were amazed by the intricate ways in which people could handle various kinds of situations. In order to "see" such intricacies, one had to set aside or "ignore," however, the presuppositions and methods of the then current social sciences and be willing to seriously consider the full details of what people are doing. This setting-aside of current presuppositions is sometimes characterized as "unmotivated looking" and has clear affinities with "bracketing" in the phenomenological tradition. In the case of talk-in-interaction, the material means of facilitating this has become the making of detailed transcripts of audio and/or video recordings. [8]

What WOOFFITT does is to explicate CA's perspective and approach and clarify it further by comparing it to a selected range of superficially similar approaches to "discourse." What seems to characterize these other approaches, in contrast to CA, is that they are much less radical in setting-aside conventional conceptions and methods. Rather than "just dropping" conventional methods, theories and agendas as CA has done, these other approaches can be seen to be struggling with various conventions, although in different ways. From WOOFFITT's treatment of DA, as it emerged in the sociology of scientific knowledge and later was used in social psychology, it is very clear that it was developed "in opposition to" conventional methods and theories. In other words, its orientation was quite strongly polemic. Over the years, however, this polemical accent seems to have become less strong, especially in discursive psychology, which has move more or less in the direction of CA. Related to this is the more recent trend to rely more on interactional data and less on other kinds of textual material, DA researchers, however, tend to choose more "socially/politically relevant" themes, while CA often works on very "mundane" issues and data. In other words, while CA preserves its distance from convention (generally, but not always) by avoiding materials of obvious social importance, DA tends to concentrate on such materials. [9]

The contrast between critical discourse analysis (CDA) and CA is, in these respects, much greater. Its practitioners tend to use rather conventional/current concepts from linguistics and critical social science, and mostly non-interactional data, to serve a highly political agenda. In other words, while the research material is discursive, its target is to expose the ideologies of groups in power, as "supported" in official documents and the press. [10]

In Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA), as discussed by WOOFFITT, the term "discourse" does not refer to concrete instances of language use in text or talk. It is used, instead, as a theoretical concept—defined by one of its proponents, Ian PARKER (quoted on page 146)—as "a system of statements which constructs an object." The general idea is that one can discern established ways of language use which have particular, mostly hidden, ideological and political effects. The critical intent is, in certain ways similar to CDA, to bring these effects to light. However, while in CDA the target is often social inequalities at large, FDA often criticizes (quasi-) scientific "discourses." [11]

The general attitude of CA, one could say, is to "bracket" any preconceptions – conventional, theoretical, political or ideological – in order to study the orientations of participants as they become visible in their interactions. Proponents of critical approaches like CDA and FDA think this is too strong a limitation—that it would make phenomena of power and oppression "invisible" and, therefore, would be supportive of dominant forces in society. This contrast can be linked to what is often called "bottom-up" versus "top-down" approaches: CA favoring bottom-up, while CDA and FDA favoring a particular style of top-down analysis. In this respect, the position of DA, in the sense used by WOOFFITT, is less clear or at least less outspoken. [12]

#### 4. Choices and Limitations

Inevitably, an author makes particular choices which reflect his or her own particular interests as well as the intended audience. Thus, topics and issues that, for another person as reader/user, would seem to be required or at least expected may be seen to be missing. What strikes me throughout the book is its strong focus on issues and approaches that are relevant within a British academic context. WOOFFITT has evidently chosen to write for an audience of British social science students. That choice is, of course a legitimate one, but it is not made completely explicit. From an international point of view, this approach limits the usefulness of the book. [13]

An important difficulty in using the CA/DA contrast as the backbone of an introductory text is that the two contrasted approaches are so different, substantially and historically. As noted, CA was developed in the 60s by a small group of people—essentially two friends, Harvey SACKS and Emanuel SCHEGLOFF, and their first generation of students (cf. LERNER, 2004). Since that time, it has spread over the world without, in essence, changing much in its basic outlook and methodology. It has been applied to an increasing range of phenomena and settings, and adopted in disciplines other than the sociology from which it emerged. This "stability" might be considered a sign of orthodoxy, but for its practitioners it proves the solidity of the early insights. Furthermore, the impact of CA on other approaches, both methodologically and conceptually, seems to be still on the increase. [14]

The DA story, however, is completely different. In the larger sense of the term, there is an enormous variety of approaches, but not a relatively stable core set of ideas and methods. For DA, in the restricted sense as used by WOOFFITT, the core idea is the intention to shift focus from the referents of discourse, (for instance, a mental state such as cognition), to the discursive practices through which such referents are invoked. But even within this field there are various approaches, as the author makes clear in Chapters 5 and 6. Some methods stress rhetorical aspects of discourse, others study the discursive use of psychological aspects, while still others (closest to CA) investigate various kinds of interactive practices—and people may shift their focus from one project to another. [15]

The British focus that I mentioned is quite evident in WOOFFITT's discussion of discourse analysis in its variant branches. He locates the start of DA in the contribution of Nigel GILBERT and Michael MULKAY (1984) to the sociology of scientific knowledge. In their book they argue that scientists, in talking about their and their colleagues' work, use two different styles or repertoires—one factual and empiricist used in formal contexts like research reports and, the other, subjectivist and contextual used in gossip and informal interviews. These findings can be seen as a challenge to the ubiquitous use of textual materials to study various kinds of practices. They suggest that variability of accounts is not something arbitrary: it is not the case that some (types of) accounts are essentially truer than others—they just have their function in different contexts.

This general approach to DA has been most successfully applied in psychology rather than in sociology which was its first target. An important step in this process was the publication of a book co-authored by one of MULKAY's students, Jonathan POTTER: *Discourse and social psychology: beyond attitudes and behaviour* (POTTER & WETHERELL, 1987). It proposes a methodological shift in psychology parallel to the one advocated by GILBERT and MULKAY for sociology: rather than studying mental states through reports in interviews or experiments in experimental settings, investigations should focus on the discourses in and through which these phenomena are constituted in everyday life. From this point onwards, "discursive psychology" (DP) has been developed into a very active school within British social psychology (cf. EDWARDS & POTTER, 1992; POTTER, 1996; HEPBURN & WIGGINS, 2005). [16]

The discussion of critical discourse analysis is less UK-centered, as it mentions some non-British contributors, but the treatment of "Foucauldian" DA is again restricted to the UK (which is a bit paradoxical, given its Continental inspirations and the different ways in which the Foucauldian influence has been taken up in various European countries, see, for instance DIAZ-BONE 2003). [17]

Now, let us take a look at WOUFFITT's selection as regards CA itself. The largest part of his attention quite obviously goes to CA's originators, SACKS, SCHEGLOFF and JEFFERSON. Besides those, there are rather few references to non-British authors. Another type of selectivity is his almost complete neglect of what some others regard as one of the most important developments of the last two decades: the advance of video-based CA work. The major initiators of these developments, Charles GOODWIN and Christian HEATH (who is from the UK!) are almost completely ignored. Finally, another major trend in recent CA is what might be called the confluence of advanced CA with an interactional version of a linguistic agenda. This trend is quite strong in the USA, for instance, in SCHEGLOFF's studies from the last decade as well as work done in cooperation with him or under his supervision (see the collections edited by OCHS, SCHEGLOFF & THOMPSON, 1996, and FORD, FOX & THOMPSON, 2002). A strong impulse for this trend came from researchers from cultures with rather different language systems (such as Chinese, Finnish, Japanese or Korean) who study verbal interaction in their own culture from a CA perspective. What they are able to demonstrate is that speakers from these cultures use specific properties of their language systems to solve the organizational problems described in "classical" CA for English (see, for instance, the contribution of Marja-Leena SORJONEN to both of the previously mentioned collections and TANAKA, 1999). [18]

In short, WOUFFITT has evidently chosen to write a confrontational introduction to CA, in which, for both "sides" in the CA/DA confrontation, he has restricted his treatment. On the DA side, he has selected those versions of DA that are most in evidence in the UK and on the CA side, he has confined his rendering to its rather classical and sociological aspects. Both of these choices can be defended, but they do limit the general usefulness of the book. [19]

## 5. Evaluation

A book like this can be evaluated in many different ways. WOUFFITT's rendering of CA, its approach and methods, both on its own and in contrast to the variant versions of DA, seems to me to be essentially to the point and correct. The picture he draws, however, is far from complete. For me, his discussions of the various kinds of DA, CDA and FDA were clear and informative, but I cannot fully judge their correctness or completeness. As to its usefulness for students, I think the first four chapters seem quite usable, but subsequent renditions of the complex issues and arguments may be hard to digest for many. As noted, the focus on the UK may limit its usefulness for teaching elsewhere, but then, it may enhance its informativeness for non-British researchers. [20]

## 6. Epilogue: Conversation Analysis Among the Human Sciences

In this section, I want to put issues raised earlier in a wider perspective. Conversation analysis (CA) has a rather special position among the human sciences. Its object, talk-in-interaction and its general approach (a data-driven explication of the detailed ways in which people organize their dealings together) are at odds with what are the generally accepted ways of the human sciences. The CA "paradigm" has proven to be quite robust, I think, and this robustness seems to have quite different effects on different people, working in different traditions. [21]

In the main disciplines such as sociology, psychology, anthropology and linguistics, the overall reaction to CA is one of more or less dismissive indifference. In so far as people in those disciplines start doing CA, their position within their home discipline is likely to become a marginal one. For those who work in a sub-discipline which is somehow closer to CA, there seem to be two directions in their relation to CA, either getting closer to it or marking one's distance and, in some cases, one can observe an ambivalent mixture of the two. [22]

Let's take another look at Discursive Psychology (DP). As noted by WOUFFITT, the discursive approach was at first applied on scientists' discourses. In an early overview, by MULKAY, POTTER and YEARLEY (1983), there are no references to CA at all. In their overview of sources of inspiration for DP, if I may characterize it as such, POTTER and WETHERELL (1987) present the work of SACKS and other conversation analysts mainly and quite sympathetically in two sections—one on accounts in conversation and another on categorization. When looking at a later book by POTTER (1996), the references to Sacks and CA are much more scattered throughout the text. In both books, CA seems to be used in a consideration of a range of theoretical and methodological resources for DP, along with ethnomethodology, (post-) structuralism (DERRIDA, FOUCAULT), the sociology of scientific knowledge and others. [23]

A number of recent publications, HEPBURN and POTTER (2004), HEPBURN and WIGGINS (2005), POTTER (2004), are useful resources for sketching the current relation of DP to CA. It would seem that among its varied resources, DP

has been using insights and methods from CA much more pervasively than before. In other words, the place of CA as one of the resources for DP has become more prominent. This is visible in a number of ways, not only in the increased and wider range of references to CA publications, but also in DP's choice of methods. While earlier the data used quite often included written texts and interview accounts, nowadays there is a strong tendency to study naturally occurring interactions, recorded and transcribed using the CA conventions. What is mostly used is data from institutional settings, involving interactions between clients and (often psychologically trained) institutional agents, such as counselors. This has to do with the fact that the ultimate interest of DP is still in "psychology," although it is psychology-as-used in everyday settings—an *emic* (folk) psychology rather than an *etic* (academic) one (POTTER, 2005). In short, the impact of CA on DP seems to have become much stronger over the years, but there remain differences of intellectual influence and agenda. [24]

In contrast to this, the core agenda for CA remains the organization of interaction, which can be associated, so to speak, with adapted versions of the agendas of a range of other disciplines including sociology and, especially, the functioning of institutions (HERITAGE, 2004), linguistics (interactional linguistics, prosodic features of language, comparative linguistics), Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) and the study of gestures. Conversation Analysts differ in the extent to which they "use" or refer to such other agendas and their associated literatures. [25]

The DP/CA relationship is, in any case, quite complex. It is not only characterized by the fact that DP is increasingly influenced positively by CA. For one thing, the complementary influence of DP on CA is hardly noticeable and, more importantly, DP's apparent positive attitude towards CA does not seem to be shared by all persons associated with it. In fact, two major figures in DP, Margaret WETHERELL (1998) and Michael BILLIG (1999a, 1999b) have published quite outspoken criticisms of CA, taking issue with aspects of a paper by Emanuel SCHEGLOFF, called "Whose text? Whose context?" (1997), to which SCHEGLOFF (1998, and, respectively, 1999a; 1999b) responded again. [26]

In his paper, SCHEGLOFF made the point that for any consideration of a "text" and its "context" (whether academic or "critical" in one or another respect), one should first analyze that "text" *on its own terms*. By doing this, any form of "critical discourse analysis" of an interactional episode would then require a technical, CA-type of analysis as a first step. This involves attention to the details which are demonstrably relevant for the participants and which constitute practices that have been observed in other contexts. A basic analysis along these lines, focused on the participants' own relevancies, he suggests, could serve "as a buffer against the potential for academic and theoretical imperialism which imposes intellectuals' preoccupations on a world without respect to their indigenous resonance" (SCHEGLOFF, 1997, p.163). [27]

In other words, SCHEGLOFF makes an "at least"-argument: when analyzing interactional data—one should "at least" consider these in terms of their local

organizational features. His opponents, however, argue for a "not enough" stance. Margaret WETHERELL (1998), for instance, while accepting the value of a CA-type approach for an analysis of interactional materials, says that the CA-perspective is "too narrow." She writes: "Conversation analysis alone does not offer an adequate answer to its own classic question about some piece of discourse—why this utterance here?" (WETHERELL, p.388). For her, DP should use a more eclectic set of approaches, including CA but also some "post-structuralist" concepts and interests. She demonstrates her preferences with a discussion on a stretch of talk involving three boys and an interviewer talking about some sexual activities of one of the boys. For her, such an analysis would be "incomplete" if it would not include the various "interpretative repertoires" used to "place" the boy's activities in various ways. In other words, she would have DP include the wider and pre-existing cultural resources in its analysis of a particular stretch of talk. [28]

In his response, SCHEGLOFF (1998) limits himself to two issues. First, he explicates the intended meaning and import of the question "why that now" (note the different formulation!), as included in his classic paper with SACKS (1973). It was meant as a *member's question*, and furthermore an indexical one. In other words, it is a question to which participants themselves can be shown to be oriented and it can refer to any aspect of talk, or more generally action. It is, then, a crucial question for CA in so far as it can be demonstrated to be a crucial one for the parties to the interaction. In itself it is not an analytic question for CA, as WETHERELL seems to suggest; to which CA could be held accountable. The second point raised in SCHEGLOFF's response is that in the analysis of her materials she completely ignores the fact that these materials were produced in an interview context. The statements which she analyzes were "provoked" by an adult, male academic for research purposes, while she refers them to the adolescent community at that particular boys school. As he concludes:

"Obviously some may wish to proceed differently (than CA, PtH), but it is worth recognizing that the enterprise is different and the payoffs are likely to be different in kind and in groundings as well. For CA, it is the members' world, the world of the particular members in a particular occasion, a world that is embodied and displayed in their conduct with one another, which is the grounds and the object of the entire enterprise, its *sine qua non*" (SCHEGLOFF, p.416). [29]

In his book, WOFFITT (pp.168-79) offers a more extensive treatment of WETHERELL's paper, including a critical re-analysis of her data. Again, from a CA point of view, analyses like the one promoted by WETHERELL run the dangers of ignoring the interactional context as it is relevant for the participants and of rushing to see in localized utterances the manifestation of presupposed cultural themes, "interpretative repertoires" or "discourses." [30]

Similar issues have been raised over the years regarding CA in relation to various kinds of ethnographic approaches. Again, a consideration of a "wider context" is often recommended, as well as the use of other data in addition to the recordings. A full discussion of these issues would require much more space than

seems sensible to use in the present context, so I refer interested readers to my book on CA (TEN HAVE 1999) and to the careful considerations formulated by Douglas MAYNARD in Chapter 3 of his book, *Bad news, good news: conversational order in everyday talk and clinical settings* (2003, pp.64-87). The upshot, I think, is that a well-based CA-type of analysis requires that the analyst has a basic understanding of what the interactants are saying/doing. Quite obviously, one should be able to understand the language spoken, including local variants and jargon. In studies of interactions in less familiar settings, understanding the sense of various activities may require quite involved "ethnographic" explorations (cf. HEATH, 2004, p.273; HEATH & LUFF, 2000). In such circumstances, non-CA methods are used as a support for CA-type of work. This is different from an overall rejection of CA as "too limited," in favor of a different, "larger" agenda (as seems, for instance to be implied in a recent paper by Paul ATKINSON, 2005). [31]

At the end of the day, it seems to me, the issue is one of agenda's and the value of various analytic outcomes. For CA, the important thing is to stay close to the actual, local relevancies of the interactional partners as these are discernible in their "situated" reactions to one another. The danger, then, is to impose "external" issues and identities, which may be relevant in an academic, intellectual and/or ideological framework, bypassing what is actually being done in the interactional context. In the "not enough" argument, this danger is either ignored or taken more lightly, while CA's focus on interactional details and organizational issues is, in turn, presented as another, and may by more important danger, or at least a limitation. [32]

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