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Clear and Engaging: A Review of Sidnell's Conversation Analysis: An Introduction

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Abstract

Conversation Analysis: An Introduction by Jack Sidnell is a concise and clear primer to describing, analyzing, and understanding human talk. Combining theoretical descriptions and analysis of transcribed conversations, Sidnell (2010) explains the elements of conversational organization: turn-taking, action and understanding, preference, sequence, repair, turn construction, stories, and openings and closings. In addition, Sidnell opens the discussion about the role of topic and context in conversation analysis. Conversation Analysis: An Introduction is a good guide to conducting conversation analysis. This book is appropriate for those who are not familiar with conversation analysis and want to get a better understanding of this method and its major components. It can also be used to teach conversation analysis to undergraduate and graduate level students.

Keywords

Conversation Analysis, Turn-taking, Repair, Stories, and Context

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Conversation Analysis: An Introduction

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Conversation Analysis: An Introduction by Jack Sidnell is a concise and clear primer to describing, analyzing, and understanding human talk. Combining theoretical descriptions and analysis of transcribed conversations, Sidnell (2010) explains the elements of conversational organization: turn-taking, action and understanding, preference, sequence, repair, turn construction, stories, and openings and closings. In addition, Sidnell opens the discussion about the role of topic and context in conversation analysis. Conversation Analysis: An Introduction is a good guide to conducting conversation analysis. This book is appropriate for those who are not familiar with conversation analysis and want to get a better understanding of this method and its major components. It can also be used to teach conversation analysis to undergraduate and graduate level students. Key Words: Conversation Analysis, Turn-taking, Repair, Stories, and Context

The presentation of a newly discovered concept, topic, or method always starts with an introduction. Quite frequently, this introduction is done with the help of a book. For me, good introductory books are clear and balanced—not overloaded with content, yet providing useful references to the external sources on the subject. *Conversation Analysis: An Introduction* (Sidnell, 2010) is a book that introduces the principles of conversation analysis "through exemplification rather than argument or description" (p. 17). This book is intended for novices to the field, but it is also suited for those who want to better understand practical applications of different elements of conversational organization because the book is replete with multiple conversation excerpts and their detailed analysis. Although Sidnell is writing from the fields of Anthropology and Linguistics, this book is not limited to these disciplines and can be used by anyone interested in conversation analysis.

Presenting conversation analysis as "an approach within the social sciences that aims to describe, analyze and understand talk as a basic and constitutive feature of human social life" (Sidnell, 2010, p. 1), *Conversation Analysis* is a useful book for those interested in learning about conversation analysis, its development, techniques, and applications. Comprehensive and clear, this book carefully blends the theoretical background of the method from seminal work on conversation analysis (e.g., Harold Garfinkel, 1967; John Heritage, 1984; Gail Jefferson, 1977; Harvey Sacks, 1974, 1995; Emanuel Schegloff 1968, 1996, 2007) with practical examples of conversation transcripts accompanied by the author's explanations and inferences.

Conversation Analysis consists of 13 chapters, with an opening chapter on talk serving as an introduction to the book and to conversation analysis as a method and a

closing chapter offering a summary of the book. Other chapters describe methods, topics, and context, as well as the elements of conversational organization (e.g., turn-taking, understanding, preference, sequence, repair, etc). Although all chapters can be read individually, they build on each other, and the content gets more complicated as the chapters unveil. Every chapter ends with notes detailing terms or statements from the chapter, while the references are compiled at the end of the book. Sidnell (2010) conveniently lists transcription conventions, accompanied with the detailed descriptions, in the beginning of the book.

The first two chapters combine theory and practical examples to frame conversation analysis in a theory-driven, yet engaging way. Sidnell (2010) opens the first chapter, "Talk," with an examination of a short dialogue that introduces readers to a new approach to understanding human interaction—the world of conversation analysis. To present the historical background of conversation analysis, Sidnell draws on works of Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, Goffman, and Garfinkel and blends history, theory, and examples for better understanding of the origins of the method. Through examples and explanations, Sidnell emphasizes that conversation analysis is different from other methods of analyzing human interaction because it is based on "close observation of the world … coupled with a method for collecting, organizing and analyzing patterns across instances" (p. 17), different from anthropological, psychological, and sociological analyses of human talk. Concise and well-written, Chapter 1provides a good description of the development of conversation analysis as a method and offers basic data analysis as an example of applying theory to practice.

The second chapter, "Methods," focuses on presenting the techniques of doing conversation analysis while working with audio or video data. Sidnell (2010) emphasizes the importance of using recordings of actual conversations because of their inherent complexity. Additionally, the author explains the importance of proper transcribing and shows the difference between the snippets transcribed in different ways. Introducing theorizing and data analysis, Sidnell relies on Sacks' work and offers suggestions for managing the data and developing an analysis. For those new to conversation analysis, Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive account of acquiring data, theorizing, making collections, and analyzing the data.

Chapters 3 through 10 are devoted to different patterns of conversation organization: turn-taking, action and understanding, preference, sequence, repair, turn construction, stories, and openings and closings. Although Sidnell (2010) separates these patterns into separate chapters, he carefully links them together while presenting new terms and concepts. Through building the corpus of a new chapter based on the concepts and rules from the previous chapters, the author aptly shows the interconnectedness of the different patterns of conversation organization that he describes.

Chapter 3 focuses on one of the major characteristics of conversation—organization of turns-at-talk. Sidnell (2010) examines turn-taking by bringing in theoretical assumptions and conversation rules (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, 1997), analyzing turn-taking in dialogues, and offering insights about the role of turns, transition spaces, overlaps and interactions in conversations. In this chapter, Sidnell provides more theory and conversation rules, but the reader stays engaged because the theory is filtered with explanations, quotes, and transcripts.

Chapter 4, "Action and Understanding," continues examining the organization of conversation and focuses on actions and sequences of actions. Using multiple snippets of transcribed conversation, Sidnell (2010) demonstrates sequences of action and proceeds with explaining related technical terminology—adjacency pairs and conditional relevance. The author describes the terms in his own words, analyzes dialogues as examples, and cites seminal literature (Heritage, 1984; Schegloff, 1968, 2007) to back up his claims. Exploring more challenging displays of intersubjective understandings, Sidnell analyzes ironical conversations. Additionally, I found very useful multiple in-text references to external sources on the topic for those wishing to read more about these concepts.

Extending the discussion of adjacency pairs, Chapter 5, "Preferences," describes preferred and dispreferred responses. Sidnell (2010) clearly defines and demonstrates the structure of preferred and dispreferred responses and explains different types of preferences. This chapter allows the reader to understand that preferences can be different conversation phenomena that "constitute a kind of conversation inertia or momentum that anonymously pushes participants in one direction or another quite irrespective of their own wishes, desires, predilections, best intentions and so on" (p. 93). The value of this chapter is in multiple snippets of transcribed conversation listed throughout the text to support theoretical claims about different types of responses. Although the topic of the chapter is not an easy one to present in an introductory text, Sidnell conveys the meaning of various preferences through carefully selected, neatly organized, and properly analyzed examples.

Chapter 6, "Sequence," further elaborates on turn-taking in conversations and focuses on complex turns—the adjacency pairs expanded before (pre-expansion) or after (insert expansion) the occurrence of the first pair part (or the first statement from the two connected utterances). To graphically present the theory, Sidnell (2010) provides figures that he further describes and explains. The author also elaborates on the complex term of post-expansion that can be minimal or non-minimal in the way it expands the sequence. The chapter is relatively short, but concise, clear, and easy to follow. Furthermore, Sidnell emphasizes that the sequences he described and analyzed cannot represent the whole range of possible sequences, thus inviting the reader to think beyond the content of the book when doing conversation analysis.

Having described turn-taking, preference, and sequence, Sidnell (2010) presents the concept of *repair* in Chapter 7. The author suggests different types of repair (utterances aimed at remediating interactional problems or misunderstandings) and explains the use of labeled arrows to indicate the repairable item, the repair initiator, and the position of the repair. Following the findings of Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977), Sidnell emphasizes the preference for self-repair or self-correction, but also allocates considerable amount of space to describing other-initiated repair, open-class repair initiators, repetition, and embedded correction. Although this is one of the biggest chapters in the book, Sidnell highlights that it provides only an introduction to repair in conversation analysis. Moreover, he aptly links the content of this chapter to previously described conversation components and to the larger issue of intersubjectivity.

Chapter 8, "Turn Construction," explains the composition and design of turn-constructional units of conversation. Although Sidnell (2010) asserts that "our current understanding of turn construction is quite partial" (p. 139), he provides a clear and

concise description of the construction of turns, turn beginnings, and turn endings. Well-selected examples, relevant figures and quotes (Heritage, 2002; Schegloff, 1996; and others), and the author's explanations of the components of turn-taking make this chapter a good introduction to understanding turn-constructional units.

As a frequent component of conversations that serve multiple purposes (e.g., complaining, boasting, alerting, etc.), *stories* are examined in Chapter 9. Sidnell (2010) treats a story as a unit of conversation that has its sequence and format and therefore can be recognized. The story has its beginning, body, and the end and is a collaborative endeavor between the storyteller and the listener. The author extends the discussion of stories by describing second stories that are typically related (i.e., the stories from a listener in response to an original story related that demonstrate how the initial story was heard). Sidnell further elaborates on telling and listening of the stories by pointing out the audience diversity that impacts the way the story is told and interpreted. An extra benefit of this chapter is the review of several studies dealing with stories in conversations. The chapter does not provide in-depth analysis of story-telling, but briefly introduces this element of conversation and makes the reader (at least, this reader) want to learn more about it.

The last chapter related to patterns of conversation organization, Chapter 10 focuses on *openings* and *closings* of interactions. Sidnell (2010) opens the chapter by describing the "pick-ups" that allow one "to start a conversation when there is no already established warrant for doing so" (pp. 197-198). The author examines the openings and closings of the conversation with the example of telephone calls. Following Schegloff's (1986) classification, Sidnell describes three jobs that participants accomplish in the openings of conversations: gate-keeping, (re)constituting the relationship, and establishing what will be talked about. With the help of excerpts from telephone conversations, the author demonstrates the core sequences of conversation openings: summons-answer, identification-recognition, how-are-you inquiries, and anchor positions (getting to the reason for the call). The chapter ends with the examination of conversation closings, strengthened by the analysis of several transcriptions. Personally, I found this chapter very well-written and would recommend it to those interested in conducting or learning more about the analysis of openings and closings of conversations.

Chapters 11 and 12 shift the focus from the conversation itself to its topic and context. Chapter 11, "Topic," describes different issues related to the topic of the conversation (e.g., determining the topic, changing the topic, formulating the topic, etc.). The topic of the conversation, or the "tying structure" (Sacks, 1995), links different parts of the conversation. Sidnell (2010) presents three topic-generating sequences and emphasizes the use of arrows to denote topic elicitors. Chapter 12 focuses on *context* as "clearly crucial to understanding even the seemingly most straightforward utterances" (p. 245). To make this chapter more interesting and different from others, Sidnell employs a case study to demonstrate the role of the context in designing and interpreting conversations. Furthermore, the author briefly introduces institutional talk and ties it to analytic conversational studies.

The final chapter summarizes the content presented in the earlier chapters "to develop a more sustained analysis of a single fragment of conversation" (2010, p. 298). Sidnell lists transcripts of three dialogues and proceeds with their analysis. The author points out repairs, leads to actions, context, addresses, and other elements of

conversational organization. The concluding chapter brings together the previous chapters and allows the reader to see how individually explained components of interaction may be brought together in detailed conversation analysis of excerpts of the interactions.

Overall, this is a very well-written, coherent, clearly structured, and neatly organized book. The book is very readable, as the author avoids jargon and clearly defines the concepts he uses. Although the author does not introduce any concepts or techniques new to the field, this book serves its purpose of introducing conversation analysis. The value of this book also lies in its comprehensive presentation of historical origins of the method—it may be difficult for a novice to read original seminal texts on the topic, but this book presents the major points in a clear and concise manner, with relevant quotes from original texts cited to support the author's descriptions. Compared to one of the main competitor texts—*Conversation Analysis* (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008)—Sidnell's book, while offering less theory, provides more practical examples of analyzed transcripts and is a better choice for those looking for practical application of different rules and concepts of conversation analysis.

Unlike other books about this qualitative method, *Conversation Analysis: An Introduction* provides lots of examples to show the practical application of the theory. This is an excellent book for personal reference and as a textbook for teaching conversation analysis. Sidnell (2010) recognizes the limitations of the book and emphasizes that this book does not cover everything related to different patterns of conversation organization, but opens the discussion about conversation analysis and its application by introducing key concepts and techniques. In conclusion, *Conversation Analysis* may be used for personal reference or for teaching both undergraduate and graduate courses and does not have any disciplinary limitations.

Those interested in this book can read the table of contents, Chapter 1, and the index on the publisher's website: http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-1405159006.html. Alternatively, Google books allows to preview Chapters 1and 2 at: http://books.google.com/books?id=BLeIZb3-yxQC&printsec=frontcover&dq=conversation+analysis+an+introduction+sidnell&source=bl&ots=NBamcnsqE3&sig=mX_JNbbEQi90xJy7ZQ71Fm0TAMI&hl=en&ei=P8XJTLT4B8Wblgf3ufj6Cg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CB8Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false

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