Analysing Interactions in Childhood

Insights from Conversation Analysis

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Foreword

Conversation analysis (CA), as amply demonstrated in the chapters of this book, has much to contribute to the study of children and their interactions. Children are in the process of emerging membership in society as well as of developmental change. They can be, from early on, full partners in communicative interchanges but with developing possibilities of how such participation can be carried out. Thus there is an interesting explanatory tension between the more totalising concepts of 'traditional' developmental psychology – 'child', 'adult', 'competence' and 'context', for instance – and the detailed analyses of CA, with its emphasis on the moment-to-moment search for intersubjective understanding. Reading the chapters of this book led me to a number of insights about the possibilities for a fruitful interchange.

First, conversation analyses can provide a corrective to a mundane developmental account that concentrates on just saying what a child cannot do at one particular age and can do at a later stage. Many of the analyses presented here suggest that when talk between children and their interactants is examined in detail, very young children can and do show an ability to identify misunderstandings on the part of the other, and to correct them in speech. Since it is increasingly apparent that preverbal infants show a range of intersubjective skills, CA may well help us to work out how these are mapped into language and used in talk. Undoubtedly 'mapping' is the wrong analogy because whatever it is that children know about other minds before starting to speak, they have to learn how language works in usage. As is shown by the analyses on misunderstanding and on the work done by both the child and others on repair, this is not a straightforward matter. These analyses could contribute a great deal to our understanding of the child's developing control of language 'in use' and, therefore, to a much more complete account of language development.

Second, many of these chapters are relevant to the question of children's 'membership' of societal contexts and their 'membership rights', defined both externally and in the moment-to-moment exchanges of conversation. These analyses show the affordances that can be provided to children by their interactants and how this can vary from moment to moment. They also show how children can accept, reject or resist conversational moves by others to constitute them in a particular membership category. This is particularly important for those working with children in professional contexts and the

chapters in the latter part of the book analyse these types of interactions and are extremely revealing on this score. I think professionals working in these contexts will find them interesting and useful when reflecting on their own practices and how they might want to adjust or change them.

My hope is that we will be able to find a way (1) to put together the types of analyses laid out in the chapters of the book with the more traditional concerns of developmental psychology and linguistics, and (2) to take the insights of CA and use them to inform the theoretical question of the factors influencing children's development generally and their increasingly sophisticated grasp of language and its uses in particular. To do this will require those involved in CA to be prepared to compare across situations and individuals – almost inevitably involving some quantitative analysis – and for the insights that arise from CA to be seriously integrated with other theoretical frameworks. This book provides an excellent basis for the latter aim.

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Introduction

HILARY GARDNER and MICHAEL FORRESTER

The aim of this volume is to bring together contributors who are not only leading researchers in the rapidly developing field of conversation analysis (CA) but who also focus on aspects of childhood interactions. Traditionally, CA has been mainly concerned with everyday adult talk in order to establish the rules and regularities that ease the path of such mundane interactions. In all CA work, there is a preoccupation with turn-by-turn sequential properties of talk that goes beyond taxonomic categorisation of individual utterances. No detail of form, magnitude or timing, in gesture, talk, gaze or sequential placement, is seen as irrelevant to the interaction. Conversation analysts view talk as situated action: acknowledging, describing and examining conversational structures and conventions, in the same way that, more traditionally, linguists structure phonology, morphology and syntax. Schegloff (1987) used the phrase 'talk in interaction' and details 'syntax for conversation' (see Schegloff 2007) showing that idealised linguistic rules and grammatical 'correctness' are less necessary to meaningful interactions than might be supposed. For a full exposition of the theory of CA there are several publications that can be recommended such as Schegloff (2007) or Hutchby and Wooffit (2008).

The focus in this collection on children's interactions is partly motivated by a key issue for conversation analysis, that of intersubjectivity, which is taken here to be the constant production, recognition and display of mutual 'understandings' between speakers during conversation. This is not dissimilar to those in child development who have emphasised the significance of interactional synchrony for intersubjective relations in early childhood. Some writers in child CA have also emphasised the importance of intersubjectivity for early development (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 1998) yet with a particular focus on the sequential detail of interaction on a turn-by-turn basis. Needless to say, understanding the emergence of children's communicative skills and abilities will be closely linked to whatever we take to be the essential attributes of engaging in intersubjective relations. In conversation analysis the primary mechanism for the maintenance of intersubjectivity is the organisation of repair – a view shared by various contributors to this volume.

In interaction, participants seek to establish intersubjectivity and make explicit displays of their understanding of cultural and language phenomenon through talk. In

seeking to understand how children gradually learn what is involved in recognising and maintaining intersubjectivity as part and parcel of the infrastructure of interaction, conversation analysts set aside the complex issues surrounding cognitive and emotional dimensions that might bear on a complete developmental explanation and focus instead on highlighting the fine detail of the local discursive context. Wootton (1997), for example, has commented that it is from learning how to utilise mutual understandings and 'interpersonal alignments' that the child's cultural awareness is fashioned.

Given the recognition that the moulding of intersubjectivity is interdependently related to whatever self-righting mechanisms are in play in the localised sequence of interaction, it comes as no surprise that procedures surrounding repair practices in child conversation are of particular interest to the researchers in this volume. Whether initiated by adult or child, the numerous ways in which adjustments, reformulations, clarifications and whatever serve as repair is a theme that permeates many of the chapters. The repair may be self-initiated or initiated by the recipient ('other initiated'); for instance, instigated by the adult in order to make his or her meaning more transparent to the child, or to help the young conversational partner to correct its own misunderstood utterance. These repairs may be overtly marked or embedded in the talk. The child itself may seek clarification from the adult or recognise particular inefficiencies in its own talk and seek to self-repair. The area in which CA can complement other psychological and linguistic research traditions that examine repair practices, is in the central place given to the interdependence between the production and recognition of trouble sources and repair. Where, when and how the utilisation of repair changes over the long and short term (and not necessarily with reference to a developmental focus) is illustrated in several contexts throughout this volume.

Significant, then, for understanding the issues that shape the child's emerging linguistic skills is the orientation that children, and those with whom they interact, have towards the production and recognition of mutual understandings. This social constructivist view of development brings into focus the subtle changes in association produced by the child, which are often shown to be highly sensitive to the communicative sequence in which they occur. Systems of repair, as outlined above, which deal with troubles in talk, contribute to this change; however, how such repair organisation operates is not dependent solely on lexicalisation. Conversation analysis pays equal attention to embodiment of meaning through action, gesture, timing, emphasis and the use of physical context. The finest detail of change in terms of timing, phonetic output, intonational change and the sequential positioning of utterances are all of potential significance, reflected here in the different considerations the contributors highlight in the volume.

As can be seen from some of the discussions already extant in this introduction, CA research on children's interactions is not solely concerned with development in the traditional sense and, indeed, draws attention to problems associated with the assumption that behavioural change is necessarily developmentally significant (see Forrester, this volume). Instead, CA looks at how the child begins to engage with the world through talk and other interactional modalities. Wootton (1997), in his seminal work *Interaction and the Development of Mind*, talks of the acculturation of the child through emerging intersubjective understandings that are locally derived – that is, pertaining to very recent cultural and moral events. Certainly, CA studies with a child focus are unique, as those skills and abilities that might be central to the display of such understandings, and how they could develop, must be mapped out precisely, which

necessitates a close examination of the fine detail of children's early interactions – both with adults and with each other.

CA adopts the view that in order to become fully fledged 'members' of a culture, children have to learn how to recognise and produce talk that displays to others around them their understanding of 'talk' as an accountable set of social practices. Displays of asymmetry in knowledge, power and understanding between conversational partners, as children gradually attain membership, is inherent in this view of talk in interaction. This theme is developed, for example, by Forrester (Chapter 3) with a very young child in the home; by Hutchby (Chapter 8) with adult–child counselling data; and by Sidnell (Chapter 6), where the context is that of child–child interaction outside the home. Clarke and Wilkinson in Section 3 also find that issues of acceptance arise in their analysis of interactions between children with cerebral palsy. Membership can be seen to be of clear significance to the participants in talk across the span of childhood experiences.

Many of the broader theoretical and methodological preoccupations of conversation analysts, working with any type of data, are reflected in the contributions to this volume. One such preoccupation is that of the relevance of notions such as a preset context or identity. Conversation analysts are somewhat cautious regarding the relevance, use and value of definitive category formulations such as child, adult, typical or ayptical development, family or gender status. The ethnomethodological background of CA requires the focus to be participant-oriented where possible, and thus CA often seeks to unpick the displayed orientations of the speakers and show how these are constituted within the interactional sequence. In the Foreword to *Applying Conversation Analysis* (Richards and Seedhouse 2005), Paul Drew draws attention to the potential power of the convergence of applied linguistics and CA as research methodologies. He exposes inherent presuppositions by comparing two different bodies of data distinguished by labels such as 'classroom' versus 'ordinary' talk – something that has been common practice in applied linguistics but may be dealt with differently in CA. In CA the detail of the analysis should indicate how the participants are orienting to the terms of those differentials in aspects of turns at talk. This ethos is developed within the research writings in this book and certain contrastive phenomena in child–adult talk may become obvious across bodies of data, regardless of the specific labels they reference. This editorial draws attention to some of those common themes.

One of the subdivisions imposed in creating the three sections of this book concerns the investigation into more stylised forms of talk – for example, those employed in professional and other institutional settings. CA has shown how much an institution's ethos and practice may be enacted through talk and, therefore, has proved to be an appealing methodology in applied research. The point at which institutional talk impinges on children's lives will be an issue for this volume and will encompass aspects of membership, asymmetry in relationships, and displays of the acquisition of cultural (and other) knowledge. To return to the idea of 'context' here is to return to a crucial theme in CA. Context is not simply a physical phenomenon but is continuously created and shaped, renewed or changed by each turn in the talk itself. And so an interaction that constitutes a medical consultation or therapy is recognisable as such whether it occurs within a child's home or within a clinical setting. The child's identity also may change as seen by the participants' orientation, turn by turn, from 'patient' to 'child' to 'expert' on his or her own illness.

We will now consider the thematic aspects of the three sections in this book, not just how they cohere but also with an eye to how issues are carried through various chapters across the subdivisions.

Section 1: Interactions between typically developing children and their main carers

The first and longest section is concerned with typically developing children, that is, those not labelled as having any form of developmental disability and engaged in everyday talk with their primary caregivers within the home. The subject matter in these chapters is certainly that of the development of conversational skills and the role of the adult in inculcating the child into appropriate social and linguistic practices. Local sequential issues are always inextricably linked to wider issues of the child's emerging membership within society, as outlined above. Focus is on the complex and meaningful layering of talk with gaze, gesture and other resources, not just because of the child's rudimentary and emerging linguistic skills but because these skills are very much part of the communicative framework at any age. The section starts with the inclusion of a hitherto unpublished article that must be viewed as a substantial piece of early childhood CA – a tribute to the late Dr Clare Tarplee, who died suddenly in 1999 just as she was establishing her postdoctoral research career. It addresses the inherent difficulties of using global categories to describe mechanisms of language development in mother–child talk such as 'feedback', imported from the field of learnability and the theoretical modelling of mental processes. Instead, by looking in fine detail at displays of intersubjective understandings, on a turn by turn basis, it shows the child's sensitivity to sequential implicature. The attention to phonetic detail is a marked feature of this chapter and raises interesting questions about the notion of a recognised word or words in child utterances and what constitutes repair.

The work of Corrin (Chapter 2), looking at children of a similar stage of linguistic development to Tarplee, also displays clearly how CA can inform important questions in child language research through microanalysis. Seemingly insignificant and overlooked types of repair are identified as key opportunities to learn about the crucial placement of talk in the context of other moves and, on a broader basis, display the mother as affording apprenticeships in the organisation of social practices central to pragmatic development. The works of Corrin (Chapter 2) and Laakso (Chapter 5) both question the rubric that children's self-initiated self repair might emerge out of earlier social practices where adults routinely draw the child's attention to an error. It would seem that this is not inherently the case, but that self-initiated repair comes very early in communicative, protoverbal development, on a par with the former. Both authors focus on instances where there are different orientations during play activity on the part of adult and child and repair may seek to establish a joint focus. In Laakso's Finnish data the issue of cross-cultural relevance is raised. It would appear that Finnish parents may have a propensity to other-correct very young children, rather than other-initiate a repair by the child, as has been found in similar data from the UK. Repair is revealed as a dynamic system as the child progresses linguistically and in age.

Tony Wootton's work on a young child's use of 'actually' (Chapter 4) is a very subtle analysis of what might be considered to be a relatively rare and somewhat dispensible

word in a child's vocabulary. Through highlighting the general features of use, and the enactments of departures from such use, we are shown precisely the insights that a developmental focused conversation analysis can bring. The child's use of 'actually', when looked at very carefully, suggests a line of developmental enquiry well beyond the use of the particular word. The fact that this word is used heavily over a short period of time and then falls away is an interesting exemplar of a child's active engagement with the processes of word learning and developing usage.

Forrester (Chapter 3) overtly addresses theoretical issues in ethnomethodologically informed CA and its relationship to child developmental research. This major debate is exemplified by a child's display of orientation to her own 'half–membership' in society through her interactions with an adult family member, and raises questions about the implicit or explicit benchmarks of cultural competence. The theme of membership is revisited in several chapters later in the book.

Section 2: Childhood interactions in a wider social world

As children grow they are likely to enter into, or be party to, interactions in a wider range of contexts outside the home, including those that are institutional in nature. Here their entry into society and their place within it is marked by a power ratio of the expert and the less expert (which also occurs between adults but the power relation may be exacerbated by the very status of being a child). Children may need to acquire adaptive interactional skills to accommodate the particular rules and practices of types of institutional talk. Alternatively, as in some instances in this volume, they may resist full cooperation with the institutional morés advanced by the adult (see Hutchby, Chapter 8). One can contrast the relaxed and embedded nature of learning at home as compared to the more direct didacticism of the school setting. There may be some commonalities despite the contextual differences, especially in the construction of repair, which has at its heart the notion of instruction. In Pike's work (Chapter 9), involving a child and teacher engaged in a mathematical problem, the development of teacher scaffolding of child learning is analysed in fine detail. In repair the adult's dispreference for other-repair/correction is extant, yet it is shown through the analysis that this dispreference can be self-defeating – and even outside the conscious awareness of both participants involved. Demonstrating an orientation to intersubjective understanding in context is shown to be more complex than often suspected. The theme of teacher–child talk is explored further in Section 3 of this book. The analysis details the tensions inherent in the finely honed interplay between learning aimed at a greater goal, such as maths or language structure, and learning how to interact successfully in the local context. The theme of learning at home and in a more controlled setting is taken up again in the final section of the book where Tykkyläinen (Chapter 12) compares clinical data to that of mother–child interaction.

How far children are involved in, or have control of, discussion of their own lives and needs is illustrated by both Cahill's analysis of triadic GP consultations regarding a child's health (Chapter 7) and Hutchby's work on counselling data (Chapter 8). Despite the move in health psychology towards more open and informed doctor–patient interaction, Cahill's work highlights the very rare and constrained nature of doctor–child interaction, even when potentially supportive adults (parents) are in attendance. This chapter arises from research directed towards enhancing communication in professional

settings and indicates how doctors could facilitate child participation through the use of address terms and other interactional resources.

Hutchby (Chapter 8) engages with child counselling data and contributes to a theme taken up by both Forrester (Chapter 3) in mundane talk and Sidnell (see below): that is, the significance of 'half-membership' rights and how children produce talk such that it displays an orientation to conventions of adult–child membership categories. The difficulties and challenges that children face when interacting in contexts/circumstances in which other social conventions predominate are highlighted. Also discussed are the subtleties involved in inviting a child's participation in such contexts, and the extent to which 'feelings talk/therapeutic vision' is something that children may have no recognition of, or indeed have resistance towards.

The theme of children's displays of membership categories is discussed further in the work of Sidnell in Section 2 of this volume (Chapter 6). The data arises from a preschool setting and stands out from the other chapters in this section as it concerns children talking together with no adult involvement. He shows that children of different ages may have different interactional concerns and, like Forrester in Chapter 3, urges caution with regard to the explanatory value of developmental stages. Sidnell reminds us of the dangers of developmental 'hegemony', in the sense of explaining away change over time, which may simply be appealing to a general or grander-scale developmental theory. Other concurrent concerns need to be unpicked – in particular how children's skills can be constrained by their own overemphasis on assumed shared knowledge with their conversational partners.

Section 3: Interactions with children who are atypical

The final section of the book comprises a set of chapters looking at interaction with children who are regarded as being 'atypical' in that they face challenges to the enactment of what are considered typical communicative processes. The children are variously those with cerebral palsy, autistic spectrum disorder, the deaf and those with specific speech and language difficulties. It cannot be presumed that a developmental 'lag' in communication is present and the authors explore issues of different and adaptive practices, rather than those concerning delay. There is evidence that interactional participants may not orient to disability or difference at all, at least in the terms set out in the wider society. The same issues, such as those of intersubjectivity and membership in their societal context, are seen to be have a form of orientation. Certainly a deficit model is routinely eschewed in favour of revealing interactional competencies hitherto overlooked. The role of professional adults, such as teachers and therapists, in supporting language and other learning is presented alongside work on more mundane interactions with peers and parents. How much CA should be used to describe professional interactions with a view to evaluating and subsequently enhancing practice and intervention is a current issue for researchers of institutional talk. Certainly the samples given here are exemplars of the value in teasing out skills and strategies that might otherwise remain implicit and embedded in talk that is obviously aimed at more global targets.

The last chapter in this section (Chapter 13 by Clarke and Wilkinson), is a good example of the problematic contrast of difference with disability, where children with cerebral palsy are using electronic communication aids. This chapter stands out as an

example of children just being themselves rather than being engaged in an overt learning process. The subtle nature of the communication that takes place between children with speech and those using an alternative means of communication, demonstrates how CA studies of children in different contexts can highlight the 'doing being ordinary' of everyday interaction for them. In many ways the concerns of these children talking together are very much the same as those in Sidnell's chapter (Chapter 6), that is, concerns about belonging and acceptance with peers. For CA itself, the use of 'alternative', electronic communication challenges contemporary CA conventions such as those regarding the 'transition relevant pause' or 'turn constructional unit'. This chapter also reminds us (as does the chapter by Radford and Mahon) of the care we need to exercise when defining a 'turn at talk'.

Radford and Mahon (Chapter 11) examine gaze and gesture in classroom interactions between children with language learning needs (deaf children and children with specific language difficulties) and their teachers. The authors' detailed analysis raises questions about the exact nature of a 'turn' in adult–child interactions (particularly in this context) and introduces the notion of a 'shared' turn. What constitutes an overlap is subtle and not immediately recognisable as such, when the adult may orient to gesture in overlap as a non-competitive turn-getting move. While the emphasis of the learning experience might be directed to symbolic language, there is clear attention to the relevance of multimodal communicative practices and their contribution to turn construction. The analysis addresses the multilayered nature of adult–child interaction and thus questions such notions as 'joint attention' and similar assumptions underpinning more typical adult–child interaction, picking up on issues discussed in earlier chapters.

The deliberate exploitation of multimodal resources by professionals in didactic contexts is revisited in the two remaining chapters: Tykkyläinen (Chapter 12), looking at speech and language therapy; and Stribling and Rae (Chapter 10), looking at complex teaching interactions.

Stribling and Rae look at social practices inherent in establishing intersubjectivity and scaffolding of (learning) with a child who has severe disabilities in a classroom context. The role of the support participant and the sequential consequences of 'triadic' autistic child/support person and teacher interaction are explored in fine detail and reveal the organisational subtlety and crucial timing of recipient sensitive management of learning support. The authors point out that, however much the child might be learning about elementary principles of mathematical subtraction, she is equally learning about participation frameworks that can contribute to her learning.

Tykkylainen, like Cahill, suggests that findings from CA can be used to enhance professional practice: a direct comparison of repair between typical children playing with their mothers and children with SLI (Specific Language Impairment) undertaking tasks in speech and language therapy. The author looks at possible institutional differences in the setting up of learning situations and the differences that are inherent due to the nature of the child's difficulties. While both sets of children, typical and atypical, made repair initiations only rarely, there were qualitative differences in the ways the language-impaired children sought repair in this institutional setting. The work focuses on the adult use of multimodal resources in support of the child achieving success with linguistic targets. The child with SLI is additionally shown to be sensitive to multimodal cues and to work hard at maintaining intersubjectivity in extended repair sequences.

It is hoped that this volume will further the appreciation of fine detailed analysis as a mechanism for understanding the nature of human communication and its development. The impact of CA as a discipline can only be enhanced by methodological expansion into the developmental and applied areas. To a great extent children can be viewed simply as people interacting, in search of the same or similar outcomes to adults. It is interesting therefore, as analysts, to consider what rules of talk, established through analysis of adult mundane talk, are relevant to children or how, why and within what particular contexts do children learn the skills necessary to engage fully in conversational contexts. By questioning assumptions inherent in macrolevel quantitative and qualitative research, CA has already opened the way to new interdisciplinary collaborations. Certainly we take the view that CA–child research can supplement and enlarge our understanding of children's behaviour. Hopefully, future developments and collaborations can continue to flourish in the light of new understandings brought about by CA.

Acknowledgements

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