

Chapter 17

Conversation Analysis and Electronic Interactions: Methodological, Analytic and Technical Considerations

Joanne Meredith

Loughborough University, UK

Jonathan Potter

Loughborough University, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes that, as a method which has engaged with interaction in other contexts, conversation analysis (CA) should be used to analyze electronic interactions. The adoption of CA leads to a number of methodological pointers and this chapter reviews some of these. The authors firstly overview previous research on electronic discourse, including work which has also applied CA to electronic interactions. The authors then describe the main elements of CA, and also briefly discuss the closely related approach of discursive psychology. Using a corpus of quasi-synchronous instant messaging chats, the authors show how data can be collected which captures how users actually conduct online interactions. The authors discuss the ethical issues inherent in collecting such data. Finally, using examples from the corpus, the authors demonstrate the importance of making timed transcripts and working with screen capture data.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses how electronic discourse is inherently interactional; that is, it is designed for a particular recipient or recipients; it unfolds sequentially responding to what has come before and building a context for what comes next; and its intelligibility is centrally related to its role in

building and responding to particular actions. To analyze such interactions it is necessary to employ a method which can best explicate how interaction functions. We propose that conversation analysis (CA), which has dealt in great detail with how spoken interactions are managed, is the best method for doing this. Our approach is not merely that CA will allow us to investigate interactions,

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but also that it will enable a better understanding of the practices of everyday internet use.

Once CA as a method of analysis is adopted, there are a number of methodological and technical considerations to be addressed. Much prior work on electronic discourse has relied upon experimental studies, or has viewed electronic discourse as a way of understanding the people behind the screen. We will discuss the problems with taking such an approach, and - drawing on the work of discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Edwards, 2004a; Potter, 2010) - suggest that electronic discourse should be analyzed as a social practice in its own right. As such, we propose that researchers should aim to collect data which captures how people use the internet, new media and new communicative technologies in their everyday lives. We also propose that both synchronous and asynchronous electronic discourse can be analyzed using CA and discursive psychology.

In order to conduct such an analysis, it is necessary to consider how to collect 'naturalistic' data. We aim to show the benefits of collecting data directly from the internet; that is, through timed transcripts as well as from participants recruited to provide screen capture data. There are a number of technical and ethical issues, which we will consider as part of this chapter.

Our objectives in this chapter are:

- First, to argue that because electronic discourse is interactional, it requires a method of analysis which is used to analyze interaction;
- Second, to introduce CA and discuss its approach to language, as well as demonstrating why it is beginning to be seen as a crucial method for analyzing electronic interactions; and
- Third, to explain why it is necessary to take a particular approach to collecting data, and the ethical implications of this.

We will demonstrate the necessity of taking this approach to data collection through examples from quasi-synchronous instant messaging chats.

BACKGROUND

The study of electronic discourse is a heterogeneous field which is distributed across a range of academic disciplines. Consequently, there are a number of different approaches to studying electronic discourse. One approach is to analyze the way particular *topics* are discussed online (e.g. Brown, 2009; Connor & Wesolowski, 2009; Lynch, 2002; Swan & McCarthy, 2003). While this research analyzes discourse that appears on the internet, the main interest is in the way the topic is treated as opposed to anything specific about the use of new media and the internet. Other approaches examine how electronic discourse impacts upon issues such as developing or maintaining online friendships (e.g. Brunet & Schmidt, 2007; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Paine & Joinson, 2008) or using electronic discourse to facilitate learning (e.g. Fitze, 2006; Gleason, 2011; Schulze, 2010). In these kinds of work the concern is with sociological, psychological or educational matters, rather than with investigating the interactional and technological specificity of electronic discourse. However, in order to understand and analyze electronic discourse, it is necessary to move away from treating *internet-data-as-resource* and move towards treating *internet-data-as-topic* (Rapley, 2001). In other words, rather than seeing online discourse as "a way to reach the people behind the screen" (Flinkfeldt, 2011, p. 763), electronic interactions can be analyzed as "social practices in their own right" (Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003, p. 461).

There has been an interest for over a decade in sociolinguistics in how the practices of online discourse differ from spoken discourse. Such research describes and classifies electronic discourse, and how it differs from spoken and written language

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