



Applying conversation analysis methods to online talk: A literature review



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ABSTRACT

While researchers have used conversation analysis (CA) methods to understand online talk since the 1990s, to date there has been no systematic review of these studies to better understand this methodological development. This article presents a comprehensive literature review of 89 peer-reviewed journal articles reporting findings of empirical studies using CA to understand social interaction online. In this review, we describe who is conducting this type of research, the contexts in which CA has been used to make sense of text-based online talk, and where such studies are being published. We also identify the “fundamental” conversational structures researchers are drawing upon in making sense of online talk as social interaction. Findings show that studies are using CA to understand “mundane” conversational contexts, as well as institutional talk from educational, counseling and workplace settings. The number of such studies are increasing and are being conducted by an international network of researchers across a variety of disciplines. The data is most often described as synchronous or asynchronous, with a slow increase in attention to social media data. Publication outlets are mostly language-based and/methodological journals. Analysis revealed four main aims: (1) comparing online and face-to-face talk, (2) understanding how coherence is maintained, (3) understanding how participants deal with trouble, and (4) understanding how social actions are accomplished asynchronously. This review contributes to the overall understanding of the methodological development of CA, offering useful insights for those interested in using it to understand social interaction as it occurs online.

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1. Introduction

In a recent literature review on notions of embodiment, [Neville \(2015\)](#) noted that, “as analysts of social interaction, we are interested in how people, together in real time, make sense to do whatever it is they are doing, with whatever resources are available, including talk, body, objects, and the surrounding environment” (p. 141). For the past 25 years, these resources have included the Internet, computing devices and the various kinds of social interaction they support. In this paper, we report on a review of journal articles exploring how conversation analysis (CA) has been used to understand social interactions that occur in the form of text-based online talk.

Known by a variety of terms, including computer-mediated communication ([Herring, 1996](#)), computer-mediated discourse

([Herring, 2004](#)), and electronic discourse ([Meredith and Potter, 2013](#)), online talk takes place through a range of modalities. These modalities have evolved over time from Usenet groups and Internet Relay Chat to discussion forums and instant messenger to Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. As new ways of interacting online have proliferated, so have the research approaches being used to understand them. These include a variety of language-based methodologies, such as linguistics ([Crystal, 2006](#); [Georgakopoulou, 2011](#); [Zappavigna, 2012](#)), sociolinguistics ([Androutsopoulos, 2006](#); [Thurlow and Mroczek, 2011](#)), pragmatics ([Herring et al., 2013](#); [Yus, 2011](#)), and discourse analysis ([Herring, 2004](#); [Myers, 2010](#)). Studies of online talk from a language perspective have included a focus on play and performance ([Georgakopoulou, 2011](#)), communities ([Seargeant and Tagg, 2014](#); [Stommel, 2008](#)), self-presentation and identity work ([Androutsopoulos, 2006](#); [Seargeant and Tagg, 2014](#)), stories ([Page, 2012](#)), and gender ([Herring and Stoerger, 2014](#)), to name a few.

[Meredith and Potter \(2013\)](#) have argued that “electronic discourse should be seen as electronic *interaction*” (p. 374) and, as such, requires a method such as CA to understand it. While CA has

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roots in sociology, generally, and in ethnomethodology more specifically, fields such as education (Gibson, 2009a, 2009b), educational technology (Mazur, 2004), journalism (Steenen, 2014), and counseling (Stommel and Lamerichs, 2014) have not only used CA to understand online talk, but have also published methodological pieces explicating its use. Scholars such as Hutchby (2001), ten Have (1999, 2000), Reed and Ashmore (2000), and Reed (2001) were early proponents of using CA to investigate online interaction; however, others such as Schegloff (2006), argued that “computer chats” should not be considered “talk” at all (p. 90). In this paper, we use the phrase ‘online talk’ to be consistent with how the researchers themselves characterize this sort of communication (e.g. Meredith and Potter, 2013).

Regardless of Schegloff’s claim, researchers have been drawing upon CA to study online talk since the late 1990s. For example, Baym published the first systematic study of agreement in “computer-mediated discussions” in 1996, drawing upon preference structure (Pomerantz, 1984) and making comparisons with oral and written conversations. Disciplines such as psychology are particularly interested in how to treat online talk as research data (Gernsbacher, 2014; Holtz et al., 2012; Jowett, 2015). Yet, Greiffenhagen and Watson (2005) criticized some CA/ethnomethodological approaches to online talk for failing to consider its use from the participants’ perspectives; that is, as *local* and *situated*; instead, much of the research treats online talk as if it were monolithic. Furthermore, they noted that most studies have exclusively relied on “logfiles” – transcripts of the interactions – rather than videotaping the users as they engage in the talk. This they call the missing body (p. 7), that is, ignoring the activities that may be going on at the same time as talk is being exchanged online. They also critiqued the tendency of researchers to treat CA concepts, such as Sacks et al. (1974) description of turn-taking, as a “model” that online talk should be judged against, highlighting that the turn-taking system was never meant to be an “ideal type construction from which real cases are seen as departing” (Greiffenhagen and Watson, 2005, p. 16).

Beyond the academic literature, the interest in exploring such methodological issues can be seen within professional conversations focused on research methodologies for understanding online talk. For example, in 2007, the International Pragmatics Conference included a section on “data and methods in computer-mediated discourse analysis” which was then developed into a special issue for *Language@Internet* in 2008 (Androutsopoulos and Beißwenger, 2008). Further, in 2010 and 2011, the same journal featured a two-part special issue on “computer-mediated conversation” (Herring, 2010; Herring, 2011), including articles on e-mail, instant messaging, blogs, and 3D virtual worlds. In 2014, the International Conference on Conversation Analysis panel and a forthcoming special journal issue focused on orders of interaction in mediated settings, including video-conferencing, blogging, and instant messaging interactions. Since 2013, the Microanalysis of Online Data (MOOD) international network has held an annual symposium, bringing together scholars from around the world to engage in such discussions (Giles et al., 2015).

Even though many online talk researchers have oriented to turn-taking as originally described by Sacks et al. (1974), some scholars have begun to explore how other CA concerns, such as transcription methods (Meredith and Potter, 2013) and repair (Meredith and Stokoe, 2013), might function in these new contexts. Nonetheless, Giles et al. (2015) pointed to the ongoing need for extensive methodological discussions around refining CA approaches for use with online talk. They noted that:

the move from an uncritical ‘digitized’ application of CA to a customized version of CA for specific use with online interaction requires the reworking of a number of tenets of CA in the

light of the challenges posed by electronic communication technology. (Giles et al., 2015, p. 47)

Subsequently, because so many disciplines have an interest in online talk, it is difficult to identify all of the relevant publications in which such research appears. A more thorough understanding is needed of which disciplines have been using CA and in what ways these applications can offer useful insights to those desiring to take up this methodology. To date, however, no comprehensive literature review of such studies has been conducted. Therefore, we engaged in a systematic review of empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals to explore how and to what extent CA has been applied to the everyday and institutionalized talk that occurs online. Our research questions were:

1. In which disciplinary journals are CA studies of text-based online talk being published?
2. In which countries are researchers using CA to understand this talk?
3. In which years were they published?
4. Which types of online talk are being analyzed using CA?
5. Which foundational structures of conversation (as described in Sidnell and Stivers 2013) are being used to understand the talk?

2. Methods

We initially reviewed over 200 articles, identifying 89 peer-reviewed journal articles in which authors self-identified using CA to study text-based online talk, with some of these articles also drawing upon discursive psychology (DP). We chose to focus on text-based online talk because this is still the most common type of online communication and most relevant to our own areas of research in education, health, and psychology (Lester and Paulus, 2011; Paulus and Lester, 2013). We excluded conference proceedings and book chapters from our corpus, because as a field it is important to know how issues and topics are represented in peer-reviewed journals, often considered the “gold standard” of publications (Woods et al., in press). Books, book chapters and conference proceedings are important to consider for their historical perspective on the emergence of the field, and thus they served to contextualize our work and are cited in both the introduction to and discussion of our analysis. We also limited our review to studies published in English, as we did not have a budget for translation services.

To locate relevant articles, we searched eight scholarly databases and conducted direct searches of 24 journal websites. Keyword searches were conducted using “conversation analysis” in conjunction with: blogs, online, discussion forum, computer-mediated communication, Twitter, Facebook, social media, chat, YouTube, e-mail, synchronous, Internet, and computer. Article references pointed us to additional relevant studies for review.

We imported these articles into ATLAS.ti version 7 for analysis. Our analysis proceeded through several steps. First, we identified the discipline of the journal in which the study was published, the country location of the first author, and publication date. Second, we identified the type of data being analyzed and the context from which it was drawn. Next, we identified the CA features that were drawn upon in the studies. These features were then categorized according to “fundamental structures” as outlined in the *Handbook of Conversation Analysis* (Sidnell and Stivers, 2013). Finally, we did an intensive reading across articles to identify the interpretations and claims that were being made about online talk as a result of CA. We structured our discussion of the findings around these analytical focal points.

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