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# The real-time processing of pragmatics: An experimental psychological-conversation analytic study of *obwohl* clauses in spoken German

Peter Golato <sup>a, \*</sup>, Andrea Golato <sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Modern Languages, Texas State University, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666 USA<sup>b</sup> The Graduate College, Texas State University, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666 USA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper answers calls in the literature for research representing a fusion of the methodologies of Conversation Analysis (CA) and Experimental Psychology (EP). A review of CA literature on German *obwohl* 'although'-subordinate clauses suggests that their interactional meaning is a function of their word order, with verb-final word order indicating a concessive function and verb-second word order indicating a correction of the main clause's meaning. A self-paced reading experiment, with German native speakers ( $n = 48$ ) and with stimuli drawn from actual German conversational data, was designed to test the aforementioned findings of the CA literature under controlled conditions. The experiment was designed to allow for direct measurement of the effect of pragmatics, as encoded through word order, upon real-time sentence processing. Results of the experiment suggest that the CA-derived interactional meanings of *obwohl*-initial subordinate clauses fully account for the performance of participants in the experiment. The paper shows that findings derived from CA studies can also be observed under the controlled conditions of a self-paced reading study, and that discourse-length utterances taken from naturally-occurring interaction can serve with little modification as stimuli in sentence processing studies investigating pragmatics.

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## 1. Introduction

The field of Conversation Analysis (CA), which grew out of Ethnomethodology (Heritage, 1984; Lynch, 2000), has until recently favored an entirely non-experimental and non-quantitative approach to the study of talk-in-interaction (Golato, 2003; Schegloff, 1993). In contrast, in the field of Experimental Psychology (EP) (and to a large extent in second language acquisition (SLA) as well), quantification and experiments which allow for the strict control of variables in laboratory settings have been preferred, resulting in research mainly on the processing of phonemes, words, morphosyntax, and sentences, though not in the context of connected discourse (see e.g., Gass and Mackey, 2012; Wagenmakers and Wixted, 2018). As the literature review will show, however, formerly non experimentally- and non quantitatively-oriented fields such as CA have moved in recent years to include both experimentation and quantification; likewise, formerly quantitatively-oriented laboratory study fields such as psycholinguistics and SLA have moved in recent years to include naturalistic data and settings (for

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [pgolato@txstate.edu](mailto:pgolato@txstate.edu) (P. Golato), [agolato@txstate.edu](mailto:agolato@txstate.edu) (A. Golato).

an overview, see Kendrick (2017)). These trends have culminated in calls by Kendrick (2017) and de Ruiter and Albert (2017) for research which combines the methodologies of CA and EP. The current paper is a response to this call, in that it uses discourse-length stimuli derived from naturally occurring talk-in-interaction in a psycholinguistic, real-time language-processing experiment. The study has two intertwined objectives: First, it examines the degree to which findings obtained with non-experimental and non-quantitative approaches, specifically CA and Interactional Linguistics, can also be observed in a real-time language processing experiment. Second, it examines whether discourse-length stimuli from actual conversations can be successfully used in such an experiment.

The paper is organized as follows: in order to motivate its experimental study, it starts out with a review of the literature on CA, EP, and related fields. As CA and EP are vast fields, the discussion is limited to methodological considerations. Next, the paper discusses the pragmatic feature under investigation, namely the syntactic structure of *obwohl* 'although' clauses in German. As the discussion will show, spoken German allows for two different verb placements within *obwohl* clauses, with each placement being associated with a different pragmatic function. The paper then presents the method used in the present study's experiment, followed by the results of the aforementioned experiment. The paper ends with a discussion of the results and of some avenues for future research.

## 2. Literature review

The literature review has two parts. First, it reviews publications which have addressed methodological issues in both CA and EP and which have called for a modification of the current approach in each field. It also discusses studies which have begun to heed this particular call. Second, it reviews the CA and interactional linguistic literature on the specific pragmatic phenomenon which is tested through the experiment in the latter part of the paper.

### 2.1. Review of methodological concerns in CA and EP

Informal quantification without statistical analysis has always been a method of preliminary data analysis in CA (Jefferson, 1988: 176). The first CA studies to employ statistical analyses of counts or tallies of the frequency of occurrence of a given discursive practice seem to have been concerned primarily with talk in institutional settings (Boyd, 1998; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1986; Heritage et al., 2001; Mangione-Smith et al., 2004; Perakyla, 1998; Robinson and Heritage, 2005; Stivers et al., 2003). To date, statistical analyses are still more frequently featured in CA studies of talk in institutional settings than in studies of talk in other types of settings<sup>1</sup> (e.g., Opel et al., 2015; Schaeffer et al., 2013), although some work of this type on everyday conversation is starting to appear as well (Kendrick and Torreira, 2015; Stivers et al., 2009).

Traditionally, CA researchers have collected interactional data within their natural setting, i.e., in the environment in which the interactions occurred (i.e., in people's homes, out on the street, in classrooms, etc.). However, in recent years, researchers have also begun to collect data of individuals interacting or performing tasks in laboratory settings. The lab environment was chosen because it allows researchers to study certain elements of the interaction such as eye-gaze (Kendrick and Holler, 2017), eye-blinking (Hömke et al., 2017), or body movements (Stevanovic et al., 2017) in more fine-grained detail. Other CA researchers have even created experiments in which stimulus items were taken from conversation analytic work. In possibly the first CA study of this kind, Walters (2004) investigated learners' understanding of preference organization in English by having subjects listen to conversations and indicate via a multiple-choice task which line of talk would likely follow next. Roberts and her colleagues (Roberts et al., 2006, 2011) also used data derived from previous CA work in experiments. Specifically, these latter teams studied the impacts of silence duration and prosody on listener perceptions of "trouble". In these experiments, they varied the length of the silences observed in actual conversations and which had followed assessments, and had subjects in the experiments indicate how likely an agreeing response would be in the next turn. Later, Roberts and Francis (2013) expanded this work to the interpretation of silences after requests.

Turning to the broad field of EP, Hoey and Kendrick (2017) observed that researchers from a variety of EP's subdisciplines are increasingly realizing the importance of interaction as the context of their work (de Jaegher et al., 2010, 2016; Fusaroli et al., 2014; Levinson, 2016; Pickering and Garrod, 2004; Schilbach et al., 2013), and seeing a need to study linguistic and cognitive phenomena not only in isolation (i.e., at the phoneme, word, or clausal level) but also as they are used in interaction. Several EP researchers (or teams of CA and EP researchers) have conducted experiments to expand the findings gained from CA research. For instance, in order to determine which cues (either lexico-syntactic, intonation/pitch, or amplitude) interactants use to anticipate turn completion, de Ruiter et al. (2006) presented subjects aurally with utterances modified to contain only one of the aforementioned cues, and asked them to press a button when they believed the speaker's turn was about to come to an end. Their study is different from previous work (Cutler and Pearson, 1986; Schaffer, 1983) in that it took stimulus items from a corpus of naturally occurring data. Others have since conducted follow-up studies to this work (Bögels and Torreira, 2015; Magyari et al., 2014; Magyari and de Ruiter, 2012).

<sup>1</sup> As a reviewer observed, Drew and Heritage (1992: 22) note that institutional talk may lend itself to quantification and statistical analyses because of the "special and particular constraints" of talk in these settings, as opposed to talk in settings with relatively less distinct "rules".

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