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02 Analysing cinematic discourse using conversation analysis

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ABSTRACT

The following paper examines how a conversation analysis (CA) approach to the investigation of spoken dialogue can be applied to analysis of the verbal and non-verbal (prosodic and paralinguistic) features of film discourse. In doing so, we wish to make a valuable contribution to the debate in the field between 'pure' (see Schegloff, 1988; Emmison, 1993) and 'applied' CA scholars (e.g. Have, 2007). Researchers belonging to the former grouping argue that CA should only be used to investigate naturally occurring language use (i.e. spontaneous language use), while those who position themselves as 'applied' CA scholars maintain that it is an approach that can be applied to institutional and semi-scripted instances of spoken dialogue. We begin by outlining the principles of CA and the type of data and contexts in which it has been used to analyse spoken interaction in previous research; we then analyse and discuss findings from our own study into the verbal and non-verbal features of segments of film discourse. These segments comprise selected interactions that occur in three different scenes from three different films by Woody Allen ("Husbands and Wives", 1992; "Melinda and Melinda", 2004 and "You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger", 2010). These interactions have been transcribed using CA conventions and then analysed in terms of four key conversational features that have been identified by CA scholars: turn-taking, adjacency pairs, gaps and overlaps. Our findings indicate that the interactants in our study do indeed make use of these conversational features in their spoken dialogues and that they are purposeful and meaningful. We conclude therefore that CA offers a valuable tool for examining key verbal and non-verbal features of film dialogue and paves the way for further analyses of this kind.

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1. Introduction

Conversation analysis (CA), as a research method for approaching social interaction at the level of conversation, or as it is most frequently referred to as talk-in-interaction, has a long and fruitful history and has significantly impacted on the methodological landscape of many social science and humanities disciplines, including linguistics and applied linguistics. However, the tenets and concepts of CA have been for the most part applied to an exclusive feature, namely, naturally occurring language¹ in its various settings. As a result, the great potential of CA and its methodology have not been fully explored in other domains of applied linguistic enquiry, such as the study of conversation and dialogue in film, television and theatre. In spite of the fact that there are some studies of television dialogue that use CA (Bubel, 2006; Raymond, 2013; Stokoe, 2008), these are still quite rare, especially in terms of film dialogue.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to evaluate the use of CA as a tool for the analysis of cinematic discourse. Cinematic discourse

refers to the language of cinema, which integrates all the multimodal features of the fictional narrative: verbal, non-verbal, audio and visual (Piazza et al., 2011). This term encompasses all the modalities of cinematic representation, signification and communication, of which spoken dialogue comprises one component. Furthermore, there is also a double plane of multimodality in film: the multimodality in the film performance (e.g. language, posture, movements) and the multimodality in the film product (e.g. camera position and angle, editing, cinematography, sound, etc.) (Bednarek, 2010). This means that cinematic discourse operates on two planes: diegetic and extra-diegetic (Dynel, 2011a, 2011b; Piazza et al., 2011). The former refers to the story-world of films, their narratives and characters, i.e. the fictional world. The latter, on the other hand, looks at films as artistic products that are made by a crew of professionals (directors, producers, actors, screenplay writers, camera workers, etc.) for the benefit of viewers, who also engage in and contribute to the final product. The research in this paper focuses solely on the former plane of cinematic discourse, the diegetic one, i.e. on the speech in the film dialogues more specifically, which consists of both verbal and non-verbal elements of spoken interaction, including prosodic features such as intonation, volume and use of pauses. We are completely aware that focusing on only one plane of cinematic discourse offers only a modest and partial insight

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¹ Naturally occurring language here means spontaneous speech which is not elicited for the purposes of research (Jucker, 2009).

into its workings, but integrating both planes and all the various elements thereof, would be a task for a much larger study that would not fit into a single article.

Apart from being multimodal in nature, cinematic discourse is also characterised by the particularity of its linguistic expression, since it consists of a series of written dialogues spoken in front of a camera. This particular feature of cinematic discourse as scripted and non-spontaneous is precisely the reason why some scholars (Emmison, 1993; Schegloff, 1988) have argued against the use of CA as a tool in the analysis of spoken interaction in film. Whilst we recognise that there is debate in the field about the appropriateness of using CA for this purpose, we argue that conversation analysis can and should be employed as a fully-fledged research method in linguistic settings other than those of naturally occurring conversations. To substantiate this claim, we show through a close examination of the key organisational features of film dialogue against a CA matrix, how CA can be used as a valuable tool for the analysis of film conversation.

In order to support our argument we commence with a discussion of the basic principles of CA and then suggest how they can be applied in the domain of cinematic discourse. We also review some of the significant cinematic discourse studies before we proceed to report on an empirical study that applied CA methods to selected segments of film dialogue from three different films by Woody Allen: "Husbands and Wives" (1992), "Melinda and Melinda" (2004) and "You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger" (2010). Finally, we discuss the findings of our study about the organisation of talk in film dialogues in relation to CA and the purposeful use of some interactional features in the analysed film dialogues.

2. Conversation analysis principles

Conversation analysis, as a study of "the systematic analysis of the talk produced in everyday situations of human interaction: talk-in-interaction", rests on the central assumption that "ordinary talk is a highly organised, socially ordered phenomenon" (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2008, p.11). Despite the highly organised nature of talk-in-interaction, CA posits that this organisation is not uniform, but rather accomplished by collaborative endeavours of the participants in conversations (Liddicoat, 2011, p. 6). In other words, CA's approach to human interaction (i.e. talk-in-interaction) is such that it is seen as "an emergent collectively organised event" (Have, 2007, p. 9).

Another important concept in CA is "recipient design" (Sacks et al., 1974). It is defined as "the multitude of respects in which the talk by a party in a conversation is constructed or designed in ways which display an orientation and sensitivity to the particular other (s) who are the co-participants" (Sacks, et al., 1974, p. 727). This means that speakers design their utterances with a view to be understood by their interlocutors and be able to communicate effectively.

In addition, CA considers talk as an activity that is used to accomplish various social actions or goals through interaction (Sacks, 1995). This idea is closely related to CA's origins in sociology and it indicates that conversations are purposeful and that talk is used to carry out various tasks and actions, such as: inform, enquire, show various emotions, apologise, invite, suggest, and many more. These are also known as speech acts in pragmatics (Austin, 1962), but as CA uses the term social actions, the latter is going to be used in this paper.

Data sources for researching the structured and orderly organisation of talk-in-interaction have been traditionally selected from naturally occurring instances of conversation, which are recorded (audio only or audio and video) and then transcribed.

Therefore, one of the principal tenets of CA has been that talk for analysis should be "natural", namely spontaneous and not experimentally induced.

More recently however, exponents of CA have also examined different kinds of talk-in-interaction, such as "institutional talk" (Sidnell, 2010; Have, 2007), that occurs in a range of settings. Institutional talk has been further sub-divided into formal and non-formal types by Heritage and Greatbach (1991). The former type refers to the kind of interactions encountered in law courts (Atkinson and Drew, 1979); different types of interviews, such as broadcast news interviews (Clayman, 1988; Heritage, 1985; Heritage & Greatbatch, 1991) and job interviews (Button, 1992); various ceremonial occasions, as well as classroom-based interactions characterised by traditional teacher-led styles of teaching (McHoul, 1978). Non-formal types of institutional talk can occur in medical institutions, such as interactions between doctors and patients (Frankel, 1990) and counselling sessions (Peräkylä, 1995); business meetings (Boden, 1994); other kinds of social work encounters (Heritage and Sefi, 1992); service-oriented interactions in places such as shops (Lamoureux, 1988–9); radio phone-in conversations (Hutchby, 1996) and TV shows (reality shows in particular: Ergul, 2010; Ohara and Saft, 2003; Oyeleye, 2012; Valenzuela, 2012). Here the talk-in-interaction is more loosely structured than in the formal types of settings, but it is still task-oriented and different from naturally occurring speech.

Have (2007, p. 8) refers to the cases of institutional talk as 'applied CA', as opposed to 'pure CA', which examines naturally occurring talk-in-interaction in everyday, informal settings. However, Have (2007, p. 69) also states that in 'applied CA' the data may "in themselves" be "experimental", for instance as part of a research project based on interviews and that such data will still count as "natural" for CA researchers. What this statement means is that no clear-cut boundary can be placed between "natural" and "experimental" data, even though the former term refers to non-elicited, spontaneous talk, whereas the latter assumes the researcher's involvement in inducing data, by means of interview questions or mere recording and observation. Thus, this statement as well as comments by Schegloff (1996, p. 59) indicate that there are no definite boundaries between more or less legitimate data sources for conducting CA research, i.e. "whether some piece of talk can be treated as "natural" or not depends not only on its setting, but also on the way it is being analysed" (Have, 2007, p. 69).

Furthermore, in addition to making one's own recordings of naturally occurring speech and using existing recordings, there is another, third manner of procuring data sources, which is the option of using radio or TV broadcasts (Have, 2007, p. 79). This third source, however, creates ambiguities as to the appropriateness of such a data source for CA research and even contradicts the traditional principles of CA regarding this matter. Mass media talk is distinct from naturally occurring speech as it is most frequently planned, prepared, rehearsed and more often than not edited, accounting for the "artificiality" of such speech. In addition, the very fact that interlocutors are being recorded and broadcast can influence the nature of their interactions. Nevertheless, this type of data has been widely used in CA research (Atkinson, 1984a, 1984b, 1985; Clayman, 1992, 1993; Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Heritage and Greatbach, 1986; Hopper, 1995) on the assumption that 'people do not shift to a completely different set of interactional procedures when they know their talk is broadcast' (Have, 2007, p. 81).

From our discussion so far, it becomes clear that many CA studies have diverged from the kinds of data restrictions imposed by original CA scholars. Therefore, it seems plausible to suggest that CA can be also applied to the domain of cinematic discourse and be used for analysing film dialogues. In spite of the fact that film conversations are not "natural" and spontaneous, owing to their pre-scripted nature, the actual performance of those dialogues does largely follow the rules and norms of everyday

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