Conversation Analysis: Practices and Methods

John Heritage, UCLA

Abstract:

This chapter outlines some of the basic procedures involved in the analysis of conversational interaction. It describes three levels of analytic engagement: sequence analysis, identification of conversational practices, and description of the order(s) of conversational organization in which these practices are involved. Focusing on the analysis of practices, it describes three interrelated elements in the analysis of a practice: (i) identifying its distinctive characteristics, (ii) locating it within the context of conversational sequences, and (iii) determining the role and intersubjective meaning of the practice. While the aim of identifying a practice in these ways involves examining it in the broadest range of social contexts to determine the extent to which it is contextually bounded, knowledge of the meaning and use any practice can be used to shed light on the specific context of relevant conversational interaction. Because conversational practices are context-free, context-sensitive elements of human behavior, knowledge of their functioning can play a valuable role in ethnographic studies of the social world and in quantitative analyses of the causes and consequences of human interaction.

Keywords
Context, sequence, practice, reflexivity, comparison

In this chapter, my aim is to give an overview of conversation analytic (CA) methods with a particular focus on ordinary conversation. To understand these methods, it is helpful to remember that they are designed to deal with fundamental features of human action and interaction. By the 1960s, there was a broad consensus on a number of these features:

1) Human actions are meaningful and involve meaning-making.

Human actions (whether spoken or otherwise) are meaningful. Unlike the processes of the physical universe, they are goal directed and based on reasoning about the physical and social circumstances that persons find themselves in (Schütz 1962; Blumer 1969). This reasoning involves knowledge, socio-cultural norms and beliefs, and a grasp of the goals and intentions of others. Because goals, intentions and the 'state of play' in interaction can change rapidly, this knowledge and reasoning is continuously updated during the process of interaction itself (Garfinkel 1967). Social interaction also involves meaning-making. Actions, no matter how similar or repetitive, are never identical in meaning (Garfinkel 1967; Blumer 1969). Each of them is singular, if only because it takes place in a new and singular situation. Each action therefore is, in some degree, creative in the meaning it creates and conveys.

2) Actions achieve meaning through a combination of their content and context

Self-evidently most spoken actions embody specific language content, describe specific circumstances, and implement specific actions just by virtue of the creative power of language. However to this creativity of content must be added the creative power of context. The meaning of even the most formulaic of actions (such as "okay," 'mm hm' and so on) is in fact differentiated by context. The contextual variation (and specification) of action is a profound feature of human socio-cultural life, and a second major source of creativity and meaning-making in interaction that works in tandem with the creative power of language. Analysis of action cannot avoid this contextual variation without appearing

superficial and irrelevant, not least because human beings exploit context in the construction of action. 'Context' is complex and layered. It embraces the immediately preceding action (someone just said or did something you have to respond to), through medial (that someone is an old friend), to distal (she is rather closer to your significant other than to you).

3) To be socially meaningful, the meaning of actions must be shared.

Human actions are socially meaningful only to the extent that their meaning is shared by the actor, the recipient(s) of the act, and (sometimes) other observers. Absent this and actions will be unintelligible to others and will fail the achieve their desired objectives. The shared meaning of actions is constructed by the common use of methods for analyzing actions-in-context (Garfinkel 1967). This means that there must be procedures for persons to check whether their understandings about the meanings of earlier actions are correct, and of whether their responses are 'on target.' As persons construct interaction in an unfolding sequence of moves, they will also have to keep score of 'where they are' in the interaction and of the interaction's 'state of play.' Like 'context,' shared (or 'intersubjective') meaning is also layered on a gradient from the most public (I asked you a question and you replied 'No'), to less public but available to some observers (your response betrays the fact that you are not an expert), to more private (your 'No" is rationalizing an unstated anxiety, or reflects a private promise you made to someone else).

4) Meanings are unique and singular. Actions function in particular ways to create meanings that are particular.

Implicit in the first three principles is the idea that actions and their meanings are highly particularized. At first sight the extraordinary singularity of human action would seem inimical to any sustained achievement of coherent meaning. Yet it works – somehow! A key to this working can be glimpsed in the contrast between the number of colors that are perceptible to the average human (around 7.5 million) and the basic color terms used by the average speaker of a language (between 8 and 11)

(Heritage 1984a). Somehow all that particularity is being conveyed by very general descriptive terms (red, yellow, etc.). The key to the process is that most description takes place in plain sight of the colored object ("the guy in the red sweater," "the blue humming bird") and the color term can do its job by being amplified and particularized by its context ("that red would work better than that one"). Context elaborates the meanings of utterances. A similar principle applies in interaction: "Is it serious?" is understood differently in the context of a sprained ankle and a cancer diagnosis. Context specifies meaning.

These four features of action have been discussed within the fields of anthropology and sociology for about 150 years, where they have mainly been considered as potential constraints on, or obstacles to, a natural science of society. Nonetheless these are the characteristics that a conception of interaction must come to terms with. Social participants somehow manage their interactions in daily life while coping with, and in fact actually exploiting, these characteristics of human conduct. Conversation analysis is a discipline that was developed to come to terms with, and model, these capacities.

Basic Principles of CA:

(i) Sequence

The foundational principles of CA tackle these four fundamental facts of human action by exploiting the concept of sequence (Schegloff 2007). The basic idea is that the most elementary context in which a turn at talk occurs is the immediately preceding turn at talk. It is a default assumption in human conduct that a current action should be, and normally will be, responsive to the immediately prior one. Indeed persons have to engage in special procedures (e.g., "Oh by the way..") to show that a next action is not responsive to the prior.

The inherent turn-by-turn contextuality of conversation is a vital resource for the construction of understanding in interaction. Since each action will be understood as responsive to the previous one, the understanding that it displays is open for inspection. For example, in the following case, Ann's turn in line 1 is treated as an invitation by a response that 'accepts' it:

```
(1)
     Ann:  Why don't you come and see me some[times.
     Bar:                                     [I would like to
```

If, by contrast, Barbara had responded with an apology and an excuse:

```
(2)
     Ann:  Why don't you come and see me sometimes.
     Bar:  I'm sorry. I've been terribly tied up lately.
```

then it would have been apparent that Barbara had understood Ann's initial utterance as a complaint rather than an invitation (Heritage 1984a).

These two understandings are built into the design of the two different responses. They are apparent to observers but, and this is the important point, they are apparent to the participants: However the sequence plays out, Ann will find from Barbara's response how Barbara understood her and that Barbara has, or has not, understood her correctly.

We can take this analysis a step further by recognizing that at this point Ann knows how Barbara understood her turn, but Barbara does not know whether she understood it correctly. Continuation of the sequence allows Barbara to make this judgment (Schegloff 1992):

```
(3)
     Ann:  Why don't you come and see me some[times.
     Bar:                                     [I would like to
     Ann:  I would like you to.
```

Ann's 'accepting' response to Barbara's acceptance confirms Barbara in her belief that she understood Ann correctly. But it could have gone otherwise:

```
(4)
     Ann:  Why don't you come and see me some[times.
     Bar:                                     [I would like to
     Ann:  Yes but why don't you
```

In this second scenario, Barbara would see that her understanding of Ann's first turn at talk as an invitation was mistaken. Ann's response, which renews and indeed escalates her complaint, conveys that her original utterance was in fact intended to have been just that.

The sequential logic inherent in these examples is central to the construction of human interaction as a shared sense-making enterprise, regardless of its social context. Because it is the foundation of

courses of conduct that are mutually intelligible, this logic underwrites both the conduct of social

interaction and its analysis.

Basic Principles: (ii) Practices

CA investigates interaction by examining the practices which participants use to construct it. A

'practice' is any feature of the design of a turn in a sequence that (i) has a distinctive character, (ii) has

specific locations within a turn or sequence, and (iii) is distinctive in its consequences for the nature or the

meaning of the action that the turn implements. Here are three examples of conversational practices:

(a) Turn-initial address terms designed to select a specific next speaker to respond (Lerner 2003):

```
(5)
        A:      Gene, do you want another piece of cake?
```

(b) Elements of question design that convey an expectation favoring a 'yes' or a 'no' answer: in this case

the word 'any' conveys an expectation tilted towards a 'no.'

```
(6)
        Prof:  Do you have any questions?
```

(c) Oh-prefaced responses to questions primarily conveying that the question was inapposite or out of

place (Heritage 1998):

```
(7)
        Ann:    How are you feeling Joyce.=
        Joy:    Oh fi:ne.
```


Basic Principles: (iii) Organizations

The practices that CA finds in interaction cluster into organized collections that center on

fundamental orders of conversational and social organization. Detailing these is beyond the scope of this

chapter. Suffice it to say that some are clearly central to the management of interaction itself: for

example, these organizations embrace clusters of practices that are associated with taking a turn at talk;

practices of repair that address systematic problems in speaking, hearing and understanding talk, and

practices associated with the management of reference to persons and objects in the world (Schegloff 2006).

Other organizations of practices address more broadly social dimensions of interaction: a substantial number of practices are associated with the management of ties of social solidarity and affiliation between persons, favoring their maintenance and militating against their destruction; yet others are associated with the management of epistemic rights to knowledge between persons which is an important dimension of personal identity (Heritage 2007).

Methods for Studying Practices

CA methods for isolating and studying interactional practices have a good deal in common with the method of analytic induction, and in particular the constant comparative method and the search for deviant cases (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The method, of course, is specified to the interactional subject matter of conversation analysis as follows.

Stage 1: Deciding that a Practice is 'Distinctive'

First some practice, or candidate practice, will emerge as 'interesting' or worthy of pursuit. For simplicity, we will exemplify this with a fairly well researched practice: the oh-prefacing of responses to questions and other 'first actions' (Heritage 1984b, 1998, 2002). Initially the practice will likely emerge as 'vague' or 'imprecise' (Schegloff 1997). For example, at first sight, (8) and (9) look rather similar. In (8) Steve and Lesley are talking about the publishing magnate Robert Maxwell. Steve mentions that Maxwell's parents had suffered at the hands of the Nazis, whereupon Lesley infers that Maxwell is Jewish. Steve confirms this at line 8, beginning his turn with an 'oh' that is intonationally 'run into' the next component of his response as a single unit of talk (a single turn constructional unit [Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974]).

```
(8) [Field:2:3:9]
 1  Ste:     Well he didn't either 'ee had a bad start I mean 'ee had 'iz
 2      1-> (0.3) .t.k.hh father shot by the Nazis 'nd is uh .hh mother
 3          died in: Auschvitz yih kno:w [so
 4  Les:                                 [Oh really:?=
 5  Ste:     =So eez [had the: (    ]   )-
 6  Les: 2->         [Oh 'z  a  Je:w] is he Je:w?
 7          (.)
 8  Ste: 3-> Oh yeah.
 9          (.)
10  Ste:     He's had k- eez a Czechoslovakian Jew so ...
```

In (9) as part of an arrangements-making sequence, Ivy's question at line 5 is countered by one from Jane (lines 6-7). Ivy responds with "oh" and subsequently a response to the question. Her 'oh' is intonationally distinct and seems to be its own unit of response, temporally separated from the subsequent answer (lines 8-10). At this point in the investigation, while it is clear that the two responses are distinctive, it is not clear that the distinction makes a difference in terms of the meaning of the actions they are performing.

```
(9) [Rah:C:1:(16):3]
 1  Ivy:     An' then (.) she'll pick you up on the way: down then as
 2          ah said.
 3          (0.3)
 4  Jan:     Well it's a [bit eh in a[h it
 5  Ivy: 1->            [Is        [Is that too early.
 6  Jan: 2-> eh- No: no it's not too early it's jist uh how long is she
 7          gon'to be in Middles[ber. Thi[s's the th[ing.
 8  Ivy: 3->                    [.hhh    [Oh:.     [She's got tuh be
 9          ho:me by .hh i-jis turned half past eleven quartuh tih
10          twelve.
```

So now we have a candidate practice: beginning a turn with the word 'oh'. We don't really know much about its meaning yet, and we don't really know whether 'beginning' means being part of the same unit of the talk that follows, or whether 'free-standing' cases followed by more talk from the same speaker are part of the same practice.

Stage 2: Locating the practice sequentially

At the end of stage 1, we have identified our phenomenon the production of 'oh' at the beginning of a turn. We have located the practice within the turn, but not within particular sequences. As we now search for other instances, these will start to get clearer. Cases like the following start to pile up.

```
(10)  [Heritage:01:18:2]
 1  Jan:      .t Okay now that's roas:' chick'n isn'it. Th[at ]=
 2  Ivy:                                               [It-]=
 3  Jan:      =[roasting  chick'n<]
 4  Ivy: 1-> =[i t  h a s  bee:n ] cooked.
 5          (.)
 6  Ivy: 1-> It's been  co[oked.
 7  Jan: 2->              [Iz ↑BEEN cooked.=
 8  Ivy: 3-> =Oh yes.
 9  Jan:      Oh well thaz good......
```

```
(11)  [NB:II:2:R:7]
 1  Nan:      .....hhh one a'the other girls hadda leave
 2        1-> fer something en there I sit with all these (h)you(h)ng
 3        1-> fellas I fel'like a den [mother.
 4  Emm:                              [°Uh huh°
 5  Nan:      .hhh[hh
 6  Emm: 2->      [Are you th:e ol:dest one the cla:ss?
 7  Nan: 3-> °Oh: w- by fa:r.°
 8  Emm:      ↑Are yih rill[y?↑
 9  Nan: 3->              [°Oh: ya:h.°
10  Emm:      Didju learn a lo:t'n cla:ss?
```

These cases are strongly consistent with (8). In each case, the first speaker (1->) makes an observation which is the object of a pretty obvious inference by the second (2->), whereupon the first speaker re-affirms it (3->), perhaps conveying that the second speaker was questioning something 'obvious' that didn't need to be asked.

A further product of looking at these cases is that (9) starts to look different from the others. In this case a questioner turns out to have made incorrect assumptions about the situation being inquired into (arrow 1). Following the correction (arrow 2), the speaker uses a stand-alone 'oh' (arrow 3) to acknowledge the new understanding (Heritage 1984b) – and by implication her earlier misapprehension - before going on to address the newly revealed circumstances. This difference is reinforced by cases like (12) which concerns a mutual acquaintance who has been looking for a job:

```
(12)  [Rah:II:1]
 1  Ver:      And she's got the application forms.=
 2  Jen: 1-> =Ooh:: so when is her interview did she sa[:y?
 3  Ver:                                               [She
 4        2-> didn't (.) Well she's gotta send their fo:rm
 5            back. Sh[e doesn't know when the [interview is yet.
 6  Jen: 3->        [O  h  :  :  .            [Oh it's just the
 7            form,
```

Once again an initial question (1->) turns out to be based on faulty assumptions (2->), and a free-standing 'oh' registers that fact before its speaker goes on display a revised understanding of the situation (3->). We are ready, then, to say that (8) and (12) are distinctive from (8), (10) and (11).

Stage 3: Determining the Distinctive Role or Meaning of the Practice

It is clear enough from the materials to hand that oh-prefaced responses to questions often emerge in contexts where the question questions something that has already been stated or strongly implied, and the answer to the question is therefore obvious or self-evident. But is there evidence that the participants orient to this role or meaning for the practice?

The clearest evidence emerges when the questioner who got an oh-prefaced response then defends the relevance of the question. This is what happens in (13) and (14):

```
(13) [TG:10]
 1  Bee:     Dihyuh have any-cl- You have a class with Billy this te:rm?
 2  Ava:     Yeh he's in my abnormal class.
 3  Bee:     mnYeh [ how-]
 4  Ava:           [Abnor]mal psy[ch.
 5  Bee: 1->                     [Still not gettin married,
 6  Ava: 2=> .hhh Oh no. Definitely not.[married.]
 7  Bee: 3->                             [No  he's] dicided [defin[itely?]
 8  Ava: 4=>                                               [.hhh [O  h ] no.
 9  Bee: 5-> ˙hh Bec'z [las'] time you told me he said no: but he wasn't su:re,
10  Ava:             [ No.]
11  Ava:     n:No definitely not. He, he'n Gail were like on the outs,
12           yihknow,
```

Here Bee defends her question at line 5, by reference to earlier statements she attributes to Ava about Billy's marital intentions being "not sure" (3-> and 5->). And in (14) Ann defends her initial question by reference to what somebody else had told her about Joyce's health. As it turns out, Joyce had been unwell, but not very recently (line 5).

```
(14) [Frankel QC:I:2SO:1]
 1  Ann:     How are you feeling Joyce.=
 2  Joy:     Oh fi:ne.
 3  Ann:     'Cause- I think Doreen mentioned that you weren't so well?
 4           A few [weeks ago:?]
 5  Joy:           [Yeah,     ] Couple of weeks ago.
 6  Ann:     Yeah. And you're alright no:[w?
 7  Joy:                                 [Yeah.
```

In other cases, questioners may register that they already knew the answer, as in (15):

```
(15) [Frankel:TC:I:1:17]
 1  Sus:      =Yeh you guys er g'nna drive up aren'tchu,
 2  Mar:      Oh yea:h.
 3  Sus:  -> That's what I figu[red.
 4  Mar:                       [Yeh,=
```

Or that they have temporarily forgotten the circumstances that make the question inappropriate, as in

(16) lines 4 and 6:

```
(16) [Frankel TC:1:1:15-16]
 1  Sus:      .hhh So if you guys want a place tuh sta:y.
 2            (0.3)
 3  Mar:      .t.hhh Oh (w-) thank you but you we ha- yihknow Victor.
 4  Sus:  -> ↑OH that's ↑RIGHT.=
 5  Mar:      =That's why we were going [(we)
 6  Sus:  ->                           [I FER↑GO:T. Completely.
```

Or the oh-prefaced response producer may assert that her answer is self-evident. In the following case the

issue is whether Nan is prepared to phone a service engineer:

```
(17) [Holt 1:5:5]
 1  Les:      .hh Are you going tuh phone i:m?
 2            (0.3)
 3  Nan:  -> Oh no: I-:: (.) can't speak tuh anyone on the phone as you
 4        -> kno-:w, .hh but uh-: (0.3) if he will ca:ll, (0.2) and have
 5            a look an' see: if there's a leak.h up the:re,
```

Reprise

Our practice – oh-prefacing a response to a question – is now very robust. (i) It has a definite

'shape:': the 'oh' must be turn-initial and part of a larger unit of talk, not a separate free-standing element

of it. (ii) It is located in a specific sequential position: in response to a question. And (iii) It has a

determinate 'meaning' that is reflected in a variety of responses to its production. The position our

analysis has arrived at is presented in the table below:

Table 1: Two Types of Turn-Initial 'Oh'

Type of Turn-initial 'Oh'	Position	Role or Meaning of the Practice
Prefacing 'Oh'	As a response to a question	Showing that the answer to a question was self-evident and that the question need hardly be asked.
Free-standing 'Oh' + more talk	As a response to an answer to a question	Registering the answer to the question as informative.

A Context-free Practice

One of the chief objectives of basic CA is to identify bedrock practices of interaction, whose meaning and significance are fundamental and obdurate. To this end, an important test is to make sure that practices operate in a stable way across a wide range of social contexts.

With this in mind, consider the following example from a broadcast interview with Sir Harold Acton, conducted by the British broadcaster Russell Harty. The topic is Acton's life in China and his work as a teacher of T.S. Eliot's poetry at Beijing University. At this point, Harty ventures to ask him if he speaks Chinese:

```
(18) [Chat Show:Russell Harty-Sir Harold Acton]
 1  Act:     ....hhhh and some of thuh- (0.3) some of my students
 2           translated Eliot into Chine::se. I think thuh very
 3           first.
 4           (0.2)
 5  Har:     Did you learn to speak (.) Chine[:se.
 6  Act: ->                               [.hh Oh yes.
 7           (0.7)
 8  Act:     .hhhh You cah::n't live in thuh country without speaking
 9           thuh lang[uage it's impossible .hhhhh=
10  Har: ->        [Not no: cour:se
```

Acton's response (line 6) is oh-prefaced, and plainly treats it as self-evident that he "speaks Chinese." And he elaborates it with an observation about how necessary it is to speak the language of a host country (lines 8-9). For his part, Harty acknowledges the self-evident truth of this observation with his *sotto voce* "Not no: cour:se". Here then the practice is deployed to very similar effect in a very different social

setting – a celebrity interview – than in the cases we have seen so far. News interviews contain very many instances of this type.

Similarly in the following case, a doctor finds himself on the receiving end of this practice – in this case, the patient is quite elderly:

```
(19)  [Routine physical]
 1  DOC:      Hi Missis Mar[:ti:n,
 2  PAT:                   [Hi (there)
 3  DOC:      How are you toda:[:y,
 4  PAT: 1->                   [Oh pretty goo:d,
 5            (.)
 6  DOC:      How are you fee:ling.
 7  DOC: 2-> The l[ast time I saw you you had broken that ↑ri:b.↑=
 8  PAT:         [Oh oka:y,
 9  PAT:      =Mm hm:,
10  DOC:      Are you doing a little bit better:,
```

Similar to (14), the doctor's 'how are you' question (line 3), together with his 'follow-up' 'how are you feeling' (line 6) solicit health 'updates' from the patient (Robinson 2006). Both however inherit oh-prefaced responses. By line 7, the doctor defends the relevance of his question by invoking the patient's earlier broken rib as grounds for his inquiry. Here too, in the context of the medical consultation, our practice is robust.

A Context Sensitive Practice and Exploitations

Robust interactional practices like oh-prefacing have the property of 'reflexivity:' they can convey the meaning that is anchored in routine exchanges in non-routine situations. Here is an example from the celebrated trial of O.J.Simpson in Los Angeles, as narrated by a journalist:

```
(20)  [Margolick 1995]
      "She [Marcia Clark] also asked Mr. Kaelin whether the place Mr. Simpson took
      him to eat earlier that evening was not a McDonald's but a Burger King. It was
      a clear reference to published reports, heretofore entirely unsubstantiated,
      that Mr. Simpson and Mr. Kaelin went out in the evening of June 12 not to
      purchase hamburgers and french fries but drugs. "Oh no," Mr. Kaelin replied,
      almost in wonder that such a question would be asked."
```

And, transparently exploitative is this reply from one of the police officers on trial for the infamous beating of Rodney King who is asked about the videotaped evidence that was used in the prosecution case.

```
(21)  [Goodwin 1994:618]
 1    Pro:     You can't look at that video and say that every
 2             one of those blows is reasonable can you.
 3             (1.0)
 4  Powell:  -> Oh I can if I put my perceptions in.
```

As Goodwin (1994) shows, the defense case rested entirely on reinterpreting the apparently incriminating

video record, and it is the determination to insist on this reinterpretation which is expressed in Powell's

oh-prefaced response to a prosecutor's question which implies that the record is a self-evident basis for a

conviction.

In other contextual exploitations, the practice can be used to resist or otherwise 'blow off' new

topic beginnings that are unwanted. Thus in (22), Agnes has an unpleasant psoriasis infection in her toe

nails. Her sister knows about the infection in one foot, but not the other. Thus the initial question is about

the 'known about' foot:

```
(22)  [NB:I:6:13]
 1    C:     How's yer foot?
 2    A: ->  Oh it's healing beautif'lly!
 3    C:     Goo[::d.
 4    A: =>     [The other one may haftuh come off, on the other
 5             toe I've got in that.
```

As it turns out the 'known about' foot is healing well, but the oh-preface to this announcement is managed

so as to indicate that this is not 'the foot' that Agnes wants to talk about. As her sister responds to the good

news at line 3, Agnes starts to talk about the unasked about, 'other' foot in lies 4-5. Here the practice of

oh-prefacing is exploited to index the undesirability of one topic in favor of another.

A similar example is below. Here a question about the recipient's sister starts to attract an oh-

prefaced response (line 2). This response is abandoned as the question is expanded to include the sister's

husband:

```
(23) [JG:6:8:2]
 1    M:     How's your sister an' [her husband?
 2    L: ->                       [Oh t'che
 3    L:     Well as a matter of fact uh ih Dawn is alright.
 4           She had a very very bad cold the last month.
 5        => An' Charlie is: had a very serious operation. Surgery on the
 6           gal, g'll bladder. But I guess he's alright. But .hhh at
 7           his age maybe it's a little roughhh.
 8    M:     No more wild game hunting 'uh?
```

Subsequent to this, the oh-prefaced response is abandoned in favor of a brief update about the sister, followed by a shift to the husband who has had the more serious health problem.

Other very refined context-sensitive exploitations of the practice include usages designed to entrap recipients in troubles telling environments. In the following case, Jo deploys an oh-prefaced downgraded response to a 'how are you' question (Sacks 1975; Jefferson 1980; Heritage 1998):

```
(24)  [Lerner:SF:I:2:SO]
 1  Mar:     How you doing.
 2   Jo: a-> Oh: pretty goo:d
 3          (0.8)
 4  Mar:    .hhhhhh[(                )
 5   Jo: a'->        [This week, hhhhhhehh heh heh [.hhh
 6  Mar: b->                                      [.tlk Oh this week?
 7   Jo:     =hih hheeh, ˙hhh Yea:h. (˙hh-)
 8          (0.2)
 9  Mar: b-> Why what's goin on this week.
10   Jo: c-> Oh nothing. I'm j'st inna: (·) rilly good mood this ( [     )
11  Mar:                                               [Oh: good.
12          (0.8)
13   M?:    ˙tlk=
14   Jo: d-> I have my highs'n lows . . .
```

There is, of course, nothing redundant or inappropriate about a 'how are you' question at the beginning of a phone call (Schegloff 1986), and a response that treats it in such a way is patently designed to exploit the practice to draw attention to an underlying problem. Other elements in Jo's subsequent turns are designed to the same effect, especially the qualifying "This week," (line 5) and her reference to her "highs'n lows" (line 14).

Intermission

Let us pause to take stock of this examination of CA methods. We began with a practice – oh-prefacing – that we started to distinguish from starting a turn with a free-standing 'oh'. We distinguished environments in which this practice was used: these clustered around 'redundant' questions that re-invoked or re-questioned something that had already been said or strongly implied. We then moved to show other aspects of the sequence that showed the parties' orientation to the self-evident nature of what was questioned. Finally, we showed that this meaning of oh-prefacing could be exploited in contexts where what is being questioned is not at all self-evident or redundant. In these latter contexts, this 'why are you asking' meaning of an oh-prefaced response is used manipulatively.

It is often suggested that CA lacks a sensitivity to 'context' and yet, if my comments about the motivation of CA at the beginning of this chapter have any meaning, this suggestion is quite paradoxical. I would rather suggest that basic CA has exquisitely nuanced orientations to the contextuality of talk, but that this orientation is deployed in the interest of exploring the limits of the context-free meaning of a practice, as well as its context-sensitive uses. It is these limits and these uses that we have been examining, albeit briefly, in this chapter.

Ethnographic Context and the Uses of CA

As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, 'contexts' and 'understandings' have many layers, some of which are clearly outside of any particular interaction. Every defined sequential context, has its context in the larger conversation, in the sequence of such conversations that have occurred between these participants, in the enduring social relations between the participants and their biographical and emotional tenor, and in the webs of social relations in which the participants are enmeshed both separately and together. Some of this can be reported by the participants in interviews, or observed in other settings, and some of this may not be so observable. Can CA help in exhibiting the 'traces' of these relationships and structural connections in the concrete details of interactions. In this section, I will illustrate what I take to be the 'ethnographic' value of CA in this kind of a context, using the practice – oh-prefacing – that we have been working with.

Consider this datum in which a patient is asked a series of 'lifestyle' questions. Here a middle aged woman, the owner-manager of a restaurant with a daughter aged 28, who is hypertensive and on medication, is asked about her alcohol use (line 11). The question devoid of a verb and is elliptical as between the polar question "Do you use alcohol?" and the more presupposing "How much alcohol do you use?" This design allows the clinician to circumvent the "yes/no" question, while permitting the patient to decide how to frame a response. After a one second silence (a substantial period of time in an engaged state of interaction) during which the patient assumed a 'thinking' facial expression, the patient articulates a sound which conveys pensiveness ("hm::"), and then offers an estimate ("moderate"), concluding her

turn with "I'd say" which retroactively presents her response as an estimate, albeit a 'considered' one.

Though presented as a 'considered opinion,' and in scalar terms, the patient's estimate is unanchored to

any objective referent. The scene is now set for a pattern of questioning designed to extract a quantitative

estimate from the patient.

```
(25) [MidWest 3.4:6]
 1  DOC:        Are you married?
 2              (.)
 3  PAT:        No.
 4              (.)
 5  DOC:        You're divorced (°cur[rently,°??)
 6  PAT:                          [Mm hm,
 7              (2.2)
 8  DOC:        tch D'you smoke?, h
 9  PAT:        Hm mm.
10              (5.0)
11  DOC:   ->   Alcohol use?
12              (1.0)
13  PAT:        Hm:: moderate I'd say.
14              (0.2)
15  DOC:        Can you define that, hhhehh ((laughing outbreath))
16  PAT:        Uh huh hah .hh I don't get off my- (0.2) outa
17              thuh restaurant very much but [(awh:)
18  DOC:   ->                                [Daily do you use
19              alcohol or:=h
20  PAT:        Pardon?
21  DOC:   ->   Daily? or[:
22  PAT:   =>            [Oh: huh uh. .hh No: uhm (3.0) probably::
23              I usually go out like once uh week.
```

The physician begins this effort by inviting the patient to 'define' moderate (line 8). As he concludes his

turn, he looks up from the chart and gazes, smiling, directly at the patient, and briefly laughs. Laughter in

interaction is quite commonly associated with 'misdeeds' of various sorts (Jefferson 1985, Haakana 2001).

Because the laughter in this case is not targeted at a single word or phrase (Jefferson 1985) but follows

the physician's entire turn, it will, by default, be understood as addressing the entire turn. In this case, it

appears designed to mitigate any implied criticism of the patient's turn as insufficient or even self-

serving.

In her reply, the patient begins with responsive laughter (Jefferson 1979) but does not continue

with a 'definition.' Instead she takes a step back from that to remark: "I don't get....outta thuh restaurant

very much but", and her subsequent development of this line is interdicted by the clinician. While this

remark may be on its way to underwriting a subsequent estimate, its proximate significance is to convey

the context of her alcohol use, or "how" she drinks. Specifically this remark purports to indicate that her

drinking is "social": she does not drink alone in her apartment, nor does she drink on the job. In this way, the patient introduces a little of her 'lifeworld' circumstances into the encounter, conveying that her drinking is 'healthy' or at least not suspect or problematic.

The clinician now pursues a measurable metric for the patient's alcohol use by asking "Daily do you use alcohol or:=h". The question invites the patient to agree that she uses alcohol on a daily basis, thereby permitting her to take a step in the direction of acknowledging a 'worst case scenario' (Boyd and Heritage 2006) for alcohol use. The movement of the word "daily" from its natural grammatical position at the end of the sentence to the beginning, has the effect of raising its salience, presenting a frequency estimate as the type of answer he is looking for. Finally, the 'or' at the end of the sentence, invites some other measure of frequency, and thereby reduces the physician's emphasis on 'daily' as the only possible (or most likely) response for the patient to deal with.

At this point, although the physician and patient are no more than two feet apart, the patient's response to the question is to ask for its repetition. Drew (1997) observes that these kinds of repeat requests are produced in two contexts: (i) when there is a hearing problem or, alternatively, (ii) when there is a problem in grasping the relevance of the talk to be responded to. A hearing problem is out of the question because of the objective circumstances of the participants, and it is subsequently ruled out by the conduct of both of them. Not so the 'relevance' problem. After all the patient's remark at lines 9 and 10 (that she didn't get out of the restaurant "very much") was most likely on its way to suggesting that she didn't have many opportunities to drink. The transition from this implication to an inquiry about whether she drinks on a "daily" basis may indeed have been somewhat jarring, and difficult to process.

Earlier it was suggested that the parties ruled out a 'hearing problem' as the basis for the patients' request for repetition. The physician rules this out when, rather than fully repeating his previous question, he repeats a reduced form in which only the two most salient words are left: "daily" and "or." Only a full repeat would have been compatible with a belief that his patient had not heard him. A drastically reduced repeat like this one conveys, to the contrary, that he believes she heard him. For her part, the patient confirms this analysis when she proves fully able to respond to this abbreviated repeat, beginning before

it is even concluded. Here then the objective circumstances of the interaction and the actual conduct of the parties is compatible with only one interpretation of the patient's "Pardon?": that it expressed a difficulty with the relevance of the question.

This same difficulty is expressed in a different way when the patient begins to respond. The response includes "huh uh," a casual and minimizing version of "no" designed to indicate that "daily?" is far off the mark. It is also oh-prefaced which conveys that the question was irrelevant or inapposite. Here we see the patient exploits the practice to assert the fundamental inappropriateness of the physician's question and to exert 'push back' against its terms.

After she rejects the physician's frequency proposal of 'daily' as an estimate of her alcohol consumption, the patient finally comes up with an estimate of her own: "once a week." However she packages this as an estimate of how frequently she "goes out." This framing has two consequences. (i) It estimates her actual drinking in an implicit way, leaving it to the clinician to draw the relevant inference. (ii) It renews her insistence on the social, and morally acceptable, nature of her drinking, implicitly ruling out, for example, solo drinking at work, or at night after work.

With lines 15-16, physician and patient have arrived at a compromise: the physician has a frequency estimate of the patient's drinking, while the patient has been able to retain her focus on "how" she drinks. At line 17, the physician turns to the patient's chart and starts to write, subsequently acknowledging the patient's response with a sotto voce "okay" and terminating the sequence.

The transactions of this sequence will be relatively familiar to most qualitative sociologists studying medicine. Physicians need anchored, and preferably quantitative, information as a basis for clinical judgments; patients are often inclined to give more contextualized descriptions. These different orientations were conceptualized by Elliot Mishler (1984) in terms of the 'voice of medicine' with its technical priorities, and the 'voice of the lifeworld' with its experiential grounding. Mishler portrayed these two orientations as in conflict with one another, and this conflict is apparent in this datum. Yet it is a conflict which is effectively mandated by the positions of clinician and patient. In particular, there may be a special vulnerability for patients who offer quantitative estimates of their drinking to readily or too

'technically,' (e.g., "Twenty units a week.").   Patients who are tempted to respond in this manner may

reflect that it could be treated as portraying too great a preoccupation with alcohol consumption, a

preoccupation which is itself suspect and may attract further inquiry. Persons do not 'talk this way' about

alcohol in everyday life and, even in the doctor's office, too radical a departure from ordinary ways of

talking about ordinary concerns may be undesirable (Sacks 1984).

Here then, though it is but one practice of many deployed in this sequence, our findings about the

nature of oh-prefaced responses give us an element of solid interpretive anchorage in this sequence. They

do so because, as we already know, these findings are highly robust.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have worked with a practice which is robust, and which has been directly

validated, not by surveys or psychological testing, but by direct observation of the conduct of persons in a

wide variety of settings. This gives our observations about this practice exceptional validity, and allows it

to be reliably used as an interpretive resource in ethnographic interpretations of data, and as a quantitative

measure or index, if required (cf Clayman et al 2007; Heritage et al 2008).

This practice is but a small cog in a large organization of practices concerned with the

management of epistemic relations between persons. These relations concern who knows what, who has

rights to know it, and describe it, who knows better than whom, with what certainty, recency and

authority. Large numbers of practices are devoted to this business and it is not surprising that they are,

for personhood and identity are deeply implicated in the ways in which we patrol the boundaries of our

knowledge preserves, and defend our sovereign epistemic territories against overzealous incursion by

others, or trampling by invaders who care little for our culture, identity or personhood. In the end, it is the

cumulative weight of all these practices that allows interactants to live in a densely organized and

meaningful social world, and which gives the world of social interaction, and the institutions instantiated

in social interaction, their robustness and nuance. For all these reasons and more these practices matter for

CA. CA's wholesale effort to map the entire 'genome' of interactional practices is mandated by their extraordinary significance.

Future Prospects

The last ten years have witnessed a wholesale expansion of CA as a research method in a wide variety of fields, including education, medicine, the study of legal process, human-machine interaction and software engineering. CA is currently practiced in around half the world's countries. Applied and cross-linguistic work is proceeding apace. The time has arrived for more attention to the fundamentals of CA – in particular, the analysis of basic conversational practices – on which applied research ultimately depends.

End of Chapter Summary

This chapter has focused on the process of identifying, defining and understanding the meaning of specific interactional practices deployed in ordinary interaction. This process involves extracting the practice from a large variety of contexts in order to establish the extent to which it is context-free. Once this is determined, the practice (together with many others) can become the basis for narrowing the range of plausible interpretations of context, intention and meaning in indefinitely many other scenes of interaction. The worked example – oh-prefacing an answer to a question – is presented as a typical example of conversation analytic practice.

Relevant internet links:

Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis newsletter "Ethno/CA News"
http:/www2.fmg.uva.nl/emca/
Emanuel A. Schegloff's transcription training module:
http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/schegloff/TranscriptionProject/
Loughborough University CA Site
http://www-staff.lboro.ac.uk/~ssca1/sitemenu.htm

Recommended Reading

Emanuel A. Schegloff (2007). Sequence Organization in Interaction: A Primer in Conversation Analysis Volume 1. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Paul ten Have (2007). Doing Conversation Analysis: A Practical Guide. Second Edition. London: Sage.

Jack Sidnell (2010). Conversation Analysis. Boston: Wiley-Blackwell.

John Heritage and Steven Clayman (2010). Talk in Action: Interactions, Identities and Institutions. Boston: Wiley-Blackwell.

Tanya Stivers and Jack Sidnell (eds) (2011). The Blackwell Handbook of Conversation Analysis. Boston: Wiley-Blackwell.

Questions to Readers:

What elements of methodology are shared by CA and ethnography?
How are these elements specified in CA research.
How do the methods differ?
How are practices 'located' in interaction?
What is meant by the 'reflexive' feature of practices?
How does CA embody two different ways of approaching the role and significance of 'context' in interaction?

References:

Blumer, Herbert 1969. The methodological position of symbolic interactionism. In Blumer Herbert (ed.) Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and method. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall**:** 1-60.

Boyd, Elizabeth and John Heritage. 2006. Taking the History: Questioning During Comprehensive History Taking. In John Heritage and Douglas Maynard (Ed), Communication in Medical Care: Interactions between Primary Care Physicians and Patients. Cambridge, England, Cambridge University Press**:** 151-184.

Clayman, Steven E., John Heritage, Marc N. Elliott and Laurie McDonald (2007). "When Does the Watchdog Bark?: Conditions of Aggressive Questioning in Presidential News Conferences." American Sociological Review 72: 23-41.

Drew, Paul. 1997. 'Open' class repair initiators in response to sequential sources of trouble in conversation. Journal of Pragmatics **28**: 69-101.

Garfinkel, Harold (1967). Studies in Ethnomethodology. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Glaser, Barney G. and Anselm L. Strauss (1967). The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research. Chicago: Aldine.

Goodwin, Charles (1994). "Professional vision." American Anthropologist 96(3): 606-633.

Haakana, M. 2001. Laughter as a patient's resource: dealing with delicate aspects of medical interaction. Text **21**(1): 187-219.

Heritage, John. 1984a. Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Heritage, John 1984b. A change-of-state token and aspects of Its sequential placement. In J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage (ed.) Structures of social action. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press**:** 299-345.

Heritage, John. 1998. Oh-prefaced responses to inquiry. Language in Society **27**(3): 291-334.

Heritage, John 2002. *Oh*-prefaced responses to assessments: A method of modifying agreement/disagreement. In Ceci Ford, Barbara Fox and Sandra Thompson (ed.) The language of turn and sequence. Oxford: Oxford University Press**:** 196-224.

Heritage, John. 2008. Conversation Analysis as Social Theory. In Bryan Turner (Ed), The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory. Oxford, Blackwell.

Heritage, John, Jeffrey D. Robinson, Marc Elliott, Megan Beckett and Michael Wilkes. 2007. Reducing Patients' Unmet Concerns: The difference one word can make. Journal of General Internal Medicine **22**: 1429-1433.

Jefferson, Gail. 1979. A Technique for Inviting Laughter and its Subsequent Acceptance/Declination. In George Psathas (Ed), Everyday Language: Studies in Ethnomethodology. New York, Irvington Publishers**:** 79-96.

Jefferson, Gail (1980). "On 'Trouble-Premonitory' Response to Inquiry." Sociological Inquiry 50: 153-185.

Jefferson, Gail. 1985. An Exercise in the Transcription and Analysis of Laughter. In Teun A. Dijk (Ed), Handbook of Discourse Analysis Volume 3. New York, Academic Press**:** 25-34.

Lerner, Gene (2003). "Selecting next speaker: The context sensitive operation of a context-free organization." Language in Society 32: 177-201.

Margolick, David. 1995. 'Simpson Friend Testifies of Events Before Killings.' The New York Times, March 23, 1995, p.A8.

Mishler, Elliot. 1984. The Discourse of Medicine: Dialectics of Medical Interviews. Norwood NJ, Ablex.

Robinson, Jeffrey D. 2006. Soliciting patients' presenting concerns. In John Heritage and Douglas Maynard (Ed), Communication in Medical Care: Interactions between Primary Care Physicians and Patients. Cambridge, England, Cambridge University Press: 22-47.

Sacks, Harvey (1975). Everyone Has to Lie. In M. Sanches and B. G. Blount (ed.) Sociocultural Dimensions of Language Use. New York: Academic Press: 57-80.

Sacks, Harvey (1984). On Doing 'Being Ordinary'. In J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage (ed.) Structures of Social Action. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 413-429.

Sacks, Harvey. 1992 [1964-72]. Lectures on Conversation (2 Vols.). Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

Sacks, Harvey, Emanuel A. Schegloff and Gail Jefferson (1974). "A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation." Language 50: 696-735.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. (1986). "The Routine as Achievement." Human Studies 9: 111-151.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. 1992. Repair After Next Turn: The Last Structurally Provided Defence of Intersubjectivity in Conversation. American Journal of Sociology 95(5): 1295-1345.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. (1997). "Practices and Actions: Boundary Cases of Other-Initiated Repair." Discourse Processes 23(3): 499-545.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. 2006. Interaction: The infrastructure for social institutions, the natural ecological niche for language and the arena in which culture is enacted. In N.J Enfield and Stephen C.. Levinson (Ed), The Roots of Human Sociality: Culture, Cognition and Interaction. New York, Berg: 70-96.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. (2007). Sequence organization in Interaction: A Primer in Conversation Analysis, Volume 1. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Schütz, Alfred (1962). Commonsense and Scientific Interpretations of Human Action. In Maurice Natanson (ed.) Alfred Schütz Collected Papers, Volume 1: The Problem of Social Reality. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.