16

Analyzing Interactive Discourse
Conversation and Dialogue

Mary Jill Brody

1 Introduction and Historical Perspectives

There are myriad reasons for considering conversation or interactive discourse important for linguistic anthropology, despite the fact that, until recently, monologue narrative has been the default genre of examination. Monologue narrative in the form of folktales from Native American languages filled the notebooks and publications of many early linguistics anthropologists. Yet these same scholars also paid attention to the content (if not the structure) of conversation for their ethnographic bread and butter. Boas, for example, encouraged Zora Neale Hurston to be attentive to conversation in the African American communities to which she had unique access (Lewis 2001). Malinowski relied on Trobriand conversation for much of his understanding of that society, and his emphasis on the importance of phatic communion and language as action showed that the mundane content of everyday conversation was not outside what he considered to be important (1922, 1923). Yet, as Moerman (1988) points out, anthropologists have typically focused on truncated renditions of the content of conversations for their data, rather than on conversational data itself. Conversational data has been coded for content, and the occasional pithy quote has been extracted for a title or a heading, but actual conversation has not until recently been considered to be primary data as such. An important pioneer in this endeavor is Hortense Powdermaker, in her 1962 ethnography Copper Town: Changing Africa, where she found conversation an invaluable tool added to her multiple methods including “survey, essay writing, interviewing, casual visiting, attending social affairs,” when she was frustrated in her attempt to access the perspective of those living in the segregated African township to which she had limited access:

Although I drove to it almost daily, I was missing the intimate knowledge and feeling-tone of daily life which comes from actually living in a community, seeing and hearing much that goes on, and participating in daily life, all of which is so essential to an understanding of any society. It occurred to me that I might get a vicarious sense of personal daily life if an assistant recorded everything that people said and did in [their] home and its immediate neighborhood, from the time they got up in the morning until they went to bed; so I asked one to stay home for a week and do just this . . . . At the end of the week, when he brought
me the recorded conversations, I realized that these were really the stuff of life and that they provided what I had been missing. They gave much more than that: attitudes, opinions, and behavior, some of which I had not known existed. Its richness naturally prompted a continuation of the method, not only in this household and neighborhood, but in others and at the beer hall, the public washing stands, the welfare hall, the union meetings, on the road, and wherever Africans met... Knowledge was shared, gossip exchanged, and traditional and modern points of view argued. These conversations about the trivial and the significant, which make up the fabric of personal and social life, had a quality of intimacy which was invaluable to me.

*Powdermaker (1962: xix–xx)*

These African voices are quoted directly throughout her ethnography: “In the book, they give a personal dimension to an objective study. The reader hears individual Africans talk, as well as listening to the author’s description and interpretation” (Powdermaker 1962: xx). It is surprising that other ethnographers did not quickly follow her research methodology guidelines. Certainly the advent of portable tape-recorders made possible this and other types of linguistic fieldwork in conversation.

The extensive overlapping of the sometimes delicately fractional labels for what scholars do who work with interactive discourse in its cultural context can make for confusion. As part of my attempt to discover who linguistic anthropologists are and what they do with interactive discourse, I made an inventory of the first twenty years of the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, to see the frequency and type of use of conversational data in the articles published there. Of course, linguistic anthropologists publish in other journals and those who may describe themselves and their work as other than linguistic anthropology may have their work published in the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*; however, I consider this survey as a rough metric of recent trends in the field. I found that fully one quarter of the articles were based entirely or in part on conversational data. Some included lengthy conversational transcripts (e.g., Brody 1991). While some (e.g., Farris 1991) are concerned to present a list of transcriptional conventions in a footnote, most do not. This treatment of transcription conventions points to the fact that some linguistic anthropologists continue to participate in the taken-for-granted nature of transcription discussed below. Given the new concentration on conversational structure, the articles in the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* show that linguistic anthropologists continue to pay attention both to the form and to the content of conversation as important data.

Below, I will introduce various threads of analysis of interactive discourse, highlighting their similarities and differences. Next, I will discuss the various systems of transcription that each of these threads has developed; transcription is by no means a neutral act (Bucholtz 2000, Ochs 1979), and the choices made in each case are important. I have chosen to avoid discussion of both mediated and reported (reconstructed) conversation, in order to focus on face-to-face interaction. Not surprisingly, most of the work reviewed will be on analysis of English, with several outstanding exceptions (see below). I have also chosen to avoid discussion of two modes of interactive discourse found in linguistic anthropology: elicitation (see Moore 1993) and, with some exceptions, interview (see Briggs 1986). Both of these modes of dialogue are peculiar controlled and task-specific types of interaction that are to a greater or lesser degree distant from the natural interactions on which I focus.

There are, however, three works based on specialized interview data that merit mention despite my general exclusion of interview here: *The First Five Minutes* by Pittenger, Hockett, and Danehy (1960), Labov and Fanshel’s (1977) *Therapeutic Discourse*, and Erickson and Schultz’ (1983) *The Counselor as Gatekeeper*. They are important because they were carried out so early
in the stream of research reviewed here, because each developed a specialized transcription for their corpus, and because they influenced later work on interviews, conversation, and transcription. *The First Five Minutes* was a truly pioneering work, based on a tape-recording of the first five minutes of an initial session of a patient seeing an experienced psychiatric practitioner. Their transcription was a fine-grained linguistic (phonemic) and paralinguistic one presented in a unique format: pages are cut at the mid-point, with the transcription appearing in the top half of the page and the analysis in the bottom half. The techniques of analysis were explicitly based on “psychiatry and anthropological linguistics” (1960: 207). Like Pittenger et al., Labov and Fanshel developed a micro-analysis of the first five minutes of a psychiatric clinical interview, which they characterize as a “comprehensive discourse analysis,” paying attention to “implicit communication,” not only “in the form of vocal gestures” but in “the unexpressed social and psychological propositions” as well (1977: 29). Erickson and Schultz were more ambitious in breadth of scope, in that they made video as well as audio recordings of 25 interviews between students and college counselors, and developed a transcription system that included nonverbal (proxemics and eye contact) behavior.

2 Current Contributions and Research

It is challenging to try to organize more than 40 years of different trends in the analysis of interactive discourse. Many disciplines and sub-disciplines have contributed to the study of face-to-face interaction through talk, including Conversation Analysis, Linguistic Anthropology, Discourse Analysis, Sociolinguistics, Interactional Sociolinguistics, Rhetoric, Sociology, Communications, Dialogue Analysis and others. I will discuss the major trends below.

2.1 Interactional Sociolinguistics in Linguistic Anthropology

It is difficult to pinpoint a beginning for the explicit study of conversation within linguistic anthropology. In the 2005 edition of *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk among Friends* (originally published 1984), Tannen identifies the type of work she does as interactional sociolinguistics, and looks to the early work of John Gumperz (1982) as its antecedent. Schiffrin (1994: 97) identifies interactional sociolinguistics as representing a distinct thread of scholarship working with conversation within the field of discourse analysis, with roots in anthropology, linguistics, and sociology. 4

Essays within Gumperz 1982 are on topics such as “The sociolinguistics of interpersonal communication,” “Conversational code-switching,” “Prosody in conversation,” “Contextualization conventions,” “Socio-cultural knowledge in conversational inference,” and “Interethnic communication.” At the outset of this work, Gumperz states that he “seeks to develop interpretive sociolinguistic approaches to the analysis of real time processes in face to face encounters” (1982: vii) and defines communication as “a social activity requiring the coordinated efforts of two or more individuals” (1982: 1)

In her preface to the 2005 edition of *Conversational Style*, Tannen states that her work is intended for scholars who wish to delve into the theoretical underpinnings of an interactional sociolinguistic approach to analyzing conversational discourse; for students who wish to observe how the microanalysis of conversational discourse is done and try their hand at doing it; and for those interested in how the microanalysis of everyday conversation can play a role in understanding and addressing cross-cultural communication

*Tannen (2005: xv)*
One premise of interactional sociolinguistics is that talk is incomplete, and hence interlocutors must rely on extralinguistic knowledge and features such as accent, intonation, or gaze to interpret interactions. Such features have been labeled “contextualization cues” by Gumperz (1982). Interactional sociolinguistics has been most interested in the “implicit or indirect” cues that “acquire meaning when interpreted in a specific context” (Jaspers 2012: 137). Contextualization cues take on different meanings in different cultural communication systems, leading to problems in cross-cultural communication (Scollon and Scollon 1981).

2.2 Conversation Analysis

The origins of Conversation Analysis (or CA, always and distinctively with a capital C and a capital A) are in Garfinkle’s ethnomethodology (1967) and the sociologically grounded attempt to rigorously analyze behavior, in this case ordinary conversation, as routine replicable social interaction: “for participants, and hence for conversation analysts, the point of departure for the analysis of any utterance is the talk, or other action, that it emerges from” (Goodwin and Heritage 1990: 287). Detailed discussion of the deeper roots of CA can be found in Maynard (2013) and Goodwin and Heritage (1990). The founders of CA were Gail Jefferson, Harvey Sacks, and Emanuel Schegloff, who individually and collectively published a large number of articles. The significance of early work in CA for linguistic anthropology is indicated by the inclusion of papers by Sacks and Schegloff in the important linguistic anthropology collection edited by Gumperz and Hymes Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication (1972).

C. Goodwin (1981) pioneered a thorough introduction to the engagement of interlocutors in conversation that included analysis of gaze. There are several collections of papers in CA, including Atkinson and Heritage (eds) (1984), Boden and Zimmerman (1991), Button, Drew, and Heritage (1986), Button and Lee (1987), Schenkein (1978), and Sudnow (1972), among others. Michael Moerman’s Talking Culture: Ethnography and Conversation Analysis (1988) must be considered as the pioneering work of CA meets Linguistic Anthropology; in it he laments that little CA work has been done on languages other than English (p. 3, note 4), and calls for a “culturally contexted conversational analysis” (1988: 5), which he accomplishes through analyses of numerous conversations in English and in Thai, all appropriately contextualized. Its publication spurred a series of papers in the journal Research on Language and Social Interaction (vol. 24, 1990), devoted to discussing this work and its impact. Since then extensive CA research has been undertaken in other languages such as Japanese (Hayashi 2003, Maynard 1989, Tanaka 1999), Korean (Kim 1992, 1993, 1999), Dutch (Mazeland 2013), Finnish (Sorjonen 2001), and others. Several linguistic anthropologists have adopted or adapted CA for their analytic and transcriptional purposes (e.g., M. H. Goodwin 2006; see below).

2.3 Dialogue

The “dialogic turn” refers to an endeavor, centered prominently in Europe beginning in the 1990s, that takes as its premise that communication is a “two-way or multidirectional interaction among participants” (Phillips 2011: 3). Such investigations typically (but not always) involve public discourses rather than face-to-face conversations (e.g., Fairclough 1992) and emphasize models (e.g., Weigand 2010); many authors look to Bakhtinian notions of dialogue (Bakhtin 1981, 1984) and Buber’s I–thou relationship (Buber 1970). The International Association of Dialogue Analysis initiated their journal Language and Dialogue with the injunction that “language means language use in dialogue” (Weigand 2011: 5). This is more than a commitment to conversation, but a philosophical position: “Language as dialogue is not restricted to the
dialogic form but means the dialogic function or orientation, in principle, of any language use” (Wiegand 2010: 3).

3 Issues and Topics

There are a number of notable issues that are foci of scholarly work in conversations and dialogue, some of which overlap. I list and discuss some of the important topics of this work below.


On a more grammatical level, there have been investigations of questions and answers as they operate in conversation and in socialization (Brody 2004, Brown 2010) and on indexicality (Hanks 1990). Repetition in conversation has been investigated for English (Tannen 1987) and for Mayan languages (Brody 1986, 1993, 1994; Brown 1998). Study of the relation between grammar and interaction understands grammar as being emergent from the interaction of social participants (Du Bois 2014, Ochs, Schegloff, and Thompson (eds) 1996). “Grammar’s integrity and efficacy are bound up with its place in larger schemes of organization of human conduct, and with social interaction in particular” (Ochs, Schegloff and Thompson (eds) 1996: 3). As early as 1952, Charles Fries developed a usage-based grammar of English from a corpus of recorded telephone conversations. “With the recent development of mechanical devices for the easy recording of the speech of persons in all types of situations there seems to be little excuse for the use of linguistic material not taken from actual communicative practice when one attempts to deal with a living language” (p. 3, note 2).

Formulaic speech in general (Coulmas (ed.) 1981) and greetings in particular (Duranti 1997) have been the focus of cross-cultural investigation. The early paper “Opening up closings” by Schegloff and Sacks (1973), which investigates the termination of telephone calls could be considered in this context as well. There have been a number of important conversational studies in code-switching (Auer (ed.) 1998, Mishoe 1998, Myers-Scotton 1993, Poplack 1980).
One particularly interesting theme of investigation has been the conversational behaviors of those with brain damage that affects their speech (Goodwin (ed.) 2003, Yearly and Brewer 1989). This work is important for what it can tell us about language in the brain and about normal interactions. The focus of this work is on interactions between aphasics (or people whose language has been affected by neurological damage) and others.

On the one hand, people with fairly intact syntactic and semantic ability have difficulty in engaging in social interaction outside the laboratory. On the other hand, parties with very severe language impairments are nonetheless able to say quite complicated things by successfully using the social and cognitive resources provided by the sequential organization of conversation to tie their talk to the talk of their interlocutors.

Goodwin (2003: 3)

I have mentioned above several themes that analyses of conversation have centered on. This is by no means an exhaustive list but, rather, representative of the kinds of work carried out with conversation and dialogue.

4 Main Research Methods: Transcription

As previously noted, presentation of spoken language on the page has sometimes been taken for granted by linguistic anthropologists (see above). Yet serious consideration of transcription is crucial for all those who engage in the analysis of conversation or interactive discourse, in that spoken language differs from the ways it is written down in numerous significant ways (Bucholtz 2000, Lapadat and Lindsay 1999, Ochs 1979). The impermanent nature of speech makes oral data evanescent, requiring thoughtful application of transcription regarding its analysis and presentation. Issues unique to transcription of multi-party interactions include the identification of individual speakers, overlap and timing of speech, and indication of laughter and other nonverbal sounds. There are several disciplinary threads of transcription for spoken language that include considerable overlap, especially in the serious attention which they pay to the uniquely complex issues of accurately conveying multi-party interaction. I have chosen not to deal with coded transcripts from corpus data in various languages but rather to focus on transcriptions as presented in publications for readers and guidelines for preparing these. I also confine discussion to systems that are used commonly, rather than idiosyncratically.

Of course the IPA and the Americanist systems of phonetic transcription were those first used to record spoken data (Kelly and Local 1989). The detail that these kinds of transcriptions provide, however, is often cumbersome, and only highly trained readers can easily access data transcribed in this way. Transcribers and readers interested in discourse and conversation structure generally find that phonetic transcriptions carry too much information. More highly favored are systems that use common orthographic conventions and specialized indicators of features important to the analysts (e.g., timing of pauses, overlap of speech, etc.).

Edwards (1993) identifies two overarching principles behind transcription systems:

(1) that the transcript preserve the information needed by the researcher in a manner which is true to the nature of the interaction itself . . . and (2) that its conventions be practical with respect to the way in which the data are to be managed and analyzed, for example, easy to read, apply to new data sets, and expand if needed for other purposes.

4.1 Georgetown Transcription System

In that the three editors of *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* are all at Georgetown University, and all claim allegiance to a common model for research at some level (Schiffrin, Tannen, and Hamilton (eds) 2003: 1–10), it is perhaps not unfair to label the transcription initiated by Tannen (1984) and adopted and adapted by Schiffrin, Hamilton, and others as the Georgetown Transcription System. It first appears in Tannen (1984), *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk among Friends* as “Key to Transcription Conventions” (p. xix). A modified version can be found in Tannen 1989, Appendix II “Transcription Conventions,” where she acknowledges the influence of Chafe (1986) in its use of intonation units as lines, and of Preston (1982) in using standardized spelling. It includes approximate pause indication, notations for stress, pitch, intonation, and volume, along with means of indicating overlapping and latched speech (speech of the interlocutor that follows without pause or overlap), as well as conventions for speech that is difficult or impossible to transcribe, and brackets “for comments on quality of speech and context” (Tannen 1984: xix).

4.2 CA Transcription

The transcription system used by CA was developed by Gail Jefferson (Atkinson and Heritage (eds) 1984: ix–xvi), and pays special attention to the sequential nature of talk. There are bracket codings for simultaneous and overlapping utterances, linking for contiguous utterances, indications for timing intervals both within and between utterances, a series of indications for “characteristics of speech delivery” (including lengthening, intonation shifts and contours, speed of speech, volume, emphasis, and vocal qualities such as aspirations, inhalations, gutturalness, and a double parentheses convention for indicating nonverbal sounds, e.g., ((sniff)). Doubtful transcriptions are indicted by single parentheses. Additional features in the CA transcription include representations for gaze direction, applause, and indicators for pointing out the transcriptional items of interest for discussion. Jenks (2011) is a short volume dedicated to teaching the CA transcription system (see also Hepburn and Bolden 2013).

4.3 Du Bois et al.: Santa Barbara Discourse Transcription

The Santa Barbara Discourse Transcription system (Du Bois et al. 1992, Du Bois et al.1993) was developed in conjunction with the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (http://www.linguistics.ucsb.edu/research/santa-barbara-corpus). Du Bois (1991: 76) describes exactly what constitutes this transcription system:

the words spoken, written so as to allow each lexical item to be recognized; an identification of the speaker of each turn; the temporal sequencing of utterances, whether these follow each other in succession or are simultaneous (as when speakers overlap), basic units in which the utterances were articulated, such as turns and intonation units; intonation contour, whether functionally or phonetically classified; accent; fluctuations in timing such as tempo, pause and lengthening; nonverbal noises made by speech event participants, such as laughter, throat-clearing, inhalation; special qualities of voice that extend over a stretch of speech; non-utterance events that become relevant to the interaction, such as a participant’s serving food, or a sudden thunderclap in the background; metatranscriptional and “evidential” comments on the transcription itself, indicating where the transcriber is uncertain of the words spoken, and so on; and other features as appropriate.

4.4 Others

Chafe’s (1993) transcription system emphasizes prosodic features of speech (specifically, “words, pauses, lengthenings, terminal pitch contours, and both primary and secondary accents” (p. 34) as they operate to indicate cognitively significant “intonation units” and “accent units” (p. 33) that function to indicate information flow in spoken discourse. He generally uses standard spelling, with the exception of gonna and wanna. In his “Appendix: Summary of Transcription Conventions” he indicates that his system is linked to that of Du Bois et al. 1993.

John Gumperz identifies his transcription system as “a way of transcribing and otherwise preparing for systematic analysis audio- and videotaped oral performances of all kinds, ranging from chat to formal discussion and ritual event, from within a sociolinguistic and functional perspective” (Gumperz and Berenz 1993: 91); his best-known applications have been to cross-cultural conversation within institutional contexts (Gumperz 1982, 1992). His system is designed to display the interpretation of “verbal and nonverbal signs or contextualization conventions, that is, systems of cues that guide conversational management” (Gumperz and Berenz 1993: 91–92), paying particular attention to pauses, overlap, latching, lengthening, volume, pitch, and relative timing. He emphasizes the importance of using standard orthography, with the exception of gonna and wanna. He makes allowances for transcription of languages other than English and their translation into English (p. 112–113), in the context of having a system amenable to computer keyboard (see Gumperz 1992 for an extended analysis of a discourse segment). “A Note on Conventions” appears at the beginning of Discourse Strategies (Gumperz 1982: xi–xii) and “Transcript Notation” appears as an Appendix to Gumperz and Berenz (1993: 121); these systems differ considerably, but maintain the same goals.

This inventory of transcription systems is by no means comprehensive, but concentrates on those systems used by groups of scholars in the US. It turns out that many authors who use transcript data do so without indicating transcription conventions, while others who do so list those used in an ad hoc fashion in a footnote or appendix.

5 Future Directions

Conversation is the matrix of all other speech genres. With the advent of portable recording technology, the means to study conversation became available. Linguistic anthropologists embraced the technology and began to take seriously the fleeting conversational contributions of all kinds of interlocutors: first, for its content, later as a structured form of human communication. The study of conversation forced linguistic anthropologists to rethink the importance of transcription, which they adapted to meet the needs presented by conversational data. Future work will continue to expand the realm of study of interactive discourse among specific groups such as youth and the elderly, variously abled individuals such as those who are autistic or speech-impaired, and a wider range of languages and specialized speech communities. Cross-cultural
universals of conversation will be posited and challenged by findings of such investigations. There is much yet to be understood about this most basic form of human communication.

**Related Topics**

3 Gesture (Streeck); 6 Being in the Cloud (LeBlanc-Wories); 7 Language Ideologies (Kroskrity); 8 Social Subordination and Language (Huayhua); 12 Language, Sexuality, Heteroglossia, and Intersectionality (Leap); 13 Language, Gender, and Identity (Pichler); 14 Discursive Practices, Linguistic Repertoire, and Racial Identities (Baugh); 15 Language and Racialization (Chun, Lo); 17 Communicative Practices in Signed Languages (Senghas); 18 New and Emergent Languages (Riley); 23 The Emergence of Creoles and Language Change (Mufwene); 24 Discrimination via Discourse (Wodak); 26 Legal Discourse (Conley); 27 The Language of Transitional Justice (Hirsch).

**Notes**

1 Of course these monologue folk tale texts are replete with reported conversation, which is outside the scope of this paper.

2 For example “Kula conversations will predominate on such occasions . . .” (Malinowski, 1922: 214).

3 I have chosen not to engage the overwhelmingly daunting task of reviewing the contents of the much lengthier run of *Anthropological Linguistics*.

4 The other approaches identified by Schiffrin are speech act theory, ethnography of communication, pragmatics, conversation analysis, and variation analysis.

5 In the 2005 new edition of *Conversational Style*, the transcription conventions appear as Appendix 1.

**References**


Haviland, J. B. (1998) “‘Mu’uk jbankil to, mu’uk kajvaltik’: He is not my older brother, he is not Our Lord.’ Thirty years of gossip in a Chiapas village,” *Etnofoor* 11(2/2): 57–82.


**Further Reading**