

**University of Tikrit**

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**Applied Linguistics**

**Conversation Analysis (Part One)**

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# 1. Introduction



- **Conversation Analysis (CA) primarily focuses on talk** rather than language. Talk is understood as the occasion when people act out their sociality (Schegloff, 1986). Emerging within sociology in the 1960s, CA is now cross-disciplinary (CA scholars now work within anthropology, social psychology, communication studies, linguistics and applied linguistics), though it remains a minority interest within these disciplines due to the complexity of talk, where language, cognition, and sociality meet. Its importance has grown in recent decades as the isolation between these

social disciplines weakened (eroded).

- **Why Talk is Essential:** Talk is considered the primordial site of sociality (Schegloff, 1986) because it allows people to transcend isolation and share life. It is central to both world-changing events (like political summits) and everyday activities (including greetings). Personal life events (such as divorce or courtship) are also enacted through talk and would not exist as human activities without it, making talk the social medium for sharing all life experiences.

- **Talk's Privileged Status:** Talk is privileged as the most fundamentally human communication mode. Unlike writing or electronic modes, talk exists in all human social groups, is historically and phylogenetically primary, and develops naturally in children without formal teaching.

- **Importance to Applied Linguistics:** While talk is the basic site of human sociality, it is of special interest to applied linguists because language is an essential component of talk. This is clear in telephone talk, which is entirely dependent on language. Understanding how language is used in talk is a central foundation for applied linguistics, as complex communication is impossible without language.

- **Distinctive Features of CA:** CA differs from other approaches to spoken language in its theoretical assumptions and methods, particularly in its emphasis on *two main aspects*:

**Interaction:** CA views talk as a jointly accomplished activity (interaction), giving both speaker and listener equal status as co-constructors. Speakers design utterances for recipients, and listeners influence the talk with their responses. Each utterance builds upon and is understood in light of prior talk (e.g., a greeting requires an expected next utterance, another greeting).

**Temporality:** The second aspect is temporality, focusing on the two sides of the “time coin” *silence and simultaneous talk*. Silence can profoundly affect how prior or following talk is understood, and simultaneous talk can indicate how speakers feel or understand each other. Time is also critical for analyzing talk's moment-by-moment emergence, how it is highly locally organized, and showing participants' split-second sensitivities to each other, which is evident in turn beginnings or mid-utterance changes.

- **A major goal of CA** is to describe how subsystems of talk combine to explain the mechanics of talk, including: turn design (prosody, grammar, lexis), orderly turn-taking and sequencing of turns into actions (such as adjacent pairs and extended sequences).

## 2. Foundations of CA



basic rules.

The foundational principle of CA is that ordinary everyday conversation is the most basic form of human interaction and sociality.

- **Conversation as the Default Form**

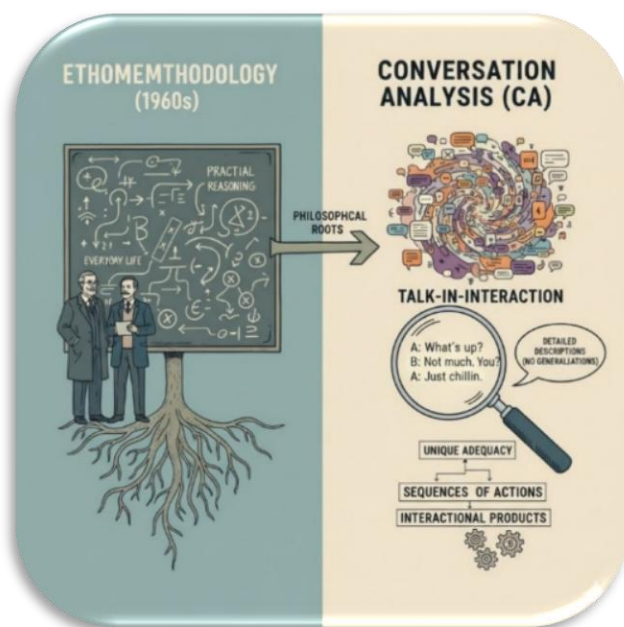
CA posits that institutional forms of talk (e.g., interviews, medical consultations, courtroom dialogue) are derived from and are a simplification of ordinary conversation.

- **Complexity of Ordinary Conversation:** Ordinary conversation is considered the most complex in terms of its speech exchange system, despite having relatively simple

- **Simplification in Institutional Talk:** In institutional settings, there are usually constraints on who speaks, when they speak, who selects the next speaker, and what kinds of actions (like asking questions or giving answers) a participant can undertake.

- **Historical Focus and Universal Claim**

In its early years, CA concentrated exclusively on ordinary conversation based on the assumption that the best way to understand how something works is to start with its most fundamental form. It wasn't until the 1980s that CA scholars began extensive work on non-conversational, institutional talk, after laying a descriptive foundation for conversation first.



A basic claim in CA, therefore, is that ordinary conversation is the **default version of talk**, and all other forms of talk are **culturally and socially restricted adaptations** (derived from local needs). The consequence is that many of the practices within ordinary conversation are likely to be **universal**.

## 2.1 Historical Foundations

### 2.1.1 Garfinkel and Goffman: *Ethnomethodology and the Study of the Interaction Order*

**Conversation Analysis (CA)** is historically linked to **ethnomethodology**, a school of thought adopted by **Harvey Sacks** and **Emanuel Schegloff** in the emergent days of CA in the 1960s. Ethnomethodology originated with **Harold Garfinkel** in the late 1940s/1950s. Garfinkel **rejected mainstream sociology's** belief in science's superior access to social reality, instead denying the existence of an external social reality of fixed norms, beliefs, and values.

Garfinkel centered his research on understanding **common sense** and the **locally achieved construction of reality**—how ordinary people interactively and reflexively understand their everyday, practical, and "rule-governed" life.

A second key influence on Sacks was **Erving Goffman**, who focused on **micro-level interactions** (individuals interacting with other individuals, small group

interactions), by observing people in detail without electronic recordings, thereby countering sociology's dominant concern with macro-level phenomena. Together, Garfinkel and Goffman were the groundbreakers for the emergence of CA in the 1960s with its own distinct agenda.

### **2.1.2 Early CA**

CA emerged in the 1960s as a distinct intellectual movement, but still shared much of its philosophical base with ethnomethodology. One such shared base is the examination of practical reasoning in everyday life, exemplified through talk-in-interaction.

CA is the study of sequences of actions and their interactional products, with the starting point being the “unique adequacy” of such an instance, what makes some talk just that which it is, and nothing else.

CA was not initially concerned with looking for **generalizations** (unlike ethnomethodology), but with **detailed descriptions** of how each interaction works in itself. Over time, as many instances were analyzed, some general patterns (e.g., turn-taking, repair, sequence organization) emerged, but CA has remained cautious about overgeneralizing. CA insists on beginning any analysis of a talk instance with a description of what is going on uniquely, not with assumptions from prior research.

#### **• CA borrows from ethnomethodology three central ideas:**

□ **Accountability:** This refers to members' own methods for making their actions visible and reportable to others. It assumes that these activities are orderly, observable, ordinary, oriented to, rational, and describable. Accounts are possible because the practices underlying social actions, including talk, can be reproduced and learned by children and strangers, for instance.

□ **Reflexivity Accountability Indexicality:** a conviction that such accountability reflects the talk in all its aspects: the field of action, the settings, the practices of talk, the actions and activities of a social interaction. Members’ accounts of ordinary social actions reflect the social actions themselves.

□ **Indexicality:** This is the belief that meanings in language are dependent upon the locus in which they are used (related to linguistic deixis). All utterances are only adequate if they suit their local conditions, thereby rejecting a context-free characterization of language as inadequate. The goal is an "inside-out" rather than an “outside-in” attempt to understand talk and how participants make adequate sense and reference in their social context.

These Garfinkel roots led to two major directions: **Ethnomethodological logical studies of work and Conversation Analysis**, which later diverged in a number of significant ways from ethnomethodology.

- **Sacks' Research and Key Realization**

Harvey Sacks began his early research by studying natural, spontaneous social interactions, including suicide prevention meetings, group therapy, and telephone and dinner conversations. He was inspired by Goffman, who legitimized face-to-face interaction as a research topic, and Noam Chomsky.

Sacks and Schegloff's key realization and theoretical shift was the discovery that **conversational participants achieve coherent and meaningful communication even with vague language**. They concluded that conversation itself is an object of inquiry in its own right, establishing that talk is action, not just a window to other processes. This early development is captured in Sacks' lectures (1964–1972).

A central guiding question of CA became: "How can you provide an adequate description of any event?"