Talk-in-interaction, Schegloff (1992) remarks, is ‘the primordial site of human sociality.’ It is the fundamental resource through which the business of all societies is managed, their cultures are transmitted, the identities of their participants are affirmed, and their social structures are reproduced. In almost every imaginable particular, our ability to grasp the nature of the social world and to participate in it is dependent on our capacities, skill and resourcefulness as social interactants. In the past, social scientists have had little to say about how interaction works, treating it as an invisible or inscrutable ‘black box’. The advent of conversation analysis, which investigates interaction as a social institution, has begun to end this state of affairs.

Consider the following segment of talk from a medical consultation. The patient is a divorced, middle-aged woman who lives alone and works a sixty-hour week in a restaurant she owns. At Line 4, the doctor asks a ‘lifestyle’ question. Though opaque phrased, the question hearably inquires into the extent to which she drinks. She responds with an apparently bona fide effort to estimate it (Line 6) as ‘moderate’. Pressed further, she specifies this description in a turn that conveys, without directly stating, that her drinking is social and infrequent (Lines 9 and 10). The doctor is not satisfied with this, and pursues a more ‘objective’ numerically specified estimate (Lines 11–12). After a brief struggle, a compromise ‘quasi-numerical’ estimate is reached (Lines 15–16) and accepted (Line 18):

Extract 1

1  **DOC**  tch D’you smoke?, h
2  **PAT**  Hm mm.
3  (5.0)
4  **DOC**  Alcohol use?
5  (1.0)
6  **PAT**  Hm:: moderate I’d say.
7  (0.2)
8  **DOC**  Can you define that, hhhehh ((laughing outbreath))
9  **PAT**  Uh huh hah .hh I don’t get off my- (0.2) outa
10  thuh restaurant very much but ((awh:))
11  **DOC**  [Daily do you use
12  alcohol or:=h
13  **PAT**  Pardon?
14  **DOC**  Daily? or:
15  **PAT**  [Oh: huh uh. .hh No: uhm (3.0) probably:
I usually go out like once uh week.

(1.0)

Kay.

If you had been presented with this segment in 1960, you would have found few systematic resources with which to analyse what is going on in this segment, and none which could offer any significant clues as to the details of the actions the participants are engaged in. In general, the social science of the period was highly abstract and unconcerned with the specifics of everyday conduct. In fact, it was believed that individual episodes like the doctor–patient exchange above are fundamentally disorderly and that attempts at their systematic analysis would only be a waste of time (Sacks, 1984). Today, the details of this segment can be specified with a high degree of resolution (see Boyd and Heritage, forthcoming, for an account of this segment and some of the many analyses that bear on its details). This is possible because we now recognize not only that there is a 'world' of everyday life that is available to systematic study, but also that its texture is orderly to a degree that was hitherto unimaginable. My aim here is to describe how two great American social scientists – Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel – dissented from the idea that the details of the everyday world are an inherently disorderly and unsearchable mess. They are central figures in the demolition of this idea, and their perspectives have been combined to create a major social science paradigm, conversation analysis, which is beginning to unlock fundamental structural and processual features of social interaction.

Goffman

Goffman’s fundamental achievement, developed over a lifetime of writing (see Goffman, 1955, 1983), was to establish that social interaction is a form of social organization in its own right. Social interaction, he argued, embodies a distinct moral and institutional order that can be treated like other social institutions, such as the family, education, religion etc. Goffman came to term this the interaction order (Goffman, 1983) and, he argued, it comprises a complex set of interactional rights and obligations which are linked both to ‘face’ (a person’s immediate claims about ‘who s/he is’ in an interaction), more enduring features of personal identity, and also to large-scale macro social institutions. Goffman further argued that the institutional order of interaction has a particular social significance. It underlies the operations of all the other institutions in society, and it mediates the business that they transact. The work of political, economic, educational and legal and other social institutions is all unavoidably transacted by means of the practices that make up the institution of social interaction.

Goffman’s central insight was that the institution of interaction has what he called a ‘syntax’. In the Introduction to Interaction Ritual he observes:

I assume that the proper study of interaction is not the individual and his psychology, but rather the syntactical relations among the acts of different persons mutually present to one another.

(Goffman, 1967: 2)
The participants use this ‘syntax’ — a socio-logic of interaction that provides for the sequential ordering of actions (see Goffman, 1971: 171–202) — to analyse one another’s conduct. By looking at the choices people make within this syntax, persons can arrive at judgements about personal motivations and identities. This syntax, Goffman argued, is a core part of the moral order. It is the place where face, self and identity are expressed, and where they are also ratified, undermined or destroyed by the conduct of others.

Thus, in contrast to his predecessors, Goffman viewed the normative organization of practices and processes that makes up the interaction order as a domain to be studied in its own right. He repeatedly rejected the view that interaction is a colourless, odourless, frictionless substrate through which, for example, personality variables, dominance hierarchies, or institutional or macrosociological processes operate (Goffman, 1964; Kendon, 1988). What is excluded in this latter conception is the interactional order as an autonomous site of authentic social processes that inform social action and interaction. With this framework, Goffman carved out a new conceptual space, and with it a new territory for systematic analysis: the interaction order as a social institution in its own right.

In retrospect it is clear that, while his work has been enormously influential, Goffman’s inspired recognition of interaction as an autonomous domain of study was insufficiently developed to become the basis for a distinct social science field of discourse analysis. In part, these difficulties had to do with Goffman’s attitude to data. As Schegloff (1988) has noted, Goffman did not so much demonstrate his theoretical observations as exemplify them. His interest in the empirical realm was exhausted by its role in illustrating brilliantly conceived theoretical analyses. A second order of difficulty was conceptual. Goffman’s interest in the ‘syntax’ of interaction was one that connected social identity with the institutions of society. He was interested in how face and identity are associated with action, and how the inferences about them that are triggered by actions can motivate interactional conduct. He was less interested in, and did not pursue, other equally fundamental issues concerning how the participants understand one another in interaction and, just as important, know that they share their understandings.

Largely for these reasons, Goffman’s approach — brilliant though it was — failed to stabilize as a systematic approach to the analysis of interaction. There is no ‘Goffman School’ of interaction analysis, and Goffman’s seminal insights might have been stillborn but for their intersection with a quite separate emergence of interest in cognition and meaning in the social sciences during the 1960s.

**Garfinkel**

This emergence can be traced, above all, to the extraordinary researches of Harold Garfinkel (1967). Garfinkel argued that all human action and human institutions, including Goffman’s interaction order, rest on the primordial fact that persons are able to **make shared sense** of their circumstances and act on the shared sense they make. Garfinkel wanted to know how this is possible, and he hit on the notion that persons use **shared methods of practical reasoning**
('ethno-methods') to build this shared sense of their common context of action, and of the social world more generally. Garfinkel argued that coordinated and meaningful actions, regardless of whether they involve cooperation or conflict, are impossible without these shared understandings. Thus any conception of social action is incomplete without an analysis of how social actors use shared common-sense knowledge and shared methods of reasoning in the conduct of their joint affairs. It is these shared methods, for example, that enable our doctor and patient to build and navigate their sequence of interaction, knowing that issues are not quite resolved until the doctor says 'Kay' at Line 18 in Extract 1. Thus Garfinkel insisted that shared sense making is a primordial feature of the social world. Nothing can happen in the social world without it. His project – *ethnomethodology* – was to study how socially shared methods of practical reasoning are used to analyse, understand, and act in the common-sense world of everyday life.

In developing these ideas, Garfinkel drew for inspiration on the writings of Alfred Schütz (1962), who argued that common-sense knowledge is patchy and incomplete, is held in a form that is typified, approximate and revisable, and that shared understandings between persons are contingent achievements based on this knowledge. Using a series of quasi-experimental procedures (known as *breaching experiments*) to create basic-departures from taken-for-granted social expectations, Garfinkel (1967) was able to demonstrate the significance of these ideas.

For example, using the game of 'noughts and crosses,' Garfinkel (1963) had experimenters invite the subjects to make the first move, whereupon the experimenters erased the subject's mark, moved it to a new cell, and then made their own mark while acting as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. These experimental departures engendered deep confusion and moral indignation in their subjects but, Garfinkel found, the deepest anger and indignation was engendered in those who *could not make sense of the situation*. From this Garfinkel concluded that the rules of noughts and crosses are not only rules that define how one should act within the game, what counts as winning and losing etc., they are also resources for *making sense* of another's move, and of the 'state of play' more generally. It is the rules of noughts and crosses that allow the one playing as 'O' to see that the situation in Figure 1 is 'hopeless.'

![Figure 1](image1.png) ![Figure 2](image2.png)

*Figure 1  Noughts and crosses – 'hopeless'  Figure 2  Noughts and crosses – 'two in a row'*

Similarly, they can be used to see that in Figure 2 'X' has 'two in a row' and is threatening to beat 'O'. They can also be used to see that if you 'miss' noticing
the 'two in a row' situation, you're being 'inattentive'. And other understandings can be laminated on to this one. If the 'O' player in Figure 2 is an adult, and the 'X' player is a child, missing 'two in a row' by putting the next 'O' in other than the bottom right square can leave the adult open to the accusation that 'it's no fun because you're letting me win'.

From quasi-experimental procedures like this, Garfinkel concluded that shared methods of practical reasoning inform both the production of action, and the recognition of action and its meanings. In fact, he argued, we produce action methodically to be recognized for what it is, and we recognize action because it is produced methodically in this way. As Garfinkel made the point in his own inimitable prose: The activities whereby members produce and manage the settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members' procedures for making these settings account-able' (Garfinkel, 1967: 1).

Most of social life is a great deal more complicated than games. And Garfinkel used other 'breaching experiments' to demonstrate practical reasoning in these more complicated social situations. These experiments clearly indicated that social actions, shared understandings and, ultimately, social institutions are underpinned by a complex body of presuppositions, tacit assumptions and methods of inference – in short, a body of methods or methodology – that informs the production of culturally meaningful objects and actions, and that is equally profoundly involved in how we go about achieving understandings of them.

Methods of common-sense reasoning are fundamentally adapted to the recognition and understanding of events-in-context. In Garfinkel's analysis, ordinary understandings are the product of a circular process in which an event and its background are dynamically adjusted to one another to form a coherent 'gestalt'. Garfinkel described this process, following Mannheim, as 'the documentary method of interpretation' and he argues that it is a ubiquitous feature of the recognition of all objects and events from the most mundane features of everyday existence to the most recondite of scientific or artistic achievements. In this process, linkages are assembled between an event and its physical and social background using a variegated array of presuppositions and inferential procedures. The documentary method embodies the property of reflexivity: changes in an understanding of an event's context will evoke some shift or elaboration of a person's grasp of the focal event and vice versa. When it is employed in a temporally dynamic context, which is a characteristic of all situations of social action and interaction, the documentary method forms the basis for temporally updated shared understandings of actions and events among the participants.

The upshot of Garfinkel's researches was that every aspect of shared understandings of the social world depends on a multiplicity of tacit methods of reasoning. These methods are socially shared and they are ceaselessly used during every waking moment to recognize ordinary social objects and events. These methods also function as a resource for the production of actions. Actors tacitly draw on them so as to produce actions that will be accountable – that is, recognizable and describable – in context. Thus, shared methods of reasoning are publicly available on the surface of social life because the results of their application are inscribed in social action and interaction.
Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis (CA), developed by Harvey Sacks in association with Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, emerged in the late 1960s at the intersection of the perspectives developed by Goffman and Garfinkel. From Goffman, CA took the notion that talk-in-interaction is a fundamental social domain that can be studied as an institutional entity in its own right. From Garfinkel came the notion that the practices and procedures with which parties produce and recognize talk are talk's 'ethnomethods.' They form the resources which the parties unavoidably must use and rely on to produce and recognize contributions to interaction which are mutually intelligible in specific ways, and which advance the situation of interaction in an incremental, step-by-step fashion.

In the early CA publications (e.g. Schegloff and Sacks, 1973) these two perspectives were melded into a new methodology. Integral to the methodology was a reversal of the old social science perspective that individual actions are inherently disorderly, and that their patterns can only be approximated using statistics. Instead CA insisted that social interaction is orderly on an individual, action-by-action, case-by-case, level. Along with this came the insistence that this order must be found in the naturally occurring materials of interaction, rather than materials fabricated through experimental procedures or role plays. And finally, since orderliness inheres in the details of interaction, there was an insistence that these materials be recorded on audio or video tape rather than being noted, coded, or, worse, simply recollected or imagined.

In keeping with the Goffmanian background of CA, this methodology was directed at uncovering institutionalized practices, and the organization of them, through which ordinary interaction is managed. These practices were conceived as basically independent of the motivational, psychological or sociological characteristics of individuals: the institution of interaction largely antedates the characteristics of those who staff it. Just as important, Garfinkel's focus on the importance of contextuality, reflexivity and intersubjectivity primarily emerged in a focus on the sequential aspects of interaction.

Several fundamental ideas are condensed in this sequential focus. First, turns at talk are overwhelmingly produced with an orientation to preceding talk, most commonly the immediately preceding talk (Sacks 1987, 1992; Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). Speakers design their talk in ways that exploit this basic positioning, thereby exposing the fundamental role of sequential positioning as a resource for the production and understanding of their utterances (Schegloff, 1984). Second, current actions ordinarily project the relevance of a particular (range of) 'next' actions to be done by a subsequent speaker (Schegloff, 1972). Third, by the production of next actions, speakers show an understanding of a prior action and do so at a multiplicity of levels – for example, by an 'acceptance', an actor can show an understanding that the prior turn was possibly complete, that it was addressed to them, that it was an action of a particular type (e.g., an invitation) and so on. CA methodology is premised on the notion that all three of these features – the grasp of a 'next' action that a current projects, the production of that next action, and its interpretation by the previous speaker – are methodically achieved by means of a set of socially shared practices.

Consider the following sequence:
Extract 2

NANCY  a-> W'ts 'iz last name,
HYLA   b-> =Uh:: Freedlan: .hhhh
NANCY  c->    [Oh::,
HYLA   d-> (=Nice Jewish boy?
       ()
HYLA   e-> O:f gou:rse,
NANCY  f-> =v [gou;rse,
HYLA   [hh-hh-hh]hnh .hhhhh=
NANCY  =Nice Jewish boy who doesn'like tih write letters?

In the first question-answer sequence (arrowed a-c), Nancy asks for the name of
Hyla's current boyfriend, and subsequently acknowledges this information with
'Oh': (Line 3, arrowed c). With this response she shows, quite appropriately, that
this information is 'news' for her, that she did not know it before, and thus that her
question was a 'real' one that was informed by a desire to know the answer
(Heritage, 1984a, 1984b, 1995). By contrast, in the second sequence (arrowed d-f),
Nancy acknowledges Hyla's response with "v course", rather than 'oh'. By this
means, she shows that the answer was not 'news' for her and, retroactively, that
her 'question' at Line 5 (arrowed) was not a 'real' question so much as a solid
inference (based on ethnographic knowledge of the last name), and that it was to
be understood as a comment on the social desirability of the boyfriend. Here
action, meaning, context, and intersubjectivity are bound together through simple
practices of talking.

In summary, CA analyses of the use of conversational practices are
simultaneously analyses of action, meaning, context management and
intersubjectivity because all of these features are simultaneously, if tacitly, the
objects of the actors' actions. The procedures that inform these activities are
normative in that actors can be held morally accountable both for departures
from their use and for the inferences which their use, or departures from their use,
may engender. In these ideas, the perspective that Garfinkel had developed over a
number of publications was crystallized into a clear set of empirical working
practices which were applied, without exception, to tape recordings of naturally
occurring interactions.

Operating in tandem with this methodology, was a commitment to the study
of ordinary conversation as a domain which has substantive priority over other
forms of interaction such as, for example, the rituals of public events or more
specialized activities such as court hearings or business meetings. The initial
body of CA research focused entirely on ordinary conversation, and even when
drawing from data, such as group therapy or emergency telephone calls, its
practitioners focused on what was 'ordinary' rather than what was 'institutional'
or otherwise exceptional about them.

Based on this methodological framework, CA began the work of analysing
conversation as a social institution. In the process, fundamental treatments of a
range of basic dimensions of conversational practice were developed, including
turn-taking (Goodwin, 1981; Sacks et al., 1974) sequence organization (Pomerantz, 1978, 1984; Sacks, 1987 [1973]; Schegloff, 1972; Schegloff and Sacks, 1973); the overall structure of conversations (Schegloff 1968; Schegloff and Sacks 1973); the repair of difficulties in speaking, hearing and understanding talk (Schegloff et al., 1977); story telling (Sacks, 1974); word selection (Schegloff, 1972); and others. These studies carved out a range of sub-areas of conversational organization which are of continuing relevance today.

Towards the end of this period, the field also began to diversify into domains of interaction – such as legal proceedings, doctor–patient interaction, calls to the emergency services, news interviews and classroom interaction – which are socially and organizationally distinct from ordinary conversation. This diversification into ‘institutional talk’ has accelerated markedly in the past decade. The distinct orientations of these two dimensions of CA research might be summarized by suggesting that whereas CA studies of ordinary conversation analyse the institution of talk as an entity in its own right, CA studies of institutional talk effectively examine the management of social institutions in talk (Drew and Heritage, 1992; Heritage, 1997). The assumptions underlying the study of institutional talk are that ordinary conversation is more basic and primordial than institutional talk. While the practices of ordinary conversation change relatively slowly and appear to be very similar across many languages and cultures, the practices involved in institutional talk can change quite quickly and are subject to various kinds of social pressures. For example the ‘consumer movement’ in medicine has evidently changed the ways in which doctors normally deliver diagnoses (compare Byrne and Long, 1976, with Peräkylä, 1998). Similarly, journalists have become notably more adversarial and less deferential in their questioning of public figures during the past three decades (Clayman and Heritage, 1999). There is no question that the study of talk in institutional settings has become a major growth area in conversation analysis. But it has been made possible by the remarkable range and stability of conversation analytic findings that have been developed from ordinary conversation.

**Conclusion**

As its name implies, conversation analysis is a method for studying social interaction. It is not designed for the analysis of texts, or of contexts where activities are progressed by means other than social interaction. Instead, it is a method designed to unpack the fundamental organization of social action and interaction, and in its applied and institutional aspects, to link empirical findings about the organization of action and interaction to other characteristics of social actors and the settings they act in. Its strengths and limitations should be appreciated in these terms.

**References**


