

## **Book review**

***The Handbook of Conversation Analysis***, edited by Jack Sidnell & Tanya Stivers (2012). Wiley-Blackwell, 844 pages, Paperback €44.40, Hardcover €150.00, E-book €35.99, ISBN: 978-1-4443-3208-7.

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*The Handbook of Conversation Analysis* is part of the Blackwell Handbooks in Linguistics series. The stated aim of this 844-page volume is to provide a comprehensive resource about conversation analysis (CA) by consolidating in-depth reviews of current theory, practice and research in this area. A quick glance through its table of contents evidences the degree of thoroughness achieved in such a massive endeavor; it contains thirty-six chapters written by forty-two experts each representing at least one of the many disciplines and distinct aspects related to CA. This volume includes work by influential scholars that have shaped the very foundation of CA as well as by more recently recognized contributors in the field.

This book is intended as an indispensable resource for a number of reader profiles involved in CA, such as university students who are new to the field and who are required to comprehend CA-based literature throughout their studies, or for researchers, both novice and veteran, embarking on CA projects. And though the volume is located within the reference section for linguistics, scholars invested in the areas of “discourse analysis, linguistic anthropology, interpersonal communication, discursive psychology and sociolinguistics” would find this book relevant.

For educational professionals, this resource has the potential to serve as a guide for teacher-researchers in their classroom inquiry. For those only superficially familiar with CA, it can offer a solid entry into a domain that has become interwoven in the theoretical frameworks and research methodology across many disciplines in which the nature of social action and how it is carried out within their settings are studied. The classroom is considered a space where communities oriented to the goal of learning interact. Conversation analysis, more concretely, Institutional CA, has the capacity to make jointly-achieved social actions within a learning context visible at a micro-level

rather than solely at a macro-level, where often observations are more readily based on generalized, etic descriptions. This book can, therefore, help teachers orient to CA theory, which is consistent with the socio-cultural theoretical framework traditional to contemporary education, as well as help them explore phenomena affecting classroom practices from previously unknown perspectives.

*The Handbook of Conversational Analysis* is organized in five independent sections which follow a brief introduction by editors, Tanya Stivers and Jack Sidnell. They briefly outline the forty-five year development of CA. It is here where they state the purpose of this large project in the form of a handbook and how their goals are reflected in the organization of this book.

Part One of the book, *Studying Social Interaction from a CA Perspective*, consists of four chapters. Like most of the chapters in this book, it is designed to include an introduction, or a theoretical background to the content presented, a section by section explanation of the core aspects related to the theme and finally a conclusions or future directions section for the facet of CA described. As mentioned earlier, the chapters are written by leading contributors of the defined area. The authors often refer to other chapters in the book, and concepts are revisited frequently. This style again will aid newcomers to CA as basic concepts are recycled in new contexts.

This section specifically provides a thorough review of the theory and scholarship from which CA arose. The authors refer to contributions by Schegloff, Jefferson, Garfinkel and Goffman as well as other influential players and contextualize them within the larger history of the CA evolution. The chapters in Part One also describe core concepts of CA research methodology related to the why's and how's of data collection and analysis. This section is particularly useful for young researchers in that fairly practical applications of the CA approach are outlined, but within a framework that elucidates the rationale behind these research aims and practices. This information is exemplified by examining extracts from recent and benchmark CA studies and also provides for a basic understanding of concepts that will appear in later chapters. It is a good springboard for individuals new to this area but also consolidates main principles that have been developed over the past four decades, thus creating a coherent reference for researchers already working in the field.

In Part Two, *Fundamental Structures of Conversation*, the nature and anatomy of conversation as a social action is analyzed. This section reviews eight elements that have been established as essential structural units observed in the process of creating meaning within interaction. Each chapter explicates one of the following basic structures: action formation and ascription, turn-taking (e.g. turn design, the turns constructional unit and transition-relevance place, turn allocation and sharing), sequential structures, preference, repair and overall structural organization. These CA aspects are showcased in the review of widely cited contemporary research. Once again, students new to CA will particularly benefit from this section.

The third section, *Key Topics in Conversation Analysis*, is a natural progression from Part Two as it delves into eleven areas (chapters) of CA inquiry. These varied lines of research, some more traditional than others, build on the tools of conversation previously outlined in Part Two and analyze them within research topics related to embodied action, emotion, affiliation, epistemics, question and answer design, reference in interaction, phonetics and prosody, grammar application in conversation, and storytelling. The interplay between the basic structures of conversation and the influences of interactional dimensions introduced in Part Three offer readers a glimpse of the intricate complexity in CA dynamics. The ability to make this complex social process more comprehensible is a strength of the book. The coherence necessary to accomplish such a feat relies on constant cross-referencing by the authors to other chapters in the book as well as revisiting research studies mentioned in earlier sections. Recurrent analysis of CA concepts and research makes it an optimal learning tool.

*Key Contexts of Study in CA: Populations and Settings* is the title of Part Four. This section reviews seven different contexts in which CA has become progressively embedded. The research presented in these seven chapters covers studies based on children, several populations representing various forms of cognitive impairment, and research related to CA within defined professional settings including CA Psychotherapy and Medicine, CA in the classroom, the courtroom and the news interview. This section outlines major research that has helped establish legitimacy in the above-mentioned fields of inquiry. Part Four is interesting for readers with all levels of knowledge about the CA field. It affords a deeper understanding of premises underpinning CA by demonstrating how this approach fits into a discipline-specific

practice of inquiry. The chapters discuss the different roles of talk across the disciplines and how they are reflected in objectives and addressed in the methods of CA research as well as how findings from CA research are applied to the contexts presented. Visualizing CA in different contexts strengthens the reasoning that underlies CA. Furthermore, the diversity of the fields' needs can be seen to stimulate growth in and demarcate directions for CA; these chapters indicate potential changes that the role of CA may undergo in one field along with the consequential impact of these changes on others. Readers can better appreciate the common ground that CA establishes and that eventually leads to interdisciplinary dialogue among the fields. For example, researchers in many of the disciplines have concluded that CA has the power to provide evidence regarding the development of social activity captured in interaction. This is a key object of study when documenting a participant's progress towards defined goals. Markee's canonical study (2008) about tracking learning among language students is referred as support of this premise. The application of CA towards this end widens the door to a longitudinal perspective of CA—an issue that has emerged in several of the disciplines (more recently in some than in others) described in this section.

Finally, Part Five (*Conversation Analysis Across Disciplines*) features CA in its many natural habitats, or disciplines within which CA theory and methodology are traditionally rooted. The relationship between CA and these disciplines (e.g. sociology, from which CA originally arose, Communication, Anthropology, Psychology and Linguistics) is analyzed in this section. The authors aim to explain how Conversation Analysis shapes, and is shaped by, the disciplines. Whereas Part Four describes areas where CA was instrumental in developing specific lines of inquiry, Part Five emphasizes the integral function that CA serves in the make-up of each discipline presented. This section sheds light on how different understandings and applications of CA can spark debate on what it can or should be able to answer across a broad range of topics and inquiry. Part Five extends our understanding of the nature of CA and addresses issues related to its scope and potential to expand into other research domains, thus completing the circle by returning us to CA's origins, or the starting point of this volume: how and why the need for this approach initially emerged.

*The Handbook of Conversation Analysis* can create the sensation in readers that they are attending a major symposium where all the key researchers are presenting. This book is an excellent reference that not only answers many questions about CA, but can also serve to direct the reader to further sources of information about items of interest for closer inspection. The most recent concepts, theoretical framework and research available after forty-five years of development in the field of CA have been consolidated in this volume making it a highly relevant resource for a variety of CA researcher profiles.

The fact that this work falls under the category of ‘handbook’ could lead one to believe that it is considered an official, one-stop textbook for all of CA. A veteran researcher in this area might not agree with such an assumption, nor with the way the CA-related knowledge has been organized or even with the level at which some areas are treated, especially in light of the fact that consumers of the CA approach come from rather diverse backgrounds. Indeed, in a recent review of this volume Ten Have (2014) suggested that this book was not as comprehensive as he would prefer for being deemed *the* (only) resource for CA. However, it should be recognized as a major achievement that further marks the institutionalization of CA as a field of study. It can easily be recognized for its ability to address a wide range of interests, an appropriate starting point for those merely satisfying a curiosity about a branch of qualitative research methodology and others who are considering a new direction for a serious CA research project. The final product—*The Handbook of Conversation Analysis*—ultimately depicts the emergence of a discipline that has evolved over the last four decades into a field with an ample base that supports many areas of research inquiry, and thus facilitates a coherent dialogue among scholars from different backgrounds. Such an interdisciplinary dynamic is a testament to a living enterprise that leads to growth both in the areas of study as well as in CA itself.

## References

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**Author's reference**

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