Entrevista

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Feminist Conversation Analysis and Applied Conversation Analysis

Análise da Conversa Feminista e Análise da Conversa Aplicada

Celia Kitzinger is Professor of Gender, Sexuality and Conversation Analysis in the Department of Sociology, University of York, UK.[1] She participated as a guest speaker at the 7th Conference of the International Gender and Language Association (IGALA 7) held for the first time in South America, at the Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos (Unisinos), Brazil, from June 20-22, 2012. Celia Kitzinger also conducted a pre-conference workshop entitled "Conversation Analysis and Gender: An Introduction".

Ana Cristina Ostermann: What is Feminist Conversation Analysis and how it is distinguished from the more canonical studies in Conversation Analysis (CA)?

Celia Kitzinger: Some feminist researchers use the methods and discoveries of 'canonical' conversation analysis to address issues of feminist concern – and that's what I mean by 'feminist conversation analysis.' Ever since my PhD research on the social construction of lesbian identities (Kitzinger, 1987) my research has been focused on feminist issues. I was doing feminist research for more than a decade before I discovered conversation analysis. My background is in Social Psychology, not Linguistics, and I used a range of different social science methods. Mostly I relied on interviews and thematic or discourse analysis of them, but I also used Q methodology, story-completion and textual analysis of written outputs. Then, in 1999-2000, I spent a sabbatical year in the Sociology Department at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) where I took courses with leading conversation analysts (Professors Emanuel Schegloff,

John Heritage and Steve Clayman) and since then I have collected naturally-occurring data and used conversation analysis in much (though not all) of my feminist work. I've used conversation analysis to research gender and interruption (Kitzinger, 2008a), 'coming out' as lesbian (Kitzinger, 2000), heteronormativity in doctors' interactions with carers (Kitzinger, 2005), and counselling for women traumatised after childbirth (Kitzinger, 2011). I've also worked with feminist doctoral students using conversation analysis to research a wide range of feminist topics, including women's emotional labour in beauty salons (Toerien and Kitzinger, 2007), lesbian and gay awareness training (Kitzinger and Peel, 2005) and police responses to violence against women in (Brazilian) police stations (Guimarães, 2007). This 'feminist conversation analysis' is distinguished from more canonical studies in that it harnesses the powerful tools of conversation analytic methodology for specifically feminist purposes.

Let me give you an example of 'feminist conversation analysis'. I've recently published a piece of research with Rebecca Shaw (Shaw and Kitzinger, 2012), based on her doctoral research analysing a set of calls to a telephone helpline for women trying to arrange a home birth. Although women in the UK have the legal right to give birth at home with a midwife in attendance, home birth is unusual (only around 2% of births) and often very difficult to organise. Most callers to the home birth helpline are seeking help because obstacles to home birth have been put in their way – unsupportive doctors or midwives, alleged medical counter-indications, claimed staff shortages and so on. The advertised aim of the helpline is to "empower women around home birth", i.e. to com-

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municate to callers their own right to give birth in a place of their choosing, and to support them in achieving that. One important way the call-taker accomplishes (what the helpline intends by) "empowerment" is by complimenting women, e.g. "You're terrific!", "I admire what you're doing", "I think you're doing brilliantly and I can't see but that you will succeed", "I love your attitude!". Of course there is already a huge literature on compliments. Our study is a distinctively CA contribution in part because it uses naturally-occurring data (not experiments, discourse completion tasks, questionnaires or role play) and in part because we analyse it by drawing on, and developing, existing CA discoveries (turn-taking, sequence organisation, repair, word selection and so on). Our research builds on and develops the canonical CA work on compliments by Anita Pomerantz (1978) by demonstrating something of the range and diversity of compliment design and by showing how compliments and compliment responses are adapted to this particular institutional context. But unlike most conversation analysis, our research has an avowedly feminist aim: we want to use our findings to help counsellors (and others) to achieve their aim of empowering women. That aim was part of what initially informed our selection of the data set, and it contributed to our selection of research foci in analysing the data set. Our research shows that (and how) complimenting – in a particular way – works to empower women, in the sense that women accept or agree with the positive assessment of their skills, abilities, personalities etc, and come to share the call-taker's view that they can overcome the obstacles to giving birth at home. As feminists we are also committed to ensuring that our findings reach the people who might benefit from them, and I regularly contribute to training days for counsellors, midwives, antenatal teachers, doulas, and others who work to support women in childbirth. So as feminists we've found conversation analysis enormously helpful in understanding how 'empowerment' – or, at least, one element of it – is actually done in practice, and have used our 'feminist conversation analysis' to work with practitioners who are able to use our findings to make their own professional practice more effective in empowering women.

Going back to the question, there's a sense then in which feminist conversation analysis *is* canonical conversation analysis – it's an application of the conversation analytic canon to feminist concerns. As such it's often not so different from other applied conversation analytic work which applies canonical conversation analysis to (for example) addressing the problems of antibiotic over-prescribing, or unmet concerns in doctor-patient interaction. Just as we assume – on the basis of our feminist beliefs – that empowering women is ethically and politically desirable, so too other conversation analysts have taken for granted (on their basis of *their* ethical positions) that reducing antibiotic prescribing, or ensuring

that patients get to raise additional concerns in medical consultations, is a desirable outcome to which conversation analytic findings can contribute. And like them we have applied canonical CA methods and discoveries to recorded naturally-occurring human interaction to figure out what elements of human interaction already work towards the achievement of that goal with the aim of encouraging their greater use.

Finally I'd add that some of my feminist research is *not* conversation analysis at all – I continue to use other approaches where these are better fitted to the research question I want to address. And equally some of my conversation analytic research is not feminist at all but is generated simply by intellectual curiosity about (for example) how people can understand who is being referred to when the initial reference to a person is an indexical ("he" or "she") and why speakers would risk misunderstanding by speaking in that way (Kitzinger; *et al.*, 2012); or what people are doing when they repair a "we" to and "I" or vice versa (Lerner and Kitzinger, 2007). I often launch my 'non-feminist' conversation analytic work when I run into the limits of the conversation analytic canon – there is still an enormous amount we do not know about the basic organisation of talk-in-interaction.

ACO: In which ways does feminist conversation analysis help scholars interested in studying gender and sexuality in interaction that other approaches do not?

CK: Clearly if you're studying interaction, conversation analysis is the method *par excellence* – described as "the dominant approach to the study of human social interaction across the disciplines of Sociology, Linguistics and Communication" (Stivers and Sidnell, in press). Unlike many other approaches in applied linguistics, its key discoveries are derived from the study of interactional data. Conversation analysis was founded by lawyer-turned-sociologist Harvey Sacks (1992) when the invention of the (audio) tape-recorder meant that he was able to capture and repeatedly inspect recorded conversations. He listened to these conversations with an interest (derived from the then newly-born theory of ethnomethodology) in how people make sense of the world as displayed through their actions. Sacks' interest was not in talk as language, but in talk as *action*, meaning how it is designed and employed to do things like complimenting, inviting, apologising, disagreeing, telling news or giving advice, plus a great many other actions we don't have ordinary vernacular names for. His first data set was recordings of calls to a suicide prevention centre. Recordings of those interactions, along with subsequent recordings from a group therapy session for adolescents and a set of ordinary phone conversations between households in California, formed the empirical basis for the basic discoveries of CA, and these constitute the 'toolkit' that I bring, as a conversation analyst, to my own analysis of data. This 'toolkit' is perfectly fitted to the

analysis of interaction because – unlike other approaches which start from a theory about interaction (e.g. 'performativity') – the CA approach has from the outset started with data and its key discoveries (turn taking, sequence organisation etc.) are basically descriptions of the methods people use for designing their talk-in-interaction, rather than theoretically-derived constructs.

Conversation analysis provides us with a toolkit we can use to analyse how gender and sexuality are produced in interaction and what they are used to accomplish. For me one of the most interesting and distinctive features of the kind of work conversation analysts are doing in relation to gender and sexuality is to expose the extent to which they are deployed in the service of other actions. Explicit talk *about* gender and sexuality is relatively infrequent in most people's ordinary daily conversations (which is of course why non-CA researchers sometimes resort to interviews and focus groups to elicit this material). But gender and sexuality are relied upon, referred to in passing, indexed, presumed and used as the basis for a great many everyday actions apparently unrelated to gender and sexuality *per se.* My main interest is in using CA to understand what these 'incidental' uses of gender and sexuality are used to do, how they work, and their repeated use serves to reproduce, reinforce, normalise (and sometimes resist) conventional taken-for-granted social beliefs.

Let me illustrate what I mean with an example from Harvey Sacks (1992). In one of the group therapy sessions, it becomes clear that Louise, the only female member of the group has had to drop out because of her work commitments. The therapist asks Ken, one of the other group members, "Do you miss her?" and he replies "Well in some ways yes. It was nice having the opposite sex in the room, you know, having a chick"[2]. Sacks suggests that what Ken is doing is a 'safe compliment': it is a compliment to Louise because he indicates that he would like her to be present in the group, and it is 'safe' because the reason he gives for wanting her there is her gender (indexed both by 'opposite sex' and by 'chick') which distinguishes her from all the others in the group. Sacks speculates that gender is selected here not because Ken is specifically 'doing gender' or 'doing heterosexuality' but because gender is a way of singling out Louise as someone he likes to have in the group without running the risk of insulting the others as might have been found to be the case had he said that he wanted Louise there because she was 'clever' or 'honest' or 'has a good sense of humour'. These alternative possibilities, Sacks suggests, sets up the possibility that one of the other (all-male) participants could say 'Well what about me – I'm

pretty clever aren't I', or 'Don't I have a good sense of humour?' – in other words they could take it that the compliment to Louise is, by virtue of the item picked, thereby an insult to them. And this observation led Sacks into a whole speculation about how non-addressed participants in multi-party interaction engage with (and sometimes respond to) the actions of a speaker. From the point of view of those of us interested in gender and sexuality in interaction, gender is being deployed here as a vehicle for an action which is really quite unrelated to gender as such – and it is deployable in this way because it is readily available in our social world as a way of dividing people into two (and, in these speakers' world, only two) categories and because it is readily understood (by these apparently heterosexual young men) that having 'the opposite sex' in the room is a 'nice' and desirable thing. What the speaker is oriented to achieving in his utterance may be a 'safe compliment' but in doing so he relies on, and reinforces, both dichotomous gender categories and normative heterosexuality. This is, from the point of view of feminist conversation analysis (but probably not for Sacks!) a concrete example of the way in which gendered heteronormativity gets reproduced in ordinary mundane talk in interaction.

Here's another example, drawn from a data set of phone calls from lesbian households, collected by Victoria Land for her doctoral research[3]. A caller to the national health service helpline requests an emergency dental appointment "not for me but for my partner whose tooth's come out". She sounds clearly female and the adviser asks "is he in pain", selecting the masculine pronoun ("he") to refer to "my partner". Clearly the adviser is not "doing heterosexuality" or aiming to perpetuate heteronormativity. The action she's engaged in is trying to assess the extent to which the call should be treated as requiring 'emergency' action and the choice of pronoun is merely incidental to the design of the turn. It is, nonetheless, an example of what gender and sexuality researchers mean by the term 'heteronormativity'. When the caller responds with "She's lost the front tooth and in quite considerable pain", the explicit action of her turn is 'doing answering' and using the opportunity to reinforce the severity of the problem (it's a 'front tooth' and the pain is 'quite considerable') and the consequent need for emergency dental treatment. Nonetheless, this is also an instance of what lesbian feminist researchers have identified as 'coming out' – which is only sometimes done with explicit announcements (heralded by the classic and stereotypical "Mother, I have something to tell you"). My own experience as a lesbian is that I most often come out in exactly the same way that

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[2] This is a slightly simplified version of the data. For Sacks' transcript and analysis of it, see Sacks (1992), *Lectures on Conversation*, Part II, Lecture 2, 'Safe Compliments', p. 98-99).

[3] The data extract has been simplified for ease of presentation here. For a full transcript and analysis see Land and Kitzinger (2005).

this caller does – by getting on with the business in hand while correcting (often, as here, with an 'embedded' correction that never rises to the surface of the talk) the gender attributed to my partner. These moments capture the routine, totally unremarkable (and usually not remarked upon), mundane reproduction of gender and sexuality in everyday life. Other methods of researching 'coming out' as a linguistic act – such as asking people to describe how they do it – yield descriptions of how this sort of thing is done. Conversation analysis (of the appropriate data) yields actual instances of how it is done, and for me that's much more exciting!

ACO: How does feminist conversation analysis fit within the larger discussion of macro-level vs. micro-level approaches to the understanding of language and gender issues?

CK: The early development of conversation analysis was influenced by ethnomethodology – which is often described as a 'micro-level' and 'bottom-up' approach to understanding the social world and contrasted with 'macro-level' approaches which focus on the 'top down' power exerted over people's lives by law, social policy, government decisions, and institutional constraints. It seems clear to me both that people are active agents who construct the social world through their moment-by-moment interactions *and* equally – to use the oft-quoted paraphrase of Marx – that they do not do so under conditions of their own making. Conversation analysis focuses on the moment-by-moment construction of the social world through interaction. Other broader-brush methods focus on the social, political, and legal ('macro') context within which these ('micro') interactions take place. As a feminist who wants to understand the world in order to change it, I believe that it is important to understand both.

It is often argued that the 'micro' and 'macro' cannot be distinctly separated – for example that law and social policy are hammered out through people engaged in talk-in-interaction in committees, boardrooms, courtrooms and parliamentary debates. This is true, of course, but it seems to me that for feminists who want to make macro-level interventions, CA is not necessarily the method of choice (and neither is academic linguistics more generally). It's not that you *can't* research law and social policy using CA – it's just that I'm sceptical about what this kind of research can achieve politically. Of course I would love to be proved wrong!

Take same-sex marriage as an example. I have carried out CA analyses that explore some of the interactional consequences of the exclusion of same-sex couples from the civil law definition of 'marriage' in the UK (Land and Kitzinger, 2007) and these analyses provide empirical support for Sally McConnell-Ginet's (2006) claim that defining same-sex unions (even those which accord equivalent rights to marriage) as 'civil unions' or 'civil partnerships' is much more than 'just semantics'. But I'm not convinced that either CA or sociolinguistics offer much we can use in actually challenging the ban on same-sex marriage. The ban is upheld and reinforced by right-wing and religious conservative forces that are unlikely to be influenced by our careful analyses of language and interaction. My own approach to macro-level social change has been to work with the UK human rights and civil liberties organisation, *Liberty*, to bring a High Court challenge to the UK's refusal to recognise my valid Canadian (same-sex) marriage. With my wife, and colleague, Sue Wilkinson, I established a campaigning organisation (Equal Marriage Rights[4]) and worked with organisations like Equal Love[5] and Out4Marriage[6] to end the ban on same-sex marriage.[7] Similarly, for the work I am currently doing to challenge current medico-legal decision-making about people with disorders of consciousness after severe brain injury (i.e. people in comas, vegetative states or minimally conscious states), it does not seem pertinent to use conversation analysis.[8]

In my experience, it is not really necessary (or effective, or time-efficient) to analyse macro-level gross inequalities and overt discrimination – like the ban on same sex marriage or queer bashing, economic discrimination, hate-speech, rape, or femicide – using conversation analysis. There are other more direct and potentially effective ways for feminists to work on these issues. What conversation analysis is so good at, and so effective at uncovering, is the routine, mundane, taken-for-granted (micro-level) ways in which an everyday world of gendered and sexual inequalities is produced and reproduced in ordinary interaction. The challenge then is to see whether they can be changed.

ACO: What do you see as the benefits of branching out conversation analysis into different subfields like Feminist Conversation Analysis and Applied Conversation Analysis?

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[4] See equalmarriagerights.org
[5] See equallove.org.uk
[6] See www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJl_VZlU08w&feature=plcp
[7] See, for example, Kitzinger and Wilkinson (2004a; 2004b).
[8] With my sister and colleague Jenny Kitzinger, I am carrying out interviews with family members of people with prolonged disorders of consciousness after brain injury and analyzing them using thematic analysis – see Kitzinger and Kitzinger [in press]. This research, too, is guided by feminist imperatives – the personal is still political. See http://www.thehastingscenter.org/Bioethicsforum/Post.aspx?id=5557&blogid=140; and our video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kS1yZzrKSNg

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CK: I'm not sure there are really different 'subfields'. It think it's more that with the massive growth of conversation analysis over the last decade, and with increasing numbers of scholars using CA across a wide range of languages, contexts, topics, and disciplinary boundaries, the field of CA is becoming increasingly varied. The larger a field becomes, the more ways there are of 'slicing' it up, grouping some kinds together and separating them from others. As the field of CA has developed and diversified some critics have tried to circumscribe and contain the field, claiming either that CA can never accomplish particular kinds of analysis (e.g. of broader social context, see the extensive debate in *Discourse and Society* between Billig (1999), Schegloff (1997) and Wetherall (1998)) or that the use of CA to achieve particular political or pragmatic ends is somehow betraying its fundamental principles (see the *Human Studies* debate between Kitzinger (2008b) and Wowk (2007)). Despite these debates, conversation analysis has continued to diversify, and many conversation analysts today do a range of different analytic work – some 'basic' CA research (i.e. uncovering the building blocks of human interaction); some engaging with political issues; some 'applied' in the sense that it is designed with reference to its potential usefulness to users or interest groups. John Heritage (at University of California, Los Angeles), for example, has a long history of 'basic' CA researching core features of talk-in-interaction (like '*oh*'- and '*and*'-prefacing, in Heritage (1984) and Heritage and Sorjonen (1994)), has developed conversation analytic approaches to political interviews (Clayman and Heritage, 2002), and has done clearly 'applied' work intended to have direct practical applications for practitioners (Heritage *et al.*, 2007) My own CA research likewise bridges all these elements and I don't necessarily see myself as contributing to different 'subfields' but rather as exploring and contributing to the full range and diversity of conversation analysis as a field.

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