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Combining Conversation Analysis and Reflective Practice in the LSP Classroom: Putting Transcripts of Business Simulations under the Microscope

Abstract

Conversation analysis (CA) has undoubtedly established its credentials as a method for studying (workplace) interaction yet, despite this observation, the insights that CA offers to LSP instructors have not been fully exploited in the classroom. This paper firstly suggests that combining CA and reflective practice can lead to a synergy that would be beneficial to teaching practice and, secondly, this paper describes how this synergy can be implemented in a classroom context for students of business communication. Findings indicate that combining CA and reflective practice can be a viable pedagogic proposition.

Keywords: conversation analysis, reflective practice, meetings, pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Since Drew and Heritage's (1992) seminal work '*Talk at Work*', conversation analysis (CA) has become an increasingly popular tool with which to analyze workplace interaction. Yet, despite this interest in CA as a tool for investigating workplace interaction, so far, few insights from CA researchers have filtered down into the LSP classroom in a way that provides teaching strategies which can help students improve their communication skills. This relative reticence to apply CA to learning is not unsurprising given CA's traditional stance of 'indifference' whereby researchers refrain from passing critical judgment on the interaction. Furthermore, CA's complex terminology and concentration on the minutia of talk may, at first sight, be off putting and seem to have little relevance to the 'real world.' On the other hand, the relative lack of uptake of CA in the classroom is surprising given CA's research focus on the observation of naturally-occurring talk which aims to uncover what talk 'does' and the machinery of conversation that underlies such talk. As such, CA could provide a powerful tool for students (or practitioners) to reflect on their own talk and to devise strategies to improve their communicative practices.

The purpose of this paper is to argue that combining CA and reflective practice is one way of exploiting CA's potential for LSP instruction. This paper, therefore, describes and evaluates an LSP course which was designed for pre-service students taking a Masters in Multilingual Professional Communication at Antwerp University, Belgium, in which I attempted to integrate CA's emphasis on the natural observation of talk with reflective practice. More specifically, the course concentrated on the students' communicative skills in meetings. The students were non-native speakers of English, but they all had an excellent level of English. This was because the specific aim of the course was to enable students with a language/linguistics background to cross over into a business related field and so, combining language skills with business knowledge, help them find jobs in the field of corporate communication.

This paper is divided into three parts. First, theoretical considerations of CA, reflective practice, and their complementarity are discussed. Second, my own attempt to apply CA and reflective practice to a classroom setting is discussed. Third, using feedback from students and my own assessment of their work, combining CA and reflective practice in the classroom is evaluated. Finally, conclusions and observations are offered.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis was developed by Harvey Sacks and colleagues in the late 1960s and can be described as, the fine-grained sequential analysis of naturally-occurring talk in everyday situations. Sacks sets out the essence of his methodology in his influential paper entitled '*Notes on Methodology*' (Sacks, 1984). In this paper, he argues that talk is methodically organized since if we are to understand it and produce it, it must be orderly to us. However, Sacks claims that the methodical structure of talk is hidden to participants by its mundane nature, and is thus 'seen but unnoticed.' In order to reveal the underlying 'machinery of talk' that escapes the 'naked eye', it is necessary for the analyst to transcribe the talk. The repeated listenings to the tape, that a fine-grained transcription necessitates, allow the researcher to make the machinery of talk 'visible' and thus available for analysis. In this respect, CA is cast as a rigorous naturalistic method of inquiry whereby talk-in-interaction is put under the microscope.

Moreover, Sacks was not only interested in the structure of language *per se*, he was also interested in what the language was doing (Sacks, 1984: 24). The fine-grained analysis of talk could therefore bring to the researcher's attention the way in which participants 'do' things. For example, Sacks' early work on telephone help lines in suicide prevention centers revealed that the counselors sometimes had difficulty getting the names of the callers. However, examination of transcripts showed that if the counselor gave his/her name, this could elicit the caller's name and so 'do' getting the caller's name. Potentially, then, CA offers a resource not only to uncover the machinery of talk but also to establish what this machinery does and how people achieve their everyday (workplace) activities.

2.2. Reflective practice (and management)

Since industrialization, management has increasingly come to be regarded as a form of human engineering which is based on a science of work (e.g. Taylor, 1967). In this paradigm, the manager's role is considered to be that of a technician whose job is to apply the latest scientifically based principles of management to workplace practice. If, as LSP trainers, we accept this view, our role is thus to transmit prescribed communicative competencies that are commensurate with the latest theories of communication which are then (hopefully) applied in practice. As Schön (2000: 27) states, within this paradigm of technical rationality, "the rule is: first the relevant basic and applied science; then the skills of application to the real-world problems of practice."

However, the scientific model of management is challenged by many researchers who consider that management is more craft than science (e.g. Mintzberg, 2004). If this stance is taken seriously, then the craft-approach to management should be given more recognition in business education and LSP course design. Further, and more specifically as regards the communicative practices of managers, Shotter (1993) argues that managers are 'practical authors' of the organizational landscape rather than executors of management theories. In brief, Shotter (1993: 148) argues that, "it is not yet more or different theory that we need in management studies, but a better understanding of conversation and conversational realities." Consequently, if we, as LSP instructors, are to improve our students' practice we should be encouraging the investigation of tacit knowing-in-action that managers employ in their everyday workplace interactions. Tacit knowledge, a phrase attributed to the philosopher Polanyi (1962), refers to the fact that humans have more knowledge than they can know or tell. Tacit knowing-in-action is thus considered to be synonymous with notions of skills, know-how, and competence that are integral to workplace practices but of which practitioners are not consciously aware. Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge, therefore, seems to shadow CA's concept of the taken for granted and seen but unnoticed nature of talk. In other words, people have a tacit knowledge of talk but cannot articulate what they know about talk – or, more specifically, business practitioners tacitly know how to interact in a meeting but are frequently not consciously aware of such skills and, consequently, they are unable to articulate this knowledge. A conscious awareness of their workplace communicative practices, gained though reflection, would make such tacit knowledge visible and therefore available for improvement.

Schön (2000: 241) defines reflective practice as the "on-the-spot surfacing, criticizing, restructuring, and testing of intuitive understandings of experienced phenomena." It is, thus, designed to make practitioners aware of the tacit knowledge they have and to make it amenable to critical scrutiny, reflection, and, ultimately, improvement. Schön, however, not only concerned himself with those already exercising a profession but also with bringing reflective practice to pre-service students. Schön (1987), for example, argues that educational institutions should move towards reflective practice as a key element in professional education and he discusses his own application of reflective practice to his courses at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard in the late 70s and early 80s. Schön (1987: chapter 10) reports using reflection on role-plays, and transcripts of these role-plays, as one of his tools for reflective practice, and I argue that a refinement to this would be to combine such reflection with CA. In this way, students could be introduced to a tool *par excellence* for the investigation of their own interaction which puts their own talk under the microscope.

More specifically, then, in relation to the course described in this paper, the students were introduced to the communicate, evaluate and develop (CED) model of reflective practice that Jones and Stubbe (2004) set out. In this model, participants were first asked to communicate, then to evaluate their talk and identify any areas where improvements could be made, and finally to generate strategies for implementing such improvements. In my case, communication was generated through the simulation of a business meeting, reflection was stimulated through transcription and fine-grained analysis guided by the principles of CA, and the development stage was left to the students to suggest strategies for improvement.

2.3. The complementary nature of CA and reflective practice

Whilst CA has traditionally worked from a stance of indifference inherited from its ethnomethodological roots, this position is being increasingly challenged. Ten Have, for example, has used the term applied conversation analysis by which he means that CA-inspired studies can be used "to support efforts to make social life 'better' in some way, to provide data-based analytical suggestions for, or critiques of, the ways in which social life can be organized" (ten Have, 1999: 162). This has given rise to articles that use CA to give a critical edge to management communication (see, for example, Asmuß and Svennevig, 2009). However, whilst these studies exploit the critical potential of CA, they do not specifically seek to offer concrete strategies that link CA to reflective practice.

Housley and Fitzgerald (2000), though, explicitly argue that CA and reflective practice are complementary because practitioners could be trained to carry out fine-grained analyses themselves and then they could use such analyses as a rich resource for reflection. This synergy between CA and reflective practice would be created because CA transcription is used as an estrangement device so that the seen but unnoticed machinery of talk in (workplace) interaction becomes available for analysis and reflection.

Yet, despite the theoretical compatibility, to my knowledge, there are few accounts of the successful combination of CA and reflective practice. Furthermore, the overall failure of CA to link up with reflective practice is surprising since reflection on workplace interaction has been successfully combined with other forms of linguistic analyses (e.g. Jones and Stubbe 2004). And, moreover, the analysis of transcripts of interaction has been used successfully in the classroom (e.g. Zhu 2007). In what follows, my attempt to combine CA with reflective practice is set out.

3. Practical application

3.1. The course outline

The part of the course described in this paper consisted of only seven lessons (14 hours teaching time) and was designed to encourage student reflection upon their own communicative practices in meetings.
The format of the course was as follows:

- an introduction to the basic notions of conversations analysis and transcription techniques
- a business simulation
- an analysis of the interaction
- feedback and debriefing

I also asked the students to write an anonymous one-paragraph assessment of the course.

3.2. Introduction to conversation analysis

First, students were introduced to the rudiments of conversation analysis. This part of the course was based around the material provided on Charles Antaki's website[1] which gives an excellent introduction to CA and which also provides transcription exercises using video-taped data. Students were thus introduced to some of the basic machinery of talk such as adjacency pairs and formulations. Adjacency pairs are the basic units of talk that contain an exchange of one turn followed by a second

[1] Available at: http://www-staff.lboro.ac.uk/~ssca1/antaki1.htm

turn from the next speaker. The second turn has the normative constraint of having to be relevant to the first turn so that, for example, in greetings, '*hello*' is normatively followed by a return greeting. This is an obvious observation (so obvious that it is only tacitly available), but fine-grained analyses reveal that using a first turn to ask questions places constraints on what counts as a relevant response by the recipient and so can be used strategically in an argument. This is because the recipient of a question is forced to set out his/her opinion, whereas the questioner can evaluate this opinion in a third turn and so criticize the recipient without having to set out their own opinions. Formulations can be glossed as the summing up of the gist of the talk-so-far. As such, they are something that practitioners (tacitly) do in meetings, but they are perhaps unaware of the exact structure of formulations and how they can be used to 'do' decisions or 'do' establishing group understanding. Awareness of such features of talk as question and answer adjacency pairs and formulations, and what they can do, is thus a potentially important observation for practitioners.

The second phase of the introduction to CA involved using transcripts of genuine business meetings taken from my own collection. The students were led through the analysis of some transcripts and were introduced to the practical application of CA to genuine business interaction. Students were also given key readings which typified the use of CA as a tool for uncovering the machinery of talk in workplace interaction (e.g. Asmuß and Svennevig, 2009). The students were instructed to read these articles at home and then the following lessons involved the discussion of some of the themes of the articles.

3.3. The simulation

The simulation that I asked the students to perform was a decision-making activity that is available through *Bized*, which is an open source-learning site for students and instructors of business related topics. The simulation I used[2] asks students to take the role of the board members of a rugby club. The club has been performing well in recent years and has been climbing up the league tables. The board now has to make a decision. They could either stay at their current stadium and improve the existing facilities, or they could move to a larger and more modern stadium, or they could do nothing and remain in the lower leagues. The danger is that if significant investments are made and the club fails to continue their progress to the higher leagues, then financial disaster might result. On the other hand, if the club fails to invest they will have little chance of attracting sponsors or increasing their revenue from an improvement in the number of spectators attending the game and so they will miss out on the opportunity to progress. The students were asked to do the simulation at home in groups of four or five. This was largely for practical reasons since the students were asked to record the meetings and if the recording had been done in a classroom environment the background noise of other groups doing the simulation would have led to poor quality recordings.

[2] Available at: http://www.bized.co.uk/learn/business/strategy/decision/index.htm

3.4. The analyses

As previously stated, the students were taught the rudiments of transcription and they were asked to transcribe a small part of the simulation that they found 'interesting.' First, considering how long it takes to make a fine-grained transcript, a transcription of one or two pages of transcript is sufficient for the purposes of the exercise. Second, part of reflective practice is to enable the students to take more responsibility for their own learning and so asking them to transcribe what they 'found interesting' encouraged them to make observations based on their own perceived needs and interests. The students were then asked to analyze part of the transcript using the CED model and to write a 500-word assignment containing a critical analysis of the transcript and suggestions for improvement of their own communicative practices.

3.5. The debriefing

The debriefing took place in two phases: peer review and a plenary session. Since I was working with a fairly large group of around 40 students, the first part of the debriefing was done as a form of peer review whereby students discussed their work with each other in small groups. This was then followed by a plenary session for the whole class in which one of the students from each simulation-group presented their findings. This led to class discussion and instructor feedback.

4. Evaluation

The evaluation that follows is resolutely qualitative: using a synthesis of data culled from the students' assessment of the course, it is designed, on the one hand, to give voice to the students and, on the other hand, the evaluation consists of my own reflections on the course *qua* course instructor. Experimental design to test the 'effectiveness' of this approach compared to other approaches was not considered since I do not intend to play one approach to language learning off against another but, rather, to highlight the possibilities and potentials of combining CA with reflective practice.

4.1. Evaluation: the student analyses

Students were required to write an analysis of their transcript and to suggest ways in which their own communicative skills could be improved. These assignments revealed that they were able to produce adequate transcripts which located examples of the 'machinery of talk.' Moreover, most of the analyses not only located examples of the machinery of talk but also provided an account of what this machinery was doing. For example, one student noted how the use of formulations can be a powerful tool for arriving at decisions and closing down topics. The student remarked that his analysis "*illustrates the importance of formulations. Up to line 13 there is no real consensus but, on account of the formulation (line 13) which summarizes what Alex was trying to say, we can see how some kind of agreement, which led to a decision, is being done.*" Conversely, another student noted that the lack of formulations in their simulation meant that they wasted time by 'going round in circles.' This observation, derived from the fine-grained analysis of the transcript, became a learning point and something to rectify in future talk: "*for the future it would be smart, even if I am not appointed as the chairperson, to formulate or to sum up what we have. Otherwise, the discussion doesn't move on and we have the impression of running round in circles.*"

Furthermore, some students also linked the use of formulations with leader identity and drew attention to the way in which identities are realized in talk. As one student noted, "*a good leader of a business meeting should, therefore, be able to make strong formulations that really make clear what has been decided and close topic. He can use language (e.g. formulations) in such a way as will construct, confirm, and reinforce his identity as leader*."

Overall, the assignments revealed that students were able to: analyze the transcripts using CA; reflect upon *their* practice; and come up with suggestions for improvement. To leave the students with the last word, as one of them concluded: "*before I attended these conversation analysis lectures, I didn't really pay attention to what was going on during conversations but now I know that there is more going on than just sound coming out of people's mouths and conversation analysis has made me more aware of the effects of language. Words can do things and perform actions. I will certainly start using some of the techniques that I uncovered in this transcript. I am sure that it will help me become a better communicator in the future.*"

4.2. Evaluation: the students' assessment of the course

The student assessments showed that the main 'complaint' was the time spent acquiring the basics of CA. As one of the students commented, "*mere CA is less useful regarding our professional possibilities at the end of the year*" and another doubted the "*practical use in endlessly analyzing texts*." However, despite the criticisms concerning the time spent on learning transcription techniques and basic CA, the students began to see the value of this: "*after the third or fourth lesson I was beginning to see the light. I gained more insight into the structure of conversation. I was actually trying to see what was really going on in those conversations (machinery of talk)*." Students also alluded to the potential pay-off that CA could bring to their future career. For example, one student commented, "*I also became aware of the impact of power and how questions and answers work. Maybe I can apply these kinds of techniques in real life and become a better* *communicator*." Therefore, whilst the students seemed to recognize the benefits that applying CA to their talk could provide, they also considered that the 'spadework' needed to arrive at a level where they could analyze texts to be time consuming. It is difficult to see how to get round this problem since some knowledge of CA is obviously required in order to do the analysis. Moreover, it was certainly significant that the most insightful student analyses made more use of the CA they had learned whereas the weaker analyses tended to lead to rather general and less precise observations. Therefore, some kind of pre-teaching of CA prior to the analysis of transcripts is certainly essential if the exercise is to deliver its full benefits, but this has to be balanced with the students' limited interest in the intricacies of CA.

Conclusions and observations

As the student evaluations above illustrate, CA can be combined with reflective practice in the classroom and through a close analysis of the 'machinery' of talk students can increase their awareness of what is going on (what actions are being performed) in business interaction and their knowledge of how this is achieved. The benefits of such an approach to learning are fourfold. First, because learning is based on the students' own experience it is more meaningful and thus more likely to be acted upon and retained when they enter the workplace. As Jones and Stubbe (2004: 197) argue, "practitioners learn most usefully and powerfully when they guide the inquiry and the values that inform it." Second, rather than providing students with a decontextualized science of management that is then applied to practice, reflective practice provides the students with context sensitive skills that they can take with them into the workplace. Moreover, implementation is built into the process of reflective practice since the students will gain insights derived from their own communicative practice as they participate in it. Third, drawing inspiration from humanistic teaching paradigms, reflective practice places the student at the center of the learning process and, rather than adopting a passive 'jugs into mugs' transmission style of learning, the students are asked to take a more active, and thus fulfilling, role in the learning process. Fourthly, as regards business meetings, Schwartzman (1989) has noted that popular management literature, since it is rarely based on any direct observation of meetings, maybe be promoting folk theories of meeting talk. This, for example, can be seen in Williams' (1988) observation that the language of meetings taught in English language textbooks bears little resemblance to that used in actual business meetings. Consequently, rather than being taught practices that may be removed from actual talk in real business meetings, students may have a better pay-off through having an opportunity to reflect on their own communicative strategies.

Finally, the research presented in this paper, deals with the use of CA as a tool to aid reflective practice for pre-service students but, given the opportunity, it would also be interesting to use CA and reflective practice as a pedagogic approach with practitioners.

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