Analysing Interactions in Childhood

Insights from Conversation Analysis

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Conversation analysis (CA), as amply demonstrated in the chapters of this book, has much to contribute to the study of children and their interactions. Children are in the process of emerging membership in society as well as of developmental change. They can be, from early on, full partners in communicative interchanges but with developing possibilities of how such participation can be carried out. Thus there is an interesting explanatory tension between the more totalising concepts of ‘traditional’ developmental psychology – ‘child’, ‘adult’, ‘competence’ and ‘context’, for instance – and the detailed analyses of CA, with its emphasis on the moment-to-moment search for intersubjective understanding. Reading the chapters of this book led me to a number of insights about the possibilities for a fruitful interchange.

First, conversation analyses can provide a corrective to a mundane developmental account that concentrates on just saying what a child cannot do at one particular age and can do at a later stage. Many of the analyses presented here suggest that when talk between children and their interactants is examined in detail, very young children can and do show an ability to identify misunderstandings on the part of the other, and to correct them in speech. Since it is increasingly apparent that preverbal infants show a range of intersubjective skills, CA may well help us to work out how these are mapped into language and used in talk. Undoubtedly ‘mapping’ is the wrong analogy because whatever it is that children know about other minds before starting to speak, they have to learn how language works in usage. As is shown by the analyses on misunderstanding and on the work done by both the child and others on repair, this is not a straightforward matter. These analyses could contribute a great deal to our understanding of the child’s developing control of language ‘in use’ and, therefore, to a much more complete account of language development.

Second, many of these chapters are relevant to the question of children’s ‘membership’ of societal contexts and their ‘membership rights’, defined both externally and in the moment-to-moment exchanges of conversation. These analyses show the affordances that can be provided to children by their interactants and how this can vary from moment to moment. They also show how children can accept, reject or resist conversational moves by others to constitute them in a particular membership category. This is particularly important for those working with children in professional contexts and the
chapters in the latter part of the book analyse these types of interactions and are extremely revealing on this score. I think professionals working in these contexts will find them interesting and useful when reflecting on their own practices and how they might want to adjust or change them.

My hope is that we will be able to find a way (1) to put together the types of analyses laid out in the chapters of the book with the more traditional concerns of developmental psychology and linguistics, and (2) to take the insights of CA and use them to inform the theoretical question of the factors influencing children’s development generally and their increasingly sophisticated grasp of language and its uses in particular. To do this will require those involved in CA to be prepared to compare across situations and individuals – almost inevitably involving some quantitative analysis – and for the insights that arise from CA to be seriously integrated with other theoretical frameworks. This book provides an excellent basis for the latter aim.

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The aim of this volume is to bring together contributors who are not only leading researchers in the rapidly developing field of conversation analysis (CA) but who also focus on aspects of childhood interactions. Traditionally, CA has been mainly concerned with everyday adult talk in order to establish the rules and regularities that ease the path of such mundane interactions. In all CA work, there is a preoccupation with turn-by-turn sequential properties of talk that goes beyond taxonomic categorisation of individual utterances. No detail of form, magnitude or timing, in gesture, talk, gaze or sequential placement, is seen as irrelevant to the interaction. Conversation analysts view talk as situated action: acknowledging, describing and examining conversational structures and conventions, in the same way that, more traditionally, linguists structure phonology, morphology and syntax. Schegloff (1987) used the phrase ‘talk in interaction’ and details ‘syntax for conversation’ (see Schegloff 2007) showing that idealised linguistic rules and grammatical ‘correctness’ are less necessary to meaningful interactions than might be supposed. For a full exposition of the theory of CA there are several publications that can be recommended such as Schegloff (2007) or Hutchby and Wooffit (2008).

The focus in this collection on children’s interactions is partly motivated by a key issue for conversation analysis, that of intersubjectivity, which is taken here to be the constant production, recognition and display of mutual ‘understandings’ between speakers during conversation. This is not dissimilar to those in child development who have emphasised the significance of interactional synchrony for intersubjective relations in early childhood. Some writers in child CA have also emphasised the importance of intersubjectivity for early development (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 1998) yet with a particular focus on the sequential detail of interaction on a turn-by-turn basis. Needless to say, understanding the emergence of children’s communicative skills and abilities will be closely linked to whatever we take to be the essential attributes of engaging in intersubjective relations. In conversation analysis the primary mechanism for the maintenance of intersubjectivity is the organisation of repair – a view shared by various contributors to this volume.

In interaction, participants seek to establish intersubjectivity and make explicit displays of their understanding of cultural and language phenomenon through talk. In
seeking to understand how children gradually learn what is involved in recognising and maintaining intersubjectivity as part and parcel of the infrastructure of interaction, conversation analysts set aside the complex issues surrounding cognitive and emotional dimensions that might bear on a complete developmental explanation and focus instead on highlighting the fine detail of the local discursive context. Wootton (1997), for example, has commented that it is from learning how to utilise mutual understandings and ‘interpersonal alignments’ that the child’s cultural awareness is fashioned.

Given the recognition that the moulding of intersubjectivity is interdependently related to whatever self-righting mechanisms are in play in the localised sequence of interaction, it comes as no surprise that procedures surrounding repair practices in child conversation are of particular interest to the researchers in this volume. Whether initiated by adult or child, the numerous ways in which adjustments, reformulations, clarifications and whatever serve as repair is a theme that permeates many of the chapters. The repair may be self-initiated or initiated by the recipient (‘other initiated’); for instance, instigated by the adult in order to make his or her meaning more transparent to the child, or to help the young conversational partner to correct its own misunderstood utterance. These repairs may be overtly marked or embedded in the talk. The child itself may seek clarification from the adult or recognise particular inefficiencies in its own talk and seek to self-repair. The area in which CA can complement other psychological and linguistic research traditions that examine repair practices, is in the central place given to the interdependence between the production and recognition of trouble sources and repair. Where, when and how the utilisation of repair changes over the long and short term (and not necessarily with reference to a developmental focus) is illustrated in several contexts throughout this volume.

Significant, then, for understanding the issues that shape the child’s emerging linguistic skills is the orientation that children, and those with whom they interact, have towards the production and recognition of mutual understandings. This social constructivist view of development brings into focus the subtle changes in association produced by the child, which are often shown to be highly sensitive to the communicative sequence in which they occur. Systems of repair, as outlined above, which deal with troubles in talk, contribute to this change; however, how such repair organisation operates is not dependent solely on lexicalisation. Conversation analysis pays equal attention to embodiment of meaning through action, gesture, timing, emphasis and the use of physical context. The finest detail of change in terms of timing, phonetic output, intonational change and the sequential positioning of utterances are all of potential significance, reflected here in the different considerations the contributors highlight in the volume.

As can be seen from some of the discussions already extant in this introduction, CA research on children’s interactions is not solely concerned with development in the traditional sense and, indeed, draws attention to problems associated with the assumption that behavioural change is necessarily developmentally significant (see Forrester, this volume). Instead, CA looks at how the child begins to engage with the world through talk and other interactional modalities. Wootton (1997), in his seminal work *Interaction and the Development of Mind*, talks of the acculturation of the child through emerging intersubjective understandings that are locally derived – that is, pertaining to very recent cultural and moral events. Certainly, CA studies with a child focus are unique, as those skills and abilities that might be central to the display of such understandings, and how they could develop, must be mapped out precisely, which
necessitates a close examination of the fine detail of children’s early interactions – both with adults and with each other.

CA adopts the view that in order to become fully fledged ‘members’ of a culture, children have to learn how to recognise and produce talk that displays to others around them their understanding of ‘talk’ as an accountable set of social practices. Displays of asymmetry in knowledge, power and understanding between conversational partners, as children gradually attain membership, is inherent in this view of talk in interaction. This theme is developed, for example, by Forrester (Chapter 3) with a very young child in the home; by Hutchby (Chapter 8) with adult–child counselling data; and by Sidnell (Chapter 6), where the context is that of child–child interaction outside the home. Clarke and Wilkinson in Section 3 also find that issues of acceptance arise in their analysis of interactions between children with cerebral palsy. Membership can be seen to be of clear significance to the participants in talk across the span of childhood experiences.

Many of the broader theoretical and methodological preoccupations of conversation analysts, working with any type of data, are reflected in the contributions to this volume. One such preoccupation is that of the relevance of notions such as a preset context or identity. Conversation analysts are somewhat cautious regarding the relevance, use and value of definitive category formulations such as child, adult, typical or aypical development, family or gender status. The ethnomethodological background of CA requires the focus to be participant-oriented where possible, and thus CA often seeks to unpick the displayed orientations of the speakers and show how these are constituted within the interactional sequence. In the Foreword to Applying Conversation Analysis (Richards and Seedhouse 2005), Paul Drew draws attention to the potential power of the convergence of applied linguistics and CA as research methodologies. He exposes inherent presuppositions by comparing two different bodies of data distinguished by labels such as ‘classroom’ versus ‘ordinary’ talk – something that has been common practice in applied linguistics but may be dealt with differently in CA. In CA the detail of the analysis should indicate how the participants are orienting to the terms of those differentials in aspects of turns at talk. This ethos is developed within the research writings in this book and certain contrastive phenomena in child–adult talk may become obvious across bodies of data, regardless of the specific labels they reference. This editorial draws attention to some of those common themes.

One of the subdivisions imposed in creating the three sections of this book concerns the investigation into more stylised forms of talk – for example, those employed in professional and other institutional settings. CA has shown how much an institution’s ethos and practice may be enacted through talk and, therefore, has proved to be an appealing methodology in applied research. The point at which institutional talk impinges on children’s lives will be an issue for this volume and will encompass aspects of membership, asymmetry in relationships, and displays of the acquisition of cultural (and other) knowledge. To return to the idea of ‘context’ here is to return to a crucial theme in CA. Context is not simply a physical phenomenon but is continuously created and shaped, renewed or changed by each turn in the talk itself. And so an interaction that constitutes a medical consultation or therapy is recognisable as such whether it occurs within a child’s home or within a clinical setting. The child’s identity also may change as seen by the participants’ orientation, turn by turn, from ‘patient’ to ‘child’ to ‘expert’ on his or her own illness.
We will now consider the thematic aspects of the three sections in this book, not just how they cohere but also with an eye to how issues are carried through various chapters across the subdivisions.

Section 1: Interactions between typically developing children and their main carers

The first and longest section is concerned with typically developing children, that is, those not labelled as having any form of developmental disability and engaged in everyday talk with their primary caregivers within the home. The subject matter in these chapters is certainly that of the development of conversational skills and the role of the adult in inculcating the child into appropriate social and linguistic practices. Local sequential issues are always inextricably linked to wider issues of the child’s emerging membership within society, as outlined above. Focus is on the complex and meaningful layering of talk with gaze, gesture and other resources, not just because of the child’s rudimentary and emerging linguistic skills but because these skills are very much part of the communicative framework at any age. The section starts with the inclusion of a hitherto unpublished article that must be viewed as a substantial piece of early childhood CA – a tribute to the late Dr Clare Tarplee, who died suddenly in 1999 just as she was establishing her postdoctoral research career. It addresses the inherent difficulties of using global categories to describe mechanisms of language development in mother–child talk such as ‘feedback’, imported from the field of learnability and the theoretical modelling of mental processes. Instead, by looking in fine detail at displays of intersubjective understandings, on a turn by turn basis, it shows the child’s sensitivity to sequential implicature. The attention to phonetic detail is a marked feature of this chapter and raises interesting questions about the notion of a recognised word or words in child utterances and what constitutes repair.

The work of Corrin (Chapter 2), looking at children of a similar stage of linguistic development to Tarplee, also displays clearly how CA can inform important questions in child language research through microanalysis. Seemingly insignificant and overlooked types of repair are identified as key opportunities to learn about the crucial placement of talk in the context of other moves and, on a broader basis, display the mother as affording apprenticeships in the organisation of social practices central to pragmatic development. The works of Corrin (Chapter 2) and Laakso (Chapter 5) both question the rubric that children’s self-initiated self repair might emerge out of earlier social practices where adults routinely draw the child’s attention to an error. It would seem that this is not inherently the case, but that self-initiated repair comes very early in communicative, protoverbal development, on a par with the former. Both authors focus on instances where there are different orientations during play activity on the part of adult and child and repair may seek to establish a joint focus. In Laakso’s Finnish data the issue of cross-cultural relevance is raised. It would appear that Finnish parents may have a propensity to other-correct very young children, rather than other-initiate a repair by the child, as has been found in similar data from the UK. Repair is revealed as a dynamic system as the child progresses linguistically and in age.

Tony Wootton’s work on a young child’s use of ‘actually’ (Chapter 4) is a very subtle analysis of what might be considered to be a relatively rare and somewhat dispensible
word in a child’s vocabulary. Through highlighting the general features of use, and the enactments of departures from such use, we are shown precisely the insights that a developmental focused conversation analysis can bring. The child’s use of ‘actually’, when looked at very carefully, suggests a line of developmental enquiry well beyond the use of the particular word. The fact that this word is used heavily over a short period of time and then falls away is an interesting exemplar of a child’s active engagement with the processes of word learning and developing usage.

Forrester (Chapter 3) overtly addresses theoretical issues in ethnomethodologically informed CA and its relationship to child developmental research. This major debate is exemplified by a child’s display of orientation to her own ‘half–membership’ in society through her interactions with an adult family member, and raises questions about the implicit or explicit benchmarks of cultural competence. The theme of membership is revisited in several chapters later in the book.

Section 2: Childhood interactions in a wider social world

As children grow they are likely to enter into, or be party to, interactions in a wider range of contexts outside the home, including those that are institutional in nature. Here their entry into society and their place within it is marked by a power ratio of the expert and the less expert (which also occurs between adults but the power relation may be exacerbated by the very status of being a child). Children may need to acquire adaptive interactional skills to accommodate the particular rules and practices of types of institutional talk. Alternatively, as in some instances in this volume, they may resist full cooperation with the institutional morés advanced by the adult (see Hutchby, Chapter 8). One can contrast the relaxed and embedded nature of learning at home as compared to the more direct didacticism of the school setting. There may be some commonalities despite the contextual differences, especially in the construction of repair, which has at its heart the notion of instruction. In Pike’s work (Chapter 9), involving a child and teacher engaged in a mathematical problem, the development of teacher scaffolding of child learning is analysed in fine detail. In repair the adult’s dispreference for other-repair/correction is extant, yet it is shown through the analysis that this dispreference can be self-defeating—and even outside the conscious awareness of both participants involved. Demonstrating an orientation to intersubjective understanding in context is shown to be more complex than often suspected. The theme of teacher–child talk is explored further in Section 3 of this book. The analysis details the tensions inherent in the finely honed interplay between learning aimed at a greater goal, such as maths or language structure, and learning how to interact successfully in the local context. The theme of learning at home and in a more controlled setting is taken up again in the final section of the book where Tykkyläinen (Chapter 12) compares clinical data to that of mother–child interaction.

How far children are involved in, or have control of, discussion of their own lives and needs is illustrated by both Cahill’s analysis of triadic GP consultations regarding a child’s health (Chapter 7) and Hutchby’s work on counselling data (Chapter 8). Despite the move in health psychology towards more open and informed doctor–patient interaction, Cahill’s work highlights the very rare and constrained nature of doctor–child interaction, even when potentially supportive adults (parents) are in attendance. This chapter arises from research directed towards enhancing communication in professional
settings and indicates how doctors could facilitate child participation through the use of address terms and other interactional resources.

Hutchby (Chapter 8) engages with child counselling data and contributes to a theme taken up by both Forrester (Chapter 3) in mundane talk and Sidnell (see below): that is, the significance of ‘half-membership’ rights and how children produce talk such that it displays an orientation to conventions of adult–child membership categories. The difficulties and challenges that children face when interacting in contexts/circumstances in which other social conventions predominate are highlighted. Also discussed are the subtleties involved in inviting a child’s participation in such contexts, and the extent to which ‘feelings talk/therapeutic vision’ is something that children may have no recognition of, or indeed have resistance towards.

The theme of children’s displays of membership categories is discussed further in the work of Sidnell in Section 2 of this volume (Chapter 6). The data arises from a preschool setting and stands out from the other chapters in this section as it concerns children talking together with no adult involvement. He shows that children of different ages may have different interactional concerns and, like Forrester in Chapter 3, urges caution with regard to the explanatory value of developmental stages. Sidnell reminds us of the dangers of developmental ‘hegemony’, in the sense of explaining away change over time, which may simply be appealing to a general or grander-scale developmental theory. Other concurrent concerns need to be unpicked – in particular how children’s skills can be constrained by their own overemphasis on assumed shared knowledge with their conversational partners.

Section 3: Interactions with children who are atypical

The final section of the book comprises a set of chapters looking at interaction with children who are regarded as being ‘atypical’ in that they face challenges to the enactment of what are considered typical communicative processes. The children are variously those with cerebral palsy, autistic spectrum disorder, the deaf and those with specific speech and language difficulties. It cannot be presumed that a developmental ‘lag’ in communication is present and the authors explore issues of different and adaptive practices, rather than those concerning delay. There is evidence that interactional participants may not orient to disability or difference at all, at least in the terms set out in the wider society. The same issues, such as those of intersubjectivity and membership in their societal context, are seen to be have a form of orientation. Certainly a deficit model is routinely eschewed in favour of revealing interactional competencies hitherto overlooked. The role of professional adults, such as teachers and therapists, in supporting language and other learning is presented alongside work on more mundane interactions with peers and parents. How much CA should be used to describe professional interactions with a view to evaluating and subsequently enhancing practice and intervention is a current issue for researchers of institutional talk. Certainly the samples given here are exemplars of the value in teasing out skills and strategies that might otherwise remain implicit and embedded in talk that is obviously aimed at more global targets.

The last chapter in this section (Chapter 13 by Clarke and Wilkinson), is a good example of the problematic contrast of difference with disability, where children with cerebral palsy are using electronic communication aids. This chapter stands out as an
example of children just being themselves rather than being engaged in an overt learning process. The subtle nature of the communication that takes place between children with speech and those using an alternative means of communication, demonstrates how CA studies of children in different contexts can highlight the ‘doing being ordinary’ of everyday interaction for them. In many ways the concerns of these children talking together are very much the same as those in Sidnell’s chapter (Chapter 6), that is, concerns about belonging and acceptance with peers. For CA itself, the use of ‘alternative’, electronic communication challenges contemporary CA conventions such as those regarding the ‘transition relevant pause’ or ‘turn constructional unit’. This chapter also reminds us (as does the chapter by Radford and Mahon) of the care we need to exercise when defining a ‘turn at talk’.

Radford and Mahon (Chapter 11) examine gaze and gesture in classroom interactions between children with language learning needs (deaf children and children with specific language difficulties) and their teachers. The authors’ detailed analysis raises questions about the exact nature of a ‘turn’ in adult–child interactions (particularly in this context) and introduces the notion of a ‘shared’ turn. What constitutes an overlap is subtle and not immediately recognisable as such, when the adult may orient to gesture in overlap as a non-competitive turn-getting move. While the emphasis of the learning experience might be directed to symbolic language, there is clear attention to the relevance of multimodal communicative practices and their contribution to turn construction. The analysis addresses the multilayered nature of adult–child interaction and thus questions such notions as ‘joint attention’ and similar assumptions underpinning more typical adult–child interaction, picking up on issues discussed in earlier chapters.

The deliberate exploitation of multimodal resources by professionals in didactic contexts is revisited in the two remaining chapters: Tykkyläinen (Chapter 12), looking at speech and language therapy; and Stribling and Rae (Chapter 10), looking at complex teaching interactions.

Stribling and Rae look at social practices inherent in establishing intersubjectivity and scaffolding of (learning) with a child who has severe disabilities in a classroom context. The role of the support participant and the sequential consequences of ‘triadic’ autistic child/support person and teacher interaction are explored in fine detail and reveal the organisational subtlety and crucial timing of recipient sensitive management of learning support. The authors point out that, however much the child might be learning about elementary principles of mathematical subtraction, she is equally learning about participation frameworks that can contribute to her learning.

Tykkyläinen, like Cahill, suggests that findings from CA can be used to enhance professional practice: a direct comparison of repair between typical children playing with their mothers and children with SLI (Specific Language Impairment) undertaking tasks in speech and language therapy. The author looks at possible institutional differences in the setting up of learning situations and the differences that are inherent due to the nature of the child’s difficulties. While both sets of children, typical and atypical, made repair initiations only rarely, there were qualitative differences in the ways the language-impaired children sought repair in this institutional setting. The work focuses on the adult use of multimodal resources in support of the child achieving success with linguistic targets. The child with SLI is additionally shown to be sensitive to multimodal cues and to work hard at maintaining intersubjectivity in extended repair sequences.
It is hoped that this volume will further the appreciation of fine detailed analysis as a mechanism for understanding the nature of human communication and its development. The impact of CA as a discipline can only be enhanced by methodological expansion into the developmental and applied areas. To a great extent children can be viewed simply as people interacting, in search of the same or similar outcomes to adults. It is interesting therefore, as analysts, to consider what rules of talk, established through analysis of adult mundane talk, are relevant to children or how, why and within what particular contexts do children learn the skills necessary to engage fully in conversational contexts. By questioning assumptions inherent in macrolevel quantitative and qualitative research, CA has already opened the way to new interdisciplinary collaborations. Certainly we take the view that CA–child research can supplement and enlarge our understanding of children’s behaviour. Hopefully, future developments and collaborations can continue to flourish in the light of new understandings brought about by CA.

Acknowledgements

With grateful thanks to ESRC Grant RES-451-26-0138, which funded the seminar series from which the impetus for this volume arose. Thank you, also, to all the attendees whose stimulating discussion helped us to further the project.

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Section 1

Interactions between typically developing children and their main carers
Chapter 1
Next turn and intersubjectivity in children’s language acquisition

CLARE TARPLEE (1962–1999)

Edited by
Michael Forrester and Anthony Wootton

Introduction

There is now a substantial research tradition within child language study which takes as its focus the language addressed to young children (e.g. Gallaway and Richards 1994). This research tradition has consolidated, developed and broadened in outlook since gathering momentum in response to nativist claims in the 1970s. Over the intervening period, one can chart a shift in emphasis from early concerns with the description of a child-directed register, to a more recent drive to understand the nature of the interactions between child and adult. Such a shift is documented by two review articles within that collection. Snow, charting changes between the late 1970s and early 1990s, writes, ‘the analysis of input moved from being located in the study of registers to being located in the study of discourse analysis’ (1994: 6); while Pine reports recognition of ‘the need to consider the interactive context in which CDS [child-directed speech] occurs if we are to understand exactly how it operates’ (1994: 18). Commentaries on the field, then, suggest that work in this research tradition can now lay claim to a sensitivity to the workings of the conversational interactions between adult and child which are the site of children’s language development.

A particular impetus for research into the language addressed to children has come from learnability theory and the ‘no negative evidence’ debate (e.g. Brown and Hanlon 1970; Morgan et al. 1995), which concerns the sufficiency with which children learning language are supplied with indications that their ungrammatical productions are indeed ungrammatical. In itself, the point at issue here is quite specific, and applicable to a particular research enterprise. It amounts to a logical problem pertaining to the child’s ability to recover from the overgeneralisation of grammatical rules in the deduction of an adult-like grammar – a debate that informs the extent to which innate capacities are built into theoretical models of language acquisition. These concerns have provided fuel for a long-running debate which has become much wider in scope. Following a catalyst article by Brown and Hanlon (1970), some have endorsed their finding that children do
not receive negative feedback following their ungrammatical productions (e.g. Morgan and Travis 1989; Marcus 1993; Morgan et al. 1995), while others have argued that they do (e.g. Bohannon and Stanowicz 1988; Moerk 1991; Farrar 1992; Furrow et al. 1993; Penner 1997). Following Hirsh-Pasek et al. (1984), some have widened the scope of what might constitute negative evidence and looked at more implicit forms of feedback (e.g. Demetras et al. 1986; Morgan and Travis 1989; Saxton 1993, 1997). Some studies have considered the role of feedback in relation to phonological and lexical development (Bohannon and Stanowicz 1988; Huttenlocher et al. 1991; Harris 1992), while others have considered similar issues in relation to atypical populations of learners, such as children with specific language impairment (Nelson et al. 1996) and deaf children (Harris 1992). It is striking, however, that in this broader arena the terms of the debate remain those pertaining to theoretical modelling. These studies make abundant use of terms like stimulus, input and feedback – terms which implicitly present language development as a computational mental process of grammar deduction.

What one finds, then, in the literature, is a debate which on the one hand claims to value an understanding of the nature of adult–child discourse and to locate language development within social interaction – while on the other claims to be steeped in terms and concepts which locate language development firmly within the individual child’s head. What I want to do in this chapter is to take one of those terms – feedback – and consider some of the limitations of this concept for understanding both how adult–child interaction works and how the nature of that interaction may have a part to play in facilitating children’s language development. By presenting an interactional analysis of some data, I hope to indicate how a greater understanding of the working of conversational interaction, as uncovered by those working in the tradition of ethnomethodological conversation analysis (see, for example, Levinson 1983; Heritage 1984a; Wootton 1989) might illuminate and advance this important area of child language research.

Feedback

Feedback is a term which has been imported into studies of adult–child discourse from theoretical models of learning and deduction. In terms of sensitivity to the dynamics of social interaction, it takes us a step further than input (still heavily used in these studies), which implies that an adult’s contributions to an interactional adult–child exchange can be stripped away and summed as an entity, each contribution divorced from the local interactional context in which it was embedded. Input, in other words, represents a one-way phenomenon. Feedback, on the other hand, incorporates a recognition of the two-way nature of dyadic talk, since it describes a relationship between two (generally consecutive) turns – the relationship of an adult’s response to a prior child production. But it is severely limited as an analytic concept applied to interactive talk, since its bounds are set at those two turns. The concept allows no consideration of the part played by later turns in the emergent relationships between earlier, adjacent ones.

Let me illustrate some of the problems caused by this limitation inherent in the concept of feedback by considering how the concept is employed in the work of Moerk (1991), whose work is more sequentially sensitive than that of many in the field. Moerk
sets out to refute the claim, often made in the literature, that ‘negative evidence’ is not a feature of adult–child talk. He does this by presenting numerous transcript examples of sequences in which adults correct children’s linguistic errors. The wealth of examples presented is effective both in demonstrating the prevalence of these kinds of sequences, and in broadening out the rather constricted view of these issues as presented by learnability theorists. The analysis is nonetheless limited, however, by the fact that the ‘feedback cycles’ which Moerk illustrates consist principally of just two turns – an ungrammatical utterance of some kind from the child and a correction of some kind from the carer. There is (in most cases) no consideration of the child’s response to this ‘feedback’ turn, and thus no attention is paid to how different kinds of ‘corrective’ carer responses are treated by the child. This limitation has at least two consequences. Firstly, it prevents us from gaining any understanding of how different carer responses may carry different implications for what the child does next. Consideration of such matters could in turn help us to understand just how certain adult utterances present usable information to the child. Secondly, omission from the analysis of the child’s response to these adult turns also leaves Moerk with no warrant for categorising the adult utterances as corrections – since we cannot tell whether the child treated them as such. This categorisation, then, can be done only on an intuitive basis. Since a concern of this work is with establishing the extent of corrective information available to the child, this omission is a significant one.

A further problem with the concept of feedback is one which has beset studies in this area. Adult response types have typically been categorised according to their structural relationship to preceding child turns. Categories such as ‘recasts’ – some instances of which function as corrections and others of which do not – are typically used. Some work (Marcus 1993; Morgan et al. 1995) has identified a problem with this – but the way in which the problem has been formulated fails, in my view, to address what is really the issue. In essence, the problem is conceived by these researchers as being a problem for the child, rather than a problem of approach. Morgan et al. (1995), for instance, argue that, since recasts are not easily discriminable as a class by children, who will also be unable to identify recasts as corrections (since some are not), recasts are unlikely to supply the child with any ‘evidence’ to make use of. The implication here is that, in looking for ways in which adult responses may provide useful information to the language learning child, we are simply looking for identifiable classes of response types which act as a signal for the child by routinely marking ungrammatical utterances. We are looking, in other words, for a signalling code which the child can crack.

What I hope to illustrate in this chapter is that we cannot afford to ignore the nature of adult utterances in the way that this line of research appears to do. It might very well matter whether an adult produces a clarification question or a correction, for instance, since these actions implicate different next actions on the part of the child, and in particular offer different kinds of opportunities for the child’s rehearsal of target items. The problem is that the categories typically employed in feedback studies are formulated in terms of the kinds of grammatical information they contain. Instead of formulating categories in terms of the kind of grammatical information they contain I hope to illustrate the benefits of looking at adult turns as interactional objects, objects which are, on that basis, identifiable to the child.
Method

The analysis which follows makes use of the procedures of conversation analysis, and draws on some important insights uncovered by that tradition, pertaining to the relationship between a turn at talk and its prior. My intention is to illustrate how we might arrive at a clearer understanding of the relationship between adult turns and child turns in child–adult talk – and to suggest how we might bring such an understanding to bear on what is a fundamental debate in child language – the role of ‘negative evidence’.

The data presented is taken from a study of naturally occurring dyadic interactions taking place between normally developing children aged between 1;7 and 2;3 and their carers (see Tarplee 1993). The recordings were made by the carers themselves in their own homes, and at the time of recording, the carers were unaware that their own part in the talk was to be an object of study. The data extracts presented have been transcribed according to the notation conventions generally adopted in conversation analytic work (see Atkinson and Heritage 1984; ix–xvi), with the additional use of symbols of the IPA enclosed within square brackets.

The analysis begins with data drawn from a particular setting – that of picture labelling from books. Since the interest here is to identify features of the social interactions in which a young child engages which might facilitate for the child the language-learning task, then an appropriate place to start looking is at an instructional activity. Picture labelling from books is clearly an activity which is often engaged in by carers and young children, and featured in all the recordings that were gathered for the study. Picture labelling is an activity where linguistic testing, instruction and rehearsal take place naturally.

Analysis

Picture labelling as an instructional routine

Picture labelling is clearly an activity in which a young child’s linguistic skills can be directly addressed and worked on, and it is worth considering just how this ‘instructional’ work is achieved. Extracts 1.1 and 1.2 display picture-labelling talk.

Extract 1.1

1 Adult: what’s: that
   (1.8)
2 Child: e:lephant =
3 Adult: = (hh)a:t’s ri:ght

Extract 1.2

1 Adult: a:nd what’s: that
   (3.3)
2 Child: [ba:dəŋər’tʃauɡəls]
   (.)
In both cases we can see a basic three-part structure to the labelling sequence, which has been indicated by numbering in the left-hand margin: there is an elicitation from the carer, a label from the child, and in third position a receipt from the adult of the child’s label. In Extract 1.2, the adult’s *no that’s the rhinoceros that’s the*—is a turn which contains both a third part to one labelling sequence and a first part to a next. *No that’s the rhinoceros* (with contrastive stress – by means of on-syllable pitch movement – on *that’s*) receives the child’s erroneous first label, while in the same turn *that’s the*—(on level pitch in mid-range) serves as a ‘fill-the-blank’ type elicitation, inviting the child to produce a repaired attempt at the label. We can see in these two examples that the third-position receipt can either affirm the child’s label (*that’s right* in Extract 1.1, *hippopotamus yes* in Extract 1.2), or it can reject it (*no that’s the rhinoceros* in Extract 1.2). We can also see that a third-position receipt which affirms that a child’s label can be designed in different ways. *That’s right* in Extract 1.1 affirms without reproducing a version of the label, while *hippopotamus yes* in Extract 1.2 combines a version of the label with a confirmation marker. Extract 1.3 illustrates a third design for affirming receipts found in the corpus:

Extract 1.3

1 Adult:  o [oh] who’s that
Child: [ëh]
(1.0)
2 Child: li:on
3 Adult: li:on
(5.0)
Child:  °norah°

Here affirmation is done without any confirmation marker of any kind, but simply with a version of the label.

The carer’s receipting turn in third position in a labelling sequence

When considering how ‘instructional’ work is accomplished in these labelling sequences, it is clear that the turn which regularly occupies third position in these three-part structures – the adult’s evaluative receipt of a child’s labelling turn – is of central importance. This kind of turn within a three-part sequence has often been identified in the literature as characteristic of classroom and other styles of pedagogic interaction.
This is because one accomplishment of an evaluative receipt in third turn position after a question is to specify that question as having held a particular status. Searle (1969:66) makes the distinction between what he terms ‘real’ and ‘exam’ questions in talk:

In real questions the speaker wants to know (find out) the answer; in exam questions, the speaker wants to know if the hearer knows.

Heritage (1984a) nicely demonstrates the options available to a questioner to constitute a question as one or other of these alternative actions, by virtue of the action that the questioner takes directly after a co-participant’s answer. Since, as Heritage (1984a: 286) points out,

In a ‘real’ question, the questioner proposes to be ignorant about the substance of the question and . . . projects the intended answerer to be knowledgeable about the matter.

Then questioners of ‘real’ questions typically receipt their answers with the use of a particle like oh which, as Heritage elsewhere explicates (Heritage 1984b), marks its speaker as having undergone some change of state in knowledge or orientation. In mundane conversation one therefore finds three-part question-answer-receipt sequences of the following form:

(Frankel: TC:1:1:13–14:ST) (Heritage 1984b: 308)

S: hh When d’ju get out. Christmas week or the week before Christmas
G: Uh::m two or three days before [Ch ]ristmas,
S: [Oh :,]

In such a sequential position, the use of oh marks its speaker as having undergone a change of state from ignorance to knowledge, through receipt of a co-participant’s answer, and therefore as NOT having been in possession of this knowledge when the question was asked.

By contrast, a third-position receipt which evaluates an answer to a question, proposes instead that the questioner has undergone no such change of state of knowledge, but has been already in possession of the information elicited by the question. An evaluative receipt, then, types a question as having been of the ‘exam’ type – a question produced in order to test its recipient’s knowledge.

There is nothing new in the association of this structure of talk with instructional activity: the recurrence of this kind of questioning sequence in classically pedagogic settings such as in the interaction between teacher and pupils in classroom lessons has often been noted by researchers working in different research traditions. This three-part structure has been described and associated with instructional modes of interaction (e.g. Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; McHoul 1978; Mehan 1979; Lerner 1995), however, few researchers have been concerned with a systematic explication of just how this kind of sequence accomplishes instructional work.

A third-position evaluative receipt after a question characterises the questioner not only as being already in possession of the information being solicited, but also, by virtue of having access to that information, as being in a position to measure the correctness of the elicited answer. This means that the child is being provided with a particularly important kind of ‘feedback’ here, over and above the message that elephant and hippopotamus are appropriate labels and rhinoceros is not. The adult is standing as arbiter over the linguistic appropriacy of the child’s productions, and means that the
child’s answer itself, framed in this way, becomes a particular kind of object. It is not an informing, as many answers to questions are, but a display. The child’s turn in a picture book labelling sequence, since it implicates an evaluative response from the adult, takes on the status of a performance, a presentation of certain skills, offered to the adult for acceptance or rejection – offered, that is, to be worked on in some way. In the examples we have so far seen, it is lexical knowledge that is being tested. A child’s labelling turns, then, present a display of certain of the child’s linguistic abilities, and explicitly offer them to the adult to be worked on in those terms.

It was seen earlier that there are essentially two kinds of work which the adult’s evaluative receipt may perform. It may explicitly accept and affirm the child’s prior action, or it may indicate non-acceptance and instigate repair on it. By means of the regular occurrence of the adult’s third-position evaluative receipt, one or other of these two courses of action is routinely taken. An important consequence of this is that the child is given reduced opportunities for a critical monitoring of her own turns, since responsibility for such monitoring is, by virtue of that third-position turn, conferred upon the adult. In the corpus, the children were very rarely seen to initiate repair on their own labelling utterances. As the adult’s evaluative receipt regularly follows very swiftly from the child’s labelling attempt, without delay, then actual opportunities for this kind of initiation are minimised – just as the expectation of its occurrence may inhibit the critical monitoring that would motivate it. One kind of ‘feedback’ available to the child in these sequences, then, is that the charge of monitoring the child’s utterances for her linguistic ‘correctness’ is taken away from the child and laid at the door of the adult – a feature that would seem to be crucial to this talk’s pedagogic nature.

There is also another kind of ‘feedback’ implicit in a carer’s evaluative receipt which follows a child’s labelling utterance. Consider Extract 1.4.

Extract 1.4

1 Child: [tʁadɪθə]
2 → Adult: tee:th
3 → Child: [tʃɪθʰ]

Here the carer follows the child’s initial attempt at the label teeth with a repetition of the label – a turn design we have already seen accomplishing the work of evaluative receipt. However, compare this extract with Extract 1.3, in which, following the carer’s repetition of the child’s label, there is a five-second silence and the child moves on to label another picture. In other words, the repetition affirms the child’s label and ends that particular labelling sequence. In Extract 1.4, on the other hand, the carer’s version of the label prompts a second, repaired, attempt at teeth by the child. Examples such as Extract 1.4 show us that the picture-labelling activity presents opportunities, not only for working on the child’s lexical skills, but for engaging with the child’s developing articulatory skills as well. The carer’s utterance of teeth serves as an affirmative receipt as far as the lexical choice made by the child is concerned, but it invites repair at a phonetic level. This example also shows us that the labelling activity is not just concerned with the testing of a child’s linguistic skills: it offers opportunities for rehearsal of development skills on the part of the child. And in terms of ‘feedback’ made available...
to the child, a consideration of Extracts 1.3 and 1.4 makes apparent that what looks to be a similar object – a carer’s repetition of a child’s prior labelling attempt – can do two very different kinds of work, and have very different implications for what follows it. In Extract 1.3, the repetition affirms the child’s lexical choice, requires no further work from the child and effectively ends the labelling sequence. In Extract 1.4, by contrast, the repetition invites the child to have another go at articulating the label. As well as the ‘feedback’ inherent in these responses (that the child’s production of lion in Extract 1.3 is lexically appropriate and articulatorily adequate, while the child’s production of teeth in Extract 1.4 is lexically appropriate but articulatorily leaves room for improvement), it is also important to consider how the child is able to distinguish between instances of a carer’s repetitions which make one rather than the other of these two courses of action (end of talk on a given picture versus phonetically repaired attempt at the label) relevant. (See Tarplee 1996, for an attempt to tease out some of the subtleties of this distinction in prosodic terms.)

**Picture labelling: summary**

In picture labelling, both lexical and articulatory skills are worked on, not only by being tested, but also by rehearsal. It can be seen that the carer’s third-position receipt in a labelling sequence is crucial to this instructional work, and provides ‘feedback’ on at least three levels. Firstly, it can explicitly affirm or reject the appropriacy of the child’s labelling attempt (both in lexical and articulatory terms). This is a similar kind of ‘feedback’ to that most often attended to in the literature (although there the concern is usually with syntactic appropriacy). Secondly, there is a level of ‘feedback’ which the literature usually misses. This is that the carer’s response to the child’s utterance has implications for what the child does next. Thirdly, the fact that there is this kind of evaluative response at all has implications for the whole tenor of the talk, since it casts carer and child into the roles of instructor and instructee, reducing opportunities for the child to engage in a critical self-monitoring of her own utterances.

The remainder of the analysis considers similar features in ordinary adult–child conversations.

**The incidence of labelling sequences outside picture book settings**

A first point to note about the conversational data is that labelling sequences taking the same three-part structure as in picture book settings are found prompted by play with jigsaw puzzles, crayons and toy animals. The adults and children in the corpus also regularly engage in similar testing and naming activities, centring on people and objects figuring in the child’s recent experience (Extract 1.5).

**Extract 1.5**

1   Adult: can you remember who came yesterday ian

     (1.2)

     Child: m:a:mmy