Cognition and conversation

COGNITION AND CONVERSATION

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Abstract

This paper considers the different approaches to cognition in conversation analysis and discursive psychology. Its points are illustrated through a critical but appreciative consideration of a paper by Drew in which he uses conversation analysis to identify 'cognitive moments' in interaction. Problems are identified with Drew's analysis and the conclusions he draws. In particular, he (a) presupposes a dualistic division between depth and surface; (b) makes circular inferences from conventional conversational patterns to underlying cognitive entities; (c) presupposes (rather than demonstrates) that the underlying cognitive entities influence conduct. It is argued that none of these things is required by conversation analysis; rather Drew is imposing cognitivist assumptions on conversational materials. Discursive psychology's approach focuses on cognitive issues in terms of how they are constructed and oriented to in interaction; its virtues are pressed.

Over the past 15 years discursive psychology (henceforth DP) has developed an alternative to the cognitivism that is the staple of the modern discipline of psychology. It is also pervasive in sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis and the 'discourse processes' tradition (Edwards, 1997; Potter & Edwards, 2001). Cognitivism is a general approach that treats human action as a product of cognition. Within cognitivism discourse is treated as the *expression* of thoughts, intentions or some other entity from the cognitive thesaurus. At it strongest, action and interaction is treated as *only* explicable in terms of cognitive precursors (for a general overview of cognitive psychology and interaction research see Potter & te Molder, 2005).

In contrast to cognitivism, DP has a very different way of conceptualizing psychological issues. Instead of treating discourse as dependent upon, and explicable by way of, cognitive objects and processes, it starts by studying the way things appear as participants' concerns. That is, it treats mind, personality, experience, emotions, intentions and so on in terms of how they are *constructed* and *oriented to* in interaction. Following this general programmatic DP has included studies:

1. Of the procedures through which psychological implications of talk are managed. For example, this might consider how motives are established or memories are discounted as flawed (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992);
2. Of the practical use of terms from the cognitive thesaurus (e.g. Edwards, 1999 on anger and jealousy);
3. That respecify the central cognitive research topics of social cognition, cognitive psychology and cognitive science (including scripts and schemata, categories, attitudes and beliefs, emotions – see Edwards, 2005);

4. Of psychological methods in practice and the way they constitute their objects and produce them as the property of individuals (for an example, see Antaki, 2005).

Work in discursive psychology has been profoundly influenced by conversation analysis (CA) which offered the most analytically powerful approach for dealing with interactional materials.[1] From the outset CA eschewed cognitivism. At the end of his very first published lecture Sacks (1992) suggested that analysis would be most effective without worrying how fast people think or even whether they are thinking at all: 'just try to come to terms with how it is that the thing comes off' (p. 11). His emphasis was on how the visibility/hearability of interaction is crucial to its operation, with 'cognition' (mind, thoughts, knowledge etc.) relevant through how it is heard and seen. For example, a speaker can display 'shared knowledge' with another by completing another's utterance – this can show the recipient that the speakers 'know what's on each other's minds' (Sacks, 1992: 147).

For the most part CA research has followed Sacks' injunction to not worry about people's thinking. This has been facilitated by its disciplinary position based in sociology. While CA researchers developed an elaborate and somewhat critical approach to institutions (e.g. Drew & Heritage, 1992) they rarely focused on psychology and cognition (but see Drew, 1995; Heritage, 1990/1; Mandelbaum & Pomerantz, 1990; Pomerantz, 1990/1; Schegloff, 1991).

This is the context in which Hedwig te Molder and I conceived of the project of engaging CA and DP researchers and focusing them on the status of cognition (the outcome of which is a collection: te Molder & Potter, 2005). The CA contributions provide a sophisticated and analytically based take on a wide range of important issues. They highlight the subtle and complex ways in which psychological matters

enter into interaction. For example, Heritage (2005) considers the way cognition is 'embodied' in interaction using the change of state particle 'oh' and Hopper (2005), in perhaps his last published piece before his untimely death, teases away at how we can identify the operation of strategies in a set of phone calls. However, in this short note I wish to consider the arguments in the chapter by Paul Drew (2005).

Drew's is a rich and carefully argued chapter that rewards repeated reading. At its heart is an attempt to provide an analytically grounded identification of speaker confusion. Drew makes the challenging claim to have identified confusion generated by the confounding of expectations derived from conversational norms. Moreover, he suggests that this confusion is *state of mind* – something that is neither commented upon or oriented to as confusion, nor used as a display of confusion in some action. Despite the centrality of 'confusion' to Drew's chapter, I want to concentrate on one of his more 'straightforward' examples to give a clearer illustration of the issues at stake. I believe that if the points are telling with this example they also will be in the case of 'confusion'. My aim will be to offer a critical appreciation that will both recognise the important and original contribution Drew makes to a study of psychology in discourse, but also caution as to a possible drift into cognitivism. By focusing on this study I hope to highlight the potential pitfalls of one approach that proposes to use conversation analytic techniques to identify 'cognitive states'. These are difficult issues at the leading edge of new research, which makes it worthwhile trying to be as precise as possible as to what might be involved in identifying cognition through an analysis of talk.

Drew and invitation declinations

In its broadest form Drew suggests that although conversation is normatively organized there are 'cognitive moments' in interaction where 'cognitive states manifestly come to the interactional surface, although they are not overtly expressed' (p. 170). He takes the example of invitation refusals (declinations). He notes that studies of talk have identified a regular structure to the way invitations are turned down – these usually involve three elements:

[Appreciation] + [(mitigated) Declination] + [Account]

Drew suggests, speculatively, that the structure may 'enable speakers to disguise their actual states of mind (what their actual intentions are, what they really feel, etc.)' (p. 162). He also notes that the regularity of this structure (combined with more general elements of dispreferred 2nd turns such as delay and 'well' prefacing) allows recipients of declinations to spot them very early on. He uses the following example to illustrate the claim:

1	**Emma:**		Wanna c'm do:wn 'av [a bah:ta] lu:nch w]ith me?=
2	**Nancy:**		[◦It's js] ( )◦]
3	**Emma:**		=Ah gut s'm beer'n stu:ff,
4		→	(0.3)
5	**Nancy:**	→	Wul yer ril sweet hon: uh:m
6			(.)
7	**Emma:**	→	[Or d'y] ou'av] sup'n [else ◦( )◦
8	**Nancy:**		[L e t-] I :] hu. [n:No: i haf to: uh call Roul's
9			mother, h I told'er I:'d call'er this morning . . .

Drew suggests that Nancy's refusal starts to become apparent very early. The delay on line 4 and the [Appreciation] on line 5 are both characteristics of refusals.[2] And

Emma can be seen to orient to these features in line 7 as she offers a potential [Account] for Nancy not coming. Drew glosses this in the following manner:

> This is a 'cognitive moment', in a double sense: in order to make that move, before Nancy makes explicit her declination, Emma has to have *realized* that Nancy might be going to decline her invitation; she thereby *reads Nancy's mind*, attributing that *intention* to her (p. 170, emphasis in original).

Crucially, Drew treats Emma's turn in line 7 as *contingent* on the *mental state* of *realizing* that Nancy is to decline the invitation. I will make a series of observations about the analysis and its difficulties.

Declinations and cognitions

1. The first thing to note is what Drew is *not* claiming. Again, he is not claiming that the structure of the interaction allows the analyst to tell how Nancy 'regards' Emma's invitation. A standard declination structure can disguise precisely that. Declinations will have the same structure if, in colloquial terms, you 'really' 'want' to go, but can't, or if you 'really' don't 'want' to go, but can't get out of it.

2. The second thing to note is that Drew is developing a dualistic picture here. He distinguishes conduct from state of mind, and uses the classic depth/surface figuration of cognitivism where cognitive states can 'come to the interactional surface' or remain 'disguised'. This is a particular problem when the topic of the chapter is the status of cognition – for it presupposes a position on the very thing that is at issue. It seems to be *assuming* a position that Sacks, Garfinkel, Wittgenstein, Coulter and Edwards, in somewhat different ways, have disputed (see Coulter, 2005 for a recent discussion). In effect, Drew is accepting a cognitivist picture which has the mental state hidden deep in the person behind a possibly

disguising veneer of actual conduct. This is at odds with a picture that treats the distinction between, say, what was thought and what was done as a way of talking.

3. Although Drew is not claiming that analysis of interaction can allow the researcher to tell whether a speaker *wants* to decline an invitation or not, he is claiming that, because of the standard patterning of invitation refusals, the *intention* to decline (wanted or not, reluctant or not) can be apparent before the explicit turn down. In his terms, the organization of refusals provides a 'cognitive moment' for 'mind reading', allowing Emma to 'realize' that Nancy 'intends' to decline.

It is clear that Drew has brilliantly marshalled the findings and apparatus of CA to show that the declination is predictable from prior conversational elements (the delay and appreciation). And, furthermore, it provides the means for identifying Emma's turn in line 7 as oriented to the signs of an impending declination. That is, it grounds analysis in speakers' own orientations. However, to claim that Emma is reading the *intention* to decline in Nancy's *mind* is going further. It is not clear that the *analysis* supports that extension.

4. One way of thinking about this is to consider how the notion of intention should be understood. There are certainly important traditions of psychology where intentions are treated as mental events that are (somewhat) causally related to subsequent actions (Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour is a prominent example). However, the tradition of thinking inspired by Wittgenstein tends to treat the term intention as part of a particular language game (Anscombe, 1957). Again, this is to treat 'intention' as a *way of talking* rather than a referential term for a mental state.

5. Another way of thinking about this is to consider the relationship between the delay (line 4), 'well' prefacing (line 5) and [Appreciation] (line 5) on the one

hand, and the [Declination] (lines 8-9) on the other. Given the conventional nature of this relationship – given, that is, that the early elements are parts of the design of declinations – it is potentially circular to treat these elements as signs of an *intention* to do the act of declining. In effect, part of a declination is used as evidence of an intention to the do the declination which is, in turn (and here is the circle) evidence of the intention. Does it not make at least as much sense to say instead that this is conventionally how declinations are done and, from an interactional perspective, even though nothing about a cognitive state is 'articulated or explicitly referred to' these elements are not obviously less informative than an explicit phrase such as 'I am not able to come' would be?

That is not to say that the distinction between what is explicit and what is not is irrelevant to participants and analysts. Indeed, *how* actions are done indirectly, *why* indirection might be used, and *what* might count as indirection have all been topics within CA (e.g. Drew, 1984; Schegloff, 1988). However, the distinction between explicit and implicit is different from, and does not commit the analyst to, the distinction between state of mind (intention) and action (declination).

6. Drew's analysis is not just cognitivist in making a mind/conduct distinction. It makes a further characteristically cognitivist move in treating Emma's conduct as *contingent on* a state of her mind. (Note that this is not one loose formulation in Drew's chapter, he uses it 4 times on page 169 alone). The analysis does not merely make a mind/conduct distinction, then, but it makes the conduct *dependent* on mind. In this case, Emma has had a *realization* and that realization *leads to* her offering an account anticipating declination (line 7). The evidence for the *realization* is the set of conventional declination preliminaries; i.e. conventional conduct on Nancy's behalf.

It is far from clear, however, that this analysis provides sufficient evidence for a particular 'state of mind' leading to (causing? influencing?) Emma's actions. There *is* the interactional evidence of Emma's account (line 7) which 'anticipates'[3] Nancy's declination, and its placing in the sequence *is* evidence that it is oriented to the conventional features of the declination that have become apparent. But it is a cognitivist contention that somewhere around line 6 (presumably) Emma has a 'state of mind' that generates the account on line 7. *That* is not demonstrated by the CA. Note that this does not show that Nancy does *not* have such a 'state of mind'. There might be further analytic moves to establish such a thing, or to show its absence; or there might be conceptual arguments about the coherence (or not) of that object. In general, I am suggesting that Drew is constructing the 'cognitive state' on the basis of the sorts of public features of conduct that are available to the participants and then treating it as both separable from conduct, but nevertheless influencing it.

7. I noted in point 1 above that Drew is not claiming to show how Nancy feels about Emma's invitation; that is, to show what her 'actual state of mind' is. So it is notable that in cognitive terms Drew's analysis is of half a mental state – her state of 'realizing' is combined with either 'reluctance' (maybe) or 'relief'. If these are 'cognitive states' do they sit nicely alongside one another? Is realizing in some sort of realizing/reluctance mix the same as realizing in a realizing/relief mix? Or could it be that there is a surface of actual conduct, with 'realizing' as one mental layer underneath, and with 'reluctance' (say) as a deeper and more hidden layer of the mind underneath that? All of this raises, in turn, the issue of whether there might be another unconscious layer in turn below that (on that kind of notion see Billig, 2005). Furthermore, do these states or layers conflict or interact? This line of

questioning seems odd, and yet seems to be a consequence of the analytic line that Drew has taken.

The vocabulary of 'cognitive state' and 'realization'

It is worth focusing briefly on Drew's vocabulary of cognition, and in particular the terms 'cognitive state' and 'realization'.

What is a 'cognitive state'? The idea of a 'state of mind' or 'state of consciousness' goes back as a technical term to the mid 18th Century. For example 'The Will is that State of Mind, which is immediately previous to, and causes, those express Acts of Memory, Fancy and bodily Motion that are termed voluntary' (1749 D. Hartley quoted the OED, 1989). However, the figuration is no doubt influenced by the wide currency of recent cognitive science where 'mental states' are a commonplace object of study (e.g. Liang, et al., 2001). Since the 1950s notions of 'cognition' having 'states' which could be features of 'systems' made up of 'units' or 'modules' that process 'information' became common, and more recently computer science has been an important source of mental tropes (see Gardner, 1985).

What is a 'realization'? The vernacular term 'realize' has a range of practical and interactional roles.[4] It did not become established in the language for the abstract scientific work of psychological analysis (although it can of course be pressed into such service); rather it evolved in and for the practices of talking and writing. Note, for example, the way in the following example Skip constructs a failure to realize as an account for destroying the fingerprints that might have helped identify a burglar:

Holt:X(C)2:1:6:8

1 **Lesley:** They ca:n't fi:nd any um (1.3) any fingerprints,
2 (0.6)

3 **Skip**: No:

4 (1.9)

5 **Skip**: No well I (.) I would've obliterated them anyway (.)

6 → without realizing

Skip counters the deliberation suggested by the descriptive term 'obliterated' by indicating that he would not have '*realized*' that the fingerprints were there to destroy. It is here a useful term for separating conduct from what was 'intended', and thereby managing culpability. This is more of DP approach, to focus on the activities performed by cognitive notions in contrast to reading through them to underlying states. At this same time this practical role can generate complications for those wishing to use the terms as parts of analysts' descriptions of talk.

Discussion – conversation and cognition

What I have tried to show in this brief discussion of one example is the way interaction research can presuppose a traditional cognitivist picture in its analysis. The point is that, in this case at least, it is done more by analysts' fiat than achieved as an analytical discovery in the materials. These are very complex issues with a range of ambiguities. Nevertheless, I suggest that Drew is (a) using depth surface separation; (b) constructing depth in the language of cognitivism ('cognitive state') and; (c) treating that 'latent' 'cognitive state' as influencing the 'interactional surface'. In making this argument I have been attempting to highlight the difficulty for even the most sophisticated of interaction analysts in moving from the organization of talk to the existence of cognitive states.

Part of the difficulty in performing this kind of analysis is because the available vocabulary of semi-technical terms such as 'cognitive state' or vernacular psychological terms such as 'realize' is so limited. The descriptive language that we

ourselves have available as analysts bound up with cognitivist assumptions. And if we abandon that language we often end up with language that suggests mechanical or causal processes.

In CA the solution to this dilemma has been to use constructions for description and analysis of interaction such as 'orient to' or 'display' which suggest action and even intention but do not depend on a particular image of cognition. Drew wonders at one point in his chapter whether in 'conversation analysis we sometimes use 'orient to' in a way which perhaps stands for (disguises?) a cognitive state' (p. 170). Whether it does this or not (and clearly the above argument leads me to doubt any simple correlation between the use of such terms and mental states), the strength of these constructions is that they allow the analyst to describe interaction without assuming any particular version of cognition, or even that cognition in any of its range of technical senses, is taking place at all. Furthermore, vernacular psychological words such as 'realize' or 'understand' can be used in ways that do not presuppose a cognitive picture (as Wittgenstein and others have long pointed out). They can be pressed into analytic service without importing a full scale cognitivist metaphysics (for more on this, see Potter, 1998).

None of these points should detract from the interest of Drew's analysis of the material, and in particular its demonstration of psychological concerns as part of interaction. CA is still placed to make a major contribution to this enterprise but, at least in this case, it is not clear that it has provided support for a distinctively cognitive analysis.

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[1] Although strongly influenced by CA, DP has also drawn heavily on both constructionist thinking in the sociology of scientific knowledge tradition and rhetorical thinking. For explication of the role of these ideas in DP see Billig (1996), Potter (1996) and Wooffitt (2005).

[2] Drew does not make anything of line 2 – it could be that Nancy is displaying trouble with this invitation even earlier than line 4.

[3] 'Anticipates' is Drew's term for what Emma does in line 7 (p. 170); note the way that it is here not used as a mental state description but as a description of a public speech activity.

[4] Interestingly, the psychological sense of 'realize' (understand or grasp clearly) appeared more than 150 years after the sense of bringing something into being (OED, 2nd Ed., 1989). We might speculate as to how far the mental sense developed as a parasite on the non-mental (cf. Edwards, 1997).