ConversationalAnalysis

Author: Numa Markee

Publisher: Lawerence Erlbaum Associates

Reviewer: Elizabeth Skarakis-Doyle & Michelle Truppe
School of Communication Sciences and Disorders
University of Western Ontario

In Conversational Analysis, the author makes the case for the use of conversational analysis (CA) techniques in the study of second language acquisition (SLA). The author seeks to redress current limitations in the SLA literature. She is particularly concerned with the emphasis in that literature upon conversational adjustments as a means for creating 'comprehensible input', and further that such input is considered the driving source in acquiring a new language. Research to date has not supported such a connection. The author critiques cognitive based theories of the comprehensibility of input in SLA. She asserts that acquiring meaning in a new language goes beyond a formal lexical level to encompass systemic, interactional and schematic knowledge which are all socially constructed. The book is intended for researchers and consumers of research (e.g., students and ESL teachers) in second language acquisition and sociolinguistics. Unfortunately, the book has only tangential relevance to the issues of language acquisition that concern Speech Language Pathologists.

In this eight chapter book, the author begins by providing an overview of research and theory in SLA then moves to a description of conversational analysis and its theoretical background in the first three chapters. Specific topics from conversational analysis are provided in chapters 4-6 and their potential contribution to understanding SLA is discussed. These topics include the sequential organization of conversation, turn-taking and repair sequences. In chapters 7 and 8, two case studies are presented to illustrate the contribution of conversational analysis to understand SLA in conditions of comprehended input which has been hypothesized as central to learning a new language and non comprehended input. The cases come from the study of conversational interactions among non native speakers in a university ESL classroom.

In the first two chapters, the author describes the three main theories of second language acquisition and through an examination of their implicit assumptions from a conversation analysis perspective identifies the limitations in the current literature and its approach to SLA. She introduces ethnomethodological analyses to the study of SLA and provides a rationale for the use of qualitative approaches to such investigations. Once the theoretical and methodological foundation has been laid, the author moves to practical issues of recording, transcribing, and analyzing data in the third chapter. Ethical considerations such a confidentiality and sensitivity to the participants' manner of speech (i.e., non-standard pronunciations) are also emphasized. She supports an emic approach to CA which derives the units of language to be analyzed from the data themselves rather than basing them upon a priori categories. This approach is consistent with her ethnomethodological perspective which is apparently a new contribution to the investigation of SLA.

In the following three chapters, several elements of conversation, i.e., sequential organization, turn-taking, and repair are used to exemplify the potential of CA to illuminate second language learning. In the Chapter 4 review of the sequential organization of conversation, Markee refers to a model of comprehension that focuses on the interaction between schematic, interactional, systemic, and lexical knowledge as relevant to conversational analysis. Specifically, she addresses how interactional knowledge is used as meaningful talk is being constructed. She further suggests that, via CA, certain sequence types were found to facilitate SLA.

In Chapter 5, Markee also attempts to capture how turn-taking serves as a resource for conversation and second language learning. For example, conversational parameters such as turn allocation techniques (i.e., self-selection) allow speakers to collaboratively construct various kinds/lengths of talk exchanges that facilitate the acquisition of meaning in a second language. She also addresses the issue of turn taking practices in traditional ESL classrooms (i.e., teachers dictate how long a learner's turn will be) that may not in fact facilitate second language learning.

In Chapter 6, the SLA literature which views repair from a functional perspective (i.e., clarification requests and checks) is critiqued. Repair is believed to play an essential role in making complex language comprehensible to the second language learner. Markee, however, demonstrates through CA that repair may not be sufficient to motivate such learning. She suggests that repairs may fail to provide adequate restructuring by the participants. Although repair is necessary for second language learning, it may be a "face" threatening conversational device from the perspective of the second language learner.

One theme that unifies these chapters is the impact of equal and unequal power in those speech exchanges considered of importance for SLA. For example, the author demonstrates how the social status of participants may dictate interactional sequences such as the use of adjacency pairs or determine the number of likely next speakers in conversation. More importantly, unequal power may influence the likelihood of a speaker to initiate a repair because it may be socially demeaning to do so.

In the two final chapters, Markee attempts to demonstrate that this qualitative approach is a powerful methodology that reveals second language learning on a moment-by-moment basis. Markee argues that conversational analysis has five dimensions that allows researchers to: 1) analyze whether participants understood input gained during conversation, 2) identify successful attempts to learn, 3) shows how meaning is constructed within the 'social' realm of learning, 4) how participants adjust themselves to various speech exchange systems, and 5) how aspects such as turn-taking and conversational repair can be analyzed from detailed transcripts. A case study is present in each chapter, one illustrating how second language learning occurs in a condition of comprehensible input, the other illustrating how such learning proceeds in a context of incomprehensible input. Through these examples, she also illustrates the gaps within the existing theories of SLA and the contribution of a qualitative CA perspective to closing those gaps.

The role of social interaction in first language acquisition was a lively research topic in the 1980's and was embraced by Speech Language Pathologists in their application of pragmatics in clinical practice. Perhaps Markee's book Conversational Analysis will similarly inspire ESL teachers and others interested in second language learning to consider language in context as an essential element in the acquisition process.