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The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics

Conversation Analysis and Child Language Acquisition

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There is now an emerging body of work that can be best described as child-focused conversation analysis (child-CA). The main theme of the research centers on what is involved with children learning how to talk with additional work on CA studies of childhood. An examination of the literature reveals the diverse themes and issues underscoring contemporary work found across many disciplines. While all such work employs CA methods, the research questions, and underlying theoretical leanings, are diverse. Furthermore, the research designs are similarly varied, including single-case studies, longitudinal designs, cross-sectional comparisons, field studies, ethnographic descriptions and participant-observation. Whatever the design, approach or data selection criteria employed, there is a shared commitment to the analysis of children's naturally occurring talk-in-interaction *in situ*.

As a guide to the emerging literature, child-CA research can be classified into five general areas (a) pre-linguistic communication (b) repair (c) competencies and understandings (d) grammar, and (e) childhood. Such a differentiation is to some extent arbitrary and employed solely for overview purposes. While there may be some link between these sub-themes and disciplinary agendas there is not always a correspondence between discipline and topic areas. Furthermore, although there may be an implicit trans-disciplinary orientation to describing and explaining the *development* of children's conversational skills and abilities, this is not necessarily a shared aspect of child CA work. This overview does not cover CA based studies with older aged children or child language impairment.

(a) Pre-linguistic communication

Child-CA research in this theme has highlighted the earliest indications of young children's methodic social communicative skills. In a series of studies of 1-3 year-old children, Kidwell (2009) demonstrates their orientation to a normative social order and their gradual recognition of what constitutes misconduct and being monitored by others. Highlighting instances where children make use of another child's gaze shift as a resource for shaping their own actions, Kidwell's (2009) analysis of embodied action and sequence in talk-in-interaction, particularly what might be presupposed through gaze and 'looking', is a unique example of the ethnomethodologically informed nature of child-CA. Similarly, Kidwell and Zimmerman (2007) in their examination of how very young children present objects to others, show how the production of the 'observability' of objects is often what inaugurates interaction between children. The theme of what makes actions observable is also examined by Lerner & Zimmerman, (2003) showing how very young children employ the appearance of one action to accomplish another. Other relevant work has indicated that pre-verbal Finnish infants can recognize communication failures early on (Laakso; 2010).

(b) Repair

How, why and under what circumstances children *repair* their own or other's talk represents a second theme. Through examining children's repair practices we can gain insight into how they understand conversation, and specific

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3 elements of the language system. As part of an influential corpus of child-CA
4 work Wootton (1994) documented the emergence of third turn repair. He noted
5 how initially re-requesting and outright rejections (say of the offer on an object)
6 were mixed together, followed by a period where brief gestures were employed
7 alongside a re-request, and by 18 months, acts of rejection clearly differentiated
8 from re-requesting. This careful analysis of one child's request and repair
9 practices serves as an early example of how fine-grained analysis can reveal
10 aspects of a child's competence hitherto unknown. The ability of a child to call
11 on resources of self-repair and correction, is also highlighted by Filipi (2007) in
12 her examination of how one child responds to somewhat disinterested
13 continuers in talk. More recently Forrester (2008) has documented the
14 emergence of self and other-initiated repair between the ages of 1 and 3 years,
15 highlighting the fact that spontaneous self-repair is more common initially than
16 (adult) other-initiated repair. The likelihood of children producing self-repair is
17 associated with the non-response of a co-participant, highlighting their
18 sensitivity to the interdependence of talk, gesture and action. Cross-linguistic
19 comparisons however, warrant caution given Laakso's (2010) work with Finnish
20 1-5 year old children that other correction of children's speech diminished
21 rapidly after 2 years. By 4 years Finnish children display adult-like skillfulness in
22 their production of self and other-repair for social-interactive purposes. Further,
23 when children first use self-repairs, the lexical repair initiators typical of Finnish
24 are not yet used; by age 2, parents other-correcting of their children's speech
25 rapidly diminished, and by 4 years, children are skilful in repairing their
26 utterances for social-interactive purposes, using adult-equivalent linguistic
27 devices.
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37 (c) Competencies and understandings 38 39 40

41 Attaining membership of a culture entails children learning how to recognize and
42 produce talk, *and* simultaneously display their understanding of talk as a
43 reflexive social activity. They need to display to others their understanding of
44 'talk' as an accountable set of social practices. Wootton (1997) talks of the
45 acculturation of the child through emerging intersubjective understandings that
46 are locally derived, that is pertaining to very recent cultural and moral events.
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48 In charting key aspects of the child's conversational skills and
49 understandings Wootton (1997) comments that intersubjective 'understandings'
50 have three important properties; they are local, public and moral. For example,
51 these understandings are public in that the child's conduct is systematically
52 sensitive to agreements and preferences which have been *overtly* established
53 within earlier talk. Detailing and examining intersubjective understandings is
54 central to the work of Tarplee (2010), who addresses the inherent difficulties of
55 using concepts such as 'feedback' to explain language development. Looking at
56 displays of understanding, on a turn-by-turn basis, Tarplee (2010) highlights the
57 child's orientation to sequential implicativeness, and makes the point that the
58 particular kind of parent-child interaction where linguistic pedagogy is relevant
59 is constituted by the structure of the talk itself.
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4 A related child-CA study concerned with children's competencies,
5 questioned the assumed relationship between cognitive development and play.
6 Examining 4-9 years olds playing together, Whalen (1995) demonstrated the
7 detailed ways that children first initiate, then systematically organize and
8 accomplish fantasy play as a socially shared thoroughly collaborative activity.
9 Similarly, Sidnell (in press) analyzed the talk of 3-4 year olds during make-
10 believe play. Focusing on how 'what it is to know' is practiced by children, he
11 details the manner in which epistemic rights about make-believe characters and
12 events flow from participation in the activities, where children orient to
13 knowledge as a structural domain imbued with significant moral importance.

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15 In contrast, Church (2009) describes how children recognize and display
16 disagreement and confrontation with adults and peers. In arguments, threats,
17 and responses to potential conflict, young children use atypical dispreferred
18 turn-shapes, highlighting their developing understanding of the 'projectable' and
19 conditional nature of turn-taking. Church's (2009) analysis indicates the subtle
20 processes involved in children gradually learning how to produce accounts in
21 their talk that dispel or displace potential conflict.
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24 The potential difficulties children face when dealing with adults is
25 brought out in the work of Wootton (2005). Detailing the manner in which
26 children make requests, he considers whether there is any orderly connection
27 with between the grammatical form requests take and the sequences in which
28 they happen. Over and above demonstrating the relationship between the child's
29 request from selection and patterns of 'accountable alignment' particular to the
30 preceding talk and action, Wootton (2005) draws our attention to the fact that
31 transitions (from early to more complex later request forms) need to be
32 explained with reference to the dynamics of the interactional configurations the
33 child is experiencing rather than internal developmental mechanisms.
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37 (d) Grammar

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39 Another theme of child-CA work subsumes topics such as language form, syntax,
40 prosody and conversation monitoring. Tykkyläinen & Laakso (2010) consider
41 how 5-year-old Finnish children employ the 'agreement-pursuing' question
42 particle, showing that use is closely embedded with attempts at negotiating
43 social relationships with peers, particularly during fantasy play. The role of adult
44 input and how children begin to recognize the significance of turn-taking is
45 brought out in the work of Wells & Corrin (2004). Using an IPA supplemented
46 CA orthography they highlight how a child can recognize significant prosodic
47 features, when and where to employ them, and what the results might be.
48 Corrin, et al, (2001) comment on the subtle nature of prosody in turn-taking and
49 turn-completion and note that it is use of mid-pitch which projects the non-
50 completion of a child's turn – a non-final element which adults orient to.
51 Other structural features of the local-management system seem unique to adult-
52 child talk. Tarplee (1996), for example, has documented the phonetic repair
53 work children produce in contexts where adults disguise direct correction by
54 carefully designed temporal placing of turns-at-talk. Contrastingly, adults often
55 produce repair initiators in their talk with children without explicitly locating
56 what the trouble-source of the child's prior turn might be. Corrin's (2010)
57 analyses of the talk of a 19-21 month-old boy indicates that self-repair can be
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3 initiated through potentially ambiguous adult turns during the ongoing sequence
4 of talk.

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6 Again, as with repair studies, cross-linguistic comparisons are emerging
7 within this theme. Salonen & Laakso's (2009) note that 4-year-old Finnish
8 speaking children produce fewer morphological and more syntactic self-repairs.
9 They are also able to produce long and complex revisions of ongoing speech, and
10 can monitor their conversation at various levels: pronunciation, morphology,
11 and content, while simultaneously taking account embedded non-verbal actions.
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14 15 (e) Childhood

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18 In work considering aspects of learning how to talk beyond structural elements
19 of conversation, we find both sequentially focused CA and membership
20 categorization analysis (MCA). For example, the difficulties and challenges
21 children face when interacting in unfamiliar circumstances is highlighted by
22 Hutchby (2010), in counseling contexts, and Cahill (2010), within medical
23 interactions. The subtleties involved in inviting and encouraging a child's
24 participation gain importance given O'Reilly (2006) observation that adults are
25 likely to simply ignore children's interruptions in family therapy sessions.
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28 The manner in which children cope with challenging and problematic talk
29 between each other, is documented by Sidnell, (2010), in his work on
30 questioning repeats, commenting that children of different ages exhibit
31 contrasting interactional concerns that cannot be accounted for simply by
32 appealing to 'internal' developmental mechanisms. Other work reminds us that
33 children's own interactional concerns regarding role position can be evident in
34 their talk. Forrester & Reason (2006) for example highlight the sensitivity
35 children exhibit surrounding membership categories of the self. Likewise, Butler
36 & Wetherall (2006) using both sequential and membership categorization
37 analysis looked at the play activities of 6-7 year old children, and document the
38 subtle social-pragmatic practices used by children, commenting that such
39 situated cultural resources produce nuanced and creative versions of the world.
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42 Such versions of the world are not fixed or determining however,
43 highlighted in the work of Danby & Baker (1998), whose analysis of pre-school
44 aged boys play, 'illustrates that masculinity is not a fixed character trait, but is
45 determined through practice and participation in the activities of masculinity.'
46 (p.151). The interdependence of talk and social positioning is also clear in
47 Weatherall's (2002) research on children's recognition and production of gender
48 roles. Weatherall (2002) makes the point that children of this age, as part of their
49 striving to become competent members of the culture, show a particular
50 sensitivity to the display of their knowledge of gender categories, and will
51 correct inappropriate use of membership category terms. Finally, De Leon
52 (2007) provides an illustrative example of how child-CA can illuminate our
53 understanding of both conversational structure and childhood. His analysis of
54 two young Mayan children's re-organization of greeting structures, playful
55 repetition, and recycling across turns, engenders an emergent sibling culture
56 that 'contests the social organization of the age-graded structure of the extended
57 family' (De Leon, 2007; p. 405).
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3 CA research on children, adult-child talk, and topics germane to understanding
4 how children learn to talk are gathering momentum. There are a number of
5 identifiable themes in the literature that linguists and child language researchers
6 might subsume under the term developmental pragmatics. However, what is
7 distinct about child-CA is the careful focus on how, why and under what
8 conditions younger members of any culture gradually attain the skills necessary
9 for producing those reflexively accountable sense-making practices that
10 constitute talk-in-interaction. Ethnomethodologically informed child-CA extends
11 the boundaries of traditional language acquisition research and reminds us that
12 language is first and foremost, a social-discursive practice.
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For Peer Review

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