

The Affective Dimension of Writing Center Talk: Insights from Conversation Analysis

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Most writing center scholarship about the affective dimension of tutoring talk addresses writers' negative affective stances or expressions (e.g., frustration), and theorizes how tutors might respond productively to those stances (Baker). Noreen Lape and Daniel Lawson both critique how that scholarship depicts affect as *disruptive* to helping writers improve their product and process.

Lape and Lawson also call for more nuanced, empirical analyses of affect. In this article, I explain and model how Conversation Analysis (CA), defined as “the study of recorded, naturally occurring talk-in-interaction” (Hutchby and Wooffitt 14), offers useful insights about the role negative stances play in tutoring. Specifically, CA demonstrates how tutors can respond to negative stances (conveyed through actions like complaining) as opportunities for helping writers think critically about their work.

Writing center researchers (Godbee; Mackiewicz and Thompson; Thonus) have employed CA and similar discourse-analytic approaches to examine conference talk. Those researchers who analyze negative affective stances (e.g., “I’m annoyed with this assignment”) often praise tutors who respond with what scholars of language and social interaction describe as *affiliation*, or interaction that supports writers’ stances (Stivers 35). Beth Godbee, for example, describes a writer who, having failed preliminary exams, engaged in *troubles-telling*—talk about a problem or difficulty. Godbee suggests a tutor’s affiliative responses (e.g., sharing similar experiences) helped the writer feel supported and motivated as she left the session to revise her essays. Godbee claims that writers’ troubles-telling and tutors’ affiliative responses “can (or even should) diverge” from talk about drafts (173). Similarly, Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Thompson claim that sympathizing with writers can motivate them before they return to conference tasks (59-67).

Despite the benefits of affiliation, it can be counterproductive in some contexts, as I will show. We can strengthen our pedagogy by helping tutors see writers' negative stances not just as opportunities for digressing into extensive affiliative talk, but also as opportunities for helping writers think critically about their writing choices. Because CA allows us to see those moments in detail, it is an apt framework for complicating what we claim to know about affective dimensions of tutoring interaction.

WHAT IS CA ANYWAY?

Sociologists Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson developed CA in the 1970s; researchers from various disciplines use it to closely examine conversational turn-taking (Sidnell). CA focuses on how interacting participants contribute to conversation through taking turns. As participants take turns, they make sense of each other's contributions to the conversation (Sidnell). Their turns and contributions build and accomplish certain *actions*, such as *complaining* (Sidnell 122). Researchers applying CA start by audio- or videotaping an interaction. Later, they watch or listen to the recording to notice an interesting action and its multiple occurrences (Babcock and Thonus 48). Then, researchers transcribe the interaction to examine how participants are understanding each other's turns, what actions are happening through turn-taking, and what larger patterns are observable.

For example, applied linguist Tara Tarpey employs CA to examine conversational moments when tutors responded to writers' *self-deprecation* (e.g., "I'm bad at grammar"), which tutors often interpret as a lack of confidence. Extensive social interaction research shows that the common trend for responding to self-deprecations involves rejecting or disagreeing with the self-deprecation (Tarpey), with something like "no, I think you're doing fine!" This disagreeing ("no") is often paired with complimenting (e.g., "you're doing fine!"). However, Tarpey demonstrates that tutors' responses are not always in line with that trend. The transcription below begins with the tutor (J) directing the writer's attention to a grammatical error by stating "you don't have the possessive, either" (Tarpey). After that statement, the writer (F) self-deprecates (e.g., "I'm bad at those"), which is in bold. The tutor responds with a question (line 05), *not with* typical disagreement.

- 01 J: Because of Mama, you don't have the possessive,
02 either
03 F: ((writes on paper)) I know I can't yeah I know
04 **I'm bad at those for some reason**
05 J: Do you ever read it out loud to yourself?

The question includes an embedded suggestion (“reading out loud”), and Tarpey argues that this instance and similar examples reflect a trend in which the tutor uses “self-deprecation as an opportunity for pedagogy” (56). Although disagreeing and complimenting the writer might help motivate him, the tutor responds to the self-deprecation as an opportunity to help F improve his writing and think about his process (“reading out loud”).

So, CA is useful for two reasons. First, it requires researchers and practitioners to focus on authentic interaction, not role-played or simulated tutorial talk. Extensive research on language and social interaction has revealed the limits of simulated interaction for accurately capturing what happens in authentic, real-time interaction. Specifically, social scientist Elizabeth Stokoe finds that participants’ actions “were more elaborate or exaggerated” in simulations and role-playing (165). Second, CA is writer-centered and tutor-centered, in that it requires that we privilege participants’ perspectives rather than what we think should matter to participants. A CA researcher’s claims and conclusions must be grounded in how participants understand and treat another’s turns-at-talk. In my analysis, I demonstrate how tutors understand certain negative stances as opportunities for helping writers think critically about their writing choices, rather than as occasions for affiliation and diversion from talk about the draft.

DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

I conducted this study from October 2013 to May 2015 at Marquette University’s Ott Memorial Writing Center. A 2014 Midwest Writing Centers Association research grant helped support my work. I transcribed the talk using conventions Jefferson developed. After reviewing a videotaped session and transcript, I observed that a graduate student writer Bob (a pseudonym) frequently engaged in troubles-telling during the final minutes of his conference. At four separate times in this 10-minute span, Bob reported some trouble he had with reading and understanding a scholarly case study for his Human Resources graduate class. He was analyzing this study in the paper he discussed with undergraduate tutor Meg (another pseudonym). In CA literature, troubles-telling has been analyzed as a type of talk similar to complaining, and through which speakers take negative stances and display emotions (Ruusuvuori 337). In her foundational 1980s studies of troubles-telling, Jefferson identifies a “tension between attending to the trouble and attending to business as usual” (419). Tutors similarly need to find a balance between (a) responding to the trouble and (b) continuing to talk about a writer’s draft.

Once I identified examples of troubles-telling from the recorded tutorials and transcribed the talk, I considered these questions: How does the writer talk about his troubles? How does the tutor respond to that troubles-telling?

ANALYSIS

Transcription Key

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| 1. (n) | Indicates length of a pause in seconds |
| 2. ((word)) | Indicates researcher's comments |
| 3. () | Indicates unintelligible talk |
| 4. heh/.hh | Indicates laughter/in-breath |
| 5. Brackets [] | Indicates overlapping talk |

In Example 1, Bob points to his paper and states his decision to use a direct quotation from the case study (“I had to pull that out”). He continues his turn with troubles-telling that starts with “I couldn’t even think.” Here, Meg supports Bob’s stance, but in a way that does not diverge much from conference tasks (e.g., reading aloud).

EXAMPLE 1

- 01 Bob: I had to pull that out because I couldn’t
02 even think how I would you know. I—I
03 would I couldn’t even think about how
04 I would you know explain [that
05 Meg: [()
06 Bob: Without like a big you know—I could have wrote
07 eight page paper
08 Meg: Mhmm
09 Bob: on the internal bias of the of the
10 (2.0)
11 Bob: Parameters of both people rating the same
12 thing [from
13 Meg: [Sure
14 Bob: different perspective you know,
15 Meg: Yeah.
16 Bob: Page five like I said this one’s way harder
17 than the other one [and
18 Meg: [Heh
19 Bob: I spent—I spent about a whole day just trying to
20 understand this so,
21 Meg: Yeah
22 Bob: ((Reads from paper for 59 seconds))

After Bob describes his trouble with reading the case study in his initial turns, he explains the passages from the article he could have written so much about (lines 06-07, 09-12, 14). Meg just *aligns* with his talk (“mmhm”) or allows him to keep taking turns (Stivers 32). At line 16, Bob looks down at his paper and seems ready to continue reading aloud when he utters “page five,”

which signals his intention to start reading from his paper. But, he takes another turn to describe the case study as “way harder than the other one” and complains with “I spent about a whole day just trying to understand this.” Meg again only aligns with this complaint (“yeah”) and withholds affiliation. And Bob moves back to reading aloud.

The second example comes after Bob finishes reading part of his paper aloud. He turns and looks at Meg, and his initial turns are akin to those in Example 1.

EXAMPLE 2

- 01 Bob: I pulled that out as a direct quote because it
02 was just too confus— .hh
03 Meg: Mhmm
04 Bob: I barely understand it myself,
05 Meg: Hehe
06 Bob: But,
07 Meg: Yeah
08 Bob: You know what I mean?
09 Meg: Yeah as long as your teacher doesn't think or your
10 professor doesn't think you're relying too much on
11 text and it is helping [()
12 Bob: [See that was kinda what I
13 was concerned about,

In his initial turns-at-talk, Bob describes the study as “just too confusing.” He then explicitly states the trouble with reading and understanding it at line 04 (“I barely understand it myself”). Meg just aligns with his negative stance (“yeah”), allowing him to continue talking. Bob then seeks Meg’s affiliation at line eight (“you know what I mean?”). Meg responds with “yeah” but qualifies her talk (“as long as”), which indicates her reluctance to affiliate with him. As Meg continues her turn, she references Bob’s “professor” and what she might think about Bob’s overreliance on quotation (“you’re relying too much on text”). In response, Bob expresses his own concern about his professor’s expectations (“that was kinda what I was concerned about”). This example shows that Meg understands Bob’s talk as indicative of a potential problem in his writing—that he is relying too much on direct quotation. She allows Bob to express his frustration, but she also challenges his choice.

Example 3 begins with Bob pointing to a passage of his paper and stating that he “pulled this [a quotation/passage] right out of the book because it was so convoluted to me.”

EXAMPLE 3

- 01 Bob: I pulled this right out of the book because it was

02 so, convoluted to me like you know,
 03 Meg: Mmh
 04 Bob: ((reads aloud from paper for 27 seconds and explains
 05 to Meg what he just read for another 24 seconds))
 06 Meg: Okay
 07 Bob: I know I have tuh—I had to explain it to myself
 08 to understand what was happening,
 09 Meg: Yeah so with those explanations like—are you feeling
 10 like enough is being said here ((pointing to paper))
 11 for your professor to know that you get that?
 12 Bob: Oh she knows,
 13 Meg: Okay,
 14 Bob: She understands,

After assessing the text in negative terms (“so convoluted”), Bob reads from his paper and explains his summary of the case study’s methodology to Meg (omitted lines). After her “okay,” Bob clearly articulates his struggle—that he “had to explain it” to himself “to understand” the case study’s methodology (line 08). Meg responds with “yeah” and then asks a question about his written “explanations.” Pointing to the paper, she asks if Bob feels “enough is being said here” and whether his professor will be able to see from his writing that he understands the study’s methodology. As in Example 2, Meg focuses on a potential problem in Bob’s writing. In her talk following line 08 (not shown above), she says, “like I don’t know if she [the professor] wants more.” Meg implies that Bob is relying too much on quotations, rather than using his own words, which would demonstrate to his professor that he “gets” it. Here again, Meg’s actions give Bob the space to express his trouble, while she identifies a problem with his choice and challenges it.

In the final minute, just before they say their goodbyes, Bob refers to his struggle again and complains about the difficulty of the assignment (“this one was a bear to write”). Meg does affiliate here but distances herself from fully supporting Bob’s negative stance. As with previous examples, she references and challenges his direct quotation.

EXAMPLE 4

01 Bob: This—this one was a bear to write, I’m gonna
 02 Meg: It seemed like it was harder content [but like it does
 03 Bob: [Uh
 04 Meg: follow really logically and as long as you feel
 05 like you know you’re not relying too much on the
 06 quotes but they’re there to explain things then like
 07 I think you’re set,

Like Examples 2 and 3, Meg frames the direct quotation problem

as something that Bob will need to make the final decision about based upon his own feeling and thinking (“as long as you feel”) and upon what he knows about his professor’s expectations. In Examples 2, 3, and 4, Meg challenges his choice but defers to Bob to make the final call.

CONCLUSION

CA is a framework that yields important insights about negative affective stances in writing center interaction. From this analysis, I draw two conclusions. First, Meg found Bob’s writing choice (e.g., reliance on direct quotation) to be problematic, which is evidenced by her lack of agreement with it and her lack of affiliation with his struggles (all examples) as well as her challenging of the choice (Examples 2, 3, and 4). Second, these examples suggest an emerging trend—that tutors can productively pass up affiliative opportunities when writers attribute their problematic writing choices to some past trouble. For Meg, affiliation is counterproductive in these moments because affiliating can be conflated with supporting, rather than disapproving of, Bob’s choice.

Future work with CA and other discourse analytic methods can help us build pedagogical approaches that are supported by analysis of what tutors and writers do in authentic, real-time interaction. For example, we should explore how the nature of writers’ troubles (e.g., about an instructor) shapes tutors’ responses. There is more to investigate about how tutors navigate opportunities for affiliation, and those investigations will help us refine our pedagogy and what we know about the affective dimension of our work.



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