

# Professional Telephone Discourse

- 1. Professional discourse can be defined as discourse in professional or institutional settings and analysed through Conversation Analysis (CA), which differs from Discourse Analysis (DA).**

Professional discourse can be defined as discourse in professional and institutional settings, including the objectives the members of professions and institutions might have, their tasks and inferential frames. The terms institution, organisation and profession, although being used as synonyms, have different connotations:

- Institution: mainly from a sociological point of view and having a social and moral value. Schools, judicial and legislative institutions are normally associated with the general term “institution”
- Organisation: with the main aim of economic profit, not necessarily reflecting the moral values of a society
- Profession: referring to individuals and their competence at work

There are three aspects in the nature of institutions that can be relevant for discourse studies:

- Institutions and professions attribute specific roles to individuals ⇒ effect on the individual's behaviour and the expectations by other people, e.g. the expectation a customer has of a bank accountant
- Due to the increasing differentiation in modern societies, institutions and professions themselves become more and more complex. Interaction with and within these structures becomes more and more specialised.
- Institutions and professions have a certain power, which also gives them a kind of “public voice” and enables them to exert certain influence on the society. They can determine what's on the agenda or not (e.g. a student in an exam – however, she will just be on the agenda for a little while until the exam is over).

Discourse Analysis (DA): originates in linguistics and uses typical linguistic methodologies as well as linguistic principles and concepts. Mainly oriented at “aesthetically well-formed sentences” that are cohesive (grammatically and formally correct on the surface) and coherent (casually and semantically correct under the surface; partly based on cohesion). Furthermore, DA takes an interest in the linguistic rules (e.g. speech act rules) that are applied to the sentences. In most cases, a text is considered a static product and analysed exclusively, i.e. each sentence is isolated and analysed for itself.

DA starts from a-priori categories and uses a “top-down” methodology, trying to find data that fit into these categories.

Conversation Analysis (CA): originates in social sciences, mainly ethnology. Uses empirical methods to analyse conversations, trying to avoid a-priori theory building. Uses a “bottom-up” methodology, starting inductively from pure data with the aim to find regularities and finally put up categories for the data. ⇒ “CA is completely data-driven!”

Early studies focused on techniques used by people to give social events an internal structure, e.g. when telling each other stories or jokes. Later they focused on the repetitive patterns of social events which provide a possibility to organise conversations. This is especially relevant for professional telephone conversations which often contain a highly repetitive structure, e.g. in service or donation hotlines.

Central to CA is the concept of turn-taking. A turn is defined as a single speech act that ends with a pause or a syntactic entity that makes a change of speakers possible. Person A takes her turn, making it clear in the end that Person B may take over now. Turn-taking between two persons is always structured A-B, A-B and so on. This concept seems to be so strong that everybody (unconsciously) sticks to it – less than 5 percent of the speech stream is characterised by overlap. Moreover, gaps between turns are minimal, which shows that turn-taking can be considered a general management system for conversations.

Another crucial concept based on turn-taking is the adjacency pair. An adjacency pair is a sequence of at least two utterances that are

- adjacent
- produced by different speakers
- ordered as a first part and a second part
- typed, so that a particular first part requires a particular second part.

Examples for adjacency pairs are

- question – answer
- offer – acceptance / rejection
- greeting – greeting

If there are deviating cases the conversation partners will notice and indicate or interpret this. For example, if a second turn does not follow a first turn in an adjacency pair, this may be interpreted as a sign that the intended conversation partner is not available at the moment.

Furthermore, adjacency pairs follow a preference organisation. If, for example, the first turn is a request (“Could you do me a favour?”), the preferred second turn represents compliance (“Sure, no problem.”) whereas the dispreferred second turn is a refusal (“I would like to, but I’m very busy at the moment.”). There are striking differences between the preferred and the dispreferred turn: the preferred turn is quite short, presenting the preferred option already at the beginning of the turn. The dispreferred turn, however, is mainly structured in a more complex way because it contains excuses / explanations. Moreover, it presents the dispreferred option close to the turn’s end.

Because of all these conceptual features, Conversation Analysis is also applicable to institutional talk. In analysing professional conversations, there are five dimensions to be regarded:

- lexical choice: speakers select descriptive terms which are fitted into their roles within an institutional setting (e.g. use of “we” instead of “I”)
- turn design: selection of the activity a turn is designed to perform, or selecting the verbal shape of an action
- sequence organisation during the conversation: e.g. that a phone call to a technical support hotline always begins with a question-answer sequence; moreover, Q-A sequences dominate such conversations
- overall structural organisation: task orientation has a big impact on the organisation of a conversation (e.g. solving a technical problem)
- social relations: professional “cautiousness” and interactional asymmetry (Q-A sequences, politeness towards a customer even though he is very unfriendly)

**2. Telephone discourse, especially in a professional context, is mainly directed towards a common goal both communicators want to reach. Negotiating activity is a crucial concept for the success of problem solving processes in technical telephone discourses. However, it appears to be much more ad hoc activity than in other professional contexts.**

Generally, negotiation is understood as a formal, face-to-face, problem-solving encounter. However, in ethnomethodology and CA, the term “negotiation” is understood as the process of interactively making sense by means of conversational resources. Meaning is accomplished locally, jointly and collaboratively by participants in conversation, with the negotiation process being locally and sequentially organised. Based on the concept of bargaining sequences elaborated by Maynard, Firth derived the concept of negotiation encounters and negotiating activity.

On the one hand, negotiation encounters are characterised as single-location encounters, formally and physically defined, involving parties with potentially conflicting wants and needs. An example for a negotiation encounter is a customer calling a support hotline with a technical problem.

On the other hand, negotiating activity is interactionally-defined, being contingent on the parties’ mutual discourse actions. It is initiated by one party displaying misalignment with a statement of the opposing party, and terminated when definitive agreement on one or more substantive issues is reached. The demonstrable end-goal orientation for the parties involved in negotiating activity is thus mutual alignment. Thus, a misalignment-alignment sequence in a conversation is a distinct hint towards negotiating activity.

However, the two concepts are not necessarily associated. Negotiation encounters may take place without negotiating activity occurring, and vice versa.

In order to solve a problem through conversation, the participants have to perform certain actions: they have to agree that there is a problem, they have to find a solution, and to implement it. An example:

A customer calls the support hotline of an Internet Service Provider, having a problem with her internet connection.

Agent: Welcome to the surfEU support hotline. My name is XY, how can I help you?

Customer: Hello, I’ve got a problem with my internet connection: whenever I try to dial up to the net, I get an error message.

A: Which kind of error message do you get?

C: Uhm, wait a second (1.5) it’s (.) error 691 – user name or password error.

A: Could you ever go online via our service?

C: Yes, with this guest account you provided on your installation cd.

A: Ah (0.3) have you already registered with your own user name and password? Since the beginning of June it is necessary to have your own user name in order to be able to use our service.

C: (1.0) Uuh, no. Where can I do that?

A: Well, (0.8) do you have another Internet account?

C: Yes, but it’s pretty expensive, that’s why I don’t want to use it anymore.

A: I would recommend you to use it just once more and go to our registration page. That is (0.5) do you have a pen and paper?

C: Yes.

A: The address is (page address). On this page you just have to fill in all the fields and click “Continue”. But -

C: Yes?

A: But please read the instructions carefully, otherwise you might do the process again.

C: And what do I do when I have registered?

A: When your registration is complete, you will get a second page which you should print out. It contains all the data necessary for logging in.

C: And can I use the same connection, only with my own data?

A: Yes, definitely. It only takes about 15 minutes for the registration to be confirmed in our database. After that, you can use surfEU as before.

C: Then I'll try that. Thank you very much.

A: Thank you for calling. Bye.

C: Bye.

(Phasen der Konversation von Hand ausfüllen!)

Technical telephone conversations, though, seem to be of a different nature than usual negotiation encounters in professional contexts. While other forms of negotiating activity appear to be more or less stable and routinized interactions of institutional mandate to process cases or agree on details, technical problem solving seems to be much more ad hoc, incidental activity. This makes the institutional context and the tasks and roles of the participants crucial for the sequential nature of negotiating activity. Thus, it is still far from clear in which ways negotiating activity works in different contexts.