Interactions and/with Supportive Supervisors
Conversation Analysis for the Young and Digitally Inclined

Vinicio Ntouvlis

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Abstract

In diesem Beitrag reflektiere ich darüber, wie Helmut Grubers Betreuung meiner Doktorarbeit mein Forschungsethos geprägt hat. Sein Vorschlag, dass ich konversationsanalytische Methoden für die Analyse von Online-Interaktionen verwende, wird beispielhaft diskutiert, um zu demonstrieren, wie Helmut Grubers Betreuung meiner Arbeit zu einer Art Methodenpluralismus und Interdisziplinarität geführt hat. Nach einem kurzen Überblick über die Geschichte von konversationsanalytischen Ansätzen zu computervermittelter Kommunikation (CVK), wird Helmut Grubers Beitrag zu der Gesprächs- sowie CVK-Forschung präsentiert. Auf der Grundlage dieser Diskussion verdeutliche ich schließlich, welch großen pädagogischen Einfluss Helmut Grubers Forschungspraxis auf mich hatte.

Schlagwörter: PhD supervision, Conversation Analysis, Computer Mediated Communication, interdisciplinary

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"[…] There's a whole big long thread!"

Hodges looks at Jerome.

"She means an online conversation,"
Jerome says.

Stephen King. 2016. *End of Watch*, p. 229.
London: Hodder & Stoughton.

1 Introduction

According to a study by Devine & Hunter (2017), having a supportive
PhD supervisor reduces emotional exhaustion during one's doctoral
studies as it is associated with less pressure to actively keep up appearan-
ces. I can confidently say that it was thanks to my supervisor Helmut
Gruber's open and supportive stance during my doctoral studies that I
was always able to ask for help when I needed it, without filtering out
my fears that I had "no idea what I was doing." It was on one such
occasion, when I was dealing with a fascinatingly 'niche' form of
communication in Facebook comment sections, that he suggested I use
Conversation Analysis methods for approaching these written online
interactions.

This puzzled me a bit. Wasn't Conversation Analysis (or CA) the
thing you did with spoken data? I had never transcribed a second of
spoken conversation before. Eventually, I was able to properly familia-
rise myself with the existing tradition of CA work on Computer
Mediated Communication (CMC), which has been around since the
1990s and which I previously ignored. But more importantly, through
my supervisor's guidance and his example, I was able to see beyond my
initial conception of CA as a 'thing' one does monolithically.

In this paper, I reflect on this experience in order to illustrate the in-
fluence that my supervisor's background had on the development of my
own research ethos. Focusing specifically on the choice of CA as a tool
for analysing written CMC, I show how taking on a supervisor's

suggestions can amount not to strictly aligning oneself with an established tradition, but instead to developing one's own approach to research practice through the supervisor's influence. In this particular case, by considering (part of) Helmut Gruber's own research history, I want to argue that what was passed on to me was an integrative approach to studying CMC.

To do this, I first provide a very brief overview of CA work on CMC, sketching out the convergence of CA methods and an interest in studying digital communication (Section 2). Then, I trace the same two themes in Helmut Gruber's body of work to show how his research has not been strictly paradigm-bound (Section 3). Finally, I reflexively examine how a similar problem-oriented, interdisciplinary take was established in my own doctoral work as a result of my supervisor's overall influence (Section 4). Section 5 closes off the paper with some concluding thoughts.

2 CA and 'digital CA': Developments within a paradigm

Originating in Harvey Sacks's work in sociology, CA has become a widely popular methodological approach for the qualitative study of talk-in-interaction, adopted across disciplines. Although the key focus of CA has historically been the study of spoken interaction (through audio recordings and systematic transcriptions thereof), the emergence of written CMC has also been attracting conversation-analytical interest since the 1990s.

Like other early treatments of web-based communication (see Hine 2000: 14 ff.), the first CA studies in this area were also underlain by a view of CMC as 'limited' when compared to face-to-face interaction (Giles, Stommel & Paulus 2017). For instance, Herring (1999) examined the establishment of interactional coherence in online messaging, framing CMC as inherently "disjointed" due to a lack of, among other things, (embodied) audiovisual cues.

While this deficiency-oriented view of CMC was eventually abandoned in favour of more dynamic examinations of media affordances

(e.g., Meredith 2017), spoken interaction has remained the central point of reference in conversation-analytical treatments of CMC. This may take the form of, for example, comparing well-known CA phenomena such as 'repair' across their spoken and written (digital) guise (Meredith & Stokoe 2014), or approaching digital messaging practices as adaptations of behaviours from spoken interaction (see Marmorstein & König 2021).

In fact, despite a proliferation of CA-based CMC research in the last decades (for an overview, see Paulus, Warren & Lester 2016), in the mid- and late 2010's the microanalytical treatment of online interactional data was still seen as a challenge for CA due to the approach's in-built speech-centeredness (Giles et al. 2015; Meredith 2017; Meredith 2019; Jucker 2021). In this context, the Microanalysis of Online Data (MOOD) research network was started in order to systematically articulate a framework of "digital CA"; i.e., a bespoke "methodological approach for the currently established and apparently durable forms of online inter-action" (Giles et al. 2015: 49).

The MOOD network appears to have been founded by a group of scholars who were well-versed in using CA for studying CMC, but whose research efforts were treated as non-mainstream or less legiti-mate within this paradigm:

> We were all, to a greater or lesser extent, successfully using conversation analysis (CA) to conduct analyses of online data and publishing this work: yet, we had all encountered some skepticism from journal reviewers and others, to the effect that what we were doing was *not* 'real' CA. (Giles et al. 2015: 45, original emphasis)

Through MOOD, these CA scholars thus "sought to develop further CA-informed methodologies and methods to carry out research on new media *with the same degree of intellectual rigour that has been applied to the study of offline talk-in-interaction*" (Giles et al. 2015: 45–46, my emphasis). The pursuit of this goal therefore has the character of an intra-paradigmatic effort to expand the scope of CA from face-to-face conversation to also covering CMC in a way that would be just as rigorous, and by extension, would enjoy the same level of academic/

institutional credibility. A concrete goal, for example, was (and continues to be) to problematise existing CA concepts with regard to their suitability for studying CMC, which in turn opens up questions concerning the extent to which CA tenets may need to be rethought (Giles et al. 2015; Paulus, Warren & Lester 2016; Jucker 2021).

All in all, this brief sketch of the emergence of 'digital CA' speaks to a conversation that CA as a paradigm is having with itself. That is, empirical work and dedicated methodological reflections ultimately serve the goal of 'updating' CA for the analysis of CMC.

However, this intensive intra-paradigmatic work on questions of theory and method does not preclude an engagement with the useful tools of digital CA by those who, like me, have never seen themselves as 'conversation analysts.' This idea is something I came to understand partly through its exemplification in my supervisor's research history.

3 Helmut Gruber's work on talk-in-interaction and CMC

Helmut Gruber's body of work is perhaps most closely associated with the field of pragmatics, his conception of which is fruitfully broad, as also made evident through his work as Editor-in-Chief for *Pragmatics*, the quarterly journal of the International Pragmatics Association. Other keywords (of varied scope and nature) that may describe his interests reasonably well include: discourse analysis, text linguistics, critical discourse analysis, CMC, and *Gesprächsanalyse*, the "German sister or daughter" of CA, born in the 1970s (Henne & Rehbock 1979: 7, my translation). In what follows, I want to trace how the two latter foci (the analysis of talk-in-interaction and CMC) have manifested in the work that Helmut Gruber has been doing over the last forty years or so.[1]

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1   Here I must mention an important caveat for the ensuing discussion: Unlike many of the contributors to this Special Issue, I have no synchronous experience of the circumstances under which Helmut Gruber produced the work I discuss here. (For much of this time, I wasn't even born.) Despite the personal tone of this paper, I can only approach Gruber's past work through the publications in which it has been entextualised. My discussion of his 'interests' or 'research ethos' is thus not informed by my personal knowledge

Helmut Gruber's interest in talk-in-interaction appears to have accompanied his interest in mass media communication. Specifically, in the early 1990s, in the context of his *Habilitation* project (eventually published as a monograph, Gruber 1996), he examined the systematics of interactional conflict in the Austrian TV program *Club 2*, an evening talk show (Gruber 1992, 1993, 1998a). In his earlier publications on the subject, his analyses of conflict-in-interaction relied partly on classic conversation-analytical concepts, focusing on issues such as the sequential organization of conflict and role allocation among the discussants.

The discussions of *Club 2* provided fertile material for the examination of interactional conflict as the talk show relied on differences of opinion among its guests, who were often politicians (Gruber 1992, 1993). This kind of data can be argued to be less than optimal CA material as CA has traditionally (or had, up to the time of Gruber's work discussed here) prioritised the analysis of everyday, mundane, and hence maximally 'natural' interactions (Gruber 1996: 37). Talk show discussions are not so 'naturally' occurring in the sense that they are staged and oriented towards offering a 'show' (see Ilie 2001 for a treatment of talk shows as semi-institutional discourse). On the one hand, participants' engagement in a show renders their assumption of particular roles in the interaction more salient than their individual histories (cf. Gruber 1992), providing a great opportunity for a close look at conversational mechanisms while also treating contextual considerations as emergent through the talk at hand, in line with CA's traditional view of context (cf. Wooffitt 2005: 63–65). On the other hand, in the German-based tradition of *Gesprächsanalyse* that was part of Gruber's methodological apparatus in this research, the interplay of institutional factors and language use are vital considerations (cf. Gruber 1996). In fact, in his adoption of CA techniques, Gruber (1996) remained both

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of him when he was conducting the research but is only a post hoc commentary based on my reading of these texts. Being interpretative, this account is also socio-historically shaped by my current knowledge of and esteem for Helmut Gruber in his role as my supervisor.

very interested in 'context' and critical of the more mechanistic aspects of CA, opting for a qualification of his mode of work as closer to ethnomethodology than CA (for a clarification of the ties between ethnomethodology and CA, see Heritage 2001). In the end, where Gruber's project on conflict-in-interaction was going was 'towards the pragmatics of a discursive form,' as the subtitle of his 1996 monograph states ("zur Pragmatik einer Diskursform"; Gruber 1996).

This brings me back to Gruber's commitment to a broad under-standing of pragmatics, which as his work on talk show interaction illustrates, does not prescribe a close adherence to one particular approach (CA) for analysing talk-in-interaction. While I lack both the space here and the expertise to thoroughly unpack the bespoke analytical apparatus Gruber used for analysing *Club 2* discussions, this brief treatment is already indicative of Gruber's problem-driven and open approach to research.

Another 'problem' Helmut Gruber started tackling in this spirit during the 1990s was CMC, the study of which was still in its early stages. Next to his interest in mass media communication (besides talk shows, an overview of his discourse analytical work on newspapers would be worth a separate article), Gruber also focused on the emergent shapes of communication on 'new media,' initially dealing with email discussion lists (Gruber 1997, 1998b, 2000a,b). Again he seemed to approach the subject matter from a variety of angles, from genre theory (Gruber 1997, 2000a) to systemic functional linguistics and critical discourse analysis (Gruber 2000b).

Especially relevant here is Gruber's most explicitly CA-inspired treatment of email discussions as conversations (Gruber 1998b). Examining topic initiation and thematic development in particular, Gruber (1998b) aligned with the conversation-analytic practice of comparing CMC to face-to-face interactions, pointing to email discussions' lack of linear sequentiality and the particularities of the participation framework they afford. The description of the latter had interesting Platonic undertones:

> the communicative situation which is referred to by the metaphor "e-
> mail discussion" might be more accurately compared [not to face-to-
> face conversations but] to the situation of a group of persons who are
> sitting in a dark cave. (Gruber 1998b: 22)

Gruber's research interest in CMC persisted long after these early
studies and later also came to intersect with his interest in politicians'
discourse as he analysed Austrian presidential candidates' tweets (e.g.,
Gruber 2019, 2021). With these newer studies, the older tendency to
understand digitally mediated communication through comparisons to
face-to-face interaction developed in Gruber's work (as in 'digital CA,'
in fact) into a consideration of the affordances of digital platforms (e.g.,
Gruber 2017).

    Seen alongside his research on talk show discussions, Gruber's
studies of CMC exemplify his concern with different concrete forms of
communication, dynamically shaped by emergent (techno)cultural con-
texts. His focus on (this time digital) communication-in-context was
once again served through various analytical toolkits, among which CA,
suggesting the same broad view of pragmatics noted earlier as well as
the prioritisation of multi-faceted engagement with one's object of
inquiry instead of an attachment to a particular approach or tradition.

4 A supervisor's critical influence: A reflexive account

The short overview of Helmut Gruber's research on talk-in-interaction
and CMC given above first and foremost contextualises his suggestion
that I should use CA tools in my own work on CMC. Not only has the
study of talk-in-interaction been part of his life's work, but Gruber was
also very much there in a professional sense when early work on new
forms of CMC was emerging. More important, however, is this: Neither
the fact that CA and CMC are a part of Helmut Gruber's research history
nor his recommendation that I look into them for my dissertation meant
that I would have to 'marry' this approach, take it on uncritically, or

shape a researcher identity around it. Still, this anecdote from my supervisor's guidance is indicative of how our cooperation did eventually shape my researcher identity in a way that shifted towards *pluralism*.

It went somewhat like this. At the beginning of my doctoral studies, a term I would use a lot describe my research was *ethnography*, and specifically *digital ethnography*. I had read a lot about the inherent openness of ethnographic work and that was part of what drew me to it, but unbeknownst to me, the attachment to this label of *(digital) ethnography* that stood for openness had also made me confine my research into a box, or a camp, or a field. At the same time, I understood that, as Hine (2005: 8) writes, "[w]hen we talk about methodology we are implicitly talking about our identity and the standards by which we wish our work to be judged." So, when confronted with CA – a methodology I would never have hitherto considered as part of 'what I did' and hence 'who I was' – I was worried that I would have to pivot my entire researcher identity to this one new (to me) thing. Thanks to Helmut Gruber's supportive guidance, I came to realize that I don't have to be driven by one specific "performance of community" (Hine 2005: 8) in choosing and presenting my research methods. I can instead orient myself towards investigating things that are interesting and important (to me as well as institutional stakeholders) while choosing the right tools for the job with an open mind and a broad conception of what my work should be called keyword-wise: It may just be 'pragmatics,' but even if that sounds like 'one thing,' it can actually remain pluralist, as Helmut Gruber's work shows.

If we adopt van Leeuwen's (2005) terms for the description of different models of interdisciplinarity, we may call this approach not *pluralist* – which stands for a different model in his conception – but *integrationist* (cf. Weiss & Wodak 2003). Under an integrationist model of interdisciplinarity, research is driven by "problems rather than methods" (van Leeuwen 2005: 7) and varied disciplinary insights are seen as working synergistically. Most striking here is how van Leeuwen presents this model of interdisciplinarity as reconfiguring what 'discipline' means for the researcher's identity construction:

> The idea of "discipline" is in effect narrowed down to "skill" – to the analytical and interpretative skills that can contribute in specific ways to integrated projects. In such a context I no longer say, for instance, "I am a linguist", setting myself apart from other researchers, but, "I know how to do certain types of linguistic research and can therefore make a specific and useful contribution to interdisciplinary research projects". (van Leeuwen 2005: 8)

As I now routinely go through various 'buzzwords' to describe what I do in my doctoral project when asked (*digital ethnography*, *critical discourse analysis*, *social media research*, *multimodality*), I realize that I can see these terms and what they represent for what they are: perspectives I have learned about so that I can deploy them as skills of my own. In other words, I have been profoundly shaped by this integrationist mode of thinking, whereby I see the aim of my research as solving problems, providing insight, and knowing the tools to get there – rather than, say, belonging to a particular school, or being an 'X-ist,' as in *linguist* or *conversation analyst*.

Still, it is important to note a pitfall of such an interdisciplinary mode of thinking. Especially in cases where researchers work individually (van Leeuwen 2005: 8), great care should be taken to proceed only with a proper grasp of the onto- and epistemological baggage that different approaches bring with them, to avoid shallow eclectic treatments – what Weiss & Wodak (2003: 20) call "[e]clectic ad hoc models," where "in exaggerated terms, one could say that everything is accumulated that 'comes in handy', without questioning its epistemological origin and compatibility." Such pitfalls should be given special attention in the outspokenly interdisciplinary space of applied linguistics (home of many types of so-called "hyphen linguistics"; Menz & Gruber 2001: VII; Weiss & Wodak 2003: 19–21). As the subtitle of a volume co-edited by Helmut Gruber puts it (Gruber & Menz 2001), one oscillates between having on one's hands a 'menu of methods' ("Methodenmenü") or a 'methods salad' ("Methodensalat"). In my doctoral project, I was lucky enough that my supervisor both introduced me to a feast of methods and also coached me in acquiring the necessary culinary expertise to (hopefully) not end up with a salad.

5 Conclusion: Learning an approach to research

Ultimately, the integrative research ethos I developed through Helmut Gruber's supervision can also be seen as integrative in the sense that it has taught me a way to approach not just language-in-context, but also research-in-context. The dynamic view of research that I discovered in my collaboration with and familiarisation with the work of my super-visor goes beyond "the standard conception of the research process" as defined by Cooper & Woolgar (1996: 148):

> the standard approach to the research process treats the techniques, methodologies and theories of research as essentially separate from its political, organisational and administrative context. In other words, there is an implicit distinction between what is construed as the technical business of research, on the one hand, and as the social and contextual circumstances on the other.

For reasons of space, I cannot go deeply into the "political, organiza-tional and administrative context" in which I conducted my doctoral research. What I can and want to say, however, is that Helmut Gruber played a critical role in shaping the "contextual circumstances" that changed me from a student afraid of new methods and labels into one that sees and tries to actively navigate the forest of knowledge pro-duction instead of hanging on to one or two particular trees. Following Nonhoff's (2019: 38) views on what can make discourse analytical work inherently critical, this move away from 'science fixated on methods' ("methodenfixierte Wissenschaft") can also be seen as a dissident form of research practice, and in my opinion, a very worthwhile one too, in that it is problem-oriented and creative. It is in this sense that I am most deeply thankful for Helmut Gruber's influence: Through his supervision and example, he shaped an inspiring context for my doctoral work that made me feel supported, creative, and empowered.

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