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Conversation Analysis Theory

A Descriptive Approach to Interpersonal Communication

Jenny Mandelbaum

Conversation Analysis (CA) Theory offers an observation-based descriptive theory of communication (or, more specifically for CA, talk and other conduct in interaction) with implications for the study of interpersonal communication. A primary aim of CA is to lay out the basic sense-making practices and regularities of interaction that form the basis for everyday communication, in both informal and professional settings. CA uses field recordings of conversation and other kinds of talk and embodied conduct in interaction as data, and builds systematic descriptions of the mechanisms that make human conduct possible. Taken together, these descriptions constitute a theory of communication. The key evidence for determining the relevance of these descriptions to communicators' lived experience is found in communicators' displayed orientations—displayed in the unfolding conduct itself—to the described practices. In this way, CA builds theory empirically.

Purpose and Meta-theoretical Assumptions

Originated by Harvey Sacks in collaboration with Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, CA is grounded in Goffman's view that social interaction is an autonomous, self-contained domain of human conduct that is of central importance to the social world (e.g., Goffman, 1983). CA's focus on the structures and reasoning processes of everyday interaction is also built on insights from Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodology, which emphasizes the orderly...
procedures of everyday social conduct, and sees that orderliness as accomplished by its participants. Crucially for CA, Garfinkel proposed that description of human social conduct consists of descriptions of the procedures used by communicators to produce and interpret their social world.

A key feature of CA Theory is that the accounts it develops attend to the integrity of particular episodes of interaction (Schegloff, 2005). That is, rather than theory being guided by disciplinary concerns, the concerns and orientations of interactants, displayed in the practices they use to communicate, shape discovery. This derives from the assumption that conversation, like other aspects of social life, has its own orderliness, and thus what is organizationally consequential is that which is oriented to by the participants themselves, rather than that which is particularly of interest to the researcher.

The purpose and meta-theoretical assumptions of CA are based on the empirically grounded belief that description of observed phenomena constitutes a theory of human conduct. This can best be understood by examining a specimen of the sort with which conversation analysts usually work. The following transcription is typical of the kind that conversation analysts construct as a guide to audio- and videotape recorded interaction. The audio tape of this brief phone call is available at http://www.scis.rutgers.edu/~jennym/audio/stalled-128k.mp3. Using the key below, the eye quickly becomes attuned to decoding the symbols while listening to the tape-recorded data. This set of transcription conventions, developed by Gail Jefferson (2004), is widely used by researchers studying interaction in a number of fields.

**Transcription Key:**

? indicates rising intonation (not necessarily a question) [Line 1]
, indicates “continuing” intonation [Line 2]
. indicates falling intonation (not necessarily end of sentence) [Line 5]
: indicates that preceding sound is extended or “stretched” [Line 3]
[ & ] mark beginning and ending of overlap [Line 4]
-hh marks an audible inbreath [Line 8]; hhh marks audible outbreath [Line 12]
— underlining shows a sound which is stressed [Line 8]
(0.2) indicates amount of silence in 10ths of seconds [Line 9]
(h) indicates laughter within words [Line 18]

**Excerpt 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Ring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Marcia: Hallo?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Donny: 'lo Marcia,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Marcia: Yea</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 4    | Donny: (['t's D]onny. |
| 5    | Marcia: Hi Donny. |
| 6    | Donny: Guess what.hh |
| 7    | Marcia: What. |
| 8    | Donny: -hh My car is sta:led. |
| 9    | (0.2) |
| 10   | Donny: (and) I'm up here in the Glen? |
| 11   | Marcia: Oh:. |
| 12   | Donny: hhh |
| 13   | Donny: And.hh (0.2) I don' know if it's possible, but |
| 14   | hhh see I haveta open up the ba:nk.hh |
| 15   | (0.3) |
| 16   | Donny: act uh: (.) in Brentwood?hh= |
| 17   | Marcia: =Yeah:- and I know you want- (.) en I whoa- (.) and I would. but- |
| 18   | except I've gotta leave in about five min(h)utes.= |
| 19   | Donny: |=Okay then I gotta call somebody else.right away. |
| 20   | | |
| 21   | | |
| 22   | | |
| 23   | | |
| 24   | Donny: [Thanks] a lot.=Bye-. |
| 25   | Marcia: Byg.: |

Conversation analysts approach these data inductively with the aim of discovering their unfolding, participant-produced organization, by listening to them carefully turn-by-turn (or watching them, in the case of videotaped data). Repeated replays of the data, accompanied by inspection of the transcript, yield observations about possible conversational practices and structures. These observations are then tested against many other conversations. In the brief moments of interaction that make up this phone call, we see encapsulated a rich array of conversational phenomena that provide the bedrock structure of conversational interaction (e.g., turn taking, action sequence organization, and repair organization, each addressed in more detail below), as well as beginning and ending a conversation, word selection, and so on. We also see
a number of actions produced using interactional practices that can also be employed in other environments (e.g., seeking help and refusing to help; these practices are also explained in more detail below). Once a possible phenomenon or action has been identified, large numbers of instances are collected from tape-recorded conversations and analyzed to determine that phenomenon’s regularities of use (including descriptions of occasions for use; design features, or “composition” of the phenomenon; and placement within its turn and sequence, or “position”). Thus CA is thoroughly empirical, building theories of interaction on a descriptive foundation of observation and analysis of particular instances of naturally occurring interaction. We will return to the specifics of this conversation later in the chapter, as a resource for instantiating aspects of CA Theory.

Main Features of the Theory

Three main features of CA Theory are centrally relevant to this discussion. First, CA relies on the understanding that “talk is action.” For CA, what is most important about talk is that it is used by communicators to do things. Second, CA has found that “action is structured,” consisting of collections of stable practices. Third, CA treats “action as locally organized.” I address each of these in turn.

TALK IS ACTION

Key to an understanding of the CA approach to interpersonal communication is the observation that to understand communication one has to understand that “talk is in the first place action.” That is, when someone says something, they are not only or even primarily describing (Austin, 1962), or transmitting information (Mokros & Deetz, 1996), or “making meaning.” Rather, they are doing something (Heritage, 1984). In Excerpt 1, when Donny says to Marcia, “My car is stalled” (Line 8), he is not simply describing a current circumstance or transmitting information. In fact, Marcia could hear him to be making a request by reporting a problem. This is so because he is employing a practice for “doing requesting.” Particulars of the local environment, such as intonation, what precedes and follows an utterance (e.g., in this case that it is preceded by “Guess what” and “What,”), and so on, shape how exactly an utterance is understood. Importantly, how it is understood will be revealed (to the speaker and to us as analysts) in how it is responded to (perhaps immediately next, but sometimes over an ensuing course of turns). Initially, in Excerpt 1, there is no response (which is itself noteworthy, given the relevance of a response), and Donny continues to provide details of the problem. Then in Line 17 we see that Marcia may in fact have heard Donny to be reporting trouble so as to seek help from her when she says “and I know you want—and I whoa—and I would.” Thus reporting problematic circumstances in the way that Donny does here may constitute a practice for doing an action—the action of showing that a request may be on its way (leaving it to the recipient to infer this), rather than making the request overtly.

ACTION IS STRUCTURED

Second, CA research has shown that “action is structured.” The structures of conversation allow communicators to, among other things, coordinate their talk so that speakers take turns rather than talking simultaneously; coordinate their actions with others in order to build patterned sequences of action (such as a request sequence or a “how-are-you” sequence); repair errors and other troubles in speaking, understanding, or hearing; and open and close conversations. These basic organizational systems are communicators’ solutions to the practical challenges of talking together (and getting things done through talking together), and are of fundamental importance to interpersonal communication, since each of them instantiates the interactive character of interpersonal communication that requires communicators to “work together.” For instance in Excerpt 1, we see how “turn taking” can be managed: mostly, turns are taken with minimal gap or overlap between them. This is the arrangement that predominates in conversation (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) and it is this organization that allocates (and constrains) opportunities to participate in interpersonal communication. But note how in Lines 3–4 there is an overlap when Donny produces a self-identification at the earliest possible point at which Marcia’s “Yeah” in Line 3 indicates to him that she may not have recognized him. Coming in at this earliest possible point (noticeable as a variant on “normal” turn-taking practices) is a way for Donny to enact “being in a hurry.” This example shows how the set of context-free (that is, reproducible on any relevant occasion), yet context-sensitive (that is, adapted specifically to the local particulars of a situation), practices that constitutes the turn-taking system provides a basis for conversation, and how that basis can be relied on in the production of actions. Importantly, rather than being a mechanistic set of rules everyone follows unconsciously, the organization of turn-taking forms an “interpretive framework” for understanding action.

Interacts can build courses of actions through a series of turns that hangs together with bonds that are tighter than mere chronology, such that one action makes specially relevant a particular kind of next action. This is known as “action sequence organization.” An instance of this can be seen in Lines 6–7 of Excerpt 1, where Donny’s “Guess what” makes specially relevant an immediate next response such as “What” from Marcia. The “what” would be noticeably
absent if Marcia did not produce it right away. Furthermore, “Guess what” indicates that, given a forwarding response from Marcia, Donny will produce another, related action—the delivery of news. Thus Line 6 actually begins to prepare a slot for Donny to produce news, if given the go-ahead by Marcia. (See Schegloff, 1995, for further discussion.) In addition, Donny projects the kind of response that Marcia could give to his next action by indicating before that action’s production that what he will say next should be inspected for its news-worthiness. The building of an interlinked sequence of actions constitutes a process for communicators to work together in predictable ways to construct a recognizable course of action—in this case the announcement of some news as a possible request for help, and the relevance of its reception as news or as a request for help, or both. A basic conversational pattern for accomplishing this type of connection between actions (and the turns through which they are produced) such as that between “Guess what?” and “What?” has been descriptively named the “adjacency pair” (Schegloff, 2007b).

Another recurrent challenge that communicators face is how to deal with the inevitable troubles in speaking, hearing, or understanding that occur in communication. When a speaker says something that is not heard or understood, the speaker has a set of practices for fixing the problem, and the recipients have a set of practices for prompting the speaker to fix it, if the speaker does not do so without prompting first. The practices of “conversational repair” (e.g., Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977) provide ways of fixing problems of this kind. In Excerpt 1 we see instances of conversational repair when Marcia cuts off the progress of her talk in Line 17 saying “and I know you want—.” This repair practice provides her with a method for mastering her turn. Here doing so can be used to claim that she may know what Donny wants, and to convey willingness, without actually stating what it is she takes it he wants, or making her failure to help overt. Thus repair can be used by a speaker simply to fix a problem in speaking, but sometimes doing so can also accomplish another interpersonal action.

The regular practices of turn taking, sequence organization and repairing trouble are among the wide array of orderly practices that constitute all conversations, and provide a bedrock for sociality. The description of these basic systems constitutes an observation-based descriptive theory of fundamental features of interpersonal communication. The particular ways in which turns are taken, sequences are patterned, repairs are made, and so on, organize interpersonal communication such that violations of these orderly practices can provide for the recognizability of various interpersonal actions. We saw this above with Donny’s overlap in Line 4, where a “violation” of the practices of turn taking was a way of enacting “being in a hurry.” Lerner (2004) showed that overlap also can be produced in ways that achieve solidarity. Crucially, you could not have the recognition of a “violation” such as simultaneous talk without a turn-taking system for speaking in conversation that shows that—ordinarily—turns at talk are produced one at a time with minimal gap or overlap.

**ACTION IS LOCALLY ORGANIZED**

Finally, from a CA perspective, as the above discussion indicates, communication is “locally organized.” There are two important components of CA theorizing regarding what is meant by “local.” First, with regard to what is “relevantly” local for interactants, CA utilizes a particular sense of “context.” For CA, contexts are not “buckets” that shape and constrain communication (Drew & Heritage, 1992). Rather, context is “produced” and “enacted” by interactants’ actions, in addition to shaping and constraining those actions. Interaction is thus both “context-shaped” and “context-renewing” (Drew & Heritage). Interactional practice is viewed as a domain that is relatively autonomous from traditional constituents of social structure such as gender, race, power, socioeconomic status, and so on. It is not that CA denies these constituents’ existence or potential influence. Rather, CA emphasizes the importance of attending to their relevance and demonstrable impact on the current interaction (or “procedural consequenceality”; Schegloff, 1987) at any given moment. Thus for CA (as for the participants in the conversation), the focal action in Excerpt 1 is getting help (for Donny), and turning Donny down (for Marcia). Issues such as relationship or identity, which some interpersonal communication scholars might take to shape and control the interaction, for CA may be produced in and through the particular ways in which Donny seeks help and Marcia refuses to help. (See Mandelbaum & Pomerantz, 1991, for an extended discussion of this issue.)

Second, immediately preceding talk is a prevalent resource relied on by interactants for determining what a prior speaker may be doing in a given utterance. The action that a current turn may be doing may be shaped by features of “turn taking” that immediately precede it, or by features of “sequence organization,” among other possibilities. For instance, as noted above, Marcia hears Donny’s announcement at Line 8, “My car is stalled” in the context of his “Guess what” in Line 6. Furthermore, it is produced in the slot just after the opening of the conversation, where the reason for the call is normally produced (Schegloff, 1986). Its position here in the call, and just after the “guess what—what” adjacency pair prepares a slot for Marcia to hear whatever is produced next as her “big” news. The various features of the position of this news inform answers to the question every participant must ask of every turn—“Why that now?” In this sense, “adjacency” becomes an important concept for researchers to unpack, as it is for interactants also, in determining what is relevantly local.
Conceptualization of Communication in the Theory

For CA, communication consists of actions constructed by communicators out of talk and body behavior. As noted above, communication is regarded as a (necessarily) publicly available constitutive process, rather than as a vehicle for message transmission or meaning-making. Communication is regarded as the central resource for the enactment of all aspects of social life. Whereas CA began as an attempt to study the "orderliness" of everyday life, with taped conversations providing merely a conveniently preserved sample (Sacks, 1984), it rapidly became apparent that conversation itself is central to social life. Schegloff referred recurrently in his work to talk-in-interaction as the primordial site of sociality (e.g., Schegloff, 1987). CA's view of communication as a means for constituting action is consonant with recent moves in interpersonal communication theory to study relationships as constituted via communication (Duck, 1994; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). That is, rather than social structure and individual variation, and so on, being seen as "independent variables with discursive consequences" for communication in relationships (Hopper & Chen, 1996, p. 10), communicators also shape, construct, or "do" relationships through their communication. CA provides tools for documenting the practices through which this is accomplished, offering a dynamic conceptualization of relationships and identities, and positioning communication as a central mechanism for producing both relationships and identities. Particular ways of talking can shape and constrain relationships and identities, and changing those ways of talking can reshape them.

Uses of the Theory

CA studies proceed inductively, as noted above. This has resulted in a body of work that springs from analysts’ observations of the natural world of interaction (with a careful focus on preserving the integrity of the interactional occasion as it was produced by and for "interactants"; Schegloff, 2005) rather than from systematic attempts to pursue the disciplinary concerns of interpersonal communication theory. In focusing on the structures, actions, and reasoning practices that constitute everyday and institutional talk-in-interaction, a body of CA work describes particulars of how communicators construct and manage their interpersonal relationships. Pomerantz and Mandelbaum (2005) note that "interactants maintain incumbency in complementary relationship categories, such as 'friend-friend,’ 'intimate-intimate', or 'father-son,' by engaging in conduct regarded as appropriate for incumbents of the relationship category and by ratifying appropriate conduct when performed by the co-interactant" (p. 160). That is, there is a variety of practices in and through which interactants enact incumbency in particular relationship categories. These practices show how "being in a relationship" is interactively constructed, since they reveal particular rights and obligations that relationship members enact vis-à-vis one another. For instance, Drew and Chilton (2000) and Morrison (1997) found, in studying calls between family members and friends, that a recurrent activity in these calls was inquiries that attended to what was known about the other person's schedule, and to problems experienced by the other person or their significant others (e.g., "How was the drive?"). Inquiries of this kind (which Morrison calls "tracking questions") were followed by a report of the relevant activities (e.g., "Just fine"); thus ratifying the claim of legitimate concern about and access to these events in the other's life, and then responded to with a display of understanding and interest in the report (e.g., "Good"), and further elaboration by the party of whom the inquiry was made. This work indicates that one set of practices associated with enacting "being in a relationship" involves how knowledge about one another is managed, invoked, and deployed.

Raymond and Heritage (2006) note that "there can be direct links between the identities of participants and the rights and responsibilities associated with those identities that are directly implicated in practices of speaking" (p. 681). They call this the "epistemics of social relations," and present a case study to show how particular ways of talking provide for claiming knowledge in such a way as to enact "having grandchildren." They show, for instance, how the interlocutor will defer to the "actual" grandparent's knowledge of the children through small features of talk, such as producing claims about the grandchildren as questions rather than as declaratives. These are examples of seen but unnoticed features of relationships that can be discovered empirically through systematic examination of actual cases of recorded interaction.

The "epistemics of social relations" is a critical nexus of interpersonal communication that is ripe for further investigation. Additionally, this work demonstrates that just because one "is" a grandparent (or incumbent of any other relationship or identity category) does not mean that such status is relevant on a given occasion. Rather, practical interactional steps must be taken by communicators to invoke the category’s relevance (and all of its associations; Sacks, 1992) for any particular occasion. This then leads to the observation that, for practical purposes, incumbency in a relationship is not some entity that one "has," but rather something that one "does" through communication. We "do" being a grandparent, grandchild, parent, female, boyfriend, girlfriend, married, and so on. Furthermore, CA uses its analytic tools to spell out the tacit yet relied-on knowledge that interactants draw on in dealing with one another in enacting these and other identities. A long-standing debate in the field of interpersonal communication concerns its "distinctive" character (Berger, 2005). Almost any action in conversation can have interpersonal consequences as a by-product. However in research of the kind illustrated here, CA
has begun to describe practices that are particular to interpersonal communication; practices that seem to be fundamental to enacting connectedness in a relationship.

**Strengths and Limitations of the Theory**

Many of CA Theory's strengths can also be considered limitations, and derive from the fact that CA proceeds inductively. That is, the descriptions that CA builds are grounded in features of field recordings of naturally occurring communication, to which analysts can show interactants are demonstrably oriented. This provides interpersonal communication with a new sense of "local."

A strength of CA is that in focusing on that which is demonstrably relevant to and procedurally consequential for interactants, it avoids treating a communicator as "a judgmental dope of a cultural or psychological sort" in Garfinkel's (1967, p. 67) terminology. That is, an interaction order that is coherently structured to manage the procedural challenges inherent in interacting together is independent of individual and even cultural variation. While it can be deployed to enact or construct individuals qua individuals, and to enact individual goals, it is not the individuals' judgments, psyches, or cultures that shape its basic organization. Actors' circumstances are in fact shaped and altered by their actions (Heritage, 1995, p. 392). Thus the findings of CA that are relevant to interpersonal communication offer descriptions of the organization of the natural world of relationships and identities, and emphasize documented orientations that are manifested and deployed in interaction. As a result, conversation analytic work tends to take a bottom-up approach to society in general, and to relationships in particular. That is, the influence of societal institutions (ranging from marriage and family to medical, legal, corporate, or governmental, for instance) is recognized, but understood to be consequential for communication only inasmuch as it is demonstrably enacted and oriented to by communicators (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Schegloff, 1987). This has further consequences: First it becomes possible to spell out the communicative practices through which concepts important to interpersonal communication are enacted in and through talk, such as gender (Hopper & LeBaron, 1998), culture (Hopper & Chen, 1996), or relationships (Pomerantz & Mandelbaum 2005), by analyzing interactive moments where these are demonstrably oriented to by interactants. Second, it provides a liberating view of relationships (one that places communication at the center): they are not produced by social structures or individual psychologies, but rather by communicators in interaction. If this is the case, then unsatisfactory or dysfunctional relationships can be reconstructed by the members of those relationships in different ways through communication. A consequence of this stance of CA Theory is that it deemphasizes the role of individual psychological drives on the one hand, and macrosocietal structures on the other. While some consider this to be a strength of the approach, others consider it a limitation. (However, see Kitzinger, 2005, for CA work that shows the relationship between the sequential organization of talk at the microlevel of interaction and the macrosocial structure of heteropatriarchy that communication reproduces by examining the interactional practices through which "family" is enacted.)

Another result of an inductive discovery process is that, in addition to the more expectable findings about the practices through which relationships are enacted and maintained, serendipitous findings can be made. For instance, while investigating laughter, Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff (1987) discovered the specifics of how the use of an obscenity, and uptake of it or resistance to it, can be ways of constituting intimacy. A disadvantage of the inductive process (with an emphasis on taking into account the integrity or the organic whole of the data) is that it may prohibit straightforward pursuit of disciplinary goals (see Schegloff, 2005).

Finally, the single-minded focus on describing interaction practices has meant that CA focuses on particulars, rather than on aggregates. It is important to note, however, that CA uses large collections of instances of a particular phenomenon in order to develop a description that is both context sensitive and context free; because of this, descriptions of practices are based on aggregates of single cases. However little attention has been paid to measuring outcome variables. For instance, issues such as satisfaction are not examined often, although some CA work in the medical context has examined this (e.g., Robinson & Heritage, 2006).

**Directions for Future Research and Applications**

The CA stance that relationships and identities are things that we "do" via communication rather than things that we "have" is strongly generative of future investigations and applications. As noted above, research on the basic mechanisms in conversation for producing and enabling interpersonal communication provides opportunities for documenting matters that have previously been addressed theoretically, or addressed using recollected occurrences.

Another intersection between traditional interpersonal communication and CA Theory is with regard to CA's focus on when and how particular membership categories are employed in interaction. What are the rights, entitlements, and obligations associated with them? Work in this domain began with Sacks (1992), and has been pursued by Schegloff (e.g., 2007a), Kitzinger (e.g., 2005), and others. This is a rich domain for spelling out both the communicative practices in which and through which locally relevant identities are
enacted and managed, and the interpersonal actions pursued through their enactment and management.

CA Theory provides for interpersonal communication research to start with accounts of actual practices, or “how” questions, and use answers to these questions to explore “why” questions, or questions about motivation, in a grounded fashion. For example, in Excerpt 1 above, analysis of “how” the action of requesting help is done could lead to grounded speculation about “why” Donny asked for help in this way (e.g., he asks in a way that minimizes imposition on Marcia, by putting her in the position to volunteer to help). Continued basic research examining how countless social actions are produced by communicators should result in further grounded insights about why they produce these actions.

Some CA work has recently taken a critical turn, and has been used to lay out, for instance, the practices of heteronormativity (Kitzinger, 2005). This suggests that future work in which CA is used to examine interpersonal communication could address other inequities produced through communication. By examining these particulars, we could describe in detail the communication practices that constitute a fully democratic relationship.

In these ways, in addition to laying out the particulars of interaction as a discreet domain in its own right, CA’s description-based theory provides for both further amplification of important dimensions in traditional interpersonal communication and the breaking of new ground in our understanding of phenomena central to interpersonal communication that can be discovered in the seen but unnoticed interactional details that make up all relationships.

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### References


Expectancy Violations Theory and Interaction Adaptation Theory

From Expectations to Adaptation

Cindy H. White

My initial interest in Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT) was sparked by the following question: When unexpected things happen, what determines if we see the event as a surprise or a disappointment? It seemed to me that a key difference was how the event related to what we expected, which influenced how we interpreted the event. For instance, I once had a new coworker whom I thought of as rather distant and standoffish; he was older than me and we appeared to have little in common. As a result, I did not talk much with him and knew little about him. One day after a departmental dinner we both attended he brought me a pound of a special type of rice that had been served at the meal that I had particularly enjoyed. His actions definitely violated my expectations. After that, I saw his distant behavior differently, and I began to interact with him differently.

One theoretical perspective that helps to explain how we interpret and react to these types of situations is EVT. Although following norms and conforming to expectations often seems like the best way to make social interaction work smoothly, Judee Burgoon’s early work on the theory proposed that there are circumstances where violating norms is advantageous (Burgoon, 1978; Burgoon, Stacks, & Woodall, 1979). Specifically, initial tests of the theory explored how violations of personal space were interpreted in conversation and considered how characteristics of the communicator who engaged in a