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What can Conversation Analysis tell us about "difficult" interactions?

Conversation Analysis is the study of how people do things in talk. Not just everyday things – like promising, advising, suggesting and so on – but also institutional things like how doctors deliver bad news, shop-workers deal with complaints, or telephone help-line call-takers handle callers' strong emotions. One of CA's promises is to show how such institutional exchanges can be made to 'work' better, or how a given conversational practice can be made more 'sustainable'.

I shall illustrate what it can offer by examples from police interviews and support for people with intellectual disabilities. In the police interviews, I shall focus on the very sensitive matter of interviewing people who allege having been raped: at some points in the interview the questions imply that the person is herself to blame, which causes difficulty. In my other set of examples, I shall show how interactions between adults with learning disability and the staff who support them can go wildly wrong, when the staff insist on using inappropriately complex language.

Both these practices - questions implying blame, and overly demanding language - are, because they are embedded in culturally 'normal' ways of thinking, difficult to change; but identifying them, and sharing them with staff, is a first step to making the interactions in which they occur more sustainable.