Conversation Analytic Perspectives to Digital Interaction

Practices, Resources, and Affordances

Edited by
Aino Koivisto, Heidi Vepsäläinen and Mikko T. Virtanen
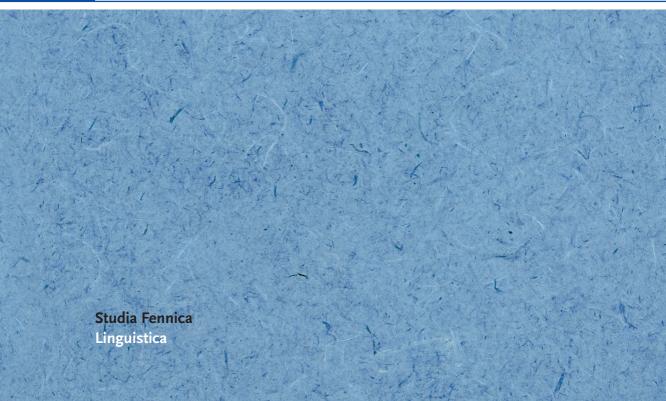
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Applying conversation analysis to digital interaction

1 Background

Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, Conversation Analysis (CA) has established its place as one of the most rigorous yet flexible methods to analyse and understand how people interact in real life. This method has demonstrated its applicability to various settings and types of conversations, including the focus of this volume – digital interactions. This collection explores the contemporary forms of technology-mediated interaction ranging from casual instant messaging to video-mediated workshops, in several languages and within several cultures.[1] Although the objects of study vary, all the chapters in this volume share conversation analytic perspective in studying technology-mediated communication. That is, the focus is on the ways in which technologies and media are – and can be shown to be – relevant for the participants themselves and consequential for the organisation of social interaction (see e.g., Arminen et al. 2016).

At the heart of CA is the study of social action as it is implemented through language as well as through other semiotic resources such as facial expressions, gestures, emojis and *Likes*. Talking (or writing) in interaction does not mean merely transmitting information to the recipient but doing various social actions such as making a proposal, asking a favour, thanking, telling a piece of news, etc. The linguistic formats and resources are therefore viewed as being in service of implementing such actions in a recognisable way (Levinson 2013). A key difference between CA and many forms of discourse analysis is that CA focuses on how interaction unfolds moment-by-moment and how participants themselves make sense of each other's contributions in this sequentially organised interaction (e.g., Schegloff 1996: 55–56; Heritage 1984: 241; see also Wooffit 2005). In other words, as a method of warranting

analytic claims, each turn is interpreted in relation to the previous and the next turn (Heritage 1984: 242).

Another distinctive feature of CA is that it does not rely on *a priori* expectations that would motivate the course of analysis based on outer features, such as gender, age, or cultural background, or the physical or digital setting such as a doctor's office or a messaging application. They are considered as relevant only to the extent to which the participants orient to them. That is, the relevant contexts are taken as being created locally in and through conversation. There is no denying that a digital platform can set restraints or provide new resources for interaction, but all in all, the important question is whether the interactants themselves display orientation to the technology or to the mediated nature of their conversation while doing "business as usual" through their devices. As Rintel (2015: 123) observes, "[t]he affordances of technology are materially inescapable but their relevance as a semiotic resource is a matter for participants".

This book offers a wide-ranging perspective on the state-of-the-art conversation analytic work on the impact of different types of technologies and media on social interaction. It furthers our understanding of whether or to what extent the varying practices of digital interaction can be considered as adaptations of the basic organisations and resources of co-present face-to-face interaction. The chapters explore the emerging practices in contemporary digital interaction and interaction related to digital technologies, covering a wide range of digital platforms (such as messaging applications, social networking sites, and video conferencing systems) and human-technology interactions (such as chatbots and social robots). The chapters are organised into four sections according to the platform or type of digital interaction: mobile messaging, social media, video conferencing, and human-computer interaction. Each of the chapters highlights an interactional or linguistic phenomenon – an action, a practice, a sequence, or a larger structure. Some of these are unique to online environments, such as graphicons or hashtags, whereas some occur in both on online and offline interaction, such as repair initiators and invitations. The size of the unit under inspection ranges from a single resource (such as a graphicon) to the overall structural organisation of an entire conversation.

This introduction provides an overview of some of the key CA concepts and analytic procedures and reviews their applicability to digital interaction. Specifically, we consider turn-taking (Section 2), turn design and sequentiality (Section 3), multimodality (Section 4), and participation in digital environments (Section 5). We present evidence that while some of the concepts such as 'turn' and 'projection' might not be readily applicable to text-based forms of interaction, and while some phenomena might not be straightforwardly approached with CA (such as *Likes* on social media), the essence of the method – the analysis of *position and composition* of contributions (e.g., Schegloff 2007: 20–21) – remains valid (see also, Meredith & Stokoe 2014: 202). We conclude the chapter with an overview of the chapters in this book (Section 6) and a brief conclusion (Section 7).

2 How to apply concepts of CA to digital interaction: the case of turn-taking and text-based messaging

This section presents our discussion of the issues that arise when applying the central concepts of CA to text-based digital interaction. We closely examine the concepts related to conversational turn-taking, that is, 'turn', 'turn-constructional unit', and 'transition relevance place', and watch what happens when they collide with another type of set of units such as 'message' or 'transmission-unit'.

In conversation analytic research, the "question of units" (e.g., Szczepek Reed & Raymond eds. 2013) has been a target of extensive debate since the seminal paper by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974). One of the central issues is the relationship between linguistic units (such as phrases, clauses, and sentences) and units that are relevant for conversational turn-taking and the formation of actions. Famously, Sacks et al. (1974: 702) suggest that turns are composed of turn constructional units (TCUs), while TCUs are typically composed of linguistic structures such as sentences, clauses, phrases, and lexical constructions. Together with their prosodic design, TCUs have the ability to form recognisable actions in specific activity contexts (e.g., Schegloff 1996: 112–113; Ford & Thompson 1996: 148–151). For turn-taking, a central asset of the identifiable linguistic structures is their projectability. That is, participants in the interaction can anticipate the completion of the turn and thus the transition relevance place before the turn is actually completed, which enables smooth turn-taking. In fact, "unit types" that lack projectability cannot be used as resources for turn-taking (Sacks et al. 1974: 702–704).

For text-based digital interaction, the question of units is interesting in terms of the applicability of the central concepts of CA and thus the whole methodology as already pointed out in the early studies (e.g., Garcia & Jacobs 1999). Indeed, while written, digital conversation – particularly chats and instant/mobile messaging – can be well analysed in terms of the sequences of action and sequential implicativeness, the question of units and turn-taking is far more complex in these digital environments. The central reason for this is the non-synchronous nature of messaging. In other words, the on-going message production and thus projectability are not available for the recipient(s) because the message is observable to them only upon its posting (e.g., Garcia & Jakobs 1999; Hutchby & Tanna 2008: 146; Beisswenger 2008; Meredith et al. 2021). Therefore, the central property associated with the notion of TCU – its projectability – is not applicable in digital, written interaction. This does not mean that messages could not be analysed as being composed of TCUs, that is, recognisable linguistic units performing social actions that can make relevant specific types of next actions (such as questions, answers, requests, offers, etc.).

Considering the relationship between the concepts of TCU or turn and a message/post, it is clear that they need to be distinguished. This is because evidently writers can include one or multiple turns or TCUs in one message (Markman 2013: 542–543). Attention can thus be paid to the *internal*

composition of a message and whether it contains either several units or a single TCU. A multi-unit turn composed as one message has been termed a 'package-text' by Hutchby and Tanna (2008). They observe that each of the multiple TCUs and actions can be "treated sequentially implicative in its own right" (ibid. 153; see also König 2019a: 614). For example, this means that within the same message, a writer can greet, ask a question, make an announcement and thus make use of the "extended occupancy" instead of having to produce their contribution bit by bit, "by the temporal unfolding of turn constructional units" (Hutchby & Tanna, ibid.).

Another, opposite strategy is "a simple format", where only one action is produced within the message (Hutchby & Tanna 2008: 146–147). For this format, a multi-unit turn is produced over the course of several messages. The literature refers to this strategy of posting several individual messages as 'chunking' (Baron 2013; Markman 2015; König 2019a) or 'incrementing' (Marmorstein, this volume). The outcome of this strategy is a 'message-succession' (Marmorstein, this volume). It has been argued that in contrast to traditional text-messaging that favours a multi-unit "package", a more common strategy in internet-based WhatsApp dialogue is to send a series of individual postings with one action (or action component) per message (König 2019a: 614). Indeed, prior research has shown considerable interest in the writer's choice to "package" versus to "chunk" when designing their multi-unit (and multi-action) contributions. Chunking can be associated with a fast tempo of texting. This is the case in Extract 1 (see Koivisto, this volume) that involves several short messages by the same participant including a proposal (message 1), a request for information (message 2), which is actually a prerequisite for presenting the original proposal, and a request for confirmation (message 3). These are produced bit by bit, giving an impression of a lack of advance planning.

Extract 1 (Amateur theatre)

1	18.11.22	Ilona	Kulma??	*Kulma??*
2	18.11.31	Ilona	Onx se vielä auki	*Is it still open*
3	18.11.36	Ilona	Eiks se oo	*It is, isn't it*
4	18.11.43	Elsa	onse	*itis ((written as one word))*
5	18.11.45	Ilona	Nice	*Nice ((in English))*
6	18.11.48	Ilona	Tulkaa sinne	*Go there*

A single-unit message (in a series) can have different syntactic-actional relationships to the surrounding messages by the same writer. Extract 1 presents a series of syntactically complete contributions. However, a contribution (and a syntactic whole) can also be divided into several messages such that the appropriate "place" (a TRP, if you will) for the sequentially next turn (message) occurs only after the last message of that series (cf. Baron 2013, Spagnolli et al. 2021). In a series such as this, each message can be designed as an incomplete turn, effectively splitting the TCU(s)

(Tudini 2015); Spagnolli et al. (2021) refer to these as 'installments'. These incomplete TCUs or installments can therefore be characterised as forward-oriented (Tudini 2015: 651). This practice has been shown to possibly prevent intervening messages by co-participants; participants consequently orient to the incompleteness of a turn that expands over several messages. Marmorstein (this volume) describes a practice in WhatsApp messaging that involves a message containing an incomplete opening message (such as "sayy" or a term of address or a greeting), referred to as an "individuated opening", being used to frame a forthcoming action or to merely invite the attention of the co-participant and check the availability for interaction. This shows that while a WhatsApp exchange does not have to be coterminous or focused (cf. Hutchby & Tanna 2008: 144) and the participants do not need to be logged in at the same time (cf. Markman 2013: 539), the participants may still have a tendency to interact as synchronously as possible.

Besides splitting TCUs across messages, writers can also recomplete or extend a "possibly complete online TCU-posts" (Tudini 2015; see also Baron 2013 on 'utterance break pairs'). This can be conceived of as occurring in the "transition space", that is, before anyone has responded. This is a practice that clearly resembles *incrementing* in spoken interaction, which means extending a prior TCU in terms of syntax and action after its possible completion to create a new transition relevance place (Ford, Fox & Thompson 2002; Couper-Kuhlen & Ono 2007). Furthermore, the syntactic formats (such as adverbial clauses, and independent NPs) resemble those reported for spoken interaction (Tudini 2015). The following extract from a Finnish WhatsApp group chat provides an example (Extract 2). In it, Karo extends her just-prior message by adding an adverbial clause ('as long as this headwind allows me', message 5):

Extract 2 (Amateur theatre)

1	13.53.11	Karo	Tulisko joku skidisti neljän jälkeen syömään kulmalle? 🙊	*Would someone come slightly after four to eat at kulma?* 🙊
2	14.27.53	Satu	Mä varmaan tuun kyl!	*I'm probably coming!*
3	14.54.32	Kalevi	Mie oon nyt kulmalla	*I'm at kulma right now*
4	16.05.52	Karo	Iha just kulmal!	*Will be at kulma in a sec!*
5	16.06.01	Karo	**Kuha tältä vastatuulelta pääsen**	***As long as this headwind allows me***
6	16.08.51	Satu	Oon täs pitkissä pöydissä heti kassojen vieres	*I'm at the long tables right after the registers*
7	16.09.15	Karo	Jees!	*Alright!*

To summarise, writers have the option of using a range of message constructions by either packaging several linguistic units and action components (TCUs) into one message or alternatively, by chunking their multi-unit contributions into several messages. This is evidence that

differentiating between the concepts of TCU/turn and message/post is necessary and warrants further exploration. Moreover, while the central characteristic of the concept of TCU – projectability – is not applicable to text-based interaction in a strictly temporal sense, participants can create a projection of more to come by splitting a single TCU so that a message contains a syntactically incomplete turn. This practice of projecting continuation functions as an invitation for active, simultaneous online participation (see also Marmorstein, this volume), which indicates that the preferred style or mode of chatting can closely proximate synchronous communication.

3 Aspects of turn design and sequentiality in text-based interaction

The many forms of digital interaction have opened up new avenues for the study of turn design, linguistic practices as well as for the management of sequences and larger activities. The focus of this section is on text-based interactions. We consider the types of complications created by the properties of these digitally mediated contexts in understanding turn design and sequential embeddedness. More specifically, we discuss 1) how linguistic practices of spoken interaction become adapted to messaging interaction and how technologically-afforded novel practices are employed, 2) how non-synchronous digital interaction encourages to produce lengthy and structurally complex contributions and the challenges for methodology that lie therein, and 3) how polymedia, that is, the employment of several mediums in parallel, affects the way in which individual contributions can be analysed and interpreted sequentially.

3.1 Old, new and borrowed: sequentiality and interactional practices

From the viewpoint of Conversation Analysis applied to digital interaction, an omnipresent question is how practices of spoken (or pre-digital) interaction are utilised and adapted to digital interaction and to what extent interactants develop new practices that stem from the affordances of a specific platform (Marmorstein & König 2021; see also e.g., Zitzen & Stein 2004; Meredith & Stokoe 2014). Below, we provide examples of some novel and adapted practices related to message construction, sequentiality and linguistic resources that are used to frame a contribution.

A characteristic of messaging platforms is message permanence; if the messages are not archived permanently, they are accessible for at least some time. An early finding, as reported by Black et al. (1983), was that this feature encourages participants to initiate and advance multiple sequences in parallel and in multi-party settings, even to engage in several discussions within one common message feed. Later studies have examined in more detail how the existence of multiple lines of activity shapes the design of turns in chat and messaging (e.g., Werry 1996; Örnberg Berglund 2009; Markman 2013).

For example, the participants in contemporary mobile group messaging routinely respond to two (or even more) prior turns consecutively (Virtanen et al. 2021). When they respond in this manner, participants may either divide their answers into two (or more) messages or deliver two (or more) answers within one message. If the participant employs engages in 'turn-splitting' – the separation and allocation of responses to their own messages – the implication is that the responses belong to different lines of activity. The opposite practice of multiple responses in a single message, referred to as 'packaging' (see previous section), serves to highlight the connectedness of the responses, as in the terms of the action they accomplish. These different options attest to how interactants flexibly employ the possibilities of the *message* as a basic unit of transmission (see also the previous section). Obviously, having these two alternatives available as a resource is a "novel" interactional practice in the sense that it is based on a technological feature of the platform.

When analysing how parallel activities are managed on messaging platforms, we can detect that linguistic resources are used in an adapted way. For example, Virtanen et al. (2021) demonstrate that when the same participant responds to two (or more) prior turns in the feed, the writer typically posts the responses so that the latter one is prefaced with the particle 'and'. 'And'-prefacing suggests that both responses were pending and that they belong to the same 'response agenda'. In other words, 'and'-prefacing contributes to maintaining coherence between successive responses that are more or less unrelated in terms of their topic and/or action. (Ibid.) For spoken interaction, 'and'-prefacing has been described in a related manner as a resource which enables the speaker's turn to connect to an overarching institutional agenda or a larger frame of activity and consequently, to create coherence (Sorjonen & Heritage 1994; Nevile 2006). However, prior studies of spoken interaction have not identified 'and'-prefacing practices related to managing multiple responses and thus managing parallel sequences. In short, as a design feature, 'and'-prefacing is a prime example of the adaptations or reconfigurations that "pre-digital" linguistic practices can undergo when transferred to non-synchronous digital environments (see, Marmorstein & König 2021: 1).

Besides the management of parallel activities, sequential connections that occur in text-based interaction are generally maintained with linguistic resources that are to some extent used similarly in spoken interaction. That is, in text-based interaction, we also find elements that project the type and shape of the upcoming turn and show how the turn relates to the previous contributions (cf. Schegloff 1987, 1996; Kim & Kuroshima 2013; Heritage & Sorjonen 2018). Besides the message-initial 'and', we can also consider other discourse particles that occupy the message-initial position (on turn-initial particles, see, e.g., Heritage 2013, Heritage & Sorjonen 2018; Vepsäläinen 2019). Let us consider greeting words as an example. Marmorstein (this volume) demonstrates that greetings and other openings are not necessarily needed in mobile messaging to establish contact. That is, participants orient to messaging as being in a "continuing state of incipient talk" (Meredith 2019: 251; cf. Schegloff & Sacks 1973). When greeting words *are* used, they develop

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new uses that can be traceable to the "original" uses. Greetings that occur in the sequence initial position are also typically disjunctive and serve to mark the message as not continuing the previous interaction but as opening a new one. When used in a non-sequence-initial position, a greeting displays renewed availability and can therefore be used to account for temporary unavailability or absence when rejoining the conversation. Marmorstein suggests that this use relates to the meaning of availability that is present in greetings, constituting a trace of their "original" use.

As yet another example, Virtanen et al. (2021) observe that the Finnish word *hei,* which is not only known as a greeting word but also as an attention-getting device (Pihlajamaa 2019), has acquired new uses in group messaging. The word *hei* can be used to introduce an immediate concern, which then initiates a new (possibly parallel) line of interaction. While this use is clearly an adaptation to multi-party messaging in which several spans of interaction can co-exist, it also has its "roots" in spoken language where attention-getters launch new courses of action and redirect talk (see e.g., Sidnell 2007: 392; Norrick 2009: 881–882).

Together, the practices discussed above demonstrate that, as Marmorstein and König (2021: 1) note, text-based dialogues "are not 'digitised conversations' reproducing ordinary conversations on a screen. Rather, they are a different kind of interaction that involves its own conditions of production and interpretation". Furthermore, our case examples demonstrate that non-synchronous digital interaction has given prominence to phenomena of sequential organisation in which connections to more or less distant prior turns are prevalent and where multiple lines of interaction are routinely managed in parallel. This contrasts with how interaction is organised and understood in fully synchronous settings where the premise is that there is a connection to the immediately prior turn (see, Schegloff 2007) and where topics and sequences can be changed, suspended, or returned to (e.g., Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2018: 342–353) but not so much advanced in parallel.[2] These complex sequential configurations create pressure for the interactants to develop new and adapted means to index sequential connectedness and separation, as demonstrated by our case examples of turn-splitting, 'and'-prefacing, greetings, and attention-getters.

3.2 IS IT INTERACTION? THE PROBLEM OF LENGTHY TURNS AND MONOLOGUES

Another characteristic feature of sequentiality and turn design in non-synchronous digital interaction is that contributions can be lengthy and structurally complex, particularly in environments such as e-mail exchanges, discussion fora, (video) blogs as well as in the comment sections of online newspapers. Indeed, the interface design of text-based platforms encourages longer contributions because the text field is typically considerably larger than offered in messaging applications. Moreover, as the production of lengthy turns in non-synchronous settings cannot be based on real-time monitoring of the recipients' displays of non/understanding (such as gestures

and facial expressions), the writer has to write "on the premises of the reader" (Rommetveit 1974: 63) and in accord with what can be "reasonably assumed that the reader knows and expects" (Nystrand 1989: 75). This is particularly applicable to opening posts where there is no local prior discussion (see e.g., Stommel & Koole 2010; Giles 2016). An additional point is that opening posts often do not receive any responses. However, As Meredith et al. (2021: 7) observe, this lack of uptake does not wholly prevent them to be analysed as "interactional": the posts are nonetheless recipient-designed. That is, they reveal how the poster orients to the recipient/audience and the social situation. However, this type of analysis cannot rely on the 'next-turn proof procedure' (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974), which is a step away from the methodological foundations of CA.

As a consequence, the CA-informed analysis of lengthy turns exhibits similarities to textual analysis (TA), which has a long tradition of analysing the organisation and interactional features of singly-constructed texts (see e.g., Nystrand 1986; Hoey 2001; Martin & Rose 2008). In addition, while it has been demonstrated that CA offers powerful tools for ascertaining the joint accomplishment of sequentiality between turns, CA researchers have focused less attention on the composition of multi-unit turns and monologue.[3] This is possibly due to the classic take on turn-taking and turn constructional units (Sacks et al. 1974) emphasising that speakers are entitled to one TCU at a time after which the transition to the next speaker becomes relevant. The analysis of multi-unit turns then has focused on resources through which speakers project more talk beyond the first TRP (e.g., on list constructions, *if-then* clauses, and story prefaces, see Schegloff 1982; Lerner 1991) and how speakers prevent a transition to the next speaker at the first TRP (e.g., "rush-throughs" see Schegloff 1982; 1996). As an attempt to combine the insights of CA and TA in the analysis of blog posts and reader comments, Virtanen and Kääntä (2018) investigate sequentiality both within and between turns. Their specific focus is on employ the tools of genre analysis (e.g., Martin & Rose 2008) to analyse the overall structure of the opening posts, and applying methods of CA to study how, and in which respects, the posts are then taken up in the comments. In a similar vein, Frobenius (2014) has investigated both the monological organisation of video blog posts and the responsive relations constructed in the viewer comments. These studies, as well as others, highlight the importance of "bespoke modes of analysis" (Giles et al. 2015: 45) to acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of interactivity in digital environments.

A more dynamic approach to the composition and design of text-based messages of varying lengths is to examine how they are constructed stroke by stroke by collecting screen-view data in video format (on transcription, see Meredith 2016). In particular, the various ways in which messages are edited prior to transmission can be symptomatic of the writer's interactional concerns. For example, Salomaa and Lehtinen (this volume) demonstrate how participants in online workplace interaction orient to the 'emotional order' (Stevanovic & Peräkylä 2014) of the organisation by replacing an intense verbalisation of emotion by a more neutral one during the process of message construction. They support their findings by demonstrating the

occurrence of similar neutralising self-repairs in spoken turns.[4] Another study by Meredith and Stokoe (2014) show how participants in casual messaging extensively modify, alter and adjust their messages – including emoji choices – before transmission and, in doing so, display their orientation to how the design of their turn "might accomplish a specific action or outcome in projecting a particular response" (ibid. 194). Although the stroke-by-stroke construction of messages is not typically accessible to the recipient, video data of message construction may nevertheless offer important insights into the participants' orientation to interaction in non-synchronous settings.

3.3 Missing turns: sequential analysis in polymedia era

Finally, we would like to discuss aspects of the sequential organisation related to the concept of 'polymedia' that was introduced by Madianou and Miller (2012) within the framework of communication and cultural studies (see also Androutsopoulos 2021). In short, the notion shifts the analytic focus from single platforms and technologies to whole ecologies of communicative opportunities. For example, interaction between friends and family can take place in, and alternate between, physical settings, instant messaging applications, audio and video calls, social media sites and so on and so forth. Importantly, the choice among channels and media for communication can be socially meaningful and consequential in many ways. For example, in 2006 the then prime minister of Finland captured the attention of both the national and international press after allegedly having ended a relationship by sending a brief SMS (see Laine 2010). With regard to the micro-analytic perspective of CA, the consequences of polymedia can manifest themselves in a highly concrete manner. Extract 3 demonstrates a case concerning a member of an amateur theatre group posting a WhatsApp message in which she returns to a discussion about a plan to go see a film together. This message is the first and only mention of the film in the logfile.

Extract 3 (Amateur theatre)

1	17:58:19	Jarkko	Anteeksi, mutta tulen myöhästymään vähän ☺	*Sorry to say, but I'm running a bit late ☺*
2	21:37:55	Reeta	31.1 treenipaikka vaihtunut [place] ja varausmahdollisuuden takia 6.2 treenit peruttu, tilalla 8.2. (tämä on päivä ennen läpäreitä, kyllä) treenit 17-21 [place]	*Rehearse place for 31 Jan changed to [place] and due to a possibility of overlapping booking, 6 Feb rehearsals are cancelled and rescheduled to 8 Feb (this date is one day before the go-through, yes) 5-10 pm at [place]*

When do people greet each other on WhatsApp? How do people start chats on Tinder? How are emotions displayed in video-mediated workplace interaction? How do people converse with a social robot? This volume offers a state-of-the-art collection of articles dealing with digital interaction in different settings – mobile messaging, social media, video conferencing, and human-computer interaction. It shows that while there are different applications and platforms that employ both written and spoken forms of interaction, the method of Conversation Analysis is a powerful tool for revealing the systematicity of varying linguistic and multimodal resources and practices specific to each context and platform. The volume offers in-depth analyses of interactional practices in different platforms; the languages covered by the chapters include Finnish, Dutch, German, and Hebrew. In addition, the volume offers a comprehensive introduction to the central concepts of Conversation Analysis and their applicability to digital interaction. In that way, the volume is suitable for all students and researchers interested in digital interaction and Conversation Analysis, also from the methodological perspective. It is also well suited as course material for university students.