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# Agency in language
## Lessons from (and for) a phenomenological approach to education

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**Abstract**
Phenomenological Pedagogy shares theoretical ground with many other perspectives which have brought forward the idea of the discursive constitution of reality. Although highly diverse, these perspectives may be seen to have a *family resemblance* in Wittgensteinian sense. In this article, I propose an overview of them, starting with a presentation of the most consolidated and authoritative traditions, which may be considered the forefathers of the *phenomenological family* – having promoted the idea of *the constitution of reality through the discursive practices of everyday life*. Some aspects of Conversation Analysis, a discipline specialized in bringing out the *phenomenally high density* of everyday interactions, will be discussed. Finally, various currents of the Applied Conversation Analysis will be presented to suggest how the research approach developed in these areas of concern could be of great inspiration for educational research rooted in (re-)thinking the mind, culture and language "phenomenologically".

**Keywords:** Phenomenological Pedagogy, situated interaction, agency of language, Conversation Analysis, institutional accountability

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### Introduction

The epistemic status of the object of research in education has been matter of a heated debate among scholars over the last century. To affirm that educational research should investigate educational *facts* or *actions* is not enough to settle the intellectual disputes. The question concerns the nature of these facts or actions and what makes them relevant to scientific investigation. In this debate, Phenomenological Pedagogy (Bertolini, 1988; Caronia, 2011) has taken a clear stance since its foundation. Indeed, according to this perspective, the educational fact (or action) is "a process of active co-production of meanings by all the actors involved"


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(Bertolini, 1988: p. 115, auth. trans). More specifically, the *intentional subjects* involved in an educational relationship are all protagonists of the *intersubjective construction of social reality*: in situated interaction, the actors negotiate meanings and progressively rework their own "visions of the world" (Bertolini, 1988: pp. 123-24), which are culturally and historically placed, having social (and not only individual) inception and predestination. Educational practices, like other human practices, are concretized in the Husserlian *Lifeworld*, conceived—in today's phenomenological pedagogy—in a constant co-developmental relationship with human subjectivity. The Lifeworld is "a subjective construction that makes use of and is rooted in a common substratum […]. (It is) the meaningful and experienced world of our daily life conceived from the outset as a co-beingness" (Caronia, 2011: p. 80, auth. trans.). In other words, assuming a phenomenological perspective on education means considering people-in-their-social-context as protagonists of educational events, and the educational fact as a combined effort in the construction of reality.

Starting from this fundamental premise, phenomenological pedagogy recognizes that *language* plays a key role in such an intersubjective and historically situated constitution of reality. Since its foundation, in fact, phenomenological pedagogy has strongly affirmed that education "is a discourse and therefore also a linguistic event" (Bertolini, 1988: p. 165). Given that the process of the co-construction of meanings lies at the core of the educational relationship, the analytical focus of pedagogy is directed towards *the practices* through which this task is accomplished in daily life: these are (mainly) *discursive practices*, mediated by *language.* Since people interact mainly by means of language "which provides the communicative resources for the definition and enactment of (past, present, and future) realities" (Duranti, 2004, p.451), the idea of the *agency of language*[1] assumes a central role in the reflection on the educational fact. In this, Phenomenological Pedagogy shares theoretical ground with many other perspectives and approaches which—starting from the work of Husserl—have brought forward the idea of the discursive constitution of reality albeit in various ways: highly diverse theories and approaches, variously related to each other, that have a *family resemblance* in the Wittgensteinian sense.

In this article, I propose an overview of them, starting with a brief presentation of the most consolidated and authoritative phenomenological traditions: those that may be considered the forefathers of the *phenomenological family* since—in various and interchangeable ways—they have pushed forward the idea of *the constitution of reality through the discursive practices of everyday life.* Although by no means a complete exploration of the approaches at stake, I will present different analytic traditions sharing a strong commitment to the study of language in interaction. In the second part of this paper, starting from a schematic summary of the complex subfamily of fields of studies named Discourse Analysis, I will delve into some aspects



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of Conversation Analysis: a discipline that has developed fine research techniques honed to bring out the *phenomenally high density* of everyday interactions. Finally, I shall close with a reference to the classification of the various currents of Applied Conversation Analysis proposed by Antaki (2011) to suggest how the research approach developed in these areas of concern could be of great inspiration for educational research deeply rooted in (re-) thinking the mind, culture and language "phenomenologically".

## The agency of language: perspectives on the discursive construction of reality

In human sciences, the interest in the *agency of language* originates in the intellectual revolutions that took place in Western thought starting from the late fifties: the *linguistic turn* which spread out over various fields of study starting from linguistics and anthropology and the *phenomenological revolution* that took place in sociology. These two "revolutions" definitively ratified the idea that the encounter between subject and reality is always a socially and culturally mediated meeting, mainly via language and other cultural artefacts (Mantovani, 2004).

The posthumous publication of the Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1957) and the lectures of J. L. Austin on S*peech Acts* (1962) laid the foundations for the *linguistic turn*. Wittgenstein's conceptualization of language as a form of life, his idea that the meaning of words must be understood with reference to the context in which they are produced, and the distinction proposed by Austin between the *meaning* and *force* of a statement (see also Searle, 1969) led to a new way to view human language. Scholars began to consider it as a *way of acting in the social world* "rather than mostly (or exclusively) as code to express ideas or represent events" (Duranti, 2011: pp. 37-38). Due to the linguistic turn, language started to be studied as a *constitutive* element of social life.

Simultaneously, the posthumously published work of Alfred Schütz (1962, 1964, 1966, 1967) served as the main theoretical inspiration for the development of the *Phenomenology of the Social World,* in the field of sociology. The absorption of Schütz's ideas led to the shift of the interest of many sociologists from the *macro* social structure and dynamics to the *micro* events that take place in *everyday human life*. As Bauman (1996) highlighted:

> The most seminal of departures that led in the course of the 1970s to widespread criticism and rejection of what Giddens termed the 'orthodox consensus' was the phenomenological revolution. Initiated by Berger and Luckmann (1966), the revolution was sustained by a spate of radical reformulations of the subject matter and proper strategy of sociological work. The posthumously published work of Alfred



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> Schütz served as the main theoretical inspiration and authority […]. The effect of the exposure to phenomenology was to shift interest from external, extra-subjective structural constraints to the interpretation of the subjective experience of actors; and from the determination to arbitrate between objective truth and prejudiced opinion to the effort to reveal the conditions of knowledge rooted in communally transmitted traditions […]" (cited in Psathas, 2004: p. 2).

Schütz's ideas and insights transformed one main area of sociology in particular: the s*ociology of knowledge,* where researchers started to focus their studies "on the dialectical relationship between the way people construct social reality and the obdurate social and cultural reality that they inherit from those who preceded them in the social world" (Ritzer, 2011). Shutz's work also provided the inspiration for the birth of a new field of study, *Ethnomethodology* (Garfinkel, 1967), which "added further impetus to the reorientation of sociology away from 'objective' systems and structures and towards 'social agency', self-reflexive, intentional action and its unanticipated consequences" (Bauman, 1996, cited in Psathas, 2004, p. 23).

As a result of these intellectual revolutions, new ways to approach research into human studies and new methods of investigation took root and thrived. In anthropology, Hymes (1962, 1964) and Gumperz (1964, 1968) were the first scholars to propose a new approach to understanding language in use, shifting the focus from *language* to *speaking* (see Duranti, 2011) and stressing the *interactional nature* of language. Their intuitions and works made other ethnographers aware that it is not possible to study a language without knowing how the speakers use it in a specific social context. Indeed, as demonstrated by an enormous range of empirical research, the use of language is context-specific: speaking is an interactive process that is always influenced by the historical-socio-cultural situation, features of the community of speakers, and the specific circumstances in which the talk takes place. These authors also strongly affirmed that the very functioning of a social group cannot be understood without studying the way in which its members use language. Thus, their research has had far-reaching consequences not only on the empirical analysis of the "social life" of languages, but also on the analysis of human social organization (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992). Among others, Duranti drew on studies by Hymes and Gumperz stressing the pragmatic aspect of *speaking as a social practice*. According to this author, speaking is the primary constitutive element of *human agency* (Ahearn, 2001; Duranti, 2000, 2004):

> It is possible to look at language considering what language does, both for individuals and for society with its institutions (e.g., the family, the school, the factory, the state) and its principles (legal, political, ethical, aesthetic.) [...] I will use the concept of 'speaking as social practice' to refer to the speech not as something added to other processes (cognitive, social, etc.) independently studied, but as an integral



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> part of the very constitution of reality. Speaking is here therefore understood as an activity that has consequences for those who participate in it. For this reason, speaking—which is a particular and at the same time fundamental type of 'language'—is the primary constitutive element of the human 'agency' namely our making and unmaking in the world (Duranti, 2003: pp. 45, 47).

As a "phenomenologically rooted" linguistic anthropologist,[2] Duranti contributed to a major change of perspective, especially concerning the *role of speakers*: recognizing that speaking is the primary constitutive element of human agency—as a logical consequence—leads to the assumption that it is not an exclusive activity of the speaker but, on the opposite, of both speaker and listeners. When someone communicates something, the *others* (co-presents) are not mere *recipients* of a message but always and necessarily co-authors of the meaning that the message is endowed with over the course of the situated interaction. Human beings are *agents* in the social world by means of the use of language, which is therefore an *agent* itself in creating, destroying and recreating the social world.

While the studies on the interactive nature of language were being developed within anthropology, the issue of speaking became of interest for scholars focusing on it as medium for social organization. Almost simultaneously to a new way of carrying out ethnographic studies on language, an original field of studies—Conversation Analysis (hereafter, CA)—was developed by a group of American sociologists interested to the connection between the use of the language and the micro-social organization among interlocutors involved in a conversation. CA, as will be discussed below, is largely based on the principle that conversations emerge as a product of local interaction between speakers who mutually construct *turn of talk*. Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson—the founders of the first generation of CA—starting from and in some ways drawing on Goffman and Garfinkel's thoughts and works (see below)—stated that "perhaps the most general principle which particularizes conversational interactions is that of recipient design" (1974, p. 727), namely the fact that each turn of talk "is designed in ways which display an orientation and sensitivity to the particular other(s) who are the co-participants" (ibid). The way in which the participants in a conversation analyze the moves of the interlocutor(s) is crucial for the organization of the conversation itself (Jefferson, 1973; Sacks & Schegloff, 1979; Schegloff, 1972) and for the micro/local social organization of the people interacting in a broader sense.

Even though anthropologists and CA scholars produced collections of studies devoted exclusively to the ethnography of speaking or CA—reaching valuable independent achievements—is a matter of fact that both field of studies were strengthened by the work of scholars who took on an integrated point of view. In dialogue with the findings from both fields, the authoritative work of Charles Goodwin (1979, 1981) enlightened the interactive construction of sentences in



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natural conversation, focusing on *non-verbal* elements of communication and on several types of contextual features. As a knowledgeable anthropologist embracing Conversation Analysis, Goodwin demonstrated the importance of visual access to the interactive construction of speakers' turns and utterances, introducing a revolutionary idea to CA (by means of a methodological innovation, i.e. the use of video recordings): the idea of *embodied action*. In fact, according to this author:

> The construction of action through talk within situated interaction is accomplished through the temporally unfolding juxtaposition of quite different semiotic resources, and that moreover through this process, the human body is made publicly visible as the site for a range of structurally different kinds of displays implicated in the constitution of the action of the moment" (Goodwin, 2000: p. 1489).

In other words, every communicative event which takes place in interaction is *embodied* by subjects mutually present to each other, inevitably co-present and co-acting by means of their body and mind. "Within interaction, the body is a dynamic, temporally unfolding field that displays a reflexive stance toward other co-participants, the current talk and the action in progress" (ibid, p. 1519). Coherently with this idea, in most of his work Goodwin investigated how human beings build social actions and shared meanings by gathering together very different kinds of "semiotic material": not only language (and all its elements, both verbal and prosodic), but also all the non-verbal aspects of communication (e.g. gestures, glances, etc.) and all possible events that take places in the local context of interaction (e.g. variations in proxemic arrangements, the use of objects, inbound or outbound movements of the interlocutor, etc.). For example, he focused on how an utterance can be reshaped as it is pronounced, according to the direction of the interlocutors' glance, indicating which participant the attention is focused on (1979, 1980). He also shed light on how the actors organize the moves in a conversation according to the relationship between the speakers and the facts at stake—for example the presumed level of knowledge of the topic of each participant. Some successive research by the same author, conducted together with M. H. Goodwin (1987, 1990), focused on the organization of a particularly interesting type of conversation: quarrels between children. From the analysis of the *in vivo* audio-recorded communications of a group of Afro-American children engaged in spontaneous play activities on the street, it emerged that even the quarrel, a type of speech where the interlocutors appear to be in contrast, is in fact "carried out through a very complex coordination process between the parties in opposition" (Goodwin , C. & Goodwin, MH, 1990, p. 85).



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## Focusing on the details of "everyday life"

In all the studies mentioned above interaction and communication are seen as privileged places for the construction of social reality and *everyday life* is recognized as the best place where to observe the meaning-making operations that individuals perform through daily speeches, narratives, gestures. The centrality of *everyday life* it is, in fact, the second theoretical "pillar" of every scientific theory and perspectives that share with the Phenomenological Pedagogy the interest for the agency of language.

The *discovering of everyday life* originates in Shutz's *phenomenology of everyday life*, but its centrality in social science research was definitively ratified by Goffman's work and Garfinkel's investigations, whose works should in fact in some cases be chronologically and logically placed before those mentioned in the previous paragraph. As pointed out by Heritage (2001) "Goffman's fundamental achievement, developed over a lifetime of writing (see Goffman, 1955, 1983) was to establish that social interaction is a form of social organization in its own right." Social interaction—as well as well as any other social institution such as family, religion, etc.—embodies a specific moral and institutional order. This order—that Goffman came to term *interaction order* (ibid, 1983)—encompasses a complex set of interactional rights and duties that are linked to the "face" (the local and circumscribed affirmation of the self in a specific interaction), to the personality of the interlocutors and to the macro-social characteristics of the context in which the interaction takes place (see Heritage, 2001). Goffman affirms that every interaction is based on a precise "syntax" known and used by all the participants to analyze and respond to the behavior of others. This syntax, for example, makes people greet when they are greeted or make individuals express solidarity when someone says they are in trouble. Just as the ordered flow of pedestrians on a sidewalk would not be possible in the absence of a "walking syntax"—namely the set of implicit (but well-known) rules that regulate the trajectories and the speed of the people who are part of a multitude—there could be no coherent human interaction without an implicit, unconscious but powerful "syntax" underlying all discursive activities. Goffman's concern with face-to-face interactions strongly contributed to promoting the acceptance of the study of the "ordinary" people's daily lives by the scientific community. Even though it would be improper to talk about a "Goffman School" of interaction analysis (see Schegloff 1988, Heritage, 2001), Goffman's insights greatly influenced the work of many sociologists, who started to shift their interests toward the *meanings* emerging from micro-social interactions.

In the same years in which Goffman theorized the concept of the *interaction order*, Harold Garfinkel (1967) developed *Ethnomethodology* with the aim of studying and understanding *ethno-methods,* namely the rules and practices through which the



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*social order of daily life* is produced and reproduced. One of Garfinkel's fundamental theoretical results is that ethno-methods function locally, within a specific interaction because they are inter-subjectively recognized and understood by interlocutors. For example, the obligation to greet—which is part of the interactional syntax theorized by Goffman—is not activated indiscriminately, according to Garfinkel, but only when both interlocutors recognize that the action of the one who greets first is, in fact, a greeting. In the process of the co-construction of meaning by the interlocutors, a central role is played by the "reflexive" aspect of social actions (*reflexivity*): through their actions, speakers show mutual understanding of the events in which they are involved and, at the same time, contribute to giving to the conversation a direction that is the result of their analysis of the interactional events at stake (see Heritage, 2005). Furthermore, most of the expressions used by interlocutors while communicating are *indexical,* namely their meaning is established with reference to the characteristics of the context in which they are produced (ibid). Thus, according to ethnomethodologists, social phenomena must be studied as phenomena of everyday life, and those who investigate them must try to understand the *meaning* that these phenomena have for the subjects involved. Ethnomethodological ethnography aims to describe and understand everyday life by using a new look, free from theoretical biases (see Dingwall, 1981). First of all, this means granting to ordinary phenomena a level of attention that is usually given to extraordinary events, for it is in everyday interaction (mediated by language) that social actors reproduce and at the same time modify the societies in which they live, participating in the daily routines and cultural practices specific to each context (Mantovani, 2004).

## Focusing on the relationship between talk-in-interaction and the mind

Within the scientific community that embraced the agency of language as area of specific interest, there have also been many psychologists who consider language as the human action most involved with the processes of thinking, reasoning and the building of knowledge.

I will recall here a psychological perspective which, starting from a Vygotskian approach to human development, embraced the linguistic turn, producing a rich variety of empirical research and theoretical conceptualizations about the human construction of knowledge, also sharing a family resemblance to the collections produced by the interactionist approaches in anthropology, sociology and education.

Socio-constructivist psychologists, such as Bruner (1975, 1977, 1978, 1990, 1991) and Pontecorvo (1992, with Ajello & Zucchermaglio; 1993; 1993a, 1993b) focused on the role of social interaction in the process of building individual and



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social knowledge, starting from the idea that the cognitive skills and the acquisition of the heritage of beliefs, values and distinctive abilities and competences of the community to which the individuals belong are processes rooted in social contexts. Fostering an enriched version of the Vygotskian view, these scholars considered the individual functioning of the mind as part of a larger social functioning: one which is culturally situated. According to these authors, in the process of the construction of knowledge, the individual uses a set of tools (i.e. categories, models and behaviors) that the historical, cultural and social context makes accessible. Furthermore, the process of the construction of knowledge has not only a situated nature, but also a distributed nature (Bruner 1990). This implies that the processes of building knowledge are processes of sharing knowledge (Pontecorvo, 1993).

Pushing the socio-constructivist vision way further, the *socio-constructionists* (Gergen, 1985, 1999; Potter, 1996) proposed a new paradigm centered on the processes of the *exclusively* social construction of cognition and knowledge. In this paradigm, as Caronia (2002) highlighted:

> Context and interaction are no longer seen as a mere container of cognitive development but become the main focus of a research perspective aimed at establishing how the development of social and cognitive skills is rooted in, and depends on social interactional contexts (Caronia, 2002, p. 72, auth. trans).

The socio-constructionist approach differs from the constructivism previously outlined in considering cognitive processes *exclusively and radically* socio-cultural products that should be investigated *only* in their social and communicative dimension. Processes that had in the past been considered individual "cognitive entities" (categorizations, schemata, stereotypes, heuristic criteria, etc.) are studied with respect to their linguistic nature and analyzed as *tools* for social interaction; therefore, they are investigated in order to understand their functioning with respect to individual and social activities and purposes (see Mantovani, 2003). The socio-constructionist approach in psychology laid the groundwork for the development of so-called Discursive Psychology (DP) (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Edwards and Potter, 1992, 2001; Potter, 1996, Edwards, 1997): a discipline strongly influenced by Ethnomethodology and, on the methodological level, linked to Conversation Analysis. As pointed out by Edwards (2005), one of the founders of DP, the problem of "how to analyze the interviews" was one of the greatest challenges faced by psychologists who had taken a socio-constructionist approach to the study of the human mind:

> The traditional use of interviews was a source of information about the interview's topic and what respondents thought and felt about it. The fact that respondents might produce inconsistent, variable versions and accounts had hitherto been



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> treated as a kind of noise to be avoided behind which to find the signal—that is, the consistent facts or attitudes supposedly being expressed. DA (Discourse Analysis, n/a) developed as a radical alternative to that approach. It focused on the so-called noise, the variability, and found there a different kind of order. What looked like cognitive inconsistency and unreliability became coherent when interview responses were left in the context of their occurrence and examined functionally and indexically. People were doing things with their talk: handling interactional contingencies, arguing particular points, drawing contrasts (p. 259).

For the DP founder, an initially and only apparently methodological issue in fact determined a profound critique, followed by a re-specification of psychological topics and explanations. Inspired by the progressively growing collections of studies on language-in-use, which from the late seventies became labelled *studies in Discourse Analysis* (see below), DP progressively "re-elaborated" traditional psychological topics as discourse practices. For example, the attitude measurement was substituted by the study of evaluative practices in discourse (Potter, 1998; Potter & Wetherell, 1988) and the role of emotions in actions and relationships was studied through the way in which people talk about emotional states in personal narratives (Edwards, 1997, 1999). In other words, DP scholars developed a discourse-based alternative to topics usually approached as individual psychological representations. The explicit reference of the founders of DP to Discourse Analysis (DA) allows me to open here a minor digression on it. What DA is and how it is related to the approaches described so far will be treated in the first part of the next paragraph. I will then go more into detail to describe some distinctive elements of a discipline, Conversation Analysis, that can be considered a particular (and particularly rigorous) type of Discourse Analysis. The special space that I will dedicate to CA is justified by the fact that, among all the types of study on language-in-interaction, it is the one that most unveils the high phenomenal density of the interactions of everyday life.

## Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis: going deep into the organization of talk

Asserting that Discursive Psychology was inspired by Discourse Analysis in making a fundamental change of perspective may erroneously suggest that the Discourse Analysis is a scientific theory or a discipline in its how right. In actual fact, this is not the case. DA is not a discipline itself but rather an "open-ended heuristic", "a systematic, rigorous way of suggesting answers to research questions posed in and across disciplines, throughout the humanities and social sciences and beyond" (Johnstone, 2008: p. XIII). As outlined in the previous paragraphs, the



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theoretical interest in *language-in-interaction* gave rise to a composite family of fields of study, which—sharing the focus on communicative phenomena in natural settings—developed and divulged new research methods and techniques to investigate human communication. Scholars in a variety of academic fields and disciplines today use the term Discourse Analysis "for what they do, how they do it, or both" (Johnstone, 2008: p. 1). In such an open-ended heuristic, we may legitimately place the (above-mentioned) studies in socio-linguistic and linguistic anthropology aimed at showing and explaining the mechanisms for constructing and managing interpretive frames and/or social identities within a given community of speakers; or the psychological studies aimed at describing and explaining psychological conditions, assuming a discourse-based approach, or the educational studies focusing on education as a situated social practice, or the sociological studies designed to show how power, through language, constitutes and regulates the social and political world,[3] and so on.

Among the fields of studies that can be connected to Discourse Analysis, there is also Conversation Analysis, as I have mentioned previously. It deserves to be examined a little in depth since it not only boasts a "temporal" primacy compared to other areas of application of the discursive heuristic, but above all, because it was the first to be "founded" as a specific discipline devoted to the accurate study of ordinary conversations as "institutions", namely as models of behavior endowed with normative cogency. It undeniably played a key role in bringing out, unveiling and making intelligible the "phenomenal density" of the social interactions of everyday life, both in ordinary and institutional contexts. As Wooffitt (2005) put it: "Conversation Analysis offers the most sophisticated and robust account of language in action" (p. 13) of all.

Conversation Analysis (CA) was developed at the crossroads of the theoretical-methodological perspectives promoted by Goffman and Garfinkel: from Goffman, CA took on the notion that language-in-interaction is a "fundamental social domain" that can be studied as a social institution in all respects; from Garfinkel it assumed the principle that the practices and procedures through which speakers produce and recognize what has been said are ethno-methods: namely, resources on which speakers must inevitably rely to produce and mutually recognize each other's contributions to interaction. Starting from these fundamental assumptions, CA focused on the ways in which speakers constantly draw on this set of resources to reach a shared understanding of "where they are" within interaction (see Heritage, 2005).

The first-generation CA embodied by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (and anchored to them) dealt with discursive practices "as based in an institutionalized set of norms that are fundamental to the very intelligibility of social action itself" (Heritage, 2005: p. 104). In an attempt to answer the question "How is intelligible social action possible?", they produced an enormous body of theories and empiri-



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cal works that show the normative structure and logic of everyday talk, conceptualizing talk as an action-in-interaction and then focusing on "what the talk does" (rather than what talk is about) by means of actions like greeting, praising, complaining, questioning, requesting, agreeing, rejecting, sympathizing, hinting and so on. Even the only partial illustration of the set of conversational practices that have been fully explored by conversation analysts its impossible here (and obviously goes beyond the aims of this article). Nevertheless, I will write a little about some fundamental achievements of CA in order to show the "robustness" of the CA approach and method in accounting for the "intersecting machinery"[4] of talk.

First of all, according to CA, the utterances that the speakers exchange within the conversations—and which can be made up of a single word, a phrase, a sentence—are organized in *turn constructional units (TCUs)* which are the fundamental units of talk-in-interaction. As pointed out by Schegloff, TCUs are more than fragments of talk (1996, p. 55-56):

> The key unit of language organization for talk-in-interaction is the turn constructional unit […]. Talking in turns means talking *in real time*, *subject to real interactional contingencies*. Whether articulated fluently or haltingly, what results is produced piece by piece, incrementally, through a series of "turns-so-far". These features support the openness of talk-in-progress to considerations of interactional import and reactivity, recipient design, moment-to-moment recalibration, reorganization and re-completion, and to interactional co-construction.

The key features of the *turn constructional units* are 1) being produced "one at a time"[5] and 2) having "a projectable completion" based on syntactic, intonational and pragmatic cues. Furthermore, the TCU completion is the *transition relevance place* where the allocation of the successive turn is managed locally, namely the place where the actors intersubjectively determine who will be the next speaker.[6] Analyzing talk using the TCU model, CA scholars understood that the *opportunity* to participate and the *way* of participating and intervening in a conversation is distributed among the speakers on the basis of a precise *turn-taking system.* As extensively demonstrated, the turn-taking system is not merely a sort of *traffic management* system: it is a basic form of social organization that constrains opportunities to speak and produces actions through speech. It shapes the design of speech itself; it requires mutual monitoring and coordination, and it requires extremely precise human skills.[7] This system is "basic" and "abstract", so it can work for two or many participants without modification. Moreover,

> […] the system works for conversations between co-workers, parents and children, bosses and employees and any other category of persons. In this sense it is invariant. However, the system allows for extreme context sensitivity, becoming adapted



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> to the minute details of particular situations, relationships and the particular persons involved […] (Sidnell, 2010: p. 56).

By studying the invariant structure of speaking in the natural context, CA in fact went as far as to focalize on the *meaning* and *context* of interaction, but linking both to the concept of *sequence* (Heritage, 2005: p. 105). Conversationalists argue that the (discursive) action that precedes a given turn of talk is the primary and constitutive element of the context in which the next turn is constructed and should be interpreted. CA argues also that the meaning of an action is modeled mainly by the sequence of previous actions from which it emerges. Hence, the social context itself is created dynamically in the sequential organization of interaction. As Schegloff (1997) points out, conversational "events" that are meaningful and relevant for the participants are always (at least partially) made visible in each successive turn, and are therefore placed "under interactional control". This vision of a *context* inextricably linked to the interactional sequence is the aspect of CA that clearly distinguishes it from the other approaches to the analysis of discourse. And it is with reference to the notion of *context* (and to the way of conceiving it, which still gives rise to discord among scholars) that I shall close this brief incursion into the discipline.

Among the scholars in the DA family, there are in fact quite significant differences in the way of conceiving the role played by the context in shaping conversations. These differences are still the object of an ongoing debate (see for example Caronia, 1997; Cicourel, 1980; Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; Maynard, 2003; Schegloff, 1987, 1992). For CA scholars, the main mechanisms of conversation regulation are, to a certain extent, "invariant" with respect to the broader macro-social context.[8] For this reason, CA has been accused of being "blind" to cultural diversity and differences of status, role and power among the participants in an interaction. For some scholars, it is clear that cultural differences deeply influence all the mechanisms of regulation studied by CA, starting from the alternation of turns. Studies in anthropology have shown, for example, that there may be significant differences in the timing of alternating turns (Lehtonen & Sajavaara, 1985; Tannen, 1985) and the turn-taking model is not applicable to societies where certain differences of status or role are institutionalized and are reproduced in daily conversations: the status in certain cultures is indeed so important that it even explicitly controls the entire course of the conversation (see Mantovani, 2008). These studies have challenged CA, affirming not only the *non*-universality of some of the "rules" that it identifies, but even making radical criticism of it, starting from its very premises. Billig (1999), for example, criticized Schegloff's use of a "rhetoric of participation" (p. 551) in particular, as it assumes that participants in an interaction have the same rights and obligations—both in society and in within the conversation itself. According to Billig, this implied an "ideological view" of the social



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world as a "world of equality and participation" (ibid.: p. 552) which weakens the CA approach from its very foundations. To counter this criticism, CA scholars responded by emphasizing that the influence of the cultural context is not denied but rather taken for granted by CA. Nevertheless, according to this approach, the constraints placed on action and the opportunities to act for the interactants are not determined *a priori* by a series of "external" variables to interaction; they emerge in the course of interaction as relevant and necessary factors for the practical purposes of the activity that the actors are carrying out at that time (Schegloff, 1992). Without denying that there may be substantial differences in the way of interacting among members of different communities, CA has been committed to demonstrating that independently of the socio-cultural and historical context in which it takes place, human interaction is orderly and it is underpinned by complex rules and practices for implementing them. These rules/practices guide the conduct of the actors, as well as sense-making and shared "definitions of the situation". Furthermore, similar rules operate at every level of detail: sequences of actions, singular actions, word choices, non-vocal behavior, etc.[9]

Conversation Analysis is therefore an approach to the study of human interactions that focuses both on the *meaning of actions* for participants and the *context* of the interaction, linking both of them to the "here and now" of the interaction itself. Its particular heuristics and research techniques make it possible to show how social reality is locally co-constructed—paraphrasing Schegloff—piece by piece, incrementally, through a series of "turns-so-far". So, in spite of its "technical" appearance—as if it was a discipline totally biased towards purely formal aspects of speaking—it has been applied in various fields of study in which the discursive constitution of reality is investigated. In the next section, I shall briefly present some of them, starting from the studies in *Institutional CA,* a current of studies founded quite early by the a second generation of CA scholars who redirected their interest from the "naturally occurring" conversation towards interaction which takes place within social institutions. I will talk in particular about the application of CA in a specific institutional workplace—the classroom—and from here I shall move towards my conclusions, again "widening" the vision of the broader family of studies on *education as a situated social practice*, namely the family of studies which—sharing a phenomenological stance—have investigated the agency of language in educational processes.

## "Family resemblances" among different approaches to the study of education: From institutional talk studies on classroom conversations to research in education "as a situated social practice".



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Using the results of the CA, *Institutional CA* examines the functioning of discourse in interaction within particular social institutions. This type of work requires a shift in perspective compared to "pure" CA. As emphasized by Heritage:

> One can examine calls to an emergency center by focusing on them as telephone calls subject to the constraints and contingencies of talking on the phone, or one can focus primarily on their nature as emergency calls subject to the constraints and contingencies of seeking emergency assistance from a public officer. Institutional CA takes this second approach (2005: pp. 104-105).

The Institutional CA's scholars apply Conversation Analysis to the study of talk-in-interaction inside courtrooms (Atkinson & Drew, 1979), school classrooms (McHoul, 1978; Mehan, 1979), medical clinics (Heath, 1986), media (Clayman, 1988; Greatbatch, 1988) and others,[10] in order to shed light on their functioning. All these studies deal with the differences between the features of informal conversation and those of institutional ones: in particular, the research into school classrooms brought together a number of studies focusing on the relationship between "informal" and "intentionally educational" interactions. Normally, in fact, there are restrictions in the range of practices that can be embodied by the actors engaged in some kind of institutional interaction (Drew & Heritage, 1992). Many studies on turn management, sequence organization and initiation-response-feedback sequences in classroom interaction (McHoul, 1978; Mehan, 1979; Koshik, 2002a; 2002b) have actually shown how basic rules of natural conversation are "adapted" to institutional educational practices. As pointed out by Koole (2012: p. 5), all of these studies also show "that classroom interactions are related to informal conversation in ways that are *educationally relevant*." This is a "key outcome" of CA research into school classrooms, which (in terms of impact on educational practices) relate this kind of research to quite differently founded and framed pedagogical research, which will be outlined further on. The research findings may in fact have immediate application in teaching practices—even though the research itself is not intentionally designed to produce "advice" and/or "prescriptions" for teachers or other professionals (or parents): for example, given the preference embodied in a *yes/no question* for either "yes" or "no", (Koshik, 2002b)[11] teachers could be better advised to use this type of question when they are trying to convey information to students rather than when they are checking students' understanding. In view of this, the CA studies on classrooms—together with all the other types of ICA investigations—are inscribed in the broader family of studies (covering a wide range of topics) of Applied Conversation Analysis. In this major group, there are studies not only of "pure" CA applied to classroom interactions (which is, *inter alia*, a fairly limited current of studies within ICA) but also a series of researches that have used the heuristic power and the theoretical and



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methodological devices of the Analysis of Conversation in research aimed at shedding light on social (educational) actions as sense-making practices.

As Antaki (2011) suggested, there is more than one way to make use of the term "Applied Conversation Analysis" among scholars. Of course, it can be used to refer to the previously mentioned Institutional Talk Studies, but also to a range of *communicational* studies, *social-problem oriented* studies and *interventionist* studies[12] that are usually both *descriptive* (aimed at unveiling how some kind of practices are accomplished by participants as situated activities) and *prescriptive* (aimed at suggesting improvements to the functioning of an institution, a workplace or other such environments). In the *communicational* ones, for example, CA reveals correlations between features of talk and particular organic and/or mental conditions, in order to challenge the "talk-deficiency" of people affected by learning disorders, aphasia or autism. Among them, the most influential is probably the pioneering work of Goodwin (1995, 2003) on the case of an aphasic man who—exploiting the variability of intonation and the sequential structure of the conversation and using resources provided by the speech of others—was able to communicate with only three small "residual" fragments of speech (the only ones that was still able to pronounce: "yes", "no" and "and"). In *social-oriented* studies, CA is used "to offer a different standpoint for a social-organizational understanding of such traditionally identified social problems such as subcultures, conflicts, power, troubles and institutional processing" (Maynard, 1988: p. 311, in Antaki, 2001). In *interventionist* contexts, CA is applied to practical problems as they emerge in interaction, with the intention of producing change. It is also possible to identify some studies that could be considered "applied CA" in more than one sense: this is the case, for example, of some attempts to apply CA to educational studies where the scope of understanding the functioning of an educational institution is oriented towards solving some pre-existing "problems", and it is achieved collaboratively with the actors involved (see Pino, 2011; Pino & Mortari, 2012, 2013 on the discursive strategies used by educators and users of residential educational/rehabilitative communities).

Conversation Analysis is therefore a perspective that allows us to rigorously investigate the practices through which the participants in an (educational) interaction jointly co-construct the form and meaning of the activities they are involved in. Applied to educational research, it has given rise to studies that are related in various ways to ones originating from other research approaches. The latter ones, for example, include neo-constructivist studies which show how learning contexts are constructed through discursive practices and interactional routines (Pontecorvo, Ajello & Zucchermaglio, 1992, Fasulo and Pontecorvo, 1997; Pontecorvo et al., 1998); studies based on the *paradigm of linguistic socialization* (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986 a, b; Ochs, 1988; Duranti, Ochs & Schieffelin, 2012) aimed at grasping the ways in which the structure, the contents and the functioning of language organize



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and are organized by culture (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1994); the studies carried out within the framework of Phenomenological Pedagogy aimed to investigate the discursive construction of the image of the "immigrant child at school" (Caronia, 1995, 1996, 1997). Much of the research on education as a situated social practice, although starting from different perspectives, has used the analysis techniques developed by CA in association with ethnography to "access those worlds of meanings in which the actions, words, behaviors of others make sense" (Zucchermaglio, 2003: p. 53, auth. trans.).

## Conclusions

The theoretical and methodological approaches presented in this article share with Phenomenological Pedagogy the idea that the meaning of educational actions is co-constructed through the daily interactional practices of educators and people-in-education. Pedagogical research, in these perspective, is a "critical investigation of that process of the construction and negotiation of visions of *self-in-the-world-with-others* in and through which the educational event as cultural transmission is constructed and implemented historically in situated and peculiar occurrences."[13] In this process, a key role is played by language, through which (in the situated interaction) the actors construct, deconstruct and reconstruct their own world. This is why educational research is - also and above all - research into the *agency of language*.

Although scholars who have used the Discourse Analysis approach to human interactions have sometimes attempted to delimit the boundaries between their fields of study, there seems to be a tension towards recognizing the strengths of various approaches and the possibility of drawing on more than one approach within the same study and research project. This eclecticism is desirable especially in Pedagogy, which has always recognized and integrated the achievements of research from "other" field of studies. Conversation Analysis in particular is a perspective that—used in ethnographic-naturalistic research, with research designs oriented by the emergence of phenomena and a constant negotiation of the investigation processes with the actors involved—allows us to rigorously investigate the practices through which participants in an interaction jointly construct the form and meaning of the activities in which they are involved. Used in phenomenologically rooted pedagogical research, it can offer fundamental tools for reflexivity, self-correction and institutional accountability.

Ultimately, Phenomenological Pedagogy—along with all the other approaches with which it shares common theoretical ground—can help to emancipate the educational practice from routine and uncritical action, offering reflective tools for its renewal.



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## Notes

[1] According to Ahearn (2001)—who attempted a complete review of the many ways *agency* has been conceptualized in academia over the past few decades—scholars who choose to use this term should define it carefully. In providing a provisional definition ("agency refers to the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act"), the author warns the reader of its vagueness. Ahern invites scholars "to define the term clearly, both for themselves and for their readers" (p. 130) and recalls how important it is for scholars interested in agency "to look closely at language and linguistic form" (p. 109). Duranti (2004) distinguishes the definitions of agency *of* language and agency *in* language, warning us of the risk, using the former (of), "assuming the uncritical reification of language as an agent with its own (independent) goals and even with its own will." In this chapter, I will not use such a distinction. I will simply talk about *agency of language* referring to "how agency is enacted and represented in (and through) language." In other words, to talk about what the language "does".

[2] See Duranti, 2000, 2009, 2010.

[3] I refer here to the stream of studies named Critical Discourse Analysis. It is beyond the scope of this article to illustrate such current in depth. However, since it has been quite influential within Discourse Analysis, I make mention of it. CDA shed light on the ways in which the asymmetry in roles and in power relations, and the various opportunities to access knowledge among people, preside over any social interaction. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) laid the foundations of this current of studies, stating that 1) power relations are discursive and 2) discourse does ideological work. CDA explicitly declares to face these issues in order to address social problems.

[4] The machinery metaphor was sometimes used by the founder of CA to describe the different types of "organization" of talk which operate concurrently and intersect in utterances, giving it a highly specific, unique character (see Sidnell, 2010: p. 2).

[5] Sacks writes: "For conversation, preservation of 'one party talking at a time' is organizationally primary" (2004: p. 37). As extensively shown, the turn transition is generally fluid: the loss of time is usually minimal and overlaps and conflicts are sporadic.

[6] Current speaker may select next speaker; next speaker may self-select; current speaker may continue.

[7] I almost literally quoted the attributes here of TTS listed by Heritage and Clayman during a lecture which I attended (at UCLA, Fall Quarter 2013).

[8] Comparative studies were also carried out within CA to demonstrate the invariance of the mechanisms of turn management. For example, Stivers et al. (2009) compare natural conversations in a native language that take place in ten traditional societies, concluding that in all these languages, the rules of "avoidance of overlaps" and "minimization of silence between one turn and the next" are always valid.

[9] Heritage & Clayman, lecture at UCLA, Fall Quarter 2013.

[10] I recall here only those that are considered "landmark" CA studies.

[11] "One of the earliest findings in CA is that we overwhelmingly organize our talk as action pairs called "adjacency pairs" (Schegloff, 2007), such as a pair of greetings, or question–answer pairs. The two parts of such pairs are produced by two different speakers, which makes the



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production of a first-pair-part an appropriate tool for turn allocation. Following a first-pair-part, speaker change needs to occur. Second, the pairs are type-governed. A greeting needs a return greeting, and a question needs an answer. Moreover, this relation between questions and answers has been discovered to be so specific that particular question formats project particular types of answers. […] The most common question of this type is the yes/no question, with its two answer options "yes" and "no," and these yes/no questions very frequently embody a "preference" for either a "yes" or a "no" answer. This feature of yes/no questions is used as an educational resource in producing the first position of the IRF sequence. Koshik (2002b), for example, found that teachers use yes/no questions that prefer no-answers to point essay-writing students to problematic aspects in their writing." (Koole, 2013, p.4)

[12] In Antaki's classification, there are also the "foundational" ones (where Conversation Analysis is applied to established areas of scholarship, with the intention of re-specifying its foundations) and the "diagnostic" one (the aim of which is to correlate sequential features of talk with clinical disorders).

[13] Caronia (1997: pp. 8-9)

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