ON GRANULARITY

Emanuel Schegloff

Department of Sociology, University of California at Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California 90095

From early in conversation-analytic inquiry and through to contemporary work, examination of how persons in a variety of interactional contexts refer to or formulate elements of their immediate environment or past experience has paid off, whether the domain in question is reference to persons (Sacks 1972a,b, 1992; Sacks & Schegloff 1979; Schegloff, 1996a) or to places (Schegloff 1972)—to mention only the most rewarding domains so far. Referring to persons in talk-in-interaction involves selection from among alternative resources, and this selection is a locus of interactional order, exploited to accomplish determinate actions.

For example, if a speaker figures that their interlocutor knows the referent (the one to be referred to) and knows that the speaker knows this, the normative reference practice is a "recognitional reference form," like first name or some descriptive phrase that taps how the speaker figures the interlocutor knows the referent. In talking in this manner, in choosing such a reference form, the speaker is "doing" something; this is a social action of a determinate type, with determinate consequences for the recipient's understanding and for the relationship between speaker and interlocutor(s). By contrast, saying "someone told me . . . " conveys that the person referred to (by "someone") is *not* known to the recipient (or that their identity is being hidden), and this embodies a different action and stance. Referring to places and spaces constitutes a similar locus of order (Schegloff 1972). Can this order of finding and of inquiry be extended to the domain of actions or events?

One observation encountered early in an effort to do so is the bearing of "granularity" in this domain. In practices of formulating place, granularity showed up as aspect of the range of potential answers to a question like "where are you,"— including such reference forms as "back in the States," "in California," "in L.A.," "in Topanga," "at home," "in the study," "at my desk," "at the computer," "on page 2," etc. The "degree of resolution" or order of place organization invoked by each term "zeroes in" or "pans out" from the target, and this feature is material to the action or other effect achieved by the selection of the term.

What form(s) does granularity take in the domain of actions or events? Here is a brief account—offered in both its explicative and exemplary capacities. The datum is taken from the start of a story told by Curt to Gary and Mike in the course of an automobile discussion at an backyard picnic in 1970s Ohio. After

introducing the main human protagonist and his "companion," a classic, original, 1932 Oldsmobile, Curt segues into his account of the story's action this way:

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1   Curt:   En he wz tellin us, we were kind'v admiring th'car=
2           =en 'e siz yah, I gotta get rid'v it though.
3           (0.5)
4   Curt:   I said why dihyou have  tih get rid'v it. 'n 'e sid well
5           I'm afraid my wife will get it. <er my ex wife.
6           (1.0)
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For economy's sake, I focus on the first two lines and organize my observations in a simple listing of points.

1. Curt's first start of the account of the action begins with a frame for so-called indirect speech; "telling" marks that what follows is not a quote, and not a characterization of what was being done by the talk to be reported, but rather a paraphrase of its "content"—not exactly what "he" said or did, but what he conveyed by what he said—its topic or upshot.

2. As will become clear in a moment, line 2 is a return to this start of the account, after the start at line 1 has been abandoned. This second pass at reporting the talk is formatted differently. It is framed not as a report of the content or the upshot, but—by the use of a quotation marker ("he says")—as a direct quote of the talk being reported.

3. These two utterance parts—at lines 1 and 2—are two distinct practices for telling about the same event in the world, which embody two different levels of detail. One offers a rough characterization of "what was told," whatever the particulars of the way in which it was told. The other offers—here, *insists on*—just *how* it was told, exactly what was said.

4. The first pass at this bit of telling is abandoned after the frame for reporting what the protagonist said. What follows is designed to embody the telling of something that needs to be told "first" because it occurred first, i.e., before the utterance whose reporting has been abandoned. So:

   (*a*) what replaces the incipiently-reported utterance embodies an account for the abandoning of it; and

   (*b*) the appropriateness of the abandoning is that, to appreciate the import of the incipiently reported utterance, one must know its context—in response/relation to what it was said.

   (*c*) And this is more than a promissory note. When the second try at reporting the utterance is produced, it is begun and ended with components that mark its relationship to what has (and had) preceded. The "yah" marks an alignment—if only pro forma—with what has just been said, which underscores the orientation of the quoted speaker to the immediate sequential context into which the utterance is being delivered. And the "though" with which the

utterance is reported to have ended registers a stance of contrast and irony to that context.

(*d*) So the grounds for abandoning the initial telling tack are embodied and displayed in what immediately follows it, which is not an *alternative* formulation but a reordering of the telling to have something else told first, with the second telling tack being designed in detail to be fitted to what has now been pre-positioned to it.

5. Note that what is interpolated between the two tacks of reporting itself represents a third order of detail in reporting on talk, "We were kind of admiring the car" neither quotes exactly what was ostensibly said nor does it deliver or report indirectly the "content" of what was said. Rather it characterizes or formulates *the action* being implemented by that talk ("admiring"), and subsumes not necessarily only one utterance, or even the utterances of a single speaker. Rather it glosses the contributions of several participants over a stretch of talking.

6. With these observations I mean to have registered differences in "granularity" between these three characterizations of what went on on some occasion.

> • "We were kind of admiring" groups together a batch of speakings as a single unit of activity—as a single reportable occurrence;
>
> • "he was telling us" groups together a set of actual productions—whether a string of sentences, or the particulars of a single utterance—as a single unit;
>
> • "'e siz yah, I gotta get rid'v it though" presents a single turn at talk in its contextual particularity, while glossing or disattending details of its production.[1]

Actually, this way of putting it is itself at odds with the constructional feature I mean to register—for each level of granularity has the effect precisely of constituting *its* formulation as the relevant structuring of events, without alluding to or conveying that it is a gloss for a subsumed order of events of which it is arguably composed.
Note then that shifting from "we were admiring . . . " to "and he says . . ."—from one level of granularity to another—is itself a practice for constituting in its course the telling being accomplished by the speaker in

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[1] Note, for example, that the next bit of the telling is reported to have focused on the element of constraint—de-emphasized (though present) in the previously quoted utterance—"I gotta get rid'v it"—and highlighted by the stress on "have" in the reported response—"why dihyou have tih get rid'v it."

the conversation from which I have taken all of this. One might (for now merely) conjecture that "we were kind of admiring . . ." is a way of providing for the "backgroundness" of this component of the telling—especially in contrast with the preceding, aborted "en he was telling us . . ."; and that "en he says" marks a step into the core plot of the story itself and its approaching climax.[2]

7. So much for "granularity," and an initial gloss of the sorts of occurrences I mean to catch with it. Why is it important to understand better? What lines of inquiry does it provide for?

8. One is the access we may be able to exploit to the terms in which the world is observed, noticed, and experienced by members of a society in the range of settings in which they live their lives. Surely this is one central component of what "culture" is meant to encompass. In order to formulate the world and their experience of it across the range of orders of granularity, members need to have oriented to it, or have been prepared to notice and register it, across that range of granularities. In the formulated experience exhibited in talk-in-interaction, we gain access to at least some of the terms and orders of relevance that shape it—and not only in what persons choose overtly to talk about; perhaps there least of all. At the same time, we gain access to the ways in which experience, its retrieval in memory, and its shaping in discourse are designed by reference to context, co-participants, stance, the realization of action, and the trajectories of activity in which it is embedded.

9. A second line of inquiry opened up by an enhanced grasp of granularity concerns the terms by reference to which explorations of the organization of action need to be pressed. Another central component of culture is the inventory of actions that compose the warp and weft of moment-to-moment conduct and experience. It is clear that the conventional lexicon for referring to actions does not exhaust the actions that people can do. For example, in a recent paper (Schegloff 1996b), I described an action I had not known existed as a discrete "do-able"—"confirming an allusion" (i.e., confirming another's understanding of what one had conveyed inexplicitly,

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[2]Calibrations and shifts of granularity are common and central features of accounts given of courses of action, and they are by no means limited to characterizations of talking. For example, later in this same story, we find the following recounting (in standardized orthography and punctuation) of what his ex-wife did that prompts getting rid of the car. "He said, 'well I drove it down to this car show, uh someplace in Ohio.' And uh, he got down in it, and the engine heated up and blew on the way back. Took it up, tore the damn thing apart, and found a rag stuffed in the radiator hose." Notice here the order of events captured by "drove it down to this car show" on the one hand (and all the "events" which compose it), and what happened after "the engine heated up and blew on the way back"—namely, "took it up, tore the damn thing apart and found a rag stuffed in the radiator hose," the last of these itself embodying a shift in granularity from the two which precede it–exemplifying again the relationship between "finer" granularity and climax of narrative trajectory.

and confirming at the same time that it had indeed been conveyed inexplicitly). Grasping it analytically and describing it showed that persons do actions at a level of granularity that has been minimally explored by social science, but that has been largely in the arena of literature and the other arts. It will surely remain in that arena, but it is also accessible to our inquiry—should even be foundational to it. Indeed, as the neurosciences develop in the new century/millenium, one interaction with the social world and its study will surely be in the neurobiological substrates of action. In order for this not to become a reductionist undertaking, it will be crucial to understand the social/cultural/interactional terms of the organization of action and the practices by which actions are produced—the most plausible intersection point with the neurological substrate. For this, a better grasp than we have now of granularity will be needed, for we will need to know at what levels of detail actions and practices are orderly and are oriented to in the production of the quotidien life of the society.

10. Finally, let me observe that my noticing all the particulars of the interactional fragment examined above, and my registering of these noticings in the preceding text, themselves embody a level of granularity—and one rarely informing sociological work, even of the so-called ethnographic or qualitative or "micro" sort. On the one hand, the introduction of this order of observation and the insistence on its relevance to sociology is grounded in the claim—amply supported by prior work—that interaction is co-constructed by its participants at this level of "detail" and finer yet, and that by the deployment of such resources for interaction, determinate social actions are differentially deployed, relationships constituted, etc. On the other hand, the level of granularity at which noticing is done matters not only for the social actors being studied, but for us as investigators as well; so too at what level the observed or noticed world is described. On the selection we make in these respects may depend whether we make a discovery or not, whether our account of it is adequate or not, whether it succeeds in convincing a skeptical audience or not, and the like. In other words, a concern with granularity is a reflexive one. It is, as Garfinkel used to put it (Garfinkel 1967), both a topic and a feature of inquiry. Knowing how granularity works matters then not just substantively, but methodologically.

I don't know if the workings of granularity is the single most important thing that I don't know, but knowing it better is surely among the most important things I look forward to.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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