CHAPTER 6

Survey Interviews as Talk-in-Interaction

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Introducing the import of the conversational turn-taking system before expli-
cating a version of our understanding of it, in Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson
(1974:701–702) we noted that a turn-taking system operates, as an economy
does, to distribute a resource — turns at talk — among participants, and that the
shape of that distribution should be supposed to affect what is being distributed,
that is, the talk.

> Until we unravel its organization, we shall not know what those effects consist of
> and where they will turn up. *But, since all sorts of scientific and applied research use
> conversation now, they all employ an instrument whose effects are not known. This is
> perhaps unnecessary* [emphasis added].

In a review article in the *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, Suchman
and Jordan (1990) have cogently brought several lines of inquiry in recent studies
of conversation and other talk-in-interaction to bear on the survey interview as
a research instrument. An earlier version of the present chapter was prepared
as one of several "Comment" pieces solicited by the *Journal* to respond to
the Suchman and Jordan article (Schegloff, 1990) and has been revised only
to incorporate summary glosses of points in their article no longer directly
accessible to the reader of this volume (and several citations to subsequent
literature). In what follows, for the more general reference I use the term *talk-in-
interaction* rather than *conversation* so as to include a range of "speech-exchange
systems" (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974:729–731), as well as variations
of genre and setting within particular speech-exchange systems. I reserve the term

conversation for that underlying, ordinary, unmarked speech-exchange system of which meetings, ceremonies, debates, talk-show formats, and interviews of diverse sorts appear to be systematic structural or procedural transformations.

Let us leave aside for the moment the ways in which talk-in-interaction is used by inquiry in the physical, biological, and medical sciences — for example, in the conduct of laboratory work or clinical research, and the effects that it has there. In the social sciences, the three most widely employed forms of talk-in-interaction are the psychological experiment, ethnographic participant observation, and the interview. In each of these, interaction between the investigator (or the investigator's agent) and the "subject(s)" is the instrument for data collection. It is high time indeed that we began to examine the actual, detailed course of these events *as interactions*, for it is only by arbitrary stipulation that what happens in the course of these interactions has been ruled irrelevant for the inquiries being conducted through them, and for the assessment of their results. One direction in which such an examination may be pressed with respect to behavioral science experiments is explored in Schegloff (1991:54–57).

Of course, interviews are but one of several forms for organizing talk-in-interaction that contrast with ordinary conversation. And survey interviews are but one of a range of forms of talk to which the term *interview* is applied. So there are at least two lines of inquiry relevant here: One is the examination of survey interviews as one distinctive modality among the range of forms of talk-in-interaction; the other is the bearing of this "interview" way of organizing talk on what is to be made of its products. Here I can offer only brief remarks on each of these lines of inquiry.

Note, then, that several of the features that Suchman and Jordan (1990) noted that distinguish survey interviews from ordinary conversation distinguish other forms of talk as well, and something may be gained for the understanding of survey interviews from studies of these other forms. For example, the fact that talk is being done "on behalf of" an absent third party was treated by Heritage (1985) as critical in understanding certain features of the conduct of news interviews and is relevant as well in understanding aspects of the turn-taking organization prevalent in official courtroom proceedings (Atkinson and Drew, 1979). The conduct of interaction with a focus on filling out a form — a project that is mutually oriented to supplying the relevancies and directing the course of the interaction — is common to a wide variety of bureaucratic encounters and professional interviews, for example, medical history taking. Button (1987) described the consequences of a withholding of repair practices in interviews of a very different sort — employment interviews. And so forth.

The conduct of survey interviews, then, represents one configuration of organizational features and shares some of these features with other forms of talk-in-interaction. Note that this is inescapable. The upshot of Suchman and Jordan's (1990) article *cannot* be efforts to remove or neutralize the interactional features of interviews. All talk-in-interaction faces certain generic organizational problems and will perforce adopt some organized solution to them. Thus we have the following.

1. If (as is virtually always the case) the talk is to be organized to have one participant speaking at a time, there will be some organized procedure for allocating opportunities to talk, and usually for restricting their size; that is, there will be some form of turn-taking organization, and it will have consequences that go well beyond simple "traffic management."

2. If there are to be coherence constraints, that is, if there are to be constraints on what can go in some turn at talk given what occurred in a preceding one or preceding ones, then there will be an organization of sequences (if actions are the relevant units), topics (if discursive contributions are the relevant unit), or both. In any case, interactional considerations are likely to be involved concerning both agreement and disagreement, and alignment and opposition, and aspects of the talk will be formed by reference primarily to these.

3. If there are to be ways of coping with transient or persistent troubles in speaking, hearing, understanding, or remembering, and so on, then some organization of repair will be in operation.

4. Almost certainly an overall structural organization will be in operation to shape the events composing the occasion, and to set the boundaries between it and surrounding events in time and space. Suchman and Jordan (1990:235) refer, for example, to one interview in which members of the family being interviewed opt out of the occasion and leave the room as the repetitive patterning of the questions becomes apparent, and another interview in which the adoption of "don't know" answers by a respondent seems prompted by reference to managing the duration and shape of the interview's occasion—"expedit[ing] the business of getting on with the interview."

5. There will be relevant other sets of practices—regarding the telling of stories and the shaping of accounts, regarding the ways in which persons and places and events should be referred to or formulated (e.g., Pomerantz, 1987), and so forth—that will of necessity enter into the constitution of the event called the interview.

And, almost inescapably, these will all be drawn from (or designed to contrast with) organized solutions to these problems in ordinary conversation, where they are designed to supply the interactional infrastructure for social organization—to allow the society to work in whatever way it works—and not to produce reliable and valid grist for social scientists' computational and analytic mills.

The last observation is especially important. The aspects of talk-in-interaction on which Suchman and Jordan (1990) focused are central properties of that medium through which the major institutions of society are embodied and enacted by its members. These properties thus inform ordinary persons' conduct of their affairs and are not merely social-scientifically motivated analyses of them. This can be seen in various features of the excerpts with which Suchman and Jordan (1990) exemplify their points.

For example, one difference between survey interviews and conversation taken up by Suchman and Jordan (1990) concerns standardization of questions to ensure comparability of responses, on the one hand, and recipient design of questions sensitive to local context, on the other. With the standardization of questions in advance and a prohibition on adaptation and redesign for a local context, some questions can have been rendered redundant by the time they are to be asked, but methodological canons require them to be asked nonetheless, engendering anomalous exchanges by conversational standards. For example, they describe (1990:234) an exchange in which a respondent's prompt response to a question about the family's combined income exceeding $20,000 is followed by a further expansion of the question that could only be redundant with the answer already given.

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I:        Was the total combined family income during the past
          twelve months, that is, yours, your wife's, Judith's
          and Jerry's more or less than twenty thousand dollars.
Mrs. E:   More.
I:        Include money from jobs, social security, retirement
          income, unemployment payments, public assistance, and so
          forth. Also include income from interest, dividends, net
          income from business, farm, or rent, and any other money
          income received.
Mrs. E:   More. It was more income.
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Suchman and Jordan (1990) note that the interviewer's continuation requires that Mrs. E "reiterate an answer she has already provided." Note as well, however, that Mrs. E does more than simply reiterate her earlier answer. She has already answered "More." Now she responds, "More. It was more income." That addition by the respondent displays that *she* [and not just Suchman and Jordan (1990)] took that continuation of the question to be problematic in the following respects (among others): (a) it implicated whether the interviewer had understood her answer before; (b) it raises the issue for her whether her second response would be understood as directed to the question as initially asked [note that her addition to the answer ("more income") echoes elements of the first question, and ties her answer to it]; and (c) she displays an understanding that the reply "more" by itself might not be recognizable as an adequate/sensible answer to the question as expanded. All of this is built into her response and displays her uptake of the interviewer's conduct and a stance toward it. What response that stance elicits in turn from the interviewer I cannot tell from the excerpt.

The point then is that modifications of ordinary practices of talk-in-interaction enacted by interviewers to underwrite the data requirements of social scientific inquiry may continue to be grasped and responded to by interviewees by reference to the practices of ordinary talk-in-interaction. And this same point must be appreciated for each of the elements in Suchman and Jordan's (1990:233–239) telling account of a range of differences between interviews and conversation: local versus external control, requirements on answers (including disallowance of elaboration on answers, on the one hand, and pursuit of such elaboration, on

the other), canons of relevance, detection and repair of misunderstanding, and so forth. They are describing orientations that inform the conduct of participants to talk-in-ordinary-interaction and that are not automatically held in abeyance in interviews; indeed, whose relevance to answering interview questions can be seen in the details of the answers produced. I can cite but a single additional example.

This is a striking case of an interview with a doctor, with which Suchman and Jordan (1990:236) exemplify the potential validity problems hidden by a failure to allow stories and elaborations following initial responses.

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I:  When you think about other doctors in general, how
    would you compare yourself to them. Are you very similar
    or different?
R:  I think I'm pretty similar to most doctors. Except that
    a lot of doctors try to stay right in the mainstream of
    medicine. They don't like to be out, away from the drug-oriented
    type of medical treatment. In other words, you
    have a problem, you have a drug for it, and that'll take
    care of it. Or surgery or something. Cut it off, and
    you'll be fine (laughs). And most doctors have that
    attitude. Then there's a small group that believe in the
    reason you have doctors in the first place. And
    that is that we're more holistic. So we can use a more natural
    approach. The hippocratic approach. So I think I'm
    more like that group.
I:  You think that's a smaller group.
R:  Yes, that's a smaller group now.
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This exchange, in which an answer is totally reversed after elaboration, illustrates a point made by Sacks (1987:62–63), that there is a systematic place for "exceptions" in conversation, namely, at ends of turns. Indeed, I would guess that in this interview there was a moment's silence following the initial response ("I think I'm pretty similar to most doctors"), a silence that is regularly treated in conversation as prefiguring disagreement, to which the "exception" or backing off is a response. In light of the operation of such a mechanism, one wonders what systematic effects are introduced into surveys by what used to be called "the silent probe" following a respondent's initial response.

An impossible conundrum may seem to be posed here. On the one hand Suchman and Jordan (1990) appear to object to disallowing elaboration, and on the other they appear to object to its pursuit. The interviewer's silence, which might be the vehicle for allowing elaboration, can appear to prefigure rejection or disagreement with a response and prompt backdowns by a respondent in some contexts. Indeed! "All of the above!" What a silence or a pursuit of elaboration conveys and embodies interactionally *does*, of course, depend on context — on what the question is, what type of response has been offered, and so forth. And this is what underlies Suchman and Jordan's (1990) recommendation that global or formulaic devices will not work as solutions to the management of interactional contingencies in interviews, that interviews be designed to exploit

the properties of the interactions that they are in any case destined to inhabit, and that interviewers be better armed to do so in informed consonance with the goals of the inquiry.

Although an interview cannot in any case be like a thermometer [to cite Suchman and Jordan's (1990) instructive contrast with another measurement instrument], reliable exploitation even of a thermometer requires knowing the properties of mercury, the glass in which it is encased, and so on, and incorporating these properties in the extraction of the desired information from the measurement device. It is by no means clear that we have such elementary understanding of the constitutive components of the survey interview. In addition to the research that Suchman and Jordan (1990) recommend into the possibilities of a more overtly collaborative design for the interaction between interviewer and respondent, a more general inquiry into the features of the survey interview as an organized occasion of talk-in-interaction may help us think through in a thoroughly informed way how exactly to understand the methodological, epistemological, and theoretical features and status of the interview as a tool of inquiry.

We can then turn to the other settings in which talk-in-interaction is used as an instrument of research, and explore the effects of the forms that it takes there, and their effects on the goals of those lines of inquiry (see, e.g., Goodwin, 1994; Heeschen and Schegloff, in press; Marlaire and Maynard, 1990; Schegloff, 1999).

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