

What Next?: Language and Social Interaction Study at the Century's Turn

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I come to this discussion ostensibly from Sociology, for, in the pairing of “Language and Social Interaction,” it appears that “interaction” is what Sociology brings to the table. Within a sociological context, “interaction” presents itself as the primordial site of the social—the immediate and proximate arena in which sociality is embodied and enacted, whatever else may be going on at so called “macrosociological levels.” Because the detailed exploitation of an orientation to interaction as the primordial site of sociality *does* put the spotlight on it and leaves the macrosocial in the penumbra of light and shadow at its margins, the study of interaction as it figures in my own preoccupations, and perhaps in the preoccupations of many in the *Research on Language and Social Interaction* constituency sometimes seems to be outgrowing its place in Sociology (or other familiar areas of inquiry) and becoming an object of study, and a *field* of study, in its own right.

When humans are the interactants, a commitment to getting at what happens in interaction, and how, inescapably implicates an engagement with “language” as well as with other resources out of which conduct in

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interaction is fashioned—posture, gesture, physically implemented action, and so forth. In the first instance, this sort of interest in language (and in the body) is analogous to the interest of a carpenter or woodcarver in the properties of wood. It is one of the main materials out of which the target objects are fashioned, so if we are to understand our target objects, we need to understand their material base. Such an interest in wood may well be different from that of a botanist; such an interest in language may well be different from that of a linguist . . . or not. Some linguists have found themselves gravitating toward such an interest as well. Also, the deep and intimate relation between “language” and talking in interaction is such that it is not implausible to think that bringing this sort of attention to it may yield observations that are of value to understanding language itself and not just its embodiment in interaction.¹

Invited to reflect on what I regard “. . . as the most interesting, important, and/or desirable directions for language and social interaction study . . .” in the next period, I find more than one claimant for inclusion in these few pages. But one central concern I have is the further development of our understanding of the organization of talk and other conduct in interaction *itself*, at the most general level at which it can be described. Not only those features that are specific to particular settings or for particular functions, not only those modifications that serve to constitute distinctive and specialized speech-exchange systems, not only features that characterize particular language, discourse, or speech communities, but, if there *is* such a thing, that organization of talk-and-other-conduct-in-interaction that is ours as *humans*, as members of *this social species*. I *do* think there is such a thing.

Of course, every episode of data that we examine is situated—involving members of a variety of cultural or subcultural communities, with some set of characterizing attributes, in some particular setting, engaged in some particular activity or activities, at some point in a shared joint biography with the other participants, ranging from no prior contact to intimate ties, speaking some language or mix of languages, and so forth. Yet whatever the data’s setting, features, and source, attention need not be directed *exclusively* to what individuates the episode, however much an effort to get at the more general import will need to register the particularities of its realization.

When the work that became conversation analysis was first getting underway, we used data from specific settings that ranged from calls to a suicide center and group therapy sessions (in Sacks’ case, e.g., Sacks,

1972a, and the early lectures in Vol. 1 of Sacks, 1992), to calls to the police or a radio talk show (in my own work), to telephone and copresent conversations involving family members or friends and the like (in both Sacks' work and in my own). However, the work done on the "institutional" or "work" settings (in the sense of Drew & Heritage, 1992, pp. 3, 59 n. 1) was as directed as other work was to describing not only what was distinctive to the setting—to therapy or to police emergencies—but also to understanding those very specificities by reference to the more general orders of organization of which they were particular and particularized realizations. In coming to terms with single episodes of those materials or with collections of single episodes, it was possible to elucidate quite general practices. Calls to a suicide hot line (e.g., Sacks, 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 3–11) or to the police (Schegloff, 1968) provided the occasion for getting at contingencies of opening episodes of interaction on a rather larger canvas, or of closing episodes (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Dealing with situated references to persons or places could be exploited to get at more general practices for referring to persons (Sacks, 1972a, 1972b; Sacks & Schegloff, 1979) or to places (Schegloff, 1972), and so on. Such materials, furthermore, could be addressed to come to describe *organizations* of practice—like turn-taking (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), or sequence organization (Schegloff, 1995), or the organization of repair (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977) or of person reference (Schegloff, 1996a)—as the way of getting at the particular practices implicated in the single episode being examined. Indeed, it was not only possible, it may even have been desirable, and maybe even necessary.

Recall that Sacks' (1972a) initial account of membership categorization devices began with the effort to come to terms with something that callers to a Suicide Prevention Center sometimes say: "I have no one to turn to." Surely one cannot ignore that this is a call to a professional agency and that the caller is proposing suicide, and Sacks did not do so; indeed, that turned out to be central to the final analysis of how a suicidal person can say they have no one to turn to in the very conversation in which it appears they have turned to someone. However, the initiating data and problem were made the occasion for pressing analysis in a broader, more general and formal direction—not at the expense of the more situated analysis but to provide the very tools needed to prosecute it tellingly.

Similarly, my efforts to understand, in calls to the police, the assessment of vernacular accounts of persons' troubled circumstances by reference to the technical, legal, and bureaucratic criteria for police

intervention (which is the problem my dissertation was originally designed to address) kept getting pushed earlier and earlier in the trajectory of the calls because each utterance seemed to require reference to its preceding sequential context for its analysis, and led eventually to the need to understand how those conversations were initiated, further still to how the problem of starting a conversation might be most cogently formulated, and further still to the elucidation of the overall structural organization of conversation (Schegloff, 1967, 1968, 1979, 1986; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Here again, this was *in the service* of the situated particulars of the originating data, *not in contrast* to them.

It is *not* necessary to disregard the particular and the situated in order to get at the general and the formal, and it is not necessary to disregard the general and formal in order to get at the situated particulars. For each of these, just the opposite is the case.

Yet increasingly, it seems to me, attention is focused on the particular discourse community, the particular institutional, work, or other setting, the particular activity in progress, the particular conjunction of technological and computational devices or constraints, as objects of interest in their own right *only*, without situating them in the larger domains of organization of which they are part and by which they are at least partly shaped, and without bringing the upshot of inquiry back to that broader or more formal matrix of analysis. Increasingly (though not exclusively),² those who describe what happens in a particular setting and how the parties do what they do, do *not* go on to ask how this relates to other forms that the activity in question can take, to how such things are done in other contexts (and how the notion “such things” is properly formulated for *their* inquiry), to how the doing of the target activity figures in the panoply of other activities and orders of activity that are also ongoing, and to how what has just been described can help us to broaden our understanding of the whole *domain* of practices of which it is a part.³ I worry about this because it seems to me to augur a possible stagnation of our analytic resources and a withering of the sources of our analytic energy.

Let me try to articulate my concern by way of distinction familiar to sociologists from a classic essay by an intellectual ancestor, the essay “Politics as a Vocation,” by Max Weber (1946). Weber proposed to distinguish between those whom he characterized as living “*for* politics” and those whom he characterized as living “*off* politics.” It is plausible to take this to be a pejorative distinction, with those who live for politics being in some sense noble, and those who live off politics being somehow

parasitic.⁴ Yet it need not be understood that way. Those who live off politics can be understood as those who mobilize political resources on behalf of other, essentially *nonpolitical* goals and projects; arguably this is not parasitic, but the mechanism by which power and resources flow to those places in a polity and society that need them (or that can secure them). Those who live *for* politics, on the other hand, marshal the resources of both politics and other sources of energy in the society to enhance the political institutions themselves, to keep them flexible, principled, and prepared to be put at the service of societal needs. Politics is thus understood as something in need of tending in its own right, its service to other institutions aside. Each stance can be a proper, even a righteous one, and an indispensable one; each can be abused, resulting in the aggrandizement of political power for its own sake or in the draining and attenuation of the vigor and capacity of political institutions for essentially private and particular interests.

The explication of the metaphor is probably transparent. There has been a tendency to draw on a pool of analytic resources—methods of analysis, a body of formulated phenomena and domains of phenomena, and so forth—as a received inheritance from prior work, using these resources as tools for the elucidation of particular targets of inquiry. There has been less of a tendency to design inquiry to enhance and renew the theoretical or analytic capital that is being drawn on by pressing inquiry as far as possible to the formulation of practices of talk-in-interaction that could serve as such analytic tools for other investigators engaged with quite different sorts of data. Without some renewal of that activity, I fear that our pool of analytic resources will become stagnant, overly familiar, rigidified into doctrine and orthodoxy, subject to scholastic internalist hermeneutics, and not renewed by challenging confrontation with data—by which I mean, of course, not confrontations designed to discredit the entire enterprise, but ones that take the enterprise as robust, and renew and advance it by grounding revision in encounters with real data.⁵

I think it is fair to say that this field has achieved an initial plateau of stability. To avoid spinning its wheels there, workers must now not only explore and display how its resources can illuminate settings not previously examined; they need to explore and display how newly inspected data can illuminate practices of interaction not previously described, and transform our understanding of practices that we thought well in hand. Either there is stagnation or we advance, and advance requires moving our analytic

resources beyond what has already been achieved, within a frame of respect for past achievements that deserve it.

NOTES

- 1 For example, objects that in a more traditional framework may have been referred to as “modifiers” (or “adjectives”) because of a view refracted through the prism of grammatical structure, we can alternatively term “descriptors,” because what they are designed and used to do is “describe.” So one ripple effect for studies of language of pursuing accounts of talk-in-interaction is potentially a revised view of how to understand—and how to describe—language. And, in return, students of interaction have much to learn about how the construction elements of talk-in-interaction are constrained and shaped by features of the language—for example, by the shaping of its grammar by word order or by morphological inflection (Schegloff, Ochs, & Thompson, 1996, pp. 28–32), or how its prosodic practices can have as a by-product interactional implications that parties to interaction must deal with (cf. chaps. in Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 1996; French & Local, 1983; Goodwin, 1996; Schegloff, 1996b, pp. 84–85, 1998).
- 2 I am not, of course, urging an abandonment of respect for the indigenous terms of understanding of contexts, settings, activities, and so forth, just the opposite. Rather than homogenizing all materials into a generic domain termed *interaction* or *discourse*, and so on, we do indeed need to register those specificities of context so as to establish which of them are the locus for organizations of practice relevantly and descriptably different from those that are in effect elsewhere. So, for example, we learn from juxtaposing interactional settings such as news interviews (Heritage, 1985, *inter alia*), sociolinguistic interviews (Schiffrin, 1987, *inter alia*), and ordinary conversational contexts (Heritage, 1984; Schegloff, 1993) in seeing how certain types of sequence do or do not get “oh” deployed in them as a display of registering, a token of change-of-state, a move to sequence closure (Heritage, 1984; Schegloff, 1995), and so forth. But these lessons have to be learned, and one way of helping them get learned is to take the observations one makes in a particular context and ask how that serves to confirm and specify what has seemed to be the case with that phenomenon in other data, or how it mandates a change in our understanding of the phenomenon.
- 3 Indeed, too often such accounts seem to have been offered as grounds for abandoning the more general undertaking altogether, sometimes in the name of ostensibly ethnomethodological considerations. From the very beginning, however, Garfinkel (1967) used the situated details of mundane occurrences to explore the most general and abstract and formal issues he could—indexicality, accountability, reflexivity, and so forth. The “just-this-ness” or “haec-icity” of situated objects and events is their most generic feature. As with other of these features, it must be gotten at through the identifying detail of particular situated occurrences, but that should not mask that these occurrences are nonetheless being used to pose generic questions.

- 4 There is a faint aroma of this in Weber (1946), who focused his discussion on the economic independence of political participants, or their lack of it, and the varying modalities and styles of political participation and leadership that economic dependence or independence—or *dispensability* in Weber’s terminology—fostered.
- 5 To cite but one example, Lerner’s (1991, 1996) account of “anticipatory completion” enriches and extends the account given in Sacks et al., 1974, of where “possible next speakers” may accountably start speaking, but does so within its terms and as part of a cumulative enterprise.

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