

Conversation Analysis as Social Theory

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Conversation analysis (CA) emerged as a recognizably distinct approach to the analysis of social life in the privately circulated lectures of Harvey Sacks (1992 [1964–72]). Its earliest publications, initially placed in non-sociological journals such as *American Anthropologist* (Schegloff 1968), *Semiotica* (Schegloff and Sacks 1973), and *Language* (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974), became visible to sociologists as an outgrowth of Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology (Douglas 1970; Sudnow 1972; Turner 1974). In 1975, Harvey Sacks was killed in an automobile accident, and the hiring freeze in American universities consequent on the oil shock and "stagflation" of the 1970s (Wiley 1985) forced almost all the first generation of CA graduate students into other walks of life. Dominant sociological figures of the 1970s lined up to dismiss CA as dustbowl empiricism (Cosser 1975), or "do it yourself linguistics" (Goldthorpe 1973), or a "re-enchantment industry" fit only for the counter-cultural hippies of southern California (Gellner 1975). Under these circumstances CA was all but extinguished as a field of sociological analysis.

The early 1980s witnessed a resurgence of the field. The resistance of sociological journals to publish CA research resulted in the creation of several significant anthologies. Regenerated during the subsequent years of the decade, the field has now grown to become the dominant method for the sociological study of interaction, and reaches into anthropology, linguistics, communication, cognitive science, and electrical engineering. Published papers run into the thousands, and the method is practiced in many dozens of countries on all the continents of the world. Citation rates for classic CA papers have roughly doubled during each of the past two decades, and Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson's (1974) effort at "do it yourself linguistics" is now, according to the editor of *Language*, "by far the most cited" and downloaded paper in the journal's 80-year history (Joseph 2003).

In this essay, I suggest some ways in which CA represents a contribution to social theory. These suggestions may be thought to be tendentious, not least because Cosser's calumny stuck and CA is sometimes thought of as a kind of atheoretical

empiricism – a method without a substance, as he so unfortunately phrased it. This latter point of view strikes me as self-evidently false, and in what follows I sketch the CA contribution to a view of social interaction as a social institution, I give a brief account of how its institutional order articulates with other elements of social systems, and conclude with a view of CA as a contribution to a theory of self–other relations.

BACKGROUND

The proximate origins of CA are to be found in the work of Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel. These two giants of American social theory essentially inaugurated the study of everyday life as a research focus in its own right. They did so by dissenting from the dominant view of post-World War II sociology that the specifics of the everyday world are too random and disorderly to support systematic analysis. However they arrived at their forms of dissent from very different perspectives.

Emerging from a specifically Durkheimian tradition (Goffman 1955, 1956; Goffman and Verhoeven 1993), Goffman started from the perspective that what he came to call the interaction order (Goffman 1983) is an institutional order in its own right. The interaction order, he argued, comprises a complex set of interactional rights and obligations which are linked both to “face” (a person’s immediate claims about “who s/he is” in an interaction), more enduring features of personal identity, and also to large-scale macro social institutions. Goffman also observed that the institution of interaction underlies the operation of other social institutions, mediating the business they transact, and he repeatedly rejected the idea that it is a kind of colorless, odorless substrate through which sociological and psychological processes exert their influence on human affairs (Goffman 1964; Kendon 1987). The interaction order that Goffman depicts is structural and driven by a logic which is external to the individual and which supports an objective hermeneutics of individual accountability. As Goffman wrote in the introduction to *Interaction Ritual*: “I assume that the proper study of interaction is not the individual and his psychology, but rather the syntactical relations among the acts of different persons mutually present to one another” (Goffman 1967:2).

It is this external normative order of “syntactical relations” that provides for the sequential ordering of action (Goffman 1971) and which also provides for action’s public accountability. In turn, this enmeshes the individual in a web of lines and associated face claims (Goffman 1955), thereby permitting persons to analyze one another’s conduct and arrive at judgments about personal motives and identities. It is a core feature of social order.

Harold Garfinkel arrived at convergent conclusions from a very different starting point: phenomenologically inspired theoretical investigations of the subjectively meaningful character of human social action. Having studied with Parsons at Harvard, Garfinkel apprehended clear deficiencies in the treatment of action, reasoning, mutual understanding, and social representations in *The Social System* (Parsons 1951) and other studies emanating from Harvard during that period (Garfinkel 1960, 1967; Heritage 1984a, 1987). Drawing on the researches of Alfred Schutz (Schutz 1962), his objections centered on the lack of process in Parsons’s

treatment of action, its failure to conceptualize the dynamic and methodical basis in terms of which actions are produced and recognized, weaknesses in the treatment of processes of mutual understanding in the context of action, and failures to grasp the dynamic reproduction of collective knowledge and representations accompanying this process.

Drawing on experiments with games and other "breaching experiments" which engineered departures from everyday expectations (Garfinkel 1963), Garfinkel concluded that shared methods of practical reasoning inform both the *production* of action, and the *recognition* of action and its meanings. In fact, he argued, we produce action methodically to be recognized for what it is, and we recognize action because it is produced methodically in this way. As Garfinkel made the point in his own inimitable prose: "the activities whereby members produce and manage the settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members' procedures for making these settings accountable" (Garfinkel 1967). His experiments clearly indicated that social actions, shared understandings, and, ultimately, social institutions are underpinned by a complex body of presuppositions, tacit assumptions, and methods of inference – in short, a body of methods or methodology – that informs the production and recognition of culturally meaningful objects and actions (see CHAPTER 8).

Methods of commonsense reasoning are fundamentally adapted to the recognition and understanding of events-in-context. In Garfinkel's analysis, ordinary understandings are the product of a circular process in which an event and its background are dynamically adjusted to one another to form a coherent "gestalt." Garfinkel described this process, following Mannheim, as "the documentary method of interpretation," and he argued that it is a ubiquitous feature of the recognition of all objects and events, from the most mundane features of everyday existence to the most recondite of scientific or artistic achievements. In this process, linkages are assembled between an event and its physical and social background using a variegated array of presuppositions and inferential procedures. The documentary method embodies the property of reflexivity: changes in an understanding of an event's context will evoke some shift or elaboration of a person's grasp of the focal event and vice versa. When it is employed in a temporally dynamic context, which is a characteristic of all situations of social action and interaction, the documentary method forms the basis for temporally updated shared understandings of actions and events among the participants.

CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

Conversation analysis, developed by Harvey Sacks in association with Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, emerged at the intersection of the perspectives developed by Goffman and Garfinkel. The two men most centrally involved in its foundation, Harvey Sacks and Emanuel Schegloff, were both students of Erving Goffman at the University of California at Berkeley during the 1960s, and also had frequent and extensive contact with Harold Garfinkel at UCLA during the same period (Schegloff 1992a). From Goffman, CA took the notion that talk-in-interaction is a fundamental social domain that can be studied as an institutional entity in its own right. From Garfinkel came the notion that the practices and procedures with which

parties produce and recognize talk are talk's "ethnomethods." They form the resources which the parties unavoidably must use and rely on to produce and recognize contributions to interaction which are mutually intelligible in specific ways, and which inform the participants' grasp of the context of their interaction in a continuously updated, step-by-step fashion. This fusion is directly expressed in one of the earliest published papers in CA:

We have proceeded under the assumption . . . that in so far as the materials we worked with exhibited orderliness, they did so not only for us, indeed not in the first place for us, but for the co-participants who had produced them. If the materials (records of natural conversation) were orderly, they were so because they had been methodically produced by members of the society for one another. (Schegloff and Sacks 1973)

From these early papers and Sacks's lectures (Sacks 1992 [1964–72]), CA emerged as a study of the institution of conversation that focuses on the procedural basis of its production. This basis was conceived as a site of massive order and regularity, whose normative organization and empirical regularities could be addressed using the sorts of basic observational techniques that a naturalist might use in studying animals or plants (Sacks 1984a). As it has emerged, the field has consolidated around two basic theoretical and methodological assumptions.

The structural analysis of action in ordinary conversation

Fundamental to the inception of CA is the notion that social interaction is informed by institutionalized structural organizations of practices to which participants are normatively oriented. It is this structural assumption, which is fundamentally associated with Goffman, that differentiates CA as an approach to the *study of social action* from sociolinguistics, which focuses on variations in language (such as accent and dialect) and their sociological determinants, and the sociology of language, which fundamentally considers languages in relation to the nation-state and other macro-level social processes.

Within this view structure underlies variations in its implementation. Associated with this view is the notion that these organizations of practices – as the conditions on which the achievement of mutually intelligible and concerted interaction depends – are fundamentally independent of the motivational, psychological, or sociological characteristics of the participants. Rather than being dependent on these characteristics, conversational practices are the medium through which these sociological and psychological characteristics manifest themselves.

It is this structural assumption which informs, in fact mandates, the basic CA imperative to isolate organizations of practices in talk without reference to the sociological or psychological characteristics of the participants. For example, a structured set of turn-taking procedures is presupposed in the recognition of an "interruption." Moreover, both the turn-taking procedures and the associated recognizability of interruptive departures from them are anterior to, and independent of, empirical distributions of interruptions as between males and females or between powerful and powerless individuals. It is thus only after the structural features of, for example, turn-taking and interruption have been determined that it is

meaningful to search for the ways in which sociological factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, etc., or psychological dispositions such as extroversion, may be manifested – whether causally or expressively – in interactional conduct.

From its inception, CA has placed a primary focus on the sequential organization of interaction. Underlying this notion are a number of fundamental ideas. First, in doing some current action, speakers normally project (empirically) and require (normatively) the relevance of a “next” or range of possible “next” actions to be done by a subsequent speaker (Schegloff 1972). Second, in constructing a turn at talk, speakers normally address themselves to preceding talk and, most commonly, the immediately preceding talk (Sacks 1987, 1992; Schegloff and Sacks 1973). Speakers design their talk in ways that exploit this basic positioning (Schegloff 1984), thereby exposing the fundamental role of this sequential contextuality in their utterances. Third, by the production of next actions, speakers show an understanding of a prior action and do so at a multiplicity of levels – for example, by an “acceptance,” an actor can show an understanding that the prior turn was possibly complete, that it was addressed to them, that it was an action of a particular type (e.g. an invitation) and so on. These understandings are (tacitly) confirmed or can become the objects of repair at any third turn in an ongoing sequence (Schegloff 1992b).

CA starts from the presumption that all three of these features – the grasp of a “next” action that a current projects, the production of that next action, and its interpretation by the previous speaker – are the products of a common set of socially shared and structured procedures. CA analyses are thus simultaneously analyses of action, context management, and intersubjectivity because all three of these features are simultaneously, if tacitly, the objects of the actors’ actions. Finally, the procedures that inform these activities are normative in that actors can be held morally accountable both for departures from their use and for the inferences which their use, or departures from their use, may engender. This analytic perspective represents a crystallization into a clear set of empirical working practices of the accumulated assumptions embodied in a wide range of ethno-scientific approaches described elsewhere (Heritage 2002a).

The primacy of ordinary conversation

The second assumption can be stated more briefly. It is that “ordinary conversation” between peers represents a fundamental domain for analysis and that the analysis of ordinary conversation represents a basic resource for the extension of CA into other “non-conversational” domains. This conception was first expressed in work on turn-taking (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974), by which point it had become apparent that ordinary conversation differs in systematic ways from, for example, interaction in the law courts or news interviews. The conceptualization of these differences has developed substantially in recent years (Drew and Heritage 1992; Heritage 2005; Heritage and Clayman, forthcoming).

There is every reason to view ordinary conversation as the fundamental domain of interaction, and indeed as a primordial form of human sociality (Schegloff 1996a). It is the predominant form of human interaction in the social world and the primary medium of communication to which the child is exposed and through

which socialization proceeds. It thus antedates the development of other, more specialized, forms of "institutional" interaction both phylogenetically in the life of society and ontogenetically in the life of the individual. Moreover, the practices of ordinary conversation appear to have a "bedrock" or default status. When they are subject to processes of historical change these tend to be slow and unrecognized, nor are they generally subject to discursive justification (by reference, for example, to logic, equity, or efficiency) in ways that practices of interaction in legal, medical, pedagogical, and other institutions manifestly are. Research is increasingly showing that communicative conduct in more specialized social institutions embodies task- or role-oriented specializations and particularizations that generally involve a narrowing of the range of conduct that is generically found in ordinary conversation (see below). The latter thus embodies a diversity and range of combinations of interactional practices that is unmatched elsewhere in the social world. Interactional conduct in institutional environments, by contrast, embodies socially imposed and often irksome departures from that range (Atkinson 1982).

ORDERS OF ANALYSIS

Acceptance of the notion that conversation embodies a specific institutional order invites investigation of its constituent practices in terms of their contribution to fundamental aspects of conversational and social organization. A number of domains of organization are the objects of continuing investigation (Schegloff 2006).

Turn-taking

The first is what Schegloff (2006) calls the "turn-taking" problem, which concerns "who should talk or move or act next and when should they do so." Turns at talk are valued in their own right and they represent a scarce resource because, ordinarily, only one person can talk at a time. Even in two-party conversation the coordination problem is considerable: granted that one party has the floor, how is it to be managed that the speaker's turn has ended and the recipient should begin talking? The problem is significantly greater in multi-party interactions. A solution to this problem is necessary for coordinated social action to occur at all.

In the well-known analysis developed by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974), the turn-taking problem is solved via a normative system in which single units of talk are allocated to speakers, at the end of which a next speaker (which includes a current one) is allocated a next unit via an ordered set of rules. The significance of this solution is that it is stated in terms of units of talk and rules for their allocation, rather than persons and their social attributes. An institutional problem is resolved in a completely institutionalized way.

An important facet of this solution is that, through the turn-taking system, the parties administer rights both to claim occupancy of a turn-space and to "own" the talk which is implemented within it – the latter being particularly apparent in the management of turns in which a second speaker completes a first speaker's sentence (Lerner 1989, 2004). Though the implementation of these rights is most often semi-automated and outside the sphere of what Giddens (1984) calls

discursive consciousness, violations of these rights (for example in interruptions [Jefferson 2004a; Schegloff 2000]) become visible as complainable departures from the norms of turn occupancy (Schegloff 2002). The turn-taking system is not merely “technical,” it is also “moral” – a dimension which it shares with other systems through which the interaction order is managed.

Sequence organization

A second problem is the “sequence organizational” problem and concerns “how successive turns or actions are formed up to be ‘coherent’” (Schegloff 2006). The central insight that drives the CA approach to this problem is that contributions to interaction anticipate, invite, and in some cases require responses. This is largely because these contributions are situated in an action space within which social rights and obligations are mobilized. Turns at talk offer or request goods and services (including information), position their producers relative to others in social relations and epistemic space, and undertake courses of action embracing narrative, play, humor, and, beyond these, the whole kaleidoscope of conjoint human conduct from shaking hands to making love.

The starting point for work on sequential organization was the observation that some first actions make certain kinds of next actions unavoidably relevant, to the point that if the relevant next action is not done it will be “noticeably absent,” and may be the object of sanctions or other remedial measures (Sacks 1992 [1968]; Schegloff 1968). A central property of these sequences of actions, termed adjacency pairs, is that of “conditional relevance.” Conditional relevance is readily apparent as a feature of greetings (which require return greetings), questions (which require answers, or at least responses), and related actions.

This analysis opened up two crucial features of the “sequence organizational problem”. First and prospectively in time, it provided a mechanism through which an agent can get another to do something (Heritage 1984a; Schegloff and Sacks 1973). At the same time it provides an institutionalized motivation for the other to respond – to avoid sanctions, or the inferences which might otherwise be drawn from failure to respond. Second, and retrospectively in time, it provided a mechanism through which mutual understandings might be managed in interaction. For the second action, in being designed as a response to the first, must perforce display an analysis of what kind of “first” it is. And the doer of the first can inspect the second action to determine whether the second embodied an appropriate or correct understanding of the first. Embedded in sequence structure therefore is an apparatus through which intersubjective understandings of social actions can be displayed, checked, and, where necessary, corrected (Schegloff 1992b, 2007).

Adjacency pairs provide an armature around which secondary organizations can form. These organizations can be schematically represented as expansions that are organized in relation to a “base” adjacency pair (figure 15.1). Most of these expansions address the appropriateness of first actions, management of the prospects that desirable second actions will come to pass, and management of situations in which those second actions depart from the expectations (or desires) of the producers of first actions. Detailed description of these organizations is beyond the scope of this chapter, but they are extensively described in Schegloff (2007).

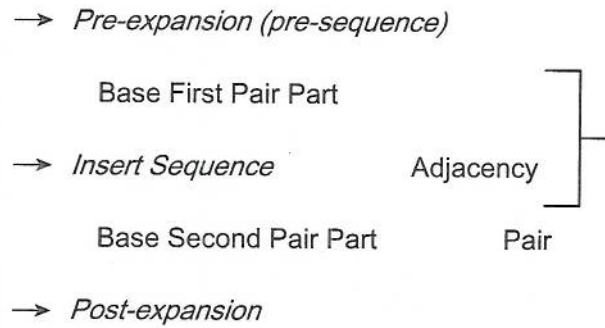


Figure 15.1 Adjacency pairs and their expansions

Of course social interaction is not exclusively built up from actions embodying this level of normative constraint. A majority of actions invite response without requiring it and are less constraining of its content. A conceptualization recently developed by Stivers and Rossano (2007) suggests that pressure to respond is mobilized through a variety of dimensions of action, including gaze, intonation, epistemic imbalance between actors, and aspects of interrogative syntax (or morphology). In this viewpoint, more “relaxed” sequences of interaction are mobilized and realized in a step-by-step process through these locally implemented response-mobilizing resources, while the more canonically constraining adjacency pair formats involve the simultaneous deployment of many if not all of them.

Intersubjectivity and repair

Little can be achieved in interaction if the parties cannot grasp what is being said to them or grasp it incorrectly. Indeed as Schegloff (2006: 77) has noted, “if the organization of talk in interaction supplies the basic infrastructure through which the institutions and social organization of quotidian life are implemented, it had better be pretty reliable, and have ways of getting righted if beset by trouble.” The organization of repair consists of a coordinated set of practices designed to address problems of speaking, hearing, or understanding talk (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977). These practices are implemented within a narrowly defined temporal space that begins in the speaker’s current turn, extends through the responsive turn, and ends at the initial speaker’s next turn. Correspondingly, the organization of repair is distinctively formed and implemented as between speaker-initiated and executed repairs, and repair that is initiated and/or executed by a recipient. Repair must necessarily involve practices for identifying what is being (or to be) fixed and which is the replacement, and these differ between speakers and recipients.

Similar to turn-taking, the organization of repair is generally designed to respect the rights of speakers to “say what they wish to say” and to own it. By definition, a current speaker has the first opportunity to fix problems encountered in an ongoing turn at talk, and if unfixed problems are encountered by recipients the latter will tend to *initiate* repair on the prior speaker’s talk rather than attempting to fix it unilaterally (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977) or, in contexts where the speaker’s turn is in trouble, wait for the speaker to solicit assistance (Goodwin and

Goodwin 1986). Moreover unilateral fixes, when they occur, tend to be disguised or off-record (Jefferson 1987), or indeed “abdicated” (Jefferson 2007). However the rights of speakers in the context of repair do not extend indefinitely. In a remarkably apt, but imaginary, illustration of a Wittgensteinian language game, Stanley Cavell (1968: 159) observes that:

“It is always conceivable” that, for example, the language game(s) we now play with the question “What did you say?” should not have been played. What are we conceiving if we conceive this? Perhaps that when we ask this of A, only A’s father is allowed to answer, or that it is answered always by repeating the next to last remark you made, or that it is answered by saying what you wished you had said, or perhaps that we can never remember what we just said, or perhaps simply we have no way of asking that question . . .

And he asks:

What would our lives look like, what very general facts would be different, if these conceivable alternatives were in fact operative? (There would, for example, be different ways and purposes for lying; a different social structure; different ways of attending to what is said; different weight put on our words; and so forth.)

The organization of repair is implicated in another great principle of conversational organization: the principle of progressivity (Schegloff 1979). In a brilliant passage, Schegloff (2007: 14–15) frames the issue in this way:

Among the most pervasively relevant features in the organization of talk-and-other-conduct-in-interaction is the relationship of adjacency or “nextness.” . . . Moving from some element to a hearably-next-one with nothing intervening is the embodiment of, and the measure of, progressivity. Should something intervene between some element and what is hearable as a/the next one due – should something violate or interfere with their contiguity, whether next sound, next word or next turn – it will be heard as qualifying the progressivity of the talk, and will be examined for its import, for what understanding should be accorded it. Each next element of such a progression can be inspected to find how it reaffirms the understanding-so-far of what has preceded, or favors one or more of the several such understandings that are being entertained, or how it requires reconfiguration of that understanding.

Schegloff notes that the organization of repair is sensitive to this fundamental principle of progressivity at the within-turn level where the progression of an action is at issue (Schegloff 1979), and at the level of sequence where progression involves a jointly constructed course of action (Schegloff 2007). Within the matrix of repair practices, progressivity is pitted against intersubjectivity (Heritage 2007a) and, as Schegloff (2006: 79) also notes, these practices “make intersubjectivity always a matter of immediate and local determination, not one of abstract and general shared facts, views or stances.” As Garfinkel (1967: 30) repeatedly noted, shared understanding is constructed from a multiplicity of methods of talking. The organization of repair permits humans to exploit these multiplex connections between language

and the world, while providing a safety net when our high-wire act with language goes awry.

The epistemic order

A large proportion of interaction involves the conveying of information. In this process persons continually position themselves with respect to the epistemic order: what they know relative to others, what they are entitled to know, and what they are entitled to describe or communicate. This activity is the object of highly elaborated management practices (Pomerantz 1980). Epistemic positioning is, first and foremost, conducted with reference to co-interactants in the here and now, but may also involve non-present others, commonsense knowledge, and more abstract and socially patterned rights and obligations to knowledge.

Epistemic positioning is conducted through the entire resources of language and sequence organization (Goodwin 1979; Goodwin 1996; Heritage 2007b). For example, declarative sentences ordinarily establish a positive epistemic gradient between speaker and hearer. Declaratives encode the speaker's right to know and to assert what is being declared, rights which are commonly predicated on the assumption that the speaker knows something that the recipient does not. Correspondingly, interrogative sentences ordinarily establish a negative epistemic gradient between speaker and hearer. They encode the speaker's desire to obtain information, a desire which is commonly predicated on the assumption that the question recipient knows something that the questioner does not.

These gradients can be adjusted through practices of turn design (Pomerantz 1988). The assertion that "John's coming" can be epistemically downgraded in certainty ("John may be coming"), or presented as a matter of belief ("I think John's coming"), or hearsay ("Bill says that John's coming" [Pomerantz 1984a]). Correspondingly, the question "Is John coming?" can be adjusted to reduce the negative gradient between speaker and recipient: "John's coming isn't he?" or "Surely John's coming?". Numbers of interactional practices are available to subvert or resist the positionings that these designs instantiate (Heritage 1998, 2007b; Raymond 2003; Schegloff and Lerner 2006).

Over and above turn design, considerable sequential resources are devoted to establishing and securing relative epistemic positioning. For example, pre-announcement sequences ("Did you hear about X?") are commonly implemented prior to informings as a means of establishing that what is purportedly and projectedly new information is indeed new (Terasaki 2004). Similar issues attend the delivery of stories (Goodwin 1984, 1986; Sacks 1974). Responses to information recurrently contain elements that allow tellers to infer that the epistemic gradient on which their action was based was indeed the case, and that what was said was informative to the recipient. For example, the word "oh" is virtually dedicated to this task (Heritage 1984b, 1998, 2002b).

Other practices addressed to the epistemic order between interactants include sequential positioning: a first describer has implied epistemic authority in relation to some described state of affairs relative to a second speaker even when the parties are in full agreement. Thus a range of additional practices is required when the epistemic claims related to going first and going second require modification (Heritage and

Raymond 2005; Raymond and Heritage 2006; Schegloff 1996b; Stivers 2005). In another dimension of interaction, the selection of referring expressions embodies very precise recognition of who and what an interlocutor knows, while also encoding nuanced information about the purposes of utterance (Sacks and Schegloff 1979; Schegloff 1972, 1996c; Stivers 2007). Finally speakers may show exceptional caution in describing states of affairs that fly in the face of mundane expectations and commonsense knowledge (Jefferson 2004b; Sacks 1984b).

The intensity with which epistemic positions, rights, and obligations are indexed and policed in practices of turn design and sequence organization is vivid testimony to their fundamental status within social relations. This is not simply a matter, important though it is, of the construction of epistemic communities and cultures. It is also intertwined with the ownership of experience and of rights to its expression. Very fundamental rights to knowledge and opinion accrue to persons who have them by virtue of personal experience (Sacks 1984b), and the interactional policing of epistemic claims is arguably central to the management and maintenance of personal identity (Raymond and Heritage 2006). Correspondingly, reconciliation of personally owned knowledge and experience with the "better knowledge" of distinctively expert and empowered epistemic communities is a central dilemma for modern societies in which expert knowledge (for example, of "risk") cannot be directly translated into the coin of personal experience.

Social solidarity

A common theme from the social contract theory of the seventeenth century through to contemporary game theory and ethology is that social relations in groups involve a tradeoff between competition and cooperation (Byrne and Whiten 1988; Dunbar 1996; Goffman 1971). To conceptualize this tradeoff in social interaction it is useful to draw on Brown and Levinson's (1987) extension of Goffman's analysis of face. In Brown and Levinson's analysis, each person is conceived as having two kinds of face wants: (1) positive face wants involving the desire for affirmation and acceptance, and (2) negative face wants involving the desire to remain unimpeded. This extension itself echoes the social contract tradition of political theory, in particular the concepts of liberty advocated by Hobbes and Rousseau respectively (Berlin 1969). In the spirit of Goffman's treatment of Durkheim's concept of ritual, social interaction can be viewed as driven by social contract considerations writ small, and as an arena within which individuals pursue personal objectives while maximizing and, where necessary, trading off, both of these classes of face wants.

Almost, if not all, social actions position both the actor and the recipient in social space, thereby defining (or at least proposing) a social relationship between them. Greetings, for example, invoke recognition of another and invite reciprocation and ratification of that recognition. Requests assert the legitimacy of the requested thing, the requester's right to request it of the recipient, and invoke the requestee's obligation to supply it and so on. As Goffman (1971: 95) noted, even the act of speaking expresses a right to speech and a corresponding obligation to listen. The sequence organizational conventions of the interaction order provide important resources that tilt social action in favor of cooperation.

A primary resource is preference organization. This term describes the formats of turns in which, broadly speaking, affiliative and disaffiliative actions are performed. Granted a first action that requires response, affirming and affiliative actions are done briefly and with no delay, while disaffiliative and rejecting actions are signaled by delay and other pre-indications that there is trouble ahead. The import of this patterning, which is highly regular and clearly insitutionalized, is that the probability of affiliative actions actually occurring is maximized, while the probability of disaffiliative actions actually occurring is minimized (Davidson 1984; Pomerantz 1984b; Sacks 1987).

Just as significant in this regard is conduct when face-threatening rejections are produced. As Goffman (1971) was among the first to note, rejections are overwhelmingly associated with accounts. In a context in which a first action embodies a range of ways in which speakers presuppositionally position themselves relative to recipients in terms of needs, desires, rights, and obligations, accounts address which one of these presuppositions is defective. In this context, inability and other kinds of "no fault" accounts predominate (Heritage 1984a) for the simple reason that they manage contexts of rejection so that contingent grounds are invoked rather than those that threaten the presumptive relationship between the parties. In this connection, accounts function as "secondary elaborations of belief" that preserve not only the status quo of the relationship, thereby permitting its future use, but also, and ultimately, the normative underpinnings of social action itself (Heritage 1987, 1988).

While the discussion has so far focused on second (responsive) actions, it is of course the case that large numbers of first actions are also (potentially) face-threatening. Requests intrude on recipients' negative face (Brown and Levinson 1987), as does troubles-telling (Jefferson 1980, 1988), while the delivery of bad news may damage both the positive and negative face of its recipients. Complex sequential negotiations surround these activities (Maynard 2003; Schegloff 1988), and turn design is routinely the object of efforts to maintain a balance between the assertion of entitlement to a good and a recognition of the contingencies that may surround its provision (Curl, Drew, and Ogden forthcoming). More generally, persons in interaction must continually position themselves relative to one another in terms of rights and obligations, the imposition of burdens on others, hierarchy and social distance, and of course the formulation of positions of relatedness, friendship, and love (Brown and Levinson 1987). Goffman (1955) recognized these concerns as lying at the core of social order:

An unguarded glance, a momentary change in tone of voice, an ecological position taken or not taken, can drench a talk with judgmental significance. Therefore, just as there is no occasion of talk in which improper impressions could not intentionally or unintentionally arise, so there is no occasion of talk so trivial as not to require each participant to show serious concern for the way he handles himself and the others present.

After decades of research on language and social interaction, the relevance of these concerns is beyond question.

THE INTERACTION ORDER AS AN INSTITUTION

What kind of institution is the interaction order as sketched in these few paragraphs? At its most basic it is an institutional order that regulates the relationships within the simplest social system there can be. This social system comprises just two persons: self and other. In a famous discussion, John Rawls (1971) suggests that human cooperation might be maximized if the principles underpinning a just and fair society were conceived and agreed by persons who could not know in advance what their actual position in such a society was to be. Such a state of affairs is of course wholly counterfactual. Yet, with regard to the rights and obligations of the interaction order, the Rawlsian conception may be less far-fetched. All human interaction involves continuous interchange between the roles of speaker and hearer. Rights and obligations to speak and listen fluctuate accordingly and are accommodated within a turn-taking system that administers opportunities to act without much reference to the particular actors involved. In sequence organization, rights to mobilize response are available to all competent users of the language on every occasion of its use. In acts of speaking, a person may at any point be the producer, or the recipient, of talk that is in need of repair. The rights and obligations associated with those roles are distributed in accordance with the primary rights of the speaker – as agent – to be understood in the way that he or she wishes to be understood, and the secondary rights of recipients to demand that speakers make themselves clear. In regard to knowledge, epistemic gradients can fluctuate from moment to moment between participants depending on the topic, or its details, under discussion. The management of solidary face relationships is an obligation of speakers just as it is of recipients, and at all points in interaction.

It is perhaps for just these reasons that a powerful sense of injustice can be mobilized by departures from the conventions of the interaction order – the interruptions, snubs, and impositions of persons who could have, and should have, known better and acted differently. By the same token, it may not be unrealistic to find in the pragmatics of communication a universal foundation for a theory of freedom and justice (Habermas 1970, 1979). At the same time, as Parsons (1951) was pre-eminent in recognizing, a normative order is not to be confused with an empirical one. Symmetrical rights in a fluctuating interactional order do not translate into symmetrical rights in a social one. An “equal opportunity” interaction order self-evidently does not translate into “equal opportunity” social relations, nor is the interaction order any prophylactic against inequality. The manipulation of expectations is almost certainly a fundamental feature of hominid evolution (Byrne and Whiten 1988), and the manipulation of normative expectations is a mechanism of social advantage. Indeed departures from symmetrical rights, whether enforced through the medium of interaction or by other means, may be a central means by which the “oil” of power is gleaned from the “shale” of interaction.

THE INTERACTION ORDER AND SOCIETAL INSTITUTIONS

It is clear that, as Goffman (1983) observed in his presidential address to the American Sociological Association, the interaction order is an institution that mediates the operation of other institutions in society. Without the interaction order, the

institutions which are the primary subject matter of sociology – the economy, polity, law religion, war-making, the reproductive (family, socialization, education), and the reparative (medicine) – cannot function. All of them rest on the institution of talk. Moreover, as Schegloff (2006) notes, the institution of talk can survive the collapse of these other institutions more or less unscathed. And indeed it survives across historical time and changing social structures: with some adjustments for culture and diction, we can “follow” the interactions portrayed in Shakespeare and Euripides, Chaucer and Aeschylus.

At the same time, it is clear that the interaction order undergoes significant modification when it is pressed into institutional purposes. No one could mistake questioning in a school classroom, for the give and take of question and answer in ordinary conversation (Heritage 1984a; Levinson 1992). Nor could either of these be confused with questioning in a courtroom (Atkinson and Drew 1979; Drew 1992), a news interview (Clayman and Heritage 2002), or a medical consultation (Boyd and Heritage 2006). Within the interactional matrix of these institutions, every resource that can be deployed to make conversation “ordinary” can be deployed to make these interactions expressive of institutional purpose and asymmetry (Drew and Heritage 1992).

In his address, Goffman wrestled with the interaction order’s intrication within normative systems which, whether based on the fundamentals of class, race, and ethnicity or lodged in institutional roles or both, lead to social outcomes that are distant from the Rawlsian ideal. He was right to do so. In many languages, interactants are grammatically obligated to encode markers of relative status between speaker and hearer. In such languages orientations to relative social status, because they are grammaticalized, are built into the structure of every act of communication (Agha 1994; Brown and Gilman 1960; Enfield 2007). In the absence of sanctions and regulation, the interaction order offers no defense against the dynamics of exclusion, or of in-group formations (Goodwin 2006), nor against unconscious institutional racism in the interactional treatment of persons, nor the outcomes of that treatment (Stivers and Majid 2007; van Ryn and Fu 2003), nor, again, against the confluences of interactional and social power which it mediates (Kollock, Blumstein, and Schwartz 1985; West 1984a, 1984b). Investigation into how interaction is embedded in the reproduction of race, class, and gender inequalities, though overdue, is a clear prospect for contemporary CA research (Kitzinger 2005a, 2005b; Land and Kitzinger 2005; Speer 2005).

CONCLUSION

In his war diary of 1918, Georg Simmel (1923) distinguished between sociological legacies that are in cash and in real estate. Viewed in these terms, both the method and the substance of CA have a distinctly landed appearance. They are paradigmatic in Kuhn’s (1962) sense of the term. An existing, but evolving, body of methods and findings ranging across data collection, representation, and analysis have become broadly standard in the field. The method and its substance are contiguous with, and capable of interfacing with, other styles of sociological analysis, including both qualitative and quantitative methods. The relevance of the method and its substance across a range of disciplines from electrical engineering, robotics, and cognitive

science, through linguistics, psychology, and anthropology are widely acknowledged. Applications of the method to the study of social institutions are so extensive as to be beyond the descriptive scope of this chapter. In short, a large amount of highly fertile sociological territory has been recovered from the chaotic riparian swamps to which the analysis of interaction was consigned by an earlier generation of scholars from Parsons (1951) to Chomsky (1957).

All but invisible to most sociologists, CA has also evolved into a large-scale, cross-cultural, cross-linguistic field. It is a major contributor to an emerging cross-disciplinary domain of study that asks what it is to be distinctively human, and that responds in terms of converging trends in neurobiology, zoology, evolutionary theory, anthropology, and psychology (Enfield and Levinson 2006). The questions to which this field is addressed are strikingly similar to those that animated Mead's (1934) analysis of mind, self, and society nearly a century ago – the distinctive nature of mind (and mind-reading) and human intentionality (Astington 2006), its embeddedness in stable sequences of interaction, its involvement in self and identity, and its cultural, social, and anthropological variability.

The distinctively sociological contribution of CA to this enterprise is to establish the existence of stable organizations of human interaction, and to situate them firmly within an understanding of social relations. It is a very considerable elaboration of the theoretical inheritance accrued from Goffman and Garfinkel and, more distally, from Durkheim and Mead. It has involved a paradigm shift in the conceptualization of human action from the notion of a (or even “the”) structure of social action (Parsons 1937) to a pluralized conception of variegated structures (Atkinson and Heritage 1984) designed to meet the fundamental exigencies of human life described here, together with others described elsewhere (Schegloff 2006).

At the end of “On Face Work,” Goffman (1955) observed that “universal human nature is not a very human thing.” However the same claim may not so easily be made about the interaction order. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson's (1974) model of turn-taking has held up across numerous languages, as have the Schegloff-originated models of repair and person reference (Enfield and Stivers 2007). Even minutiae of interaction, such as systematic practices for showing that a question was inappropriately asked, have been found across languages as diverse and distant as English and Mandarin (Heritage 1998; Wu 2004). In the preface to *Presumptive Meanings*, Levinson (2000: xiv) observes that:

Current perspectives on the relation between universal human nature and cultural factors often seem to me to be inverted: for example, language is held to be essentially universal, whereas language use is thought to be more open to cultural influences. But the reverse may in fact be far more plausible: there is obvious cultural codification of many aspects of language from phoneme to syntactic construction, whereas the uncoded, unnoticed, low-level background of usage principles or strategies may be fundamentally culture-independent . . . Underlying presumptions, heuristics and principles of usage may be more immune to cultural influence simply because they are prerequisites for the system to work at all, preconditions even for learning language.

Perhaps there is, after all, an interaction order for all of humankind.

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