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## Editorial

# Questions of context in studies of talk and interaction – ethnomethodology and conversation analysis

### 1. Context

The questions dealt with in this special issue of *Journal of Pragmatics* are doubly vexed. The first matter at issue is that the papers I've solicited take on some aspects of the debate within, and between, ethnomethodology (EM) and conversation analysis (CA) – and, by extension, wider approaches to discourse analysis and perhaps even pragmatics as a whole – as to whether and, if so to what extent, contextual particulars are relevant to the analyst's task in hand; therefore specifying, to some degree, what that task actually *is*.

This context debate is, within CA and related disciplines, almost legendary by now and can range from positions where one must scrutinise the conversational text and nothing but the text, via intermediate positions that allow certain restricted aspects of context to appear in the analysis. Then we move up to (or down to, depending on your analytic viewpoint) allowing in such matters as the broad social, cultural and political milieu in which everyday interactions happen to happen.

Most of this debate is referenced in an earlier paper with Mark Rapley and Charles Antaki, published in *Journal of Pragmatics* (McHoul et al., 2008). Accordingly, I won't rehearse it here. With due modesty, I believe the article exhibits some pertinent elements of how those who may disagree (sometimes profoundly) on questions of context in EM/CA can still agree to write together and open up the issue for further discussion. At least, it was the acceptance of this paper by *Journal of Pragmatics* that prompted the further discussion that is this special issue as such. Some readers may then want to turn to that paper at this point, as an extended preface to this current issue. It can be found at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2007.03.006>. Should any reader not be able to access the full paper, its abstract gives some of its flavour:

To deal with some current debates about the analytic validity of 'contextual' details in the analysis of talk-in-interaction, we (Alec McHoul and Mark Rapley) work through two cases. The first is hypothetical and derives from the current

literature in speech-act-theory-inspired pragmatics (Capone, 2005). The second is actual and arises from our initial disagreement with an earlier publication by one of our colleagues (Charles Antaki [1998]). What we hope to show is that the idea of context is, itself, something of a moveable feast; that it can have multiple formations ranging from the broadly political to the almost-but-not-quite effect of surface texts and their sequential implications. In this respect, we hope to ease tensions between otherwise cognate approaches to the analysis of talk-in-interaction. Our argument is that, if context is hearable in the talk as such, then it cannot be ignored by analysts. In the third section of the paper (and precisely so as not to make this a 'contestation'), Charles responds in his own terms and to see what kind of mutual footing there may (or may not) be for all involved in the analysis of talk vis-à-vis questions of context. If there is an upshot of the paper as a whole it is that further work on the 'context question' in studies of talk-in-interaction could well entail a return to (and perhaps a respecification of) the foundational ethnomethodological question of the status of 'members' knowledge'.

## **2. Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis**

The second controversial matter is not so much explicitly mentioned as implicit in the project as a whole and embedded in its title: namely the assumption that there has always been and remains a clear relationship between CA and its parent enterprise, ethnomethodology. For some working in these fields today, the disciplines (or sub-disciplines) are quite distinct. Indeed, there is a whole generation of conversation analysts who have learned their trade with no working knowledge of EM; and, perhaps more sadly, who have been actively discouraged by their mentors from delving into ethnomethodological questions. There are perhaps fewer, as it were, 'pure' ethnomethodologists who never consider conversational materials as relevant to their endeavours.

Under very different mentors – particularly David Hatch, Rod Watson, Wes Sharrock and John Lee – and in a very different era, I never questioned an obvious connection between EM and CA. And I still do not resile from that stance which comes, for the greater part, from studying the published and unpublished works of Harvey Sacks. Sacks, to be sure, founded CA; but he was absolutely explicit that conversational materials were simply one form (and by no means the

only possible form) of access to how the everyday order of things is constituted. Conversational 'data' were, for Sacks, no more than easily obtainable bits of the social world that were both ready to hand, anywhere one looked or listened, and easily preservable (as recordings and transcripts) for detailed analytic inspection. Other materials of a similar nature were and are just as ready to hand and preservable, as Eric Livingston's paper in this issue shows. For EM purposes, conversational materials need not be any more or less useful than, to mention Eric's interests here, those derivable from completing jigsaw puzzles, making mud maps, playing draughts (checkers) or solving problems in geometry.

The field of 'talk *and* interaction' is, accordingly, a massively diverse one and by no means confined to activities of conversing.<sup>1</sup> Here, we may take our cue, when thinking of it as a whole – if that is even possible – of Wittgenstein's notion of 'language-games' in the *Investigations* (1958:¶23):

Here the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.

Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others:

Giving orders, and obeying them –

Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements –

Constructing an object from a description (a drawing) –

Reporting an event –

Speculating about an event –

Forming and testing a hypothesis –

Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams –

Making up a story; and reading it –

Play-acting –

Singing catches –

Guessing riddles –

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<sup>1</sup> The *and* is italicised to distinguish it from the more restrictive *in*. In addition, I would want to argue for the term *talk* itself to be expanded – at least for analytic purposes – beyond its usual and blinkered quasi-synonymy with *conversation*. *Talk* can be just as synonymous with, say, *mean/refer to* in ordinary English; as in, 'we're talking millions here'; and there are many and varied other alternatives for *talk*. Etymologically, it derives from the Middle English *talken*, the frequentative of *tell*. *Talk* is broad enough to cover pretty much *whatever* is telling. Again, for analytic purposes, then, 'talk *and* interaction' may be a half-decent draft specification of what pragmatics as such analyses.

Making a joke; telling it –  
Solving a problem in practical arithmetic –  
Translating from one language to another –  
Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.

Two things are manifest, at least to me, from this possible parallel between something like our 'talk and interaction' and Wittgenstein's 'language-games'. (1) What we're ultimately interested in is taking pretty much any bit of ordinary everyday interaction as a means of understanding forms of life (*Lebensformen*) as such and not simply for its own sake as a technical object. Without this injunction, claims to social scientific status are null and void. (2) As a consequence of (1), conversation may be our favourite 'game' (mine happen to be cryptic crosswords and the Italian card game *scopa*) but it's not the only one in town.

Conversing, then, is just one of the indefinitely many things we happen to do routinely and which can, on analysis, reveal the mundane condition (for Sacks, 'the cultural machinery') of the social order itself. And this is EM's unique contribution to the social sciences: an alternative specification of those sciences' foundational question – how is the social order possible? The assumption (hypothesis, theory?) is that the social order is possible because we who live in (and as) it put it there, accountably, for anyone to see as being always-already there. That is, we do stuff in such a way that it can be seen and heard to be the stuff it is and not something else. I have always admired and often quoted Wes Sharrock's (1995:4) concise way of putting it; so I won't hesitate to do so again:

Social order is easy to find because it's put there to be found. When you go about your actions ... you do them so that (or in ways that) other people can see what you're doing. You do your actions to have them recognized as the actions that they are. When you stand at the bus stop, you stand in such a way that you can be seen to be waiting for a bus. People across the street can see what you're doing, according to where and how you're standing.... [Y]ou're standing at a bus stop and somebody comes and stands next to you and they stand in such a way that eventually you can see that these people are standing in a line and that one person's the first and another is the second, and some person's at the end. People stand around at bus stops in ways they can be seen to be waiting for a bus.

Notice here that not a word has necessarily been spoken; yet any occasion of doing such an ordinary thing as waiting for a bus can be preserved, analysed and re-analysed by others to search out its (as we might say) social-order-accountable properties.

This socially deep yet overtly displayed order of things may be found anywhere and everywhere. For example, it may be found in such diverse locales as therapy sessions, as Leudar *et al* show in their paper in this issue; interviews about infertility in Malawi (Bregje de Kok's paper); TV studios (Broth) or emergency reports (Cromdal *et al*). It may even be found in such supposedly 'macro' sociological settings as parliamentary debates (Dupret and Ferrié) ... and the list could go on but it must, inevitably, end somewhere for the practical purposes of a single issue.

So, at the end of the day, there is Dennis Day who, to my mind at least, proposes a still-controversial solution to the question of how to analyse day-to-day events and their contexts – may the controversy continue and benefit all in the best of scientific spirits. But it's not far from the point when he takes on the question of whether context for the *analyst* – whatever any given analyst takes that to be – should or should not have 'demonstrable relevance to *participants*'; and then whether it's OK to permit inclusion of materials from other recordings involving just those participants in just those settings. What if, as per Dennis's large fieldwork corpus, the question of ethnicity crops up time and time again?

Our current issue, then, does predominantly feature conversational materials and contributes to CA in this sense. For all that, I don't think, to adapt Stephen Hester and David Francis's (2001:217) insightful expression, anyone here is at risk of losing their ethnomethodological moorings.

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**Alec McHoul** recently retired as professor in the School of Media Communication & Culture at Murdoch University, though no-one ever told him what he was professor of. Having published widely in the interdisciplinary field of sociology and language studies, he is now dedicated to growing Australian native plants on his semi-rural property and birdwatching. For more details, including a publication list, go to: <<http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/~mchoul/>>.