

## What a difference forty years make: The view from linguistics<sup>1</sup>

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### *Abstract*

In great part thanks to Manny Schegloff's contributions, CA has brought with it a fresh new way of thinking about language. Three roughly chronological stages can be identified in Schegloff's linguistic development: (1) casual observation about small-scale linguistic phenomena, including silence, timing of sounds, syllables and words, non-lexical tokens, reference and deixis; (2) serious engagement with large-scale linguistic phenomena, including sentences, questions, speech acts, coherence, and prosody; (3) full-blown linguistic theorizing about, e.g., the natural habitat of language and grammars as positionally sensitive objects. The conclusion is that Manny Schegloff has contributed, if unwittingly, to a 'new-age', interactional revolution in linguistic thinking.

### *Keywords*

silence, timing, non-lexical token, reference, deixis, sentence, question, speech act, coherence, prosody, language in its natural habitat, positionally sensitive grammar

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From the first publication of "Sequencing in conversational openings" in 1968 to the occasion for this *Festschrift* adds up to more than forty years of legendary productivity. This chapter aims to pay tribute to Manny Schegloff and his *oeuvre* by trying to assess what these forty years have meant for the discipline of linguistics and how that discipline is practised today. Over the past twenty or so years, those who have been able to observe, first-hand, the reception of Conversation Analysis and of Schegloff's work among linguists will know that it has ranged from admiration and fiery enthusiasm to skepticism, suspicion, and doubt. The reactions have not been independent of the personalities involved. Yet if we abstract away from the personal and try to assess quite soberly what the field of linguistics has gained from these past forty years of CA work, the conclusion can only be: it has gained a lot.

It is well known that a view from the outside can be salutary. Linguistics has profited greatly in the past from outside views. In the early twentieth century some of the best and most impressive grammars of the English language were written by 'foreigners': Poutsma, Curme, Kruisinga, Jespersen, to name only the most well-known. Needless to say, a view from the outside brings with it both opportunities and risks. One of the risks is that the outsider will be accused of talking about something he or she knows nothing about. One of the opportunities is that precisely because the outsider is 'free' of all the conventional baggage that comes with training in the discipline, their vision is clearer. At the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, one can venture to claim that CA – in great

part due to Schegloff's work – has brought with it a fresh new way of thinking about language by taking an unencumbered view from the outside.

But this has happened rather incidentally. We only need to remember Sacks' disclaimer that he was not interested in language *per se*:

*It was not from any large interest in language or from some theoretical formulation of what should be studied that I started with tape-recorded conversations, but simply because I could get my hands on it and I could study it again and again....*

(Sacks 1984: 26)

Not only was CA's attention to language incidental. It was also radically different, because it started – not from pre-established beliefs and theories about language passed down through generations of scholarship – but from naive (pre-theoretical) and careful observation of what language really looks like when it is used by real speakers on real occasions in their everyday lives.

How did this new view of language develop? On closer examination we can identify three stages in Schegloff's linguistic development.

### **I. The beginning stage: Casual observation about small-scale linguistic phenomena**

It began rather imperceptibly, with CA's notorious "unmotivated looking".

Schegloff found himself casually remarking on things that are eminently linguistic, because they relate to language, but which no proper linguist had ever thought to

investigate. (A proper linguist at the time was a structuralist/generativist who was primarily interested in symbolic signs and their systemic relationships to one another.) Quite early on, however, Schegloff was taking seriously small linguistic phenomena like the following:

### *1. Silence*

Few linguists would ever have thought that the *absence* of language might be worth investigating. But Schegloff (1968), along with Sacks and Jefferson (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974), showed that silence can be highly meaningful at specified positions in sequential structure (the findings cannot be reviewed here in full but a few relevant quotations will serve mnemonic purposes):

*If one party issues an S (=summons) and no A (=answer) occurs, that provides the occasion for repetition of the S. That is to say, the nonoccurrence of the A is seen by the summoner as its official absence, and its official absence provides him with adequate grounds for repetition of the S. (Schegloff 1968:364)*

*...a silence after a turn in which a next has been selected will be heard not as a lapse's possible beginning, nor as a gap, but as a pause before the selected next speaker's turn-beginning. (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974:715)*

Here Schegloff and his colleagues are pointing to linguistic meaning potential in the *absence* of language. It comes about by virtue of speakers *withholding* language

when it would be expected, so that its absence serves as an index to what is missing. Some linguists like to talk about ‘zero’ morphs and ‘zero’ anaphora as having a bearing on meaning potential, but this kind of ‘zero’ turn-taking goes a good deal further.

## ***2. Timing in sounds, syllables, and words***

Linguists were of course aware that words are not always articulated the way the dictionary says they should be. But these deviations from what a speaker of a language was thought to 'know' about that language were considered 'degeneracies' deriving from the strain of performance. However, together with Jefferson and Sacks (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977), Schegloff (1979) shows that disturbances in the flow of speech, in particular as regards timing, are *meaningful*. They “do” something in conversation, namely they signal the relevance of repair:

*a variety of non-lexical speech perturbations, e.g. cut-offs, sound stretches, 'uh's etc.,...signal the possibility of repair-initiation immediately following...*

(Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977:367)

*The cut-off stops a 'next sound due' from occurring when it is due; the 'uh' and pause occupy the position at which a next due element of the talk would otherwise be placed (Schegloff 1979:273)*

What is radically new about this kind of observation from a linguist's point of view is that language *performance* is taken seriously and that language use is treated as a contingent *accomplishment* in real time.

### **3. Non-lexical tokens**

Traditionally, linguists like to think of themselves – and are thought of by others – as scholars who deal with meaningful elements like morphemes and words. Sounds and sound objects which are not words and/or do not enter into the make-up of words are outside their purview. Yet Schegloff (1982) quite early on drew attention to *uh-huh* and "other things that come between sentences" as being potentially meaningful:

*Perhaps the most common usage of 'uh huh', etc. (in environments other than after yes/no questions) is to exhibit on the part of its producer an understanding that an extended unit of talk is underway by another, and that it is not yet...complete. (Schegloff 1982:81)*

*...several quite distinct positionings of "uh(m)"—so deployed by speakers and so understood by recipients—are to mark the "reason-for-initiating" an episode of interaction, that a dispreferred response is upcoming, that a dispreferred sequence is being launched, or that a sequence's ending has resisted consummation and is being tried again. (Schegloff 2010:166)*

What is new here from a linguistic perspective is the idea that something other than a symbolic sign, or lexicalized word, can be instrumental in the production of language-based discourse. For linguists it already requires a significant frame switch to conceptualize discourse as a *process* rather than as a product. But now Schegloff is saying that this process is *interactive*: sentences are not "born naturally whole out of the speaker's forehead, the delivery of a cognitive plan" (Schegloff 1982:73) but involve the collaboration of others. For the traditional linguist,<sup>2</sup> who believes that language resides in the *individual's* head, a statement like this is heresy.

#### ***4. Reference and deixis***

Linguists of course acknowledge that there are deictic expressions in language for referring to persons and places whose use and interpretation depend heavily on the context of occurrence. Such expressions are, however, usually thought to be limited to a small set of indexical words including personal pronouns (*I, you, he, she*), demonstratives such as *this* or *that*, and locative adverbs such as *here* and *there*. But quite early on, Schegloff (1972) argued that *all* formulations of place are 'recipient designed', i.e., their choice depends on the specific circumstances of use:

*...for any 'place' there is a set of formulations that are 'correct'. On any occasion of employing a term for that 'place' much less than the full set is 'right'...On each occasion in conversation in which a formulation of location*

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<sup>2</sup> This term does not refer to a specific individual but rather to an imaginary figure reuniting all the beliefs and assumptions stereotypically assumed to be consensual in the field.

*is used, attention is exhibited to the particulars of the occasion. (Schegloff 1972:114f)*

Shortly thereafter, together with Sacks, Schegloff made a similar argument with respect to reference to persons:

*The specification of the general preference for recipient design in the domain of reference to persons is: If they are possible, prefer recognitionals. By "recognitionals" we intend, such reference forms as invite and allow a recipient to find, from some "this-referrer's-use-of-a-reference-form" on some "this occasion-of-use", who, that recipient knows, is being referred to (Sacks and Schegloff 1979:17)*

Later, Schegloff (1996a) made the further point that personal pronouns such as *I* and *you* should be thought of merely as forms which serve as *resources* for referring to speaker and recipient. They are not the only, or even the unqualifiedly 'dedicated' way of doing so:

*...there is a variety of resource forms for person reference at the disposal of parties to interaction (...). And there are practices (...) for the accomplishment of adequate reference in talk-in-interaction. (Schegloff 1996a:469)*



Even personal names, he argued, should not be considered ‘objective’ or absolute ways of referring to specific individuals but are instead as indexical as is classic deixis:

*The use of name by a speaker to refer to a person can be as contingent on the addressed recipient and the context of usage as any classically deictic form.*

(Schegloff 1996a:478, n26)

What is radical about these observations is that they suggest that to the extent that talk is *recipient-designed*, to that extent language signs in use are *indexical*.<sup>3</sup> This opens up the distinct possibility that *all* of language (use) is indexical. For linguists who believe in the mental lexicon as a repository of context-free lexical meaning, such a thought is anathema.

## **II. The middle stage: Serious engagement with large-scale linguistic phenomena**

By the early 1980s, the seeds had been sown for a more thoroughgoing investigation of language in conversation. In the next (partially overlapping) stage, Schegloff began to seriously tackle large-scale linguistic phenomena:

### ***Sentences***

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<sup>3</sup> This thought goes back to the ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel (see Heritage 1984).

For linguists in the 1970s, if sentences were anything more than themselves, they were monolithic, integral building blocks of the written paragraph. But Schegloff (1979) argued that sentences are first and foremost turn-constructional units and that their 'integrity' is subordinate to sequential requirements:

*...sentences will be in turns and will be subject to the organization of turns and their exigencies. (Schegloff 1979:281)*

*... all the types and orders of organization that operate in and on turns in conversation can operate on the sentence. (Schegloff 1979:282)*

The radical idea here is that there is a *syntax-for-conversation* that organizes the production of turn-constructional units and engages with a 'syntax' of repair oriented to re-establishing the progressivity of talk when it is disturbed. How a syntax-for-conversation relates to traditional syntax is left unspecified. But the possibility is not excluded that it may be *different*. If so, this amounts to a direct territorial threat to traditional linguists and the way they understand their field.

### ***Questions***

Linguists have traditionally had very definite ideas about sentence types. There are basically four: declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamative.

Interrogatives in English typically have subject-auxiliary inversion and are used to ask questions. However, Schegloff (1984) casts doubt on this simplistic equation:

*...whatever defines the class 'questions' as a linguistic form will not do for questions as conversational objects, or interactional objects, or social actions. ... it will not do, for a variety of reasons, to use features of linguistic form as sole, or even invariant though not exhaustive, indicators or embodiments of such objects. (Schegloff 1984:49f)*

For the linguist, Schegloff's approach to questioning is unsettling because it seems to suggest that the questioning activity does not depend in any way upon the question form. More generally, it could be taken to imply that function is wholly independent of form. Linguists may disagree as to which comes first, form or function, but they tend to be unanimous in believing that form cannot be ignored when considering function. Schegloff's claim strikes right at the heart of this cherished belief.

### ***Speech acts***

Following the seminal work by Austin and Searle in the 1960s and 1970s, linguists were quick to embrace the main tenets of speech act theory, especially since the theory attributed an important role to linguistic form. In Austin's understanding, for instance, speech-act *verbs* were said to be a rough and ready guide to speech acts: if you wanted to know what speech acts are possible, you had only to look at the speech-act verbs in language. Yet Schegloff (1996b) discovered robust empirical evidence in conversation for a hitherto undescribed 'speech act' for which there is

no a priori category and no corresponding speech-act verb: this is the act of 'confirming allusions':

*Until I grappled with a collection of actual, naturally occurring repeats ... I had not the slightest idea that there was such a function, such an action, such a practice in talk as 'confirming that something had been conveyed inexplicitly,' – confirming both the allusion and that it had been an allusion.*  
(Schegloff 1996b:210)

Such a discovery comes as a shock to linguists. The import is that non-linguists are in a position – perhaps even in a *better* position — to discover what things can be done with words, because they are not fixated on words or phrases but are focussing rather on sequentially embedded actions.

### ***Coherence***

For the traditional linguist, coherence is something that goes beyond the sentence; it is in the purview of the text linguist. But coherence is nevertheless thought to be language-related, accountable for in part by cohesive markers of underlying text relations and in part by topicality. Yet Schegloff (1990) shows that coherence is rather a function of *sequential organization*:

*...the structure of sequences in talk-in-interaction is a source of coherence in its own right. Disparate topics can occur coherently within the framework of a single, expanded sequence. ... An utterance apparently coherent topically*

*with preceding talk can appear incoherent nonetheless if it is structurally anomalous within the sequence it is part of.* (Schegloff 1990:72)

Thus, it is not topics but *actions* that create meaningful courses of actions and it is meaningful courses of action that are responsible for coherence. This, too, would appear to strike at the heart of a form-based linguistic enterprise.

### ***Prosody***

Linguists have long known about lexical tones and they have even recently come to accept that there is a non-segmental (suprasegmental) dimension to language structure that is crucial for meaning in discourse. But as a rule, their attention has centered on metrical organization (strong and weak syllables) and on focus structure (the marking of new or contrastive information through primary pitch accent). Yet Schegloff's work on prosody shows that there is an *interactive* dimension to prosody which has nothing at all to do with information structure: it involves how speakers modulate their voices in relation to one another, for instance, in conversational openings:

*...it seems apt to characterize what is underway here as a negotiation over the pitch level at which this conversation is to be conducted, at least initially, and whatever is potentially linked to that pitch level, such as affective tenor.*

(Schegloff 1998:246)

Here then is reference to a prosodic dimension of language use in interaction, one that no proper linguist could ever conceivably discover, much less feel comfortable dealing with, because – like 'shared' syntax – it depends crucially on collaboration between two parties. It is *interactive* in the truest sense of the word. Observations like this challenge the linguist's understanding of language as residing in the heads of single speakers. It suggests rather that language is 'shared' or 'distributed' across multiple speakers.

### **III. The latest stage: Full-blown linguistic theorizing**

In the latest stage Schegloff's thinking has culminated in the treatment of broad questions relating to a full-blown theory of language: What is language? What should a grammar of language be?

#### ***Language in its natural habitat***

Most linguists like to think of language as knowledge that is located in the mind. But Schegloff (1996c) argues that language is social and is located in talk, specifically in turns and turn constructional units:

*...turns-at-talk are the key proximate organizational niche into which bursts of language are introduced, and to which they may be expected to be adapted.*

(Schegloff 1996c:53)

*...the ... key unit of language organization for talk-in-interaction is the turn constructional unit; its natural habitat is the turn-at-talk; its organization we are calling 'grammar'. (Schegloff 1996c:55)*

Thus, language is first and foremost a means for interaction and 'bursts' of language are housed in turns-at-talk, or better, in turn constructional units. Turn constructional units are produced in real time and are subject to interactional contingencies. It is *grammar* that organizes language in function of its habitat in turns. What this means for the linguist is that language cannot be properly studied without an appreciation of how talk-in-interaction is organized. The CA-informed linguist does not first establish facts about language and then look to see how they are borne out in interaction, but rather first analyzes the interaction and then examines the language used in it. This amounts to a radical re-structuring of priorities. And it implies that linguistic training must include interaction analysis. Schegloff (2007) is an ideal tool for this.

### ***Positionally sensitive grammars***

The *raison d'être* of the linguist is "grammar", conceptualized traditionally as capturing or embodying all that decontextualized knowledge that speakers have about the structure of their language, in particular knowledge about what the sounds, words, and syntactic structures of the language *are*, and also about what they *could be* (and cannot be). This knowledge is thought to be abstract and

context-free: it represents what single linguistic forms have in common, regardless of which context they may get used in. Yet Schegloff (1996c) argues that grammar should be thought of not as context-free but as context-sensitive, as a range of resources whose deployment is sensitive to the talk that has come before:

*...a possibly relevant organizational form for a next contribution – a relevant grammar – (can) be shaped by the immediately preceding talk and action.*

(Schegloff 1996c:110)

And because preceding talk and action can take on many different forms, speakers have many different grammars, which are 'positionally sensitive':

*One has a range of grammatical resources, grammars if you will, whose relevance is positionally sensitive to organizational features and contingencies of the sequential and interactional moment in which the conduct is situated.* (Schegloff 1996c:110)

For a linguist, this is about as radical as one can get. The implications of 'positionally sensitive grammars' are so far-reaching that they have yet to be fully fathomed. But as so much in this extraordinarily rich article, the notion will be a guide and an inspiration for CA-informed grammarians for a long time to come.

## **Conclusion**



If we look at the list of linguistic phenomena – small and large – which Schegloff has addressed over more than forty years (and only a small selection has been given here), it begins to look like a linguistic handbook – if one with a very special slant:

*Silence*

*Timing of sounds, syllables, and words*

*Non-lexicalized tokens*

*Reference and deixis*

*Sentences*

*Questions*

*Speech acts*

*Coherence*

*Prosody*

*Language in its natural habitat*

*Positionally sensitive grammars*

Manny Schegloff has not only dealt with all of these eminently linguistic topics, he has contributed fresh ideas and new insights on each one of them. The conclusion then is that, although he may not know it, Manny Schegloff is a *linguist* (among other things). In this capacity, he is to be applauded for having contributed, if unwittingly, to a 'new-age', interactional revolution in linguistic thinking.

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