What are we doing when we analyse conversation?

Keynote Address, 'Branching Out': The 6th Australasian Symposium on Conversation Analysis and Membership Categorisation Analysis

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ABSTRACT: *Here I offer a reminder of some of the phenomenological and ethnomethodological roots of conversation analysis (CA) in the form of a set of 'field propositions'. Over the years, CA has certainly 'branched out' from those roots. However, I believe a reminder is timely if we are to prevent a drift towards a rather mechanistic approach to the study of everyday cultural objects such as conversations and their ilk.*

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Prologue

The short answer to the question in the title is that we are in fact doing sociology, but sociology of a particular kind. Let me call that kind of sociology 'ethnomethodology' or EM. This claim is controversial because most sociologists do not recognise EM as a bona fide form of sociology, and most EM practitioners do not want it to count as such. I think EM, from which conversation analysis emerged in the first place, is not only a kind of sociology but a radically alternative social theory. In fact, I suspect that there may only be two kinds of social theory: EM and the others. So my basic message [to the conference] is: you cannot branch out without roots. And those roots have to do with what I will call 'field propositions': basic assumptions about the sort of thing we might take a society to be.

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Field propositions

In his third volume of his lectures on Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger argues as follows:

> *Every science rests upon propositions about the area of beings within which its every investigation abides and operates. These propositions about beings—about what they are—propositions that posit and delimit the area, are metaphysical propositions. Not only can they not be demonstrated by the concepts and proofs of the respective sciences, they cannot even be thought appropriately in this way at all. (Heidegger, 1987, pp. 41-42)*

Heidegger, I think tellingly, calls these 'field propositions' (1987, p. 42). The sciences *use* such things. Metaphysics, by contrast, reflects upon and questions them. The field propositions of the sciences, that is, are among (but do not exhaust) the 'objects' of the 'discipline' of philosophy. But can the scientist—in this case, the social scientist— carry out such a reflection at all, under any circumstances? Heidegger tells us that:

> *To be able to carry out metaphysical reflection concerning his field, the scientific researcher must therefore transpose himself into a fundamentally different kind of thinking; he must become familiar with the insight that this reflection on his field is something essentially different from a mere broadening of the kind of thinking otherwise practiced in research, whether that broadening be in degree or scope, in generalization, or even in what he sees as a degeneration. (1987, p. 43)*

So we should not be afraid of the word 'metaphysics' (and even less of 'theory'). Phobias of this kind merely turn us away from finding out what our foundational field propositions are. They leave us stranded in a purely 'ontic' domain of empirical investigation for its own sake. In CA, this tendency is sometimes called 'droning through transcripts'. So, then, let us revisit our unashamedly metaphysical roots, starting with the seminal phenomenological work of Alfred Schütz.

Schütz

For Alfred Schütz, all sociological theories are effectively answers to the question: How is social order possible? Their axiomatic (pre-investigative) answers to this question constitute their 'field

propositions'. To make this clear, Schütz (1962, pp. 4-7) distinguishes between first- and second-order constructs. Constructs of the first order belong to the natural sciences. That is, the objects before the natural scientist such as atoms, capybaras, and planets have not interpreted themselves prior to the scientist's arrival. They are incapable of doing so. And so, the natural scientist makes a first-order interpretation of them. By contrast, constructs of the second order belong to the social sciences. When the social scientist arrives on the scene, the objects he or she encounters (folks in society) have already interpreted themselves. They have perfectly good and sufficient descriptions of themselves, unlike atoms, capybaras, and planets. This distinction makes the social sciences' proper objects very different from those of the natural sciences. Positivism (also known as 'physics envy') will not wash. Not ever: simply because of this fundamental and ineradicable difference between what the natural scientist and the social scientist, respectively, choose to study.

And yet, almost all varieties of sociology, including some interactionist and ethnographic versions, ignore this first and fundamental 'field proposition'. They are consequently left with an eternally unrequitable desire to be like the natural sciences, and with a strange set of topics (sometimes confusingly called 'macro' topics) that are properly the preserve of politics and economics. Such things as 'race', 'class', and 'gender' come to mind here, but a host of others can be found in just about every basic textbook. As Eric Livingston (2008, pp. 123-129) has recently reminded us, these are all typical of 'sociologies of the *hidden* social order'. By contrast, the basic Schützian field proposition (and those that follow) steer us in the direction of a 'sociology of the *witnessable* social order'.

Garfinkel

Expanding on Schütz's fundamental insight, Garfinkel (1967) argued and showed that the predescribed character of practical social actions can and ought to be the proper object of sociological investigation. However, he took this insight further by showing that that predescribability is actually *materially incarnate* in social practices themselves. That is, as folks in the society (*ethnos*) go about their everyday practical affairs, their actions and practices overtly (that is, audio-visually or witnessably) display their own *methodical* basis. This incarnateness of the methodical properties of practical actions is therefore *reflexive* (it is done in and as the very actions that it grounds and describes) and therefore constitutes a form of *accountability*. And

this—counter to Durkhiem in particular and to mainstream sociology in general—is, for Garfinkel, how social order is possible in the first place. It is possible, that is, precisely because it is prebuilt into everyday social affairs.

Wes Sharrock (1995, p. 4) has put this very neatly indeed with his example of the ways in which an ordinary action—waiting for a bus and forming a bus queue—accountably and reflexively displays that this is what it, in fact, in practice, is:

> 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.

Social practice, of whatever kind, from waging wars to cutting one's toenails, carries with it an *account* (which, as the above case shows, need not be verbal) of what it is, in and as that specific social practice and not some other. It is accountable. Accountability is a general and radically alternative answer to the question of how social order (including its failures) is possible. Social practices can, therefore—via their necessary *accountability*—be seen to have *reflexive* properties when viewed in terms of their *methodic* properties. We will return to these central characteristics of the ethnomethodological conception of social order after looking at Harvey Sacks's distinctive contribution to it.

Sacks

Since Sacks is widely acknowledged as the founder of CA and since his big book is entitled *Lectures on Conversation* (Sacks, 1992a; 1992b), it might seem odd for me to claim that his main aim was not so much the analysis of conversation as such—significant as this may be—but rather the establishment of a new way of doing a sociology of culture

based on his own version of EM's fundamental field propositions. Still, it is interesting to look at the variety of materials Sacks uses in his lectures: not just transcribed conversations (which are ubiquitous), but also newspaper and magazine articles, ethnographic accounts, training manuals for psychotherapists ... and so on, through a very broad variety of effectively 'found' objects that, as Sacks repeatedly says, he 'just happened to have' (e.g., 1992a, p. 292). Indeed, one of his most famous cases is not a conversation at all; it is a story by a young child and it led to what is now called 'membership categorisation analysis' (Sacks, 1972). I get the sense from reading Sacks that transcribed conversations were, for him, conveniently available examples of 'fragments' of everyday social action, that anything so readily available would have done in their place, and that conversations ought not to be thought of in any way as particularly privileged objects or materials. If other materials came to hand, Sacks was not reluctant to use them. But what is the status of such 'fragments', conversational or otherwise? Are they merely 'micro' bits of flotsam that happened to have drifted into Sacks's office and out again into the lecture hall? I think not, and with some reason.

Sacks's view of such things was that cultures exhibit 'order at all points' or 'in all venues' (1992a, p. xlvi). That is, if you have an instance of the generally available (and witnessably available) 'machinery' that generates cultural objects such as bus queues, psychiatric diagnoses, or recycled turn beginnings, then any instance will do. Instances do not have to be aggregated, statistically or otherwise. If the cultural order is visible there, it will be visible in every instance. Schegloff puts this succinctly in his introduction to the first volume of the *Lectures* (Sacks, 1992a, p. xlvi):

> *This view [order at all points], rather like the 'holographic' model of information distribution, understands order not to be present only at aggregate levels and therefore subject to an overall differential distribution, but to be present in detail on a case by case, environment by environment basis. A culture is not then to be found only by aggregating all of its venues; it is substantially present in each of its venues.*

This being so, we can be doing highly significant work on cultural ordering *as a whole* from the examination of the fragments we happen to have to hand. And, to some extent, this is what underpins the massive reproducibility of CA findings over the years, albeit that this can be, in some hands, a quite dreary repetition rather than an excitingly scientific repeatability.

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Further to this, Sacks effectively (perhaps under the influence of Garfinkel) solved a major problem in the study of culture. I call this the problem of *production* and *recognition*, though Sacks himself sometimes uses slightly different terms. The problem runs something like this: cultural members produce (or 'generate') cultural objects as very specific things. For example, there can be a fine line between a threat and a promise; between discarding some rubbish and 'thoughtfully' disposing of it, between 'weeding' a garden and decimating it. And so on for the myriad forms of fine work we have to carry out as competent cultural members. It becomes important, then, that the objects we produce should be *recognised* by other members to be exactly what they were *produced* as and not some other (albeit proximate) thing. How can this be achieved? There have been many proposals for a solution, quite a few of them—including Schütz's own 'reciprocity of perspectives' (1962, pp. 11-13)—predicated on some form of intentionality or other ghostly internal process. Sacks's solution, by contrast, is utterly materialistic and takes us back to the critical level of *methods*. It is the identical array of methods or 'procedures' that competent members use for *both* the production and recognition (or 'generation' and 'detection') of cultural objects that makes this possible. As Sacks (1992a, p. 226) puts it, 'A culture is an apparatus for generating recognizable actions; if the same procedures are used for generating as for detecting, that is perhaps as simple a solution to the problem of recognizability as is formulatable'.

Accordingly, I am ultimately urging conversation analysts to remember these 'roots'—to go beyond the mere collecting and noticing of the countless conversational 'find-ables' and to give some thought to the ways in which these fragments may be part of the 'witnessable social order', as we have already seen Livingston (2008) refer to it. The work that lies ahead involves some important respecifications of conversational materials—indeed of any materials we happen to have to hand. How, if we are interested in fragments of talk, are we to describe their critical elements of accountability/reflexivity and methodicity? To ignore the question is to forget the sociological aspect of our endeavours. So, as purely assembled reminders, I offer a brief set of axioms that I think, on the basis of the above discussion, can form the 'field propositions' of what we might be about.

Fundamental field propositions of EM

1. Axiom of Accountability

A =def $f^r(P,R)$

Accountability is a reflexive function of (methods for) the Production and Recognition of cultural objects.

2. Axiom of Methodicity

$(P,R) = m_1 \dots m_n$

Production and Recognition consist in the indefinite array of possible methods for their mutual (reflexive) accomplishment.

3. Axiom of Description

$EM = \partial(m_1, m_2, m_3, m_4 \dots)$

Ethnomethodology is a description (∂) of specific instances of the methodic array insofar as they can be captured in, as, or via, actual audio-visual—that is, witnessable—materials.

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