

# On the Practical Availability of Work-Practice

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Ethnomethodology (EM) and Conversation Analysis (CA) are often talked of interchangeably, in the same breath, as being concerned with the same object of study; namely, with the explication of the orderliness of naturally organized activities. In the literature that phenomenon is accounted for under the auspices of the ‘missing interactional what’ of organizational studies. Garfinkel (unpublished manuscript) articulates the notion as follows:

Harvey Sacks speaks of a curiosity in the work and history of the social sciences: the ‘missing interactional what’ in lay and professional studies of organization. Several observable phenomena make specific what he is talking about.

1) Available for observation is the omnipresence of accountable organizations of commonplace activities like ‘families’, ‘faculties’, ‘traffic’, ‘welfare agencies’, ‘hospitals’, ‘manufacturing plants’, ‘city governments’, or ‘street gangs’.

2) It is a matter for observation too that endlessly many inquiries accompany these accountable organizations as constituent features of them. It is to be observed in these accountable organizations and their inquiries that the occasioned, embodied, interactional just-so just-what of ordinary activities remains ... ignored, unknown, unsuspected, and unmissed as technical phenomena.

3) Finally, there is to be observed that 1) and 2) taken together compose a technical phenomenon that is discoverable, is consequential, and for the study of naturally organized activities is criterial. The phenomenon consists of the essential, used, and ignored relevance to the collaborated production of the orderliness in, of,

and as ordinary activities, of the occasioned, embodied, interactional just-so-and-just-what of ordinary activities.

Garfinkel’s point, like Sacks’, is that in accounting for the organization of ordinary activities, the social sciences pass by, ignore, and otherwise fail to describe (and thus miss) the observable and reportable “work of the street” (Garfinkel 1996) in and through which members of the ordinary society construct their ordinary activities together, and in doing so “reflexively” produce common-place organizations of everyday life (Czyzewski 1994). It was plain to Sacks and Garfinkel, then, that there was a significant gap in the professional literature of organizational studies and it is this that their pioneering work set out to address.

It might be said that the gap in the literature provided a common focus for the study of naturally organized activities. That gap was, and is, a positive gap, one providing the opportunity to develop a rigorously empirical approach to the study of organizations of practical action and practical reasoning in their many and varied forms. At the heart of that achievement lies the notion of “member” (Garfinkel and Sacks 1969):

We do not use the term “member” to refer to a person. It refers instead to mastery of natural language, which we understand in the following way.

We offer the observation that persons, in that they are heard to speaking a natural language, somehow are heard to be engaged in the objective production and objective display of commonsense knowledge of everyday activities as observable and reportable

phenomena. We ask what it is about natural language that permits speakers or auditors, and in other ways to witness, the objective production and objective display of commonsense knowledge, and of practical circumstances, practical action, and practical sociological reasoning as well? What is it about natural language that makes these phenomena observable-reportable, i.e., account-able phenomena? For speakers and auditors the practices of natural language somehow exhibit these phenomena in the particulars of speaking, and that these phenomena are exhibited is itself, and thereby, made exhibitable in further description, remark, questions, and in other ways for the telling.

The interests of ethnomethodological research are directed to provide, through detailed analyses, that accountable phenomena are through and through practical accomplishments. We shall speak of “the work” of that accomplishment in order to gain the emphasis for it of an ongoing course of action. “The work” is done as assemblages of practices ...

With the notion of member, the missing interactional what of organizational studies is specified as assemblages of practices. Which is to say that naturally organized activities are ordered through observable and reportable “work-practices”. Those work-practices are made available as accountable phenomena, as empirical phenomena of order that may be seen and described, through the naturally occurring talk of parties to the work. Thus, an appreciation of natural language is central to the study of work. The question is, what does it mean to “appreciate” natural language? In what way is natural language to be “appreciated” in order that the orderliness of work might be adequately accounted for? Answers to that question lay at the core of disputes

regarding the practical availability of work to EM and CA.

### **Studying work-practice: CA**

As the nomenclature indicates, Conversation Analysis is concerned with the analysis of talk and, as such, with the relationship between ordinary activities and natural language. More specifically, CA is concerned with the “formal description of particular practices and sets of practices ... which members can use in constituting coherent talk and specific lines of action and interaction” (Schegloff, 1992). CA emerged from Sacks’ early work (circa 1970) on the mechanics of conversation and was developed by his students, notably Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson. In 1974 Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson presented the definitive paper on CA, which articulated the notion of the “turn-taking machine”:

Turn-taking is used for the ordering of moves in games, for allocating political office, for regulating traffic at intersections, for serving customers at business establishments and for talking in interviews, meetings, debates, ceremonies, conversations etc. It is obviously a prominent type of social organisation, one whose instances are implicated in a wide range of other activities.

For Sacks and his colleagues the turn-taking machine at work in naturally occurring conversation offered the prospect of accounting for the organization of ordinary activities. Offered the prospect, that is, of explicating the orderliness of naturally organized activities in details of the observable-reportable work of the streets (Schegloff 1992).

CA construes of natural language as a “speech exchange system” which parties to conversation employ to

assemble and coordinate (or order) interaction through the allocation, management, and control of turns at talk. The turn-taking machine allows talk and interaction to proceed in an orderly fashion. How? Examining tape-recordings of naturally occurring talk, Sacks et al. observed that in conducting conversations, speakers design their talk for recipients by constructing turns, thus ordering their interaction. For example,

Desk: What is your last name Loraine?  
Caller: Dinnis  
Desk: What?  
Caller: Dinnis

Such utterances were defined as turn-constructural components of which there are plethora of unit-types including single-word turns (as above), single-phrase turns (e.g. "It's a Mickey Mouse course"), single-clause turns (e.g. "You've been down here before haven't you?"), non-lexical turns (e.g. "uh huh"), and so on. Turn-constructural components or units provide for turn-transition between speakers in that the completion of the current speaker's turn is hearably projected by the unit-type as a transition relevance place in the unfolding flow of talk. In examining transition relevance places Sacks et al. identified a discrete group of turn constructural units – namely, turn-allocation components. For example,

Sara: Ben you want some?  
Ben: Well alright I'll have a  
Sara: Bill you want some?  
Bill: No

Turn-allocation components are distributed into two groups: 1) those in which a next turn is allocated by the current speaker selecting the next speaker (as above), and 2) those in which a next turn is allocated by self-selection (e.g. "I'll have some").

Questions, greetings, summonses, invitations, and more, are a special class of turn-allocation components all of which select a particular recipient who may then speak next. Such utterances are classed as adjacency pairs. Adjacency pairs consist, as the name suggests, of a first-pair part (e.g. a question) which is connected to an adjacent second-pair part (e.g. an answer). Not only do such devices select next speaker but they establish the sense of the relevant type of action to be produced in response. This is not say that the selected speaker will respond in the prompted way, only that turn transitions may be, and often are, assembled and coordinated through the use of adjacency pairs. Insofar as the selected speaker may not respond accordingly, adjacency pairs are "conditionally relevant". That is, they order turns at talk on condition that the selected speaker also finds the prompted action relevant as well. Alternately, persons engaged in conversation may self-select at the projected end of the current speaker's story, joke, answer, or any other type of utterance that does not select a particular recipient. The use of both groups of turn-constructural units is governed by some basic rules for their application. Sacks et al. described these rules as follows:

For any turn, at the initial transition relevance place of an initial turn-constructural unit:

If the turn-so-far is so constructed as to involve the use of a "current speaker selects next" technique, then the party so selected has the right and is obliged to take next turn to speak; no others have such rights or obligations, and transfer occurs at that place.

If the turn-so-far is so constructed as not to involve the use of a "current speaker selects next" technique, then self-selection for next speakership may, but need not, be instituted; first starter

acquires rights to a turn, and transfer occurs at that place.

If the turn-so-far is so constructed as not to involve the use of a “current speaker selects next” technique, then current speaker may, but need not continue, unless another self-selects.

If, at the initial transition relevance place of an initial turn-constructive unit, neither 1a nor 1b has operated, and, following the provision of 1c, current speaker has continued, then the rule-set a-c reapplies at the next transition relevance place, until transfer is effected.

These rules constrain each of the turn-taking options they provide and are constrained by one another, defining in their use participants’ rights and obligations to speak and listen. Thus the rule-set ensures that the normative conversational order “one speaker at a time” is produced and accomplished here and now.

Naturally, there are periods in any conversation when more than one speaker speaks, when interruptions are made, and that turns at talk are violated in various ways. Nonetheless, the operation of the rule-set “repairs” violations and restores normative order. If, for example, a current speaker selects a next speaker (Rule 1a) and he or she fails to respond, then the current speaker, or some other participant, may employ components in compliance with the options provided by (Rule 1c). The rule-set not only supports the production and accomplishment of a normative conversational order, then, but also provides for the maintenance of that order in its actual, live production. Consequently, Sacks et al. described the basic device organizing the conversational system, and underpinning other more specialised forms of speech exchange system, as an “interactionally managed, party-administered, local management

system”. It is a local management system in that the turn-construction and turn-allocation components and rules comprising the device allow turn-size and turn-order to vary according to the local circumstances of conversation’s production, across variations of participation, and in the face of violations. It is interactionally managed in that turn-allocation and transition is accomplished in concert by parties to the developing course of each turn and their achieved orientation to a next turn in the course of the current turn’s production. And it is party administered in that it subjects the taking of turns to the control of parties to conversation’s talk. Importantly, Sacks et al. noted that the principle

mechanism by which the system lends itself to party administration, by which turn-size and turn order determinations are intergraded, and by which the system achieves comprehensiveness for any turn-transition, is the option-cycle provided by the ordered set of rules.

Thus, the underlying rule-set constitutes a coordinating mechanism providing for the local operation of an impersonal context-free yet context-sensitive componential machinery which, in its employment, enables speakers and hearers to construct, allocate and manages turns at talk and, thereby, to order their interactions. Thus, the turn-taking machine accounts for the orderly work of the street. Just what that organization of work consists of on any occasion may be explicated by attending to and explicating the workings of the turn-taking machine as made available by parties to the setting’s talk.

### **Some technical troubles with CA**

Granting a truncated account of CA’s technical apparatus, it might be argued

that the ways in which CA “appreciates” natural language do anything but provide an account of the orderly work of the streets. In place of work-practice we are offered what work-practice looks like having been passed through the workings of the turn-taking machine. Thus, and for example, work-practice is construed of in terms of turn constructional units, allocation units, and adjacency pairs. The turn-taking machine becomes the locus and means of accounting for work-practice as a result of the purportedly ‘scientific’ character of the descriptive devices employed by CA (Lynch 1993). Jefferson’s (1978) transcript notation, for example, provides a set of rep-resentational devices for mapping the empirical features of talk as ‘it sounds to the ear’. Codification devices would be a better, more accurate description of such devices, however, consideration of which casts serious doubt on the ‘scientific’ status of CA and throws the practical adequacy of the turn-taking machinery into dispute. The nature of the dispute might be gleaned in considering CA’s ‘shoptalk’:

Jon: Does anyone have references for published observations on “latching”? I am wondering if speculation has been made on the interactional work accomplished by this phenomenon.

Dave: [I think the notion] was used to refer to changes of turns of talk that were so quick as to show virtually no time lag between the end of the previous utterance and the beginning of the next. We used a “=” sign at the end of the last word of the utterance to which the second was latched, and at the beginning of the first word of the latched utterance. I believe that nomenclature was in Jefferson’s transcription symbols.

Don: Maybe it’s just me but I cannot make/hear any distinction between “changes of turns of talk that (are) so quick as to show virtually no time lag” and instances of “no-gap” speaker transitions. Consequently, I only use the “=” symbol in my transcripts to indicate a

continuation of same speaker’s turn on another line.

Geoffrey: The latching symbol (=) is meant to indicate those instances of no gap turn transition ... These are “marked” transitions (because they begin early) when compared with the majority of transitions (during which a beat of silence develops between the end of the last turn and the beginning of a next). (Email extracts from Ethno Hotline)

What the talk makes available in observable and reportable details of work-practice is that applying transcription symbols is not simply a matter of mapping the empirical features of talk but a matter of skill and judgement: just what does a particular symbol mean, just when should it be applied and just how? By way of an answer, instructions for the application of transcript symbols are furnished in CA’s shoptalk (and its texts).

In other words the application of transcription symbols relies on the use of coding instructions which “tell” the user just how to apply them. Coding instructions are commonplace in the social sciences and are treated as scientific procedures that purportedly provide for the objective description of empirical events (Garfinkel 1967a).

The problem with coding instructions is that like any set of rules, their application relies on the discretionary exercise of judgement (ibid). In other words, coding instructions have to be made relevant to ordinary activities. For example, “to turns of talk that (are) so quick as to show virtually no time lag between the end of the previous utterance and the beginning of the next”, “to indicate a continuation of same speaker’s turn”, or “to indicate those instances of no gap turn transition”. For each and every occasion of search, detection, and assignment to a codification category (or symbol), the analyst must consult the activities being analysed in

order to establish the definite sense of the coding instructions “in this case”, and that requires the exercise of judgement. Judgement calls have to be made each and every time the analyst wishes to apply a prefigured analytic category to ordinary activities, as application criteria are not invariably specified by the coding instructions themselves. Nor could they be, given the irremediably contingent nature of their actual use as no set of coding instructions could be specified to handle the details of every possible case to which they may be applied. Contingency cannot be eliminated from coding activities but must instead, and without remedy, be managed through the discretionary exercise of judgement. (Hence the various instructions provided in the shoptalk above.)

This exercise requires the analyst to treat natural language utterances as signs or “indicators” (see extracts above) of an underlying organization of interaction (e.g. turn-taking). Once signs – such as latching symbols - have been attached to natural language utterances and ordinary activities alike through coding it becomes possible to identify “objective” organizations of work (e.g. the turn-taking machine and its components). The organized character of ordinary activities is not so much made visible through CA then, as rendered apparent through the treatment of natural language utterances as signs which function to index presumed underlying organizations of practical action and to identify themes or topics accounting for those organizations of action. The accounts of work-practice produced through this kind of analysis are not accounts produced through the analysis of natural language utterance’s however, but through analysis of the sign-functions those utterances have

come to assume through coding and the natural theorising of analysts. Natural language utterances are therefore used as “documentary evidences” (Garfinkel 1967b) indexing an underlying organization of ordinary activities made visible through the application of codification devices to documentary evidences; which, Garfinkel (1967a) suggests, raises a rather serious problem:

Coded results consist of a persuasive version of the socially organized character of [some setting’s work], regardless of what the actual order is, perhaps independently of what the actual order is, and even without the investigator having detected the actual order. Instead of having described the order of [work], the account may be argued to consist of a socially invented, persuasive, and proper way of talking about [the setting and its work] as an orderly enterprise, since ‘after all’ the account was produced by ‘scientific procedures’.

CA conducts its daily business not through the explication of the observably orderly work of the street then, but rather, through the production and interpretation of signs (Garfinkel and Wieder 1992). In other words, and as Lynch (1993) notes, when pressed, CA is only “logically empirical”. Its technologies of production, particularly transcript notation and (of late) Interaction Analysis (Jordan and Henderson 1995), lend an illusion of rigorous empirical work which hides a very conventional art.

That art might be described as “constructive analysis”. It is a predominant mode of analysis in the social sciences, which characteristically subsumes the orderly work of the street under the auspices of a generic theoretical format. Such formats work not through the description of the orderly work of the

street but through providing adequate grounds for inferring what that orderly work consists of. Thus, in passing ordinary talk and interaction through the turn-taking machine we come to see conversational components and rule-sets as fundamental mechanisms ordering interaction. Description of these components and governing rule-sets instruct the reader and, in following the instruction, make it observable just how the posited machine works in orderly ways in any particular case. In instructable details, descriptions of the rule-set at work account for the (re)production of the object described (e.g. a conversation, an argument, a debate, etc.). Members' work-practices for assembling and coordinating their interactions are substituted, then, by 'reasonable' accounts which subsume the orderly work of the streets under the inferential apparatus of a generic theoretical format.<sup>1</sup>

### **Recovering the “primordial” phenomenon**

Under the auspices of CA the notion that work-practice may be made available through an appreciation of natural language has resulted in the technical specification of work-practice in details of the workings of the turn-taking machine. Lynch and Bogen (1994) suggest that such an account

misses the sense in which Sacks identified a *primordial* phenomenon [in his early work, *circa* 1970]. This phenomenon can variously be described as “seeing-what-someone-is-saying”, “instructed action” or, in a more complicated locution, “the instructable-reproducibility of social structure”.

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<sup>1</sup> See Baccus (1986) for a thoroughgoing account of that achievement.

In his early work Sacks suggested that the orderly work of the street is ordinarily available. It might be said that participants do not need training in CA to engage in ordinary activities and otherwise account for them. Thus, it might be argued that in “reasonable” ways CA gets in the way of our seeing, as Sack originally wanted us to see (Sacks 1992a), the orderly work of the street:

[I] take it that lots of the results I offer, people can go and see for themselves. And they needn't be afraid to. And they needn't figure the results are wrong because they can see them. Since beforehand they didn't know it, and now they can see something they didn't ...

Many CA practitioners take the view that Sacks is not making an epistemological point in saying this, but rather an historical point about the way empirical sciences develop. In the early stages of a science's development little instruction, apparatus, or manipulative skill is needed to see its phenomena. This stage passes quickly as a science accumulates knowledge and technique however, and evolves in conceptual sophistication (Tom Wilson, personal communication). Thus, technical specifications are justified by appealing to the historical character of scientific development, rather than the empirical validity of such specifications (which is drawn into question through practices of codification).

Even if one accepts the validity of CA's technical devices and constructs, the approach, at best only addresses a very narrow set of work-practices for taking turns. It does not describe what work-practices are accomplished in taking turns, e.g. furnishing instructions in applying transcription symbols, and does not, as such, address the vast majority of work-practices whereby ordinary activities are

organized (including ordinary activities of Conversation Analysis). Rather than asking what the turn-taking machine is doing when members do taking turns at talk, we might instead follow Lynch (1993) and ask what members are doing when they do taking turns at talk? This is a very different order of question that retains an appreciation of natural language but shifts the focus of description to what is being done in talking, and how what is being done is organized by members in their observable and reportable actions and interactions.

### **Studying work-practice: EM**

The shift in orientation towards natural language, from the taking of turns to what is being done in and over the course of taking turns, characterises the radical programme of ethnomethodological inquiry. “Radical” means:

we replace talk of “radical just how” and speak instead of “embedding” ethnomethodology in a setting and from within the setting ... By “embedding ethnomethodology in a setting” we shall understand administering ethnomethodological policies and using ethnomethodological methods over the exigencies of inquiry, in ... a particular, distinctive, real world setting of human jobs. (Garfinkel and Wieder 1992)

The primary policy of the radical programme replaces standard forms of account (i.e. generic theoretical formats) with a concern to satisfy the unique adequacy requirement of methods:

In this weak use the unique adequacy requirement of methods is identical with the requirement that for the analyst to recognise, or identify, or follow the development of, or describe phenomenon of order in local production of coherent detail the analyst must be

vulgarly competent in the local production and reflexively natural accountability of the phenomenon of order he is ‘studying’. (ibid)

This means that the work analyst must be able to understand work in such ways as parties to its production and recognition understand it. Or, in other words, that the work analyst must develop the capacity to see what is going on, and in the ways that it is going on, as production cohorts (members) see it. The work analyst must be vulgarly competent in the field of practical action under “study”.

Vulgar competence is not a transcendent analytic skill but an occasioned requirement; one that must be satisfied on each and every occasion of work-study. The unique adequacy requirement can only be satisfied by “studying” the work closely. That is, by immersing one’s self in the work and thereby coming to terms with its endogenous organization. Being able to account for the work in terms of its endogenous organization provides the basis for writing “praxiologically valid” accounts (Garfinkel 1996). Unlike constructive analytic accounts, praxiological accounts do not attempt to make work-practice available through a generic inferential apparatus but instead, through description of the “lived work” of a particular, distinctive, real world setting of human jobs (Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingstone 1981). The validity of such accounts is provided in keeping with Sacks recognisability criterion that “people can go and see for themselves” if what is said seems to be so or, alternatively, by the “lebenswelt” constraint (Livingstone 1987). Thus, praxiologically valid accounts are corrigible accounts of observable-reportable work-practices that may be evaluated, assessed,

amended, and otherwise confirmed or rejected by parties to the work.

A practical example of what ‘vulgar’ competence” means, and its significance, is provided by Paul ten Have in consideration of “the limits of a ‘standard’ Conversation Analytic approach” (personal communication):

A few years ago, in a data session in Amsterdam, we were discussing some materials on a medical consultation’s diagnostic phase. The patient voiced a number of complaints and we felt that the physician was not taking some of these up. One of us, however, Charon Pierson, of the School of nursing of the University of Hawaii and a student and collaborator of Britt Robillard, used her professional expertise to point out that some of his subsequent questions were motivated by some of the complaints we thought he did not attend to. In other words, from a professional perspective, he was working on those complaints, but this was not noticeable for us, non-medical overhearers, and indeed for the patient. So from a Conversation Analytic perspective, we could understand some of the patient’s repetitions of her complaints as dealing with “notable absences” on the doctor’s part, while we were not getting the fine details of his “diagnostic work” qua professional practice.

Charon Pierson’s background in nursing enabled her to see and hear what was going on, and in the ways that it was going on, in details of a naturally organized course of diagnostic action. She was, and is, vulgarly competent in diagnostic practice (to some degree at least). Given the inability of CA practitioners to hear what was going in the doctor-patient talk, other than what was ordinarily available to them as competent members of the ordinary society, it seems clear that developing vulgar competence in the field of practical action that constitutes the

domain of “study” is a matter of paramount concern if the orderly work of the street is to be adequately accounted for.

As a result of its professional preoccupation with generic theoretical formats (i.e. the turn-taking machine), vulgar competence is not available to CA however:

Let me give you a story. Gail Jefferson once tried transcribing Sacks’ lecturing using her notation. She told me she was confounded by not being able to hear him lecturing when she was transcribing his lectures. Given my interests, her admission was catastrophic. She was not able to listen for the technical sociological things he was talking as the matters that conversational structures could be but was able to listen for and hear her notationally indicated conversational structures. Instead of hearing him talk sociology in just the way he was talking-it-really-and-evidently and ordinarily, the details of Sacks talking conversational structures were exhibited in established conversational indicators. She detected properties that exhibited his lecture as the details of talking conversationally. So what? A conversational analysis of persons talking chemistry or talking law will have to respect the fact that they are talking chemistry or talking law. Say that between us, at the blackboard, we are talking chemistry. What does that look like in conversational structures? Right now the answer is nothing, zilch, it can’t be done in CA (Harold Garfinkel in conversation with Benetta Jules-Rosette).

The vulgar competence that work-practice consists of, and relies on for its production and recognition, is simply not available to “canonical” CA (Garfinkel and Wieder 1992). That is, to the form of CA developed by Schegloff, Jefferson, and others. Its technologies of production get in the way, systematically removing that

competence. One might well ask why, or how come?

### **The unavailability of work-practice to CA**

Tom Wilson, a seasoned veteran of the field and one who profoundly disagrees with many of the “radical” readings articulated here nevertheless elaborates the why or how of the matter with a distinct clarity:

For Garfinkel the term “radical phenomena” refers to things having very specific characteristics, and these must be respected in any discussion: radical phenomena “are available to policies of ethnomethodology - for example, they are available under the exercise of “ethnomethodological indifference” and they are available under a respect for the unique adequacy requirement of methods. But they are specifically *not* available to the policies and methods of constructive analysis. These phenomena cannot be recovered with *a priori* representational methods. They are not demonstrable in the established terms of classic studies” (Garfinkel 1988).

I take “*a priori* representational methods” to refer to the use of notions formulated prior to a present inquiry into some concrete situation currently at hand; even if those notions were developed in close engagement with empirical materials, they are antecedent to the present inquiry, and, Garfinkel held, radical phenomena cannot be captured by such notions (Personal communication).

Transcript notations (and procedures of Interaction Analysis for that matter) and analytic devices such as turn-construction units (etc.) are, quite unequivocally, *a priori* representational methods. They configure beforehand what the phenomena will be, what it will look like to some considerable

extent, what it consists of, and the rest. As Lynch (1993) reminds us, however,

Methods [work-practices] (whether avowedly scientific or not) do not provide *a priori* guarantees, and the initial requirement for an ethnomethodological investigator is [therefore] to find ways to elucidate methods from within the relevant competence systems to which they are bound.

In defence of *a priori* methods, Wilson argues that transcriptions should not be understood so much as representations of “data”, but as “heuristic tools” through the use of which the “data” (i.e. work) may be inspected. If that is the case, if transcripts are but heuristic devices,<sup>2</sup> then Conversation Analysis is a very different beast than it is claimed to be by Schegloff & Co.

### **Work-study: the primary challenge**

Whatever the pros and cons of analytic approaches to the study of work-practice, the primary challenge for the work analyst is first and foremost to develop vulgar competence in the field of “study”, rather than developing *a priori* and generic representational methods. Jeff Coulter (personal communication) makes the point with some force:

There is one significant objection I want to register, and register firmly. It is this. There is an idea abroad (probably promulgated by a few profoundly pretentious scientists who want to be would-be philosophers or sociologists) that *no-one* who is not actually a scientist (a psychiatrist, a coroner, a cop, etc.) is in any position to write about, analyse,

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<sup>2</sup> Which offers something of the prospect of elucidating work-practice from within the relevant competence system, providing codification schemes aren’t applied to the talk being analysed.

discuss, theorise about (etc.) *their* sanctimonious work. This crap has got to stop. What is the issue here? Ian Hacking's fine book *The Social Construction of What?* goes a long way to disabusing this sealed off – esoteric – and thus, off-limits “competence”. What a joke. If an ethnomethodologist worth his salt doesn't command enough competence to work in whatever area he or she chooses to, that will be his or her downfall. But the very idea that an ethnomethodologist (just by virtue of his or her training in Sociology!!) simply *cannot* be inducted into the ways of other people's professional expertise strikes me as a canard. And an insulting one as well.

In saying this, Coulter is not simply cautioning natural scientists, but social scientists as well! The caution is not one that demands of the ethnomethodologist, conversation analyst, or work analyst more generally, that he or she be competent in the analytic arts that characterise the social sciences, but that he or she be competent in the field of practical action that constitutes the domain of “study”. In other words, Coulter's is a demand that the work analyst be vulgarly competent. That is not an insignificant challenge, indeed the social sciences as we know them would be utterly transformed were the “experts” in organizational studies of all kinds vulgarly competent in the fields of practical action they profess to “know about”.

Insofar as one might accept the challenge, the question becomes how might vulgar competence be achieved on any occasion of inquiry? Given Garfinkel's comments it should be obvious that there are no a priori answers to that question. The production of answers will be the outcome of addressing the problem in situ, of doing the study and being instructed by the practical actions and interactions that observably and

reportably comprise the setting's daily work and which reflexively elaborate its organization. A daunting achievement, but one supported by a general and significant guideline which might foster such outcomes:

Following the critical discussion of formulating in conversation by Garfinkel and Sacks, however, questions can be raised about what members are doing when they do taking a turn at talk. This is not the same as asking what the turn-taking machine is doing when members talk to one another. (Lynch 1993)

That way a disciplinary concern with natural language is preserved and used as a study policy for gearing into the orderly work of the street. It is not a policy that is concerned with constructing an inferential apparatus, however, but one directed towards elaborating, in naturally accountable detail, the orderliness of what's going on and what's being done by parties to the work of the setting under study (Moerman 1992).

Making work-practice available for inspection requires a disciplinary shift in focus then, away from the turn-taking machine, to what members are doing when they take turns at talk. Talk, in other words, should be treated, *pace* Wittgenstein, as an instrument or tool that people use to get their activities done together. In that respect, it might be said that the turn-taking machine misses the tool's embodied extension, its use, its connexion with the real world as an embedded aspect of specific worksite practices. To borrow a phrase from Wittgenstein (1992), one cannot guess how words function:

One has to *look at* [their] use and learn from that. But the difficulty is to remove the prejudice which stands in the way of doing this. It is not a *stupid* prejudice.

Rather than ask what is it about talk that engenders or permits collaborative action, *pace* canonical CA, refocusing the issue directs our attention to how people do what they do together over the course of talking together, thus coordinating (ordering) their interactions. Directs our attention, that is, to the assemblages of work-practices through the local accomplishment of which the orderly work of the streets is naturally organized by parties to it and commonplace organizations of everyday life are reflexively produced.

### **Life after CA: “radical” studies of work**

It is commonly presumed (perhaps wrongly) that EM and CA have the same objects of study, namely, naturally organized activities and the ‘missing interactional what’ of organizational studies. It might otherwise be said, and in more detail, that EM and CA are concerned with explicating the work-practices whereby the ordinary activities that comprise some setting’s work are organized by parties to that work. A guiding policy for the study of work is an orientation to and disciplined ‘appreciation’ of natural language, which is said to make work-practice available. Apparently EM and CA share the same methodological presuppositions. This is not the case however. The disciplined ways in which CA ‘appreciates’ natural language have seen the concern with the ‘missing interactional what’ transformed into a concern with the organization of turn-taking, rather than with work-practices as accountable phenomena made available through the naturally occurring talk of parties to some setting’s work. As a consequence, EM and CA do not share the same object of study as a concern with the missing

interactional what has been transformed by CA into a concern with the workings of the turn-taking machine. Thus, CA becomes an enterprise that seeks to account for naturally organized activities through the use of a generic theoretical format predicated on the production and interpretation of signs. EM, by way of contrast, is not in the business of interpreting signs:

It is not an interpretative enterprise. Enacted local practices are not texts which symbolise “meanings” or events. They are in detail identical with themselves, and not representative of something else. The witnessably recurrent details of ordinary everyday practices constitute their own reality. They are studied in their unmediated details and not as signed enterprises (Garfinkel 1996).

CA is now an established tradition in the social sciences, a “normal science research programme” in Mike Lynch’s words. The methodological arguments articulated here are not concerned with criticising the achievements of CA and they should not be read as such. They are concerned with the practical availability to CA of work and its endogenous organization. As such, these methodological arguments should be understood as saying something to the effect that whatever CA’s achievements, the approach cannot handle work-practice in an adequate fashion; work-practice is practically unavailable to the production technologies and accounting practices of canonical CA. The issue, then, does not concern the adequacy of CA as a sociological discipline per se, but rather the need to adapt CA if it is to be able to deal with the naturally organized ways in which the observable and reportable work of the streets is ordered by members of the ordinary society in their everyday

actions and interactions together. The “if” of the matter turns upon suspending the use of generic theoretical formats and codification devices and upon attending to what members are doing when they take turns at talk in the course of developing vulgar competence in the field of study and upon writing up praxiologically valid accounts. In short, making work-practice available to inspection turns upon carrying out radical studies of work.

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