

Cambridge University Press

0521552257 - Interaction and Grammar

Edited by Elinor Ochs, Emanuel A. Schegloff and Sandra A. Thompson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

Introduction¹

EMANUEL A. SCHEGLOFF, ELINOR OCHS, AND
SANDRA A. THOMPSON

One of sociology's ancestral figures, Emile Durkheim, with whom DeSaussure is often linked, is known (among many other contributions) for the claim that "the social" is not reducible to the psychological or the biological, or the sum of any individual attributes. It is, he said, an *emergent* phenomenon, a *distinct* level of organization; it is, he said, a reality *sui generis* – unto itself, of its own sort (Durkheim, 1938 [1895], 1951, among others). Some cynical (or astute, depending on one's point of view) students of intellectual history, of the history of sociology and of the social sciences more generally, and practitioners of the sociology of knowledge have remarked that this claim needs to be understood as part of a struggle to find a place for sociology in the structure of French academic life at the turn of the century. To have as the object of one's study a domain which was *autonomous*, which could not be reduced to other people's work and subject matter, was arguably one prerequisite for establishing one's own organizational niche, for establishing one's own standards of quality work, of important problems, of acceptable methods, of distinctive theories, and the like, and the professional license and mandate – the professional autonomy – to administer them.

None of this – even if true – has any bearing, of course, on the theoretical or empirical merit of Durkheim's claim. To hold otherwise would be to commit the so-called genetic fallacy. Yet it can enrich our understanding to have called to our attention that there can be secular (i.e., material) as well as sacred (i.e., theoretical) grounds for insisting on the total autonomy of one's subject matter from any apparently overlapping or even contiguous domains of phenomena and inquiry.

2 Emanuel A. Schegloff, Elinor Ochs, Sandra A. Thompson

Sociology is hardly the only academic discipline to have had to struggle to establish a place for itself within the bureaucratic organization of contemporary academic life. It was not until the 1960s, for example, that Departments of Linguistics began to be established as undertakings with a proper subject matter domain of their own, in which linguists could do “their own thing,” rather than serve as marginal adjuncts to Departments of Language and Literature, such as English, French, German, etc. – caught between language teaching and literary scholarship.² It is surely no coincidence that this departmental autonomy within the academy was directly linked to the claims of the then newly ascending stance within the discipline that claimed for its subject matter autonomy – autonomy from the humanistic literary disciplines on one side, and from the encroaching behaviorist forms of psychology on the other. The key documents in the latter regard were, of course, Chomsky’s review (1959) of B. F. Skinner’s *Verbal Behavior* and his attack (1957: 18-25) on information-theoretic models of language use such as Shannon and Weaver’s *Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1949). This disciplinary autonomy was grounded theoretically as well, in the claimed autonomy of syntax as the backbone of the biological faculty called “language.”

There were, then, diverse resonances – the purely theoretical merits aside – for that approach to language (and to syntax in particular) which took it to be a well-formed structure in its own right, built to stand on its own, with its coherence and structure best understood as self-enclosed integrity. Its proper understanding would then be equally internally shaped, and only marginally affected by our understanding of, for example, other “mental capacities,” or the cultures which are irremediably intertwined with the semantics and the lexicon of a language, let alone its pragmatics and the contexts in which language develops and is used.

The contributors to this volume are exploring a different way of approaching and understanding grammar. For them, grammar is part of a broader range of resources – organizations of practices, if you will – which underlie the organization of social life, and in particular the way in which language figures in everyday interaction and cognition. In this view, the involvement of grammar in such other organizations as those of culture, action and interaction has as a consequence that matters of great moment are missed if gram-

mar's order is explored as entirely contained within a single, self-enclosed organization. Grammar's integrity and efficacy are bound up with its place in larger schemes of organization of human conduct, and with social interaction in particular. The contributions to this volume explore a variety of telling linkages between interaction and grammar.

1.1 Background

Three genres of inquiry converge here – one grounded in functional approaches to language concerned with its role in communication and cognition, one grounded in linguistic anthropology and the cultural underpinnings of language, and one grounded in conversation analysis and the interactional matrix of language structure and use.

Functional linguists with interests in language as it appears empirically in conduct have found a potentially attractive resource in work developed in the last thirty years – largely under the aegis of sociology – on the organization of conversational interaction. Conversation analysts have sought input from linguists for at least twenty years to help describe the grammatical shaping of one of the most fundamental units in talk-in-interaction, namely turns; the research efforts of functional grammarians can be a prime source of such input. For at least thirty years, since the introduction of the *Ethnography of Communication* (Gumperz and Hymes, 1964), if not longer, linguistic anthropologists have appreciated the centrality of careful examination of recorded communicative events, and in recent years have come increasingly to articulate ways in which social order and cultural understandings are constituted and socialized through the moment-by-moment, turn-by-turn organization of everyday conversational interaction. At the same time, conversation analysts have become increasingly concerned with ways in which talk and interaction both organize and are organized by institutions, relationships and culturally specified environments. In addition, while linguistic anthropology has long been interested in the relation of grammatical to communicative competence, recently anthropologists have addressed ways in which grammatical structures have meaning in part by virtue of the social practices and activities which they help to constitute. Each of

Cambridge University Press

0521552257 - Interaction and Grammar

Edited by Elinor Ochs, Emanuel A. Schegloff and Sandra A. Thompson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Emanuel A. Schegloff, Elinor Ochs, Sandra A. Thompson

these budding common interests has continued to expand. This volume presents a sampling of the state of work at their interfaces.³

This undertaking is not yet a well-formed enterprise: the topics taken up here are varied and not systematically related to one another; the ways of working at them are equally diverse, and the authors hold themselves (and are held) responsible to quite different audiences and constituencies in the analytic themes which they sound and in the ways in which they address them.

That is where things stand now; little is to be gained by imposing an artificial order. What may be more helpful is briefly to take stock of the recent trajectories of these “feeder streams,” so that readers can have a sense of where the authors are coming from. These accounts must, of necessity, be thumbnail sketches, and they are irremediably perspectival – each written from the perspective of the editor’s feeder stream (Ochs for linguistic anthropology, Thompson for functional linguistics, Schegloff for sociology/conversation analysis), and not necessarily seen in the same light by the others (although there is a fair degree of consensus among us).

1.1.1 *Linguistic anthropology*

In the early decades of this century, Franz Boas formulated his program of cultural anthropology on the assumption that linguistic inquiry is necessary to investigating the mental habits and social life of a people (1911). For Boas and his student Edward Sapir (1927, 1933), grammatical analysis is essential to the enterprise of ethnology in that grammatical categories reflect fundamental, unconscious, cultural patterns of thinking and acting. Grammars are deeply socio-cultural and integral to cross-cultural analysis because they illuminate how humans structure the world.

Sapir’s writings in particular promoted a radical view of how grammar and the lexicon relate to social life. He suggested that language does not stand apart from experience as a parallel symbolic structure but rather “completely interpenetrates with it” (1974: 49). Sapir proposed that this interpenetration of language and life is pervasive: “For the normal person every experience, real or potential, is saturated with verbalism” (1974: 49-50). Language is not only a tool for thinking, it is also a tool for acting. Language

Cambridge University Press

0521552257 - Interaction and Grammar

Edited by Elinor Ochs, Emanuel A. Schegloff and Sandra A. Thompson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

5

is not only embedded in social intercourse; it is also itself a form of social intercourse.

Boas and Sapir championed the study of language as both thought and action, articulated human similarities as well as differences, foregrounded individual variation within social groups, and conceptualized the relation of grammar to custom as subtle and indirect. However, their ideas became rigidified in the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis to mean (for many) that the grammar of a language unidirectionally and uniformly molds its speakers into distinct patterns of thinking and behaving (Whorf, 1956). This formulation gave rise to studies relating lexical and grammatical categories within a particular language to distinct conceptual systems of its speakers (Conklin, 1955; Goodenough, 1956; Hoijer, 1951, among others). With some exceptions (e.g. Frake, 1964), linguistic relativists tended to relate linguistic systems to thought without recording and closely examining how such systems actually interpenetrate with activities and become constitutive features of social action. In part because of technological limitations and in part because of a professional disposition to capture underlying cultural patterns, these studies characterized language behavior in social life largely in terms of underlying features, habits, norms, and integrated fashions of speaking, gleaned primarily from participant observations, interviews, and secondary sources.

While a cadre of linguists and anthropologists continued to conduct research on indigenous languages and cultures, urban dialects, and multilingual communities, formal linguistics became increasingly concerned with Universal Grammar rather than grammars as holistic systems and with syntactic structure rather than semantic categories. In the 1960s, Dell Hymes asked, "Is the role of prime collaborator of linguistics among the sciences now to pass to psychology?" (1962/1974: 190). Hymes encouraged linguists to "move outward into the exploration of speech behavior and use" (1962/1974: 193). John Gumperz and Dell Hymes (1964) promoted extending linguistic inquiry to units of analysis such as the speech act, the speech event, the speech situation, and the speech community. They redrew the boundaries of linguistic competence to include communicative competence as well as grammatical competence. But these messages fell on deaf linguistic ears; the enterprises of linguistics and anthropology drew rapidly apart. Grammatical

Cambridge University Press

0521552257 - Interaction and Grammar

Edited by Elinor Ochs, Emanuel A. Schegloff and Sandra A. Thompson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Emanuel A. Schegloff, Elinor Ochs, Sandra A. Thompson

analysis faded from the syllabi of most anthropology programs; anthropology departments hired fewer and fewer linguists, rendering linguistics the least represented among the the four perspectives (physical, cultural, archeology, linguistics) that comprise the discipline of anthropology in the United States.

As grammar lost its centrality among cultural anthropologists, social action assumed a more important analytic role in the field. This shift paralleled a sea change across disciplines away from an analytic focus on timeless mental competence and atemporal structural analysis towards a focus on unfolding, socially co-ordinated, temporally and spatially situated “interactional rituals” (Goffman, 1964, 1967, 1974), “practices” (Garfinkel, 1967; Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Schegloff, 1972), “activities” (Vygotsky, 1978; Leontyev, 1981), and “talk-in-interaction” (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks, 1977; Schegloff, 1987). In these approaches, people are not visualized as passive bearers of unconscious patterns of language and culture, but rather as active agents whose actions and sensibilities at different moments influence the organization, meaning, and outcome of events. While performance is loosely motivated and organized by conventions, principles, and expectations, it is not predictable from mental scripts of situations. Rather, everyday social life is appropriately characterized by historically positioned, situationally contingent moves and strategies of active participants. Moreover, through these moves and strategies, members actively (re)construct, for themselves and for others, orderly ways of being in and understanding the world. In this sense, competence enters into a dialectical relation with performance in that each impacts the other, each is a resource for the other, each helps to constitute the other.

For linguistic anthropologists, an interest in social interaction is a compatible extension of their concern with speaking as situated action. However, the above mentioned approaches to practices, joint activity, and contingent accomplishments differ from the structuralist *zeitgeist* that characterized much of linguistic anthropology up through the early days of the Ethnography of Speaking. For example, Hymes called for reconfiguring the competence-performance distinction by encompassing communicative as well as grammatical competence and concomitantly shrinking the bounds of what was considered mere performance. However, this redesign

Cambridge University Press

0521552257 - Interaction and Grammar

Edited by Elinor Ochs, Emanuel A. Schegloff and Sandra A. Thompson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

7

preserved the competence-performance dichotomy and privileged competence over performance as the analytic focus of the discipline. Further, in the early 1960s when Hymes launched the study of “the situations and uses, the patterns and functions, of speaking as an activity in its own right” (Hymes, 1962/1974: 191), he advocated utilizing Roman Jakobson’s framework of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations (Jakobson and Halle, 1956) as well as Jakobson’s dimensions of a speech event (1960) to analyze the structures and functions of speaking across communities. This methodology inspired comparative research on communicative events, including studies by one of the editors of this volume (e.g. Keenan, 1973, 1974; Ochs, 1984). These accounts, however, generally objectified the communicative event and de-emphasized the subjective experience of moving through these events and collaboratively building actions and meanings with other persons over interactional and historical time.

A more phenomenological turn emerged later in linguistic anthropology – for example, in interactional accounts of cross-cultural miscommunication (Gumperz, 1982), language socialization (e.g. Goodwin, 1990; Heath, 1983; Kulick, 1992; Ochs, 1992a, 1992b; Schieffelin, 1990), intentionality and authorship (Duranti and Brenneis, 1986; Hill and Irvine, 1992), professional discourse (Cicourel, 1992; Goodwin, 1994), and context more broadly (Duranti and Goodwin, 1992; Hanks, 1990). Although varying in focus, these anthropological accounts articulate how in the course of historically situated social interactions participants formulate and co-ordinate their utterances, gestures, and other actions to co-construct understandings, misunderstandings, social personae, relationships, stances, activities, and/or modes of learning, knowing, and controlling the world. For some researchers, an interaction-centered anthropology of language means relating strategies for engaging in verbal interaction to the socialization, maintenance, and transformation of social realities such as the family, the school, work, or community political structures. Others relate verbal interaction to the socialization, maintenance, and transformation of ideologies, including ideologies of spoken and written language. And others have returned to the question of how grammatical and lexical structure relates to society and culture by articulating ways in which linguistic structures are themselves interactional. In

Cambridge University Press

0521552257 - Interaction and Grammar

Edited by Elinor Ochs, Emanuel A. Schegloff and Sandra A. Thompson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Emanuel A. Schegloff, Elinor Ochs, Sandra A. Thompson

his study of deixis in a Mayan community, William Hanks distills the essence of this perspective (1990: 4): “This is the real rub: reference is a kind of communicative action which occurs as part of an interactive manifold.” This position is resonant with Sapir’s conviction that language is not a symbolic system that runs parallel to experience but rather interpenetrates experience. An anthropology of language in this sense warrants studying not only how linguistic and socio-cultural histories inform social interaction, but also how interactional processes universally and locally motivate, give meaning to, and otherwise organize language, society and culture.

1.1.2 *Functional grammar*

The area of research which has come to be known informally during the last two decades or so as “functional grammar” has encompassed a wide variety of endeavors. What all these have in common is an emphasis on “grammar,” taken generally as morphosyntax, and a commitment to examining grammatical data in terms of functional considerations, that is, in terms of the ways in which language functions as a tool of human communication. It has been clear to all involved that this commitment has consistently stood in opposition to a view of language, and more particularly grammar, as an autonomous faculty of human cognition.

Within this broad conception of “functionalism,” a number of important contributions to our understanding of language as it functions in communication have emerged, most densely in four or five roughly demarcated areas of work. One intensively worked area is that of typology and universals (e.g., Comrie, 1989; Givón, 1984, 1990; Greenberg, 1978; Li, 1976; Nichols and Woodbury, 1985; Shopen, 1985, *inter alia*). A continuing emphasis on cross-linguistic generalizations throughout this period has greatly increased the degree of sophistication with which languages are described with respect to almost every aspect of “grammar.” Comparison across languages has enhanced the capacity to generalize e.g., about how tense-aspect systems get grammaticalized (e.g., Bybee, 1985; Bybee et al., 1994; Cole and Sadock, 1977; Comrie, 1976, 1985; Hopper, 1982 *inter alia*), what possible types of grammatical relations systems there are (e.g., Comrie, 1978; Croft, 1991;

Cambridge University Press

0521552257 - Interaction and Grammar

Edited by Elinor Ochs, Emanuel A. Schegloff and Sandra A. Thompson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

9

Dixon, 1979; Foley and Van Valin, 1984; Hopper and Thompson, 1980; Mithun, 1991; Shibatani, 1988, *inter alia*), how classifiers work in languages that have them (e.g., Craig, 1986), how number can be expressed (e.g., Mithun, 1988), what types of clause-combining strategies languages can have (e.g., Austin, 1988; Haiman and Thompson, 1988), what the possible ways of expressing causation are (e.g., Comrie and Polinsky 1993; Shibatani, 1976), and how grammaticalization works by converting lexical resources into grammatical ones (e.g., Bybee, 1985; Bybee et al., 1994; Hopper and Traugott, 1993; Heine, Claudi, and Hünemeyer, 1991).

During the same period, work in lexical semantics and cognitive models – such as that by Fillmore, Kay and their associates (e.g., *inter alia*, Fillmore, 1988, 1989; Fillmore, Kay, and O'Connor, 1988), by Lakoff and his associates (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987), by Langacker and his associates (e.g., Langacker, 1987, 1991), and by Van Valin and his associates (e.g., Van Valin, 1990, 1993) – has brought to light a number of insights into regularities in word “meanings” and constructions. This work, often associated with the rubrics “construction grammar,” “cognitive grammar,” and “role and reference grammar,” focusses on naming and categorization processes, the nature of grammatical constructions, prototype theory, and the operation and effects of metaphor. A related effort has been mounted under the rubric “functional grammar,” associated with the name of Simon Dik (1981, 1983) and his associates, and a more socially oriented semantically based model of grammatical structure has been the focus of attention for a group centered around M. A. K. Halliday and his associates, known as “systemic functional grammar” (e.g., Halliday, 1985).

Within psycholinguistics since the mid-1970s, several lines of work have most directly been preoccupied with the ways in which language figures in social interaction. In psycholinguistic research on communication *per se*, the work of H. Clark and his associates (e.g., Clark and Wikes-Gibbs, 1986; Clark and Schaeffer, 1987; Clark and Gerrig, 1989; Clark and Brennan, 1991) is perhaps the most sustained and visible. In the area of child language, functionally oriented work – done as much by psychologists (e.g., Bates et al., 1988; Bloom, 1973; Bruner, 1983; Ervin-Tripp, 1979; Garvey, 1984; Greenfield et al., 1985; MacWhinney, 1987, *inter*

Cambridge University Press

0521552257 - Interaction and Grammar

Edited by Elinor Ochs, Emanuel A. Schegloff and Sandra A. Thompson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Emanuel A. Schegloff, Elinor Ochs, Sandra A. Thompson

alia) as by linguists (e.g., Clancy, 1986; E. Clark, 1978; Halliday, 1975, *inter alia*) – has shown how children acquire grammatical constructions and learn to use them in appropriate contexts – constructions such as classifiers, questions, relative clauses, tense-aspect markers and other aspects of verb morphology, etc., and this work has been enhanced by cross-linguistic work by developmental psychologists (see especially the contributions to Slobin, 1985, 1992) and by anthropologists such as Ochs (1988) and Schieffelin (1990).

Arising from, and centered around, a recognition of the importance of approaching grammar in terms of its natural contexts of use, in the late 1970s a new area of functional linguistics began to emerge, which could be called discourse-and-grammar.⁴ A central tenet of the researchers defining this area has been that, if we take seriously the claim that the function of language as a tool of human communication is the central motivation for observed grammatical patterns, then the study of grammar entails both taking actual discourse as one's primary data, and explicitly relating the structure of grammar to the structure of discourse (cf., for example, Halliday, 1978, 1985; Quirk, 1960; Quirk et al., 1972). Notable proponents of this view include those outlining the relation between grammar and narrative structure (e.g., Chafe, 1980 *inter alia*), as well as many pursuing the study of grammatical phenomena in written texts (e.g., Firbas, 1971; Fox, 1987; Halliday, 1985; Thompson, 1985; Thompson and Matthiessen, 1989, *inter alia*), comparisons between written and spoken texts (such as Biber, 1988; Chafe and Danielewicz, 1987; Firbas, 1992; and the survey in Chafe and Tannen, 1987), and interactions among children and caregivers (cf. selected citations above regarding child language). Additional stimulus was imparted to this theme by the rapid development of computational linguistics (cf., for example, Grosz and Sidner, 1986). Later, inspired in part by the work of Sankoff and Brown, 1976, even more explicit claims began to be made regarding the way in which grammatical structure is deeply related to, and explainable in terms of, discourse structure (e.g., Du Bois, 1985, 1987; Givón, 1984). Hopper, 1988 captured this relationship with the phrase *emergent grammar*, showing that in fact grammar must be seen as *emerging* from discourse.

A partially overlapping research tradition with functionalist commitments has been that stream of sociolinguistics associated with