SEQUENCE ORGANIZATION IN INTERACTION

Much of our daily lives is spent talking to one another, in both ordinary conversation and more specialized settings such as meetings, interviews, classrooms, and courtrooms. It is largely through conversation that the major institutions of our society – economy, religion, politics, family, and law – are implemented. This is the first in a new series of books by Emanuel Schegloff introducing the findings and theories of conversation analysis. Together, the volumes in the series when published will constitute a complete and authoritative "primer" in the subject. The topic of this first volume is "sequence organization" – the ways in which turns-at-talk are ordered and combined to make actions take place in conversation, such as requests, offers, complaints, and announcements. Containing many examples from real-life conversations, this volume will be invaluable to anyone interested in human interaction and the workings of conversation.

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Video and audio examples of some of the interactions discussed in this book can be found at www.cambridge.org/9780521825726

Sequence Organization in Interaction

A Primer in Conversation Analysis I

EMANUEL A. SCHEGLOFF

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*Sedulo curavi humanas
actiones non ridere,
non lugere, neque detestari
sed intelligere.*

*I have made a ceaseless
effort not to ridicule,
not to bewail, nor to scorn human
   actions,
but to understand them.*

Baruch Spinoza

*Es gibt eine zarte Empirie, die sich
mit dem Gegenstand innigst identisch
macht, und dadurch zur eigentlichen
Theorie wird.*

*There is a delicate form of the empiri-
cal which identifies itself so intimately
with its object that it thereby becomes
theory.*

*Das Allgemeine und das Besondere
fallen zusammen; das Besondere ist
das Allgemeine, unter verschiedene
Bedingungen erscheinend.*

*The general and the particular con-
verge; the particular is the general,
appearing under various conditions.*

*Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre
"Betrachtungen im Sinne der Wan-
derer" 565, 569*

*Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years
"Thoughts in the Mind of the Journey-
man" Nos. 565, 569*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1829)

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Preface

Past and future

A primer, we are told by the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Onions, 1980:1,670), is "a small introductory book on any subject." Some ten years ago, amidst a mixture of encouragement and pestering by colleagues, I set about writing a primer in conversation analysis. I had been teaching a two-term course called "Conversational Structures" to classes of both undergraduate and graduate students for over twenty years by then, and more abbreviated courses to one or the other of these cohorts for several years before that. I had a fairly secure sense of what needed doing and how to get it done. Surely that could be transferred from the lecture hall and discussion room to the pages of a book.

The first term of my course took up three main subjects. First, we discussed what was meant by the term "conversation" in ordinary, informal talk, and what we would mean by it for the purposes of inquiry, and what, furthermore, might be meant by "*structures* of conversation." This ordinarily pro forma "introduction to the course" grew over time to three seventy-five-minute lectures, and sometimes part of a fourth. Second, we undertook a rough introduction to turn-taking in conversation – how people get to talk and for how long and with what consequences. For all its roughness, participants found themselves grappling with details of everyday conduct they had never before registered as "things" at all, let alone with the kind of care that was asked of them; let alone the consequentiality they were invited to see in them; let alone doing this for three to four weeks. And third, we turned our attention to stretches of talk that seemed to hang together, a stretch that seemed to constitute a unit in its own right, over and above the turns at talk that composed it; we called these "sequences," and we spent the last four to five weeks of the term elucidating and explicating how they were put together, what we could call their organization – "sequence organization."

When I set about drafting the primer in conversation analysis, I began, for reasons I no longer remember, by writing up the chapter on sequence organization. By the time I was done, it ran to some 275 pages! And this was just sequence organization! And the course I have described in the preceding paragraph was just the first of two! And I never ended up covering the subject

matter by the end of the second of those terms! "A small introductory book on any subject," indeed!

This is that "chapter," somewhat revised and slightly expanded in the intervening ten years, and grown into a "book," with its parts now "chapters" in their own right. But you, the reader, are invited to register their less formal character – as "sections," perhaps, with less discontinuity between them than is often the case with "chapters." The book is meant to amount to a single, sustained presentation of a single organization of practices, and is meant to take its place in the company of others (also "chapters" grown into "books," each offering a single, sustained presentation of a single organization of practices), among which it was not meant to be the first, though it is the first to appear. The full introduction to this "set of primers" will be found elsewhere, but I hope the engagement with sequence organization will not suffer on that account.

The epigraph which Gene Lerner chose for the volume that he edited under the title *Conversation Analysis: Studies from the First Generation* was taken from a lecture by my colleague Harvey Sacks. He said:

> Basically what I have to sell is the sorts of work I can do. I don't have to sell its theoretical underpinnings, its hopes for the future, its methodological elegance, its theoretical scope, or anything else. I have to sell what I can do, and the interestingness of my findings.   (Sacks, 1992b: 3)

These were among the first sentences in the first lecture of the first course that Sacks taught at the Irvine campus of the University of California, after having moved there from UCLA, and that is not immaterial to their tenor; they were his first self-presentation. They are informed as well by Sacks' understanding of the then-current position of conversation analysis in the academic social sciences. They were meant (in my understanding, at least) to ground appreciation of this work – both on campus and in the wider academic community – not in abstract theoretical or methodological debates divorced from actual work, but rather in exemplary displays of what this work could do, and its "interestingness." If that could be established, the theoretical and methodological discussions could follow; if not, they would not matter anyway.

More than thirty-six years have passed since that time. In this primer, and the other primers that are meant to accompany it, I want to put forward all the things Sacks disclaimed, as well as what he put on offer; and not only what *he* put on offer, but some of what *other* members of the conversation-analytic community have put on offer. I do so in the hope of fostering the growth of that community, fostering a continuing rise in the scope, rigor, robustness, and perceptiveness of the community's research and teaching, and fostering growth in the accessibility of this work to those who have pursuits of their own, but find conversation-analytic work possibly relevant

to those pursuits, or of such "interestingness" as to command their attention, whether relevant to their own pursuits or not.

Of the three epigraphs that introduce this work, the first is meant to represent its moral and political stance; the second embodies its theoretical aspiration; and the third declares one of its methodological premises and points of departure.

Substance

Whatever their other characteristics, it appears that all societies and sub-units of them have as a central resource for their integration an organization of interaction – an organization of interaction informed by the use of language. This awkward phrasing is meant to include signing communities and monastic orders in which vows of silence constrain the conduct of interaction. Though language in the conventional or vernacular sense may not be used there, conduct is informed by language via the specific renunciation of its use. When societies undergo the upheaval of massive transformation of their macro-structures – of economy, polity, and social organization – what remains largely untouched is this robust structuring of the coming together, co-mingling and interaction of members of the society. And despite the much-celebrated diversity of language, culture, mores, etc. among human communities, people crossing over from one to another can virtually always make do, even if at a relatively unsophisticated level of interaction.

What is this web of practices that is so deeply rooted that it can transcend linguistic and cultural diversity – indeed, that is the natural ecological niche for language and the arena in which the diversity of cultures as well as their commonalities are enacted? What is this web of practices that serves as the infrastructure of social institutions in the same way that a system of transportation serves as the infrastructure for an economy, that is so transparent that it is opaque, whose omnipresence and centrality make it a – if not *the* – core root of sociality itself?[1]

Surely a preface is no place to take up such questions with any seriousness and depth, let alone with empirical evidence that might show the claims to be not theoretical conjectures, but empirically grounded reports of the results of careful and systematic observation of the naturally occurring data of interaction in a variety of naturally occurring contexts. What follow, then, are thumbnail sketches of what so far appear to be generic orders of organization in talk-in-interaction – the term I will prefer to "conversation" so as to circumvent the connotation of triviality that has come often to be attached to the latter term, and to broaden the scope of what we mean to be

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[1] Some of these features are taken up in Schegloff (2006 frth).

dealing with to interactional settings that clearly fall outside the common sense meaning of "conversation."

By "generic orders of organization," I mean the various organizations of practice that deal with the various generic organizational contingencies of talk-in-interaction without which it cannot proceed in an orderly way:

(1) the "turn-taking" problem: who should talk next and when should they do so? How does this affect the construction and understanding of the turns themselves?

(2) the "action-formation" problem: how are the resources of the language, the body, the environment of the interaction, and position *in* the interaction fashioned into conformations designed to be, and to be recognizable by recipients as, particular actions – actions like requesting, inviting, granting, complaining, agreeing, telling, noticing, rejecting, and so on – in a class of unknown size?

(3) the "sequence-organizational" problem: how are successive turns formed up to be "coherent" with the prior turn (or *some* prior turn), and what is the nature of that coherence?

(4) the "trouble" problem: how to deal with trouble in speaking, hearing and/or understanding the talk so that the interaction does not freeze in place when trouble arises, that intersubjectivity is maintained or restored, and that the turn and sequence and activity can progress to possible completion?

(5) the word-selection problem: how do the components that get selected as the elements of a turn get selected, and how does that selection inform and shape the understanding achieved by the turn's recipients?

(6) the overall structural organization problem: how does the overall composition of an occasion of interaction get structured, what are those structures, and how does placement in the overall structure inform the construction and understanding of the talk as turns, as sequences, etc.?

The organizations of practice addressed to these issues – turn organization and turn-*taking* organization, sequence organization, the organization of repair, the organization of word selection, overall structural organization, and others, in the options which they shape and the practices they make available – constitute a spate of interaction recognizable as "conversation," as "interview," as "meeting," as "lecturing," as "giving a speech," as "interrogation," etc. (what we call "speech-exchange systems," Sacks et al., 1974:729–31), and as particular, here-and-now-with-these-participants instances of these.

What makes an interaction is not just the juxtaposition of bodies. What mediates and organizes the conduct of the parties is not a structureless, featureless, transparent medium. The composition of a turn-at-talk – whether it be of single words, phrases, clauses or sentences – is shaped in part by the

contingencies of turn production imposed by a turn-taking organization that will have other participants empowered or required or allowed to talk next, at points in the turn's development not wholly under the speaker's control. Particular courses of action implemented through turns-at-talk (like request sequences, complaint sequences, storytelling sequences, news-conveying sequences, etc.) implicate certain ways of understanding what is being said that render meaningful and consequential selection between apparently equivalent expressions: the delay of a turn's start by 0.2 second or less, and the like. How one says what one says can depend on who the other is, and, of all the persons and categories which could be used to characterize "the other," which one(s) have been made relevant at that moment in the talk, or can be made relevant by constructing the same "sayable" this way or that. And so on. (see Schegloff [2004b, 2006 frth]).

Each of the generic organizations of practice mentioned in the preceding three paragraphs will be the topic of one of the component primers in this set, the whole of which is meant (its size to the contrary notwithstanding) to constitute a primer in conversation analysis. None is fully understandable without the others. No one of them can have its beginning understood without having already absorbed its ending, so each should be re-begun after completion. But one has to start somewhere – both in the reading and in the writing. The writing begins here with "sequence organization"; for now, the reading starts here as well.

Acknowledgments

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