

## **Introduction: Dialogue as Discourse and Interaction**

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### **BACKGROUNDS AND CONCEPTS FOR A SOCIOLOGY OF TALK**

The historical backgrounds for the current analysis of talk in its social context are as diverse as the actual orientations in this approach to discourse. Although sociology and anthropology may be the overall disciplinary location for these backgrounds, the differentiation in theoretical, methodological, and philosophical labels used to identify these orientations suggests that the influences have been multiple. Phenomenology, qualitative and cognitive sociology, microsociology, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, the sociology of everyday life, formal sociology, and the ethnography of speaking have been the inscriptions on the signposts that have guided the various developments leading to a common interest in the study of natural discourse. Obviously this introduction can neither sketch the full history of such antecedents nor disentangle the complexity and variety of its present-day offspring. Rather, we must try to describe the more general features of this work and sketch the outlines of a framework for the chapters that appear in this volume. These few introductory pages only allow mention of some central concepts and principles of research. How the analysis of dialogue actually works is shown by the chapters in this volume and by the many referents to past and current work in the field of conversational and dialogical analysis.

One way to introduce the conceptual framework and the background of the analysis of natural talk is to try to understand why sociologists or ethnographers would be interested in analyzing conversation, institutional dialogues, stories, gossip, or jokes. This would require a detailed analysis

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of their talk and writings and an explanation of their methods of inquiry into the social world. Leaving that task to the increasing number of monographs about the analysis of dialogue, we can only mention some of the central concepts.

A first rationale for studying talk in a sociological inquiry is the seemingly trivial circumstance that people do it all the time. Talk is a prominent part of our everyday activities, and such everyday activities are the basis of the social world, an insight particularly stressed by Schutz (1970), one of the founders of phenomenological sociology. That is, the sociologist should not only be engaged in the high-level analysis of social systems and their abstract structures but also should focus on the mundane, everyday reality of practical accomplishments at the microlevel of social life.

This means that talk, like other social activities, is seen in terms of the action and interaction of participating social members, an orientation that also finds its origins in the symbolic interactionism of Mead, Blumer, and others. One crucial condition for social interaction in general and talk in particular is that people understand each other. This is possible only if we assume that social members have socially shared interpretation procedures for social actions, for example, categories, rules, and strategies. In a conversation, this understanding of the other's communicative acts also becomes visible and is displayed in the way a speaker routinely and adequately continues the talk by a coherent next turn. The sociologist, then, wants to know how people do this, what kind of implicit or intuitive methods they apply in such everyday routine tasks as talking to each other and understanding each other. This is one of the reasons why Garfinkel (1967), in the footsteps of Schutz, introduced the notion of 'ethnomethodology', which became the label under which much conversational analysis would take place in the decade to follow.

The routine nature of everyday practical activities suggests that the implicit methods people use are taken-for-granted forms of social knowledge. Although they can be problematic on occasion, they work well and are effective precisely because they are taken for granted. In this respect a dialogue in everyday life is not much different from other mundane encounters. This does not mean that we never have problems in the business of having a talk with someone (e.g., about what to say and how to say it, depending on context), but such problems can be subjected to intuitive analysis and be routinely solved. Some sociologists, for example, Cicourel (1973), have compared this kind of intuitive social knowledge with the implicit knowledge social members of a speech community have about the grammar of their language, according to the views proposed by Chomsky. Much like grammatical rules, the rules of interaction

allow social members to perform their acts according to mutual expectations and to understand each other by making sense of each feature of such acts. Hence it is one of the tasks of sociology to reconstruct this shared social knowledge. Cicourel (1973) coined the term 'cognitive sociology' to stress this fundamental aim.

We see that notions such as 'understanding', 'interpretation' or 'making sense' play a crucial role in these various but related ideas about the nature of social reality in general and about everyday talk in particular. Part of this tradition goes back to Weber's emphasis on the role of *Verstehen* in social interaction. The important methodological consequence of this approach is that social reality is not to be analyzed in general and objective terms but rather in terms of the interpretations of the social environment by the members themselves. Thus social reality is a subjectively reconstructed reality. Yet these personal interpretations may become shared so that intersubjective, common sense categories and rules can develop in everyday talk. Similarly, people's socially shared subjective interpretations of actions and their context, that is, of situations, provide definitions of such situations: Situations are real if people define them as real, and this also holds for their consequences (a well-known statement made by W. I. Thomas more than half a century ago).

This general interest for mundane social reality, everyday interaction, and interpretative methods seems to transfer the point of view of the sociologist from without to within the social actor. Sociologists describe people not only from the outside but also from the inside. It is the task of the sociologist to reconstruct the actors' point of view: How do the actors see the world? In talk, this means that the analyst tries to reconstruct how the communicative situation and previous contributions to the ongoing interaction are seen by the participants and how they make sense of each expression or move in terms of their own categories and rules.

Yet the question about how people communicate pertains not only to underlying methods, social knowledge, common-sense procedures, or other cognitions. Strictly speaking these are not directly observable and therefore are socially relevant—and sociologically interesting—only as they appear in what is actually displayed. A relevant answer to a question in conversation may signal to one participant that the other participant probably has understood the question and drawn the necessary inferences from it. This means that a serious understanding of everyday life and talk needs a detailed analysis of how people observably go about their daily business. We need a systematic account of the forms of talk (Goffman, 1981): intonation, pauses, hesitations, repairs, as well as the words, phrases, or sentences that directly express content. The presupposition of such a formal analysis (and hence of a formal sociology) is that in

principle each of such details can be made meaningful for others. Hearers only have what they can actually see and hear (together of course with their previous knowledge) and therefore may need all such details in order to arrive at relevant interpretations necessary for competent participation in verbal or other interaction.

For informal everyday conversation, such a formal analysis involves not only the details of participant expressions but also the implications of the interactive nature of such encounters. Sequences of contributions to such ongoing activities of several social participants, for instance, can be articulated into speaker turns. Much work in the ethnomethodological study of everyday conversation has been done on the methods people use in the organization of turns in talk (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Participants may have or receive a turn, and they follow a number of expedient strategies for allocating or appropriating such turns, using both verbal and nonverbal (gaze, gestures) cues. For other types of dialogue the rules for turn taking may be different, for example, in a meeting where the chair can exert control over turn allocation. Turn organization is of course just one feature of talk. Larger turn sequences may become relevant units of exchange or may constitute their own categories, such as opening (including greetings, presentation, etc.) or closing (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973), side sequences during which other business or another topic is attended to before the current topic is re-introduced (Jefferson, 1972), and so on. People may do all kinds of other things in or by talk, for example, tell stories or argue (see the chapters by Polanyi and Schiffrin in this volume).

Another important dimension of the interactive nature of discourse is its strategic organization. Many dialogues have purposes that participants try to realize optimally through a series of functionally related moves. Such strategic moves are constrained globally by a purpose or overall goal and locally by moves of a previous speaker or by expectations about moves of a next speaker. In other words, talk is organized both locally and globally and both backward and forward. Each contribution in talk, then, is designed such that the hearer will understand as intended by the speaker and will use and display this understanding in the next turn (recipient design). One pervasive strategy in everyday life, and hence also in dialogues, is the optimal display of one's social self for other participants. The work of Goffman (1959, 1967, 1974, 1981) has had decisive influence on this insight into the nature of talk as a means of self-presentation. Not only is the well-known protection of self-esteem involved here, but also the presentation of preferred roles or relationships. A doctor or a teacher signals in many ways, when going about the routine activities of talking to patients or students, that he or she is talking as

a doctor or a teacher. This implies, among other things, that such social roles are not given or defined a priori but dynamically enacted and negotiated during the ongoing encounter. In this sense, the dynamic and local accomplishment of roles in strategic encounters is rather different from the abstract role definitions of a structural sociology.

Finally, everyday talk, as well as formal dialogues, does not take place in isolation. Each turn or move of the ongoing discourse as well as the whole verbal exchange is an integral part of a situation and inextricably connected with a relevant selection of social objects, namely, the context. We have seen above that this context is not objective but is an intersubjectively interpreted or constructed setting. In court, the classroom, or the doctor's office, as well as on the bus or at breakfast, such settings and their elements are relevant for the overall organization of the communicative events: their definition, the selection of topics, style, or turn-taking rules. In addition to timing, locality, physical environment, and props, such settings are defined in terms of the strategic enactment of rules and roles, of mutual expectations, and hence in terms of socially shared knowledge about what can or should be done in such settings. Talk is indexical (Garfinkel, 1967) in the sense that it indicates how it meshes with the setting, that is, with the relevant motives, purposes, or histories of the participants. In this way, each expression-in-context can be assigned its proper, situated, and unique meaning. Each verbal act can also be implicitly compared with what would be typical for such a setting so that deviations, strangeness, or abnormality can be observed and assessed. At the same time, discourse and action are reflexive (Garfinkel, 1967) in the sense that they may not only be about the social world or the setting, but also are an integral part of it. A question may be about the future actions of a hearer but may be heard also as an invitation and hence as part of the social moves of preparing or accomplishing such an invitation.

This brief reconstructive account of some principal concerns and concepts of a sociology of discourse provides a partial answer to the question about why a sociological study of talk may be relevant. It also suggests what such an inquiry will look for and how an inquiry might be carried out. A central sociological motive for the analysis of conversation and other dialogues appears to be their relevance as everyday activities of social members, their interactive nature, the prominence of intersubjective, commonsense interpretation procedures, and their rule-governed and strategic, and hence orderly, conduct. In discourse we see and hear displayed many of the pervasive principles that organize our social life. And more than that, discourse not only reflexively organizes and defines its own role in social interaction and indicates its relevant place in the

social setting, it also may explicitly express social members' understanding of social events. Talk thus becomes both data and method of analysis. It shows both that people understand and how they do so.

## SOCIOLINGUISTIC CONCERNS

What has been initiated in various branches of sociology, or at the boundaries with social psychology and anthropology, has rapidly extended to other fields of discourse analysis. In fact, linguists have rather quickly seen the relevance of this sociological approach to actual language use. After all, some of the basic principles, such as the rule-governed nature of talk of competent social members, is more than reminiscent of Chomsky's basic tenet about the competence of ideal speakers to know and apply the rules of grammar. Also, the sociolinguist found confirmation and inspiration in this sociological approach for the concern with natural forms of language use. More than written texts or institutional communication, everyday talk was seen as the primary and elementary use of language in the social context. Soon, therefore, the boundaries between sociolinguistics and the sociology of discourse became blurred, although the perspectives of research were sometimes still different. The linguist, for instance, may be more concerned with linguistic forms and grammatical variation in talk than with turn taking, mover, or sequencing phenomena. And the analysis of laughter or applause, illustrated in the chapters by Jefferson and Atkinson in this volume, seems more characteristic of a formal sociology of paraverbal activities in dialogue than of a sociolinguistic analysis.

There are several reasons for this divergence in orientation. First, sociolinguistics has long been closely related with a more functional paradigm of social research: Correlations or dependencies were described between verbal (grammatical) structures and the usual abstract categories of social structure such as class, ethnic group, gender, status, or role. Social settings were not analyzed as such but were seen as sets of factors that determine style, meanings, or speech acts. Sociolinguists concentrated on the specific language variant or code associated with a social group or category (talk of women, children, or blacks) or with a specific town or region. Methodologically, such approaches were cast in statistical terms or in formal methods using variable rules to account for linguistic variation. Part of the work of Labov (1972a, 1972b) is associated with such an approach.

Second, many of the observations of the sociology of discourse could not readily be translated into linguistic terminology or levels of description.

Turns in talk are not just phonological, and moves are not just semantic or pragmatic; sequence organization, as in openings or closings, cannot easily be mapped on the usual levels of sentential grammar. Higher level macronotions become necessary, but these are not familiar in traditional linguistics. Even a notion as elementary as the topic of a conversation could not properly be defined in grammatical terms, let alone the many strategies people use to maintain or change such a topic.

Third, the microsociologies described above seemed to display a rather benign neglect, if not explicit refutation, of such familiar notions as 'gender', 'age', 'status', or social 'class'. Maybe a detailed account was given of the strategies of talk between a man and a woman in the course of a conversation, but no generalizations or quantifications were made about how men and women interact verbally in general.

These and other discrepancies mark the boundaries between much sociolinguistic and sociological work on discourse. The different historical and methodological backgrounds in the two disciplines are partial explanation of the sometimes conflicting positions. The sociologist of everyday life is little inclined to systematically connect general features of discourse with general, preestablished features of context. On the other hand, the sociolinguist is skeptical about notions such as the competence of native speakers and is critical of any tacit acceptance of a homogeneous speech community. The commonsense, shared methods and rules of understanding and interaction studied by the sociologist may illustrate general principles of interaction and discourse but do not seem to be captured in terms of social groups, a generalization that many sociolinguists would be reluctant to abandon. Recent approaches to constructing a bridge between macro- and microsociologies (Knorr-Cetina & Cicourel, 1981) may prove to be favorable for a new integration.

## **CONTEXT AND CULTURE: THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNICATION**

The third discipline engaged in the study of everyday talk and the analysis of dialogue is anthropology. In the so-called ethnography of speaking, founded and propagated by Hymes (1962), talk is systematically localized within its sociocultural context. In this respect it parallels the concern in sociology to contextualize everyday interaction, as we have outlined above. The obvious difference is that the ethnographer is primarily interested in the communicative events in other societies and cultures, often nonwestern ones, or in the subcultures of his or her own society. Also, the ethnographer typically tries to collect a rich data base on the many

relevant aspects of culture that may impinge on the structures and dynamics of speech events in that culture. This practice recalls some of the sociolinguistic concerns we have sketched above. Social class, ethnicity, age, gender, status, role, and other social factors are related to varieties of grammatical, stylistic, rhetorical, narrative, or other discourse structures. Summarized ethnographic findings are often of the following structure: People of category *x* (men, women, elderly, leading persons, etc.), typically use form *y* (intonation, pitch, lexical item, narrative form, code, etc.) in context *z* (with a given purpose, speaking to a specific person, and in a given social event). The analysis of speech data may then take two different directions. Either a given formal property of speech is examined for its variations in different cultures, or some kind of speech event is studied in detail within a given community or culture or compared across various cultures. In the first case we find studies about, for example, different forms of address in various cultures or an analysis of narrative structures or performances. This analysis may extend to a cross-cultural study of discourse genres, as is shown in this volume by McDowell (Chap. 14) for verbal dueling, by Sherzer (Chap. 15) for puns and jokes, and by Fine (Chap. 16) for rumors and gossip. Traditionally, and in line with some of the goals of linguistics, such analyses were also aimed at the formulation of universals, that is, general properties of narrative or rhetoric across cultures. A second line of research demonstrates the context-bound nature of such genres or their properties by explicating the specific structural or functional dimensions of discourse and by relating these to detailed analyses of the cultural knowledge and practices of a community.

Although there are obvious similarities between the kinds of work done in sociolinguistics and ethnography, there are also similarities between the aims of ethnography and qualitative, cognitive microsociology as it was discussed above. Understanding the speech events of a culture presupposes understanding the culture, that is, the meanings or values known and shared by the members of a community or group. Just as in sociology, the principal task of the ethnographer is to reconstruct and interpret this knowledge in terms of the categories or rules used by the people themselves.

In addition to the collection of ethnographic facts about language forms and variation in cultures or communities for a general theory and comparison of language and communication, one of the most valuable contributions of ethnography is the detailed description of communicative events in their full complexity. Linguists and sociologists often tend to isolate one important aspect of discourse or interaction and pay detailed attention to one dimension of analysis (often using one method). The ethnographer on the contrary is forced to be more interdisciplinary and



takes a broader focus. This is one of the reasons why the ethnographer has seldom followed the prevailing interest of linguists in studying only grammatical (or only syntactic or phonological) structures. The structure of communicative events is an interdependent, 'multilevel whole, involving both textual and contextual features. A typical ethnographical analysis of speech events features, for example, a description of the discourse genre, the overall delimitation, social function, or label of the whole speech event, the topic (theme or reference), the setting (time and physical environment), the different categories of participants, the purpose of the interaction, the type of code (spoken, written, etc.), the lexicon and the semantics, the grammar (also at the discourse level), the sequences of acts (both verbal and nonverbal), and the underlying rules, norms, or strategies for the actions or the whole event. And even this enumeration is not complete. Only in this way is it possible to make explicit the full constraints of the sociocultural context on all the levels or dimensions of the discourse, and conversely, to specify the precise effects of various discourse forms or meanings upon the context and the functions of the discourse in its context.

The conceptual richness and the theoretical complexity of such an approach must of course have its self-imposed limitations. We obtain highly articulated, multidisciplinary, and valid descriptions of single communicative events, but generalizations about specific phenomena are more difficult to assess. Also, the ethnographer in such analyses is dependent on the precise definition of theoretical notions (e.g., of 'topic' or 'setting') as they are provided by the linguist or sociologist.

Since the late 1970s cross-cultural studies of communication have paid increasing attention to the specific problems involved in the cross-cultural or interethnic forms of communication within Western society (Gumperz, 1982). The relevance of this work to sociolinguistic analyses of language use is obvious. Besides the well-known insights about language variation for different groups or situations, such a cultural, ethnographic approach will also provide more understanding of the conflicts involved in communication. And instead of the explication of shared knowledge and rules of action and discourse, this perspective will have an open eye for the heterogeneity of our own society.

Finally, in sociology, sociolinguistics, and ethnography we find increasing attention for the systematic analysis of discourse or discourse complexes in various sociocultural contexts. Several of the contributions to this volume deal with language use, conversation, dialogues and interaction in more or less formal situations: mass communication and the production of news (Heritage), the classroom (Mehan), the courtroom (Drew), meetings (Cuff and Sharrock), or political events (Atkinson). Such studies may

focus upon the specific conversational accomplishment of the actions relevant for such situations, such as providing testimony in court or giving political speeches. The analysis also may be multilevel and pay attention to the full structure of a communicative event, such as the internal structure of lessons (e.g., in terms of initiation, reply, and evaluation), cross-cultural variation in lesson structures, turn taking, or sequential organization of classroom talk (as in Mehan's chapter). Other dimensions, such as organizational constraints of the school or the features of the setting, may also become relevant in such studies of discourse-in-situation. Ervin-Tripp and Strage, in their chapter on parent—child discourse, show that, for a specific type of discourse, such a broader and more interdisciplinary approach also involves the study of social networks and status of children, processes of socialization, cognitive competence of children, strategies (e.g., of accommodation) by parents, and the overall cultural assumptions about the appropriate ways to talk to children. Data for such studies may also come from developmental and experimental psychology and need not be drawn from ethnographic description only.

In this section we have observed that the analysis of discourse and dialogue in the sociocultural context follows a number of common aims and principles, such as the explanation of implicit knowledge and rules (competence). There are, however, some differences in aims and methods, such as attention to a selected feature of talk (e.g., turn taking or forms of address), social and cultural variation of linguistic forms or communicative dimensions, the full analysis of communicative events, or the systematic description of discourse in specific social settings or within institutions. Within such diversity, the work on natural discourse and communicative events in different directions can complement each other. As we have stressed before, however, this is possible and fruitful only if interdisciplinary cooperation and integration take place. If we want to make explicit the taken-for-granted, routine knowledge and rules of social members, we enter the field of cognitive science. If we want serious insights into developmental features of children's discourse, we may also need psychological results. The study of variation in discourse as a function of social variables needs explanation in terms of cognitive representations of social situations and strategies of speakers and also a detailed ethnographic and microsociological description of the structures of the context and the detailed forms and strategies of interactions in such contexts. Other mutual dependencies, interrelations, and theoretical integration for this important area of research may be mentioned.

Despite the diversity in direction, conceptual frameworks, and methods, we witness that the first steps have been made towards such an integration.

The disciplinary boundaries between sociology (or different sociologies), anthropology, and sociolinguistics have been blurred in favor of a common interest for the detailed, ethnographical, multilevel analysis of actual language use, especially spoken dialogues, in the sociocultural context. The chapters in this volume show in detail how such analyses work and how the various approaches overlap, combine, and mutually inspire each other.

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