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Why I study ...

# talk-in-interaction

USED to be a worried social psychologist, fretting that I wasn't where the action was. I'd collect people's views on unemployment or their opinions about their friends. I'd get them to fill in response sheets under different experimental conditions. But it never felt right. I felt I was looking under the lamppost where the light was brightest, while smarter people were at the party happening away down the street.

However well designed the questionnaire, and however ingenious the experimental manipulations, I never really believed that what I got amounted to much. The words weren't consequential, they didn't do anything. I couldn't look at a response sheet without thinking: 'Yes, but what does that *mean*?'

I suppose I stopped believing what psychology forces you to believe: that language is just a medium of representation. That it paints more or less clear, more or less trustworthy pictures of things stored in the mental warehouse: attitudes, judgements, opinions, memories. I stopped believing that language just neutrally described all those things.

So far, so bad, and a lot of people felt that way in the seventies and eighties. Some of them never recovered. Some shook themselves, passed it all off as a career blip, and went back to work determined to design a *really* good questionnaire, lab experiment, category coding scheme, and so forth.

And some looked around for help elsewhere. That's what I did, and I came across Stephen Levinson's (1983) *Pragmatics*: the first book I'd read that took language seriously enough to actually wonder how it got used in ordinary everyday life. It made my head spin.

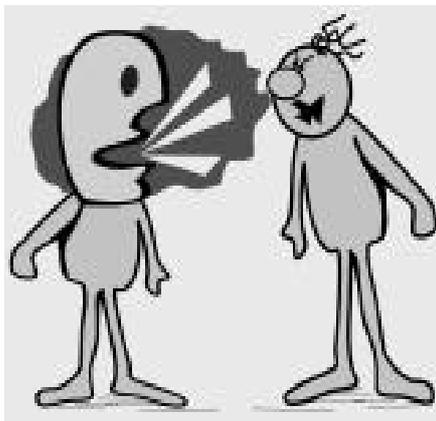
When it stopped spinning, I realised that I'd learned something: that when people talk, they aren't out to tell you what's in their mind. They're out to actually *do* something.

When you talk, you talk in an interaction, and you talk to move the interaction forward. You don't talk to reel

off the contents of your memory. You don't express an attitude like you display the contents of your china cabinet. An utterance is more like a bomb than a printout.

That was the end of dead words for me. Once you see that talk is action, you go out and look for it where it does something. I started recording my friends and neighbours, transcribing what they said, spending hours tracing the pitch and swoop of their talk.

At first, all I could do was see it in commonsense terms: she's asking him this, he's telling her that. That was no good. I went looking for more subtle tools.



Psychology didn't have them. You look in the psychology box and you see, at best, a catalogue of classifying machines. Ways of boiling talk down into a tick box of categories: 'makes suggestion', 'nods', 'asks yes/no question'. All of that is too crude.

There's a story about an exchange between the social psychologist Robert Bales and the sociologist Harold Garfinkel. Bales was promoting his classification system ('makes suggestion', 'nods', etc.) and recommending that Garfinkel use it to describe what happened in jury deliberations. Garfinkel replied, the story goes, that Bales's system was great, if one wanted to see how the jury worked as a Bales group; but if one wanted to see how

it worked as a jury, one had to start somewhere else.

That sounded right. And it opened up Garfinkel's discipline, ethnomethodology: how folk design their actions to make themselves intelligible to each other and get things done. I remember myself thinking: 'Why isn't social psychology like this?' Then I read Mick Billig's (1987) *Arguing and Thinking*, and Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell's (1987) *Discourse and Social Psychology*, and I realised that social psychology *could* be like this.

By the start of the nineties, like all converts, I'd decided to go for the heavy stuff, the obsessive, painstaking, trainspotting, finicky, Old Testament fundamentals. How people *exactly* did what they did.

I got hold of the *locus classicus* of conversation analysis, Harvey Sacks's (1992) *Lectures on Conversation*. Sacks's casebook of calls to suicide prevention centres, Californian telephone conversations, teen therapy groups and the like showed that an interaction was one part engineering (when to take a turn at speaking; how to get a turn at speaking; how to retake, hold off, maintain and relinquish a turn at speaking) and one part rhetoric (what to say, how to say it, and how to get it said without saying it).

There were rules, and people used them, abused them and flouted them with extraordinary skill. And, of course, using and abusing rules is what gets your meaning across and gets things done. Ordinary speakers are so good at it that the engineering is invisible and the rhetoric is perfectly disguised as just talk.

To get behind the gloss, I had to train myself to distrust my first reading of a transcript, holding off judgement till I had tried to take it apart and put it back together again.

Have a look at this extract, from a psychological assessment interview meant to gauge the respondent's quality of life (see box). (I've left off most of the transcription notation, but the brackets

## Extract from a psychological assessment interview

Psychologist (P): d'you feel out of place (0.4 secs) out an' about in social (0.2 secs) situations

Respondent (AN): n o

P: Anne? (0.2 secs) never?

AN: no

P: sometimes?

AN: °no°

P: or usually

AN: sometimes I do:

P: yeah? (0.4 secs) OK we'll put a two down for that one then (sniff)

show very brief pauses, and the aligned brackets show an overlap of talk.)

Your first thought — like mine — would be something like: 'OK, the psychologist has got the answer to the question and moved on.' But then you wonder at the engineering of it. What does it tell us, for example, about P's seeming to ignore AN's first two, perfectly legitimate answers (after her initial, possibly unheard answer)?

AN says 'no' but P asks again 'sometimes?'. She says 'no' again, softly, but P comes back, deadpan, with 'or usually'. AN now qualifies her answer — 'sometimes I do'. That's the answer that P accepts, and puts down on the official report — 'we'll put a two down for that one then'.

Now in engineering terms, AN has had at least two answers blocked off. When that happens in talk, you tend to try something different the third time. So maybe AN's third answer then was her trying something different, something that might fit better.

And when I looked through the entire set of interviews, this would happen again and again. The psychologist had to follow the three-alternative list of questions, and took only the third answer as the right one. She had to do that, because that's how it was scripted on the printed sheet.

But the respondent might not be thinking of that — from the respondent's point of view, the psychologist has held her accountable for not producing the right sort of answer twice, and has now managed something which the psychologist accepts.

So in this unremarkable way (at least, it wasn't remarked on by the interviewer), a whole set of assessments is based on a curious mismatch. The psychologist is making her words fit the scripted questionnaire, and the respondent is making her words fit the spaces left open for her by the interviewer.

If that's an example of engineering,

try this one, which is a combination of engineering and rhetoric. Here's someone making a point — 'expressing an attitude' — about complaints made against the police. The police, apparently, had been rather heavy handed with protesters, but Jones is not impressed by the accusation.

Here he is talking about the people who complained about the police (and I've spelled out the referent to make it a bit clearer):

... but I think that the, especially the church people that were going, (1.1 secs) um (0.5 secs) I wonder if they really thought it through [omitted words here] (mumbled: you know) they they sort of go through and say ah .hh well it's [i.e. what the police did] not what Christ would have done OK it's not what Christ would have done but Christ wouldn't have been out there protesting either

If I were still a 'categorising' sort of psychologist, I'm not altogether sure what I'd do with Jones. But when we forget about categorisation we can pay attention to his building style and we can appreciate the rhetoric. How does Jones display himself as 'not being impressed' with the complaints against the police?

First, he sets up the complainers apparently neutrally, perhaps even positively: they are 'church people'. Then he has a two-part contrast: first what 'they', the complainers, say; then what *he* says. Such contrasts always imply that thesecond thing is the trump, but he stacks the cards even more.

What 'they' say is made absurd: 'they' are made to complain that the police (those active, no-nonsense people with a difficult job to do) are not Christ-like (passive, forgiving, turn-the-other-cheek).

Why does Jones choose, of all comparisons, Jesus Christ? Because

by doing so he mobilises what those complaining people *themselves* are supposedly thinking — they are, after all, 'church people'. Then he delivers the *coup de grâce*: the protesters *themselves* weren't being Christ-like — or, in his bizarre image, 'Christ wouldn't have been out there protesting either'. Collapse of complaint.

The analysable thing about Jones is how he brings off, there and then, having that dismissive view. We get to see that what's important about what he says is what it does (dismisses and trivialises a complaint against the police) rather than what it 'is' (notionally, just a 'view').

Whether he has that view elsewhere, or whether it is his 'real' view, is unanswerable. What is a 'real' view? I don't know, and no other psychologist knows either.

The only competent authority for determining Jones's 'real view' is other people, who (if we play the tape a bit longer) can accuse him of being callous, offensive or what have you, or take him to court to sue him, successfully or unsuccessfully. Those are the sort of judgements properly handled by society. I'm not going to make them, and I'm not sure that a psychologist ought to.

But if I can show how *there and then* Jones engineered his talk to trivialise and disqualify a complaint against the police — that, doing social psychology where the action is, is worth doing.

Once you start looking closely at what people do, you can never again go back to cramming them into categories or treating their words as printouts. It does mean hours spent hunched over the tape-recorder and staring at the video screen, but the dividends are enormous. And, if the psychologist is a nosy parker interested in what people do with each other, there can't be much more profitable fun than that.

## References

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