

Co-Construction: An Introduction

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This special issue brings together a set of papers that address the import of *co-construction* in the constitution and interpretation of culturally and historically situated social interactions. As a free-standing term, the word *co-construction* is quite elliptical, implying some nonspecified joint activity of creation, deliberately leaving one in the dark as to who (or what) might be acting in concert and what exactly is being jointly created. In this volume, we refer to co-construction as *the joint creation of a form, interpretation, stance, action, activity, identity, institution, skill, ideology, emotion, or other culturally meaningful reality*. The *co-* prefix in *co-construction* is intended to cover a range of interactional processes, including collaboration, cooperation, and coordination. However, co-construction does not necessarily entail affiliative or supportive interactions. An argument, for example, in which the parties express disagreement, is nonetheless co-constructed.

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For present purposes, co-construction is considered from a number of disciplinary perspectives, especially from those of applied linguistics, conversation analysis, and linguistic anthropology. The concept of co-construction, however, has roots in fields that span the social sciences and humanities, including child language studies, Soviet psychology, literary theory of the Bakhtin Circle, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, and linguistic anthropology. Strangely enough, though kindred in spirit, these lines of research were, for a long time, carried out in parallel with little or no awareness of one another.

Since the early 1970s, child language studies have focused on ways in which young children and their caregivers jointly accomplish the production and interpretation of utterances. One way in which utterances can be co-constructed is through expansion, a central notion in studies of input or "baby-talk" register in certain communities (Ferguson, 1964, 1977; Brown, 1977; Cross, 1977; Snow & Ferguson, 1977; Ochs, 1982, 1984). An expansion is a caregiver's linguistically enriched reframing of a child's unintelligible or partially intelligible utterance. A similar phenomenon has also been noted in second language acquisition research in native-nonnative encounters in particular communities, where it contributes to a register often referred to as "foreigner talk" (Freed, 1978; Clyne, 1981; Ferguson, 1982; Seliger & Long, 1983; Ellis, 1985; Chaudron, 1988; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). Another way in which utterances may be co-constructed is when children and their caregivers contribute different linguistic components of an expressed proposition. For example, Scollon (1976) analyzed ways in which caregivers and children compose propositions across turns and speakers ("vertical constructions"), a phenomenon which anticipates and perhaps contributes to the development of children's grammatical competence. Similarly, child language studies have foregrounded the interactional work of establishing a topic as a joint discourse focus of caregivers and children (Keenan & Schieffelin, 1976; Ochs, Schieffelin, & Platt, 1979). In co-construction terms, these notions put conversational interaction as the primordial locus for the development of language, culture, and sense-making.

Independently of child language research, work on the import of social interaction in overall cognitive development has been going on since the early part of this century within Soviet psychology (especially Vygotsky, 1978; Luria, 1979; Leontyev, 1981), and, more recently, in a range of psychological approaches that draw from this field, including

research on apprenticeship, distributed cognition, situated learning, and guided participation (e.g., Wertsch, 1985; Cole & Cole, 1993; Rogoff, 1990; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This work rests on the fundamental notion that higher-order psychological skills, such as remembering, causality, and modes of reasoning, develop in part as an outcome of routine interactions with objects and competent persons in culturally situated activities across a range of community settings. This concept is captured in the Vygotskian (1978) notion of the "zone of proximal development," wherein children and other novices are able to display skills in the context of socially organized activities that they otherwise would not be able to accomplish on their own. Leontyev (1981) pushed the import of social interaction a step further when he proposed that in the course of social interaction, the identities and perspectives of participants may intermingle such that they become part of one another's interior makeup. Similarly, Rogoff's (1990) more recent concept of "appropriation" emphasizes that learners actively draw and assimilate skills and understandings from other members through their participation in social interactions with them. Together with Cole's (1985) characterization of the zone of proximal development as the locus in which culture and cognition create each other, these lines of research challenge Cartesian assumptions that mind and society are categorically distinct; they emphasize, rather, that society and mind are mutually constitutive.

It is perhaps not entirely surprising that researchers analyzing the development of children's language and thought would see the centrality of social interaction to the emergence of skills and concepts. What is more surprising is that these very same co-constructional processes appear to be central to the accomplishment of mental and social behavior throughout the human life span. This theme is taken up in literary theory by members of the Bakhtin Circle, especially Bakhtin (1981) himself and his colleague Voloshinov (1973). Bakhtinian theory prioritizes the dialogic underpinnings of texts. Bakhtin began by focusing on written texts, primarily the novel, but later expanded his theorizing to all of human communication. He emphasized that texts are not monovocal or singly authored, but rather are the products of previous, current, future, and hypothetical dialogues with other interlocutors. A conventional genre such as the novel, for example, is inherently imbued with the voices of others, for it has been historically shaped by other authors in that discourse tradition. Utterances are also viewed as multivocal or heteroglossic in nature, informed by the ideas

and representational styles of others. Bakhtin's ideas have informed current thinking about ways in which spoken and written texts from other times and places meld into the construction of ongoing texts. This intertextuality is seen to be characteristic of *all* discourse and not merely of particular types of discourse (e.g., reported speech, parody, allusion, etc.).

The primary contribution of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis has been to demonstrate that social interaction is itself an exquisite accomplishment. Almost three decades ago, Garfinkel (1967) introduced the idea that familiar and unproblematic as they may appear, mundane social encounters rely on detailed indexical understandings of what might be happening right now, what just happened, and what will likely happen next in some particular, located routine activity. An important idea in this research is that actions are accomplished and utterances understood crucially because others are filling in common-sense understandings entailed in the situation at hand. That is, sense-making is an interactional affair. Whereas both ethnomethodology and conversation analysis emphasize that routine public behavior is managed moment-by-moment, conversation analysis has articulated an interactional architecture for such management, focusing on conversational interaction and on the turn as a primary conversational unit (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, 1982, 1986; Heritage, 1984a, 1984b). Whereas child language and Soviet psychological studies focus on co-construction predominantly on an ontogenetic plane, and whereas Bakhtinian-inspired research focuses on co-construction predominantly on an historical plane, conversation analysis focuses squarely on the microgenesis of co-construction over the span of interactional time. Conversation analysis thus examines co-construction through a sociologically and linguistically tuned microscope to reveal realms of interactional work that take place even in fractions of a second, involving the coordination of talk, sound, gaze, bodies, and built environments (C. Goodwin, 1979, 1994; Goodwin & Heritage, 1990; Goodwin & Goodwin, forthcoming).

Linguistic anthropology synthesizes psychological and sociological perspectives on co-construction in an effort to articulate the role of language in constituting cultural beliefs, knowledge, understandings, ideologies, identities, institutions, activities, and events across the world's societies. Among these cultural dimensions, that of language activity or the communicative event has been of particular analytic

importance (Hymes, 1962; Levinson, 1979; Duranti, 1985, 1988; Goodwin & Duranti, 1992; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1992). On one level, linguistic anthropologists have examined ways in which activities/events are collaboratively built by co-participants, for example, how audiences are co-authors of language activities such as storytelling, oratorical performances, and gossip (Haviland, 1977; Duranti & Brenneis, 1986). On another level, these studies suggest ways in which the co-authoring of activities in turn helps to maintain and transform the social identities of the participants, the institutions in which these activities are embedded, and the ideologies that inform and legitimize their ongoingness (Philips, 1983; Briggs, 1984; Gal, 1989; M. Goodwin, 1990; Schieffelin, 1990). In this sense, these studies are microethnographic in that they examine bounded, situated activities not only as microcosms of larger cultural structures, but also as loci and media for the interactional engendering of these structures. A branch of linguistic anthropology, language socialization, examines routine mundane language activities for their socializing import (Heath, 1983; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Ochs, 1988; Schieffelin, 1990; Kulick, 1992). Like Vygotskian developmental studies, language socialization research recognizes that children come to understand and shape their sociocultural universe through participation in culturally organized social interactions. However, language socialization studies closely examine the moment-by-moment conversational unfolding of situated interactions and relates the conversational work of participants to the co-construction of sociocultural competence across the life span. In this spirit, novices at any age are seen as simultaneously appropriating and transforming both language activities and the sociocultural structures they index.

Differentially influenced by all these traditions, the articles in this issue elucidate the fundamentally interactional basis of the human construction of meaning, context, activity, and identity. This is to say (1) that things allegedly in people's heads—such as cognition and attitudes, linguistic competence, or pragmatic and cultural knowledge—are made relevant to communication through social interaction, and (2) that it is through the spontaneous playing out of the sequentially contingent and co-constructed external flow of interactional events that human beings bring these conscious, semiconscious, and unconscious internal constructs and potentialities to bear on the constitution, management, and negotiation of social reality and social relationships.

The contributions herein also demonstrate that what counts as an interactional event is something that interactants are constantly monitoring, determining, and responding to as interaction unfolds, and that these interactional events are not limited to the syntactic structures, words, phrases, and clauses interactants may utter. On the contrary, the articles in this volume make a strong case for recognizing the sequential relevance to interaction for participants of eye gaze, facial expression, gesture, body deployment, pitch, intonation, vocal stress, orientation to objects in interactional space, laughter, overlap and its resolution, unfinished and suppressed syllables, and silence. Collectively, they also point out that (1) interactants can be seen to be orienting to a complex of paralinguistic and nonlinguistic details as interactional events in the interactional stream, in addition to attending to whatever is actually said in words and linguistic structures, and (2) this kind of attention to events in the interactional stream is characteristic of interlocutors of all kinds: children, adults, and the elderly; the communicatively normal and the communicatively impaired; monolingual and bilingual speakers; participants in interaction and onlookers; familiars and strangers; and interlocutors in socially defined roles such as play peer, sibling, student, friend, counselor, nurse, spouse, parent, child, girl, boy, father, mother, and bank manager. Indeed, the five articles in this volume argue, among other things, that it is through all of these linguistic, paralinguistic, and nonlinguistic means that interactants play out, reaffirm, challenge, maintain, and modify their various (and complexly multiple) social identities as turn-by-turn talk unfolds (e.g., Jacoby & Gonzales, 1991; Ochs, 1993).

A related theme is articulated in Emanuel Schegloff's article, in particular, and is echoed in some of the other articles as well. This is the idea that relying only on the informational, semantic, and propositional content of words and utterances will fail to get at what utterances (and silences) might be doing as actions in a sequence of detailed interactional events. One of Schegloff's examples is a data extract in which a participant asks pretty much the same question three times in the course of a conversation despite having received a hearable, appropriate, and adequate reply the first time. Apparent informational redundancy is also taken up in the article by Agnes He. She shows us that although academic counseling encounters are framed by an institutional context and by information entered on bureaucratic forms, counselors and students nevertheless perform an opening sequence in the counselor's cubicle through which they co-create the student's institutional identity

for the service and advisory task at hand. Charles Goodwin's article comes at this theme in still another way. He demonstrates that when interlocutors coordinate their participation roles in particular ways and attend to the sequencing of detailed interactional events, they can jointly overcome the limitations posed by one participant's severely reduced and repetitive vocabulary. His article especially resonates as an analysis of the active involvement of a communicatively limited participant in the achievement of interactional coherence and communicative goals.

Another theme emerging from some of the articles in this collection is that such allegedly "stable" things as gender identity, rules of a game, classifications of interactional events, and family politics are highly contingent and constantly shifting, as interlocutors co-construct interactional moments. Marjorie Goodwin demonstrates that the interaction among Latina girls at play is co-constructed as intensely competitive, variously constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing the rules of their games, and that, therefore, whole bodies of research on gender differentiation and what it means to be female may be called into question. Carolyn Taylor examines how children can get their parents to stop co-constructing a contentious narrative through which a co-present child is indirectly blamed for the tense and angry state of affairs between the parents. In the case she analyzes, this is accomplished when two siblings co-construct a complex affective stance by appealing to the public shame of their parents being captured on a researcher's video recording while engaged in a dispute. In the very next moment, however, the children's categorization of their parents' interaction as a "fight" gets undermined and redefined through both parents' challenges and reframings of the children's analysis of what has been going on.

One of the important implications for taking the position that everything is co-constructed through interaction is that it follows that there is a distributed responsibility among interlocutors for the creation of sequential coherence, identities, meaning, and events. This means that language, discourse, and their effects cannot be considered deterministically preordained by alleged "inherent" properties of linguistic structures, by assumed constructs of individual competence and so-called shared knowledge, or by assigning participants to membership categories presumed to be relevant to the occasion. Indeed, to acknowledge that everything is co-constructed is to affirm that participants to interaction are not passive robots living out preprogrammed linguistic "rules," discourse "conventions," or cultural prescriptions for social

identity. The articles here indicate instead that every interactional moment is a unique space for a response to which subsequent interaction will be further responsive, and that interlocutors are processing and responding to the rich flow of unique interactional moments on-line, in real time, at the same time, at the same speed, and in the same state of half-consciousness through which they give linguistic shape to their spontaneous and often smoothly timed utterances. A co-constructed view of interaction thus entails a ratification of the biological complexity of human cognition and communication behavior and an almost subversive recognition that every interactional moment is potentially an opportunity space for some participant to redirect the unfolding of the discourse such that individual understandings, human relationships, and the social order might be changed.

This is not to say, however, that co-construction is not historically and culturally situated. Any present moment is paradoxically both responsive to its immediate interactional sequential environment and is the complex product of a history of conversations and interactional moments (and their consequences) experienced individually and collectively over time, though it is rather more challenging for analysts of discourse, language, and social interaction to sufficiently demonstrate this latter point. Thus relationships of asymmetry—whether involving competition among girl peers, an interactional division of labor, or family politics, for example—may be reproduced through co-constructed interaction; co-construction certainly does not mean that participants play identical interactional roles or that through interaction asymmetrical social relations fall away into an egalitarian utopia. What this collection of articles does suggest is that reproducing and reasserting *any* social order among interlocutors—whether that order is more symmetrical or more asymmetrical—is just as much a coordinated, co-constructed interactional achievement as is challenging that social order.

We conclude these introductory remarks with three important methodological and intellectual issues the articles raise for the study of language, discourse, and social interaction. One is the obvious importance of capturing the paralinguistic and nonlinguistic—as well as the linguistic—events of interaction and of having a principled way of incorporating them into a sequential analysis of what appears to be going on from the participants' point of view in a particular sociocultural setting. To recognize this as important is to think deeply both

about the methodological, technological, and observational expertise we need to continue to develop and about how such evolving expertise might change the way we collect, record, transcribe, analyze, and display naturally occurring data, especially in face-to-face settings.

A second issue is the challenge of treating spontaneously produced discourse not as free-standing "text," however it may look when transcribed or isolated from larger stretches of talk and interaction, but as something contingently dynamic and unfolding in interactional time. To meet this challenge we need to appreciate that the meanings, actions, and social relations that get done in any interactional moment are but momentary, candidate achievements. What happens in the very next interactional moment might ratify those achievements or call them into question. A related but different kind of dynamism that we need to be attending to, as well, is suggested in Taylor's data, and that is that long after the events of some main focus of interactional interest, a participant may reinvolve that interaction in a particular way to other participants, including the researcher. This kind of dynamic reframing of the meaning of events over interactional time is especially important when working with databases that capture long stretches of naturally occurring interaction and/or that are longitudinal in some way.

A third issue is that to study language behavior, discourse, and social interaction—which some might call linguistic or communicative *performance*—is to study communicative *competence*, not as an abstract construct or a model, but as it plays out in all its incredible complexity as people go about managing their identities, their relationships, and their lives. Looked at in this way, the analysis of naturally occurring language, discourse, and social interaction is, if you will, a bottom-up engagement with communicative competence, the details of which have yet to be acknowledged by most intuitive, top-down models, theories, and experimental/quantitative approaches current in the communication-oriented fields of inquiry, across the disciplines, represented by the readers of this journal.

We are pleased, therefore, that this cross-disciplinary group of researchers has come together to consider co-construction in naturally occurring discourse in a variety of settings and cultural contexts. And we are pleased to present this collection in *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, which has been a forum especially encouraging of the cross-disciplinary examination of human communication.

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