

be given to the apparent *strength* of evidence. Based on the results of this study, we recommend that a defendant use logical proofs (with supporting physical evidence) to avoid penalties. However, some pieces of evidence may lack persuasiveness. For example, a woman was ticketed for parking in a no-parking zone, and she claimed that she could not tell whether the kerb was painted red or not:

Defendant: Also, I took photos. [*to prove the red paint was faded*]

Judge: Well, let's have them here. [*The judge studied these photos for a long while*]. Nope! These sure look red enough to me. Guilty as charged.

In G. Anzani (ed.), Analyzing *Éra* *any*  
Explanation: A Casebook of Methods,  
Sage, 1988, pp. 127-144

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## Explanations as accounts: a conversation analytic perspective

John Heritage

In this chapter I will discuss some central aspects of explanations or accounts as treated using conversation analysis. My concern will be with accounts which are *naturally occurring* in conversation rather than elicited by an investigator. I will focus on the use of accounts in *ordinary conversation* rather than some more specific or specialized location in social space such as a hospital, a school or a courtroom. And I will largely concentrate on accounts which are addressed to, or explain, some current action going on in the conversation, rather than accounts that focus on events that are wholly external to the conversation in which they occur (though see Cody and McLaughlin in chapter 8 for an approach to the latter type of data). The central conceptual focus of this discussion will fall on the role of accounts in relation to conversational organization and social solidarity.

### Theoretical background

Conversation analysis has developed over the past 15 years as a subdiscipline within the wider intellectual framework of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967). Primarily concerned with social action and its underlying reasoning, its focus has been descriptive and naturalistic rather than explanatory or experimental. Practitioners have aimed, in the first instance, to describe *how* common-sense reasoning and social action work, rather than to develop explanations in advance of detailed description. As the reference to reasoning suggests, Garfinkel and his collaborators have formed part of the recent 'cognitive revolution' in the social sciences but, as a sociologist, Garfinkel's preoccupation was with how social actors can achieve a shared or common apprehension of the social world. He proposed that every aspect of a cognitively shared social world depends on a multiplicity of tacit (taken for granted) methods of reasoning. These methods, he argued, are both socially organized

and socially shared and they are ceaselessly used during every waking moment to recognize ordinary social objects and events.

In order to demonstrate his claims, Garfinkel devised numerous procedures which were designed to engineer drastic departures from ordinary expectations and understandings about social behaviour. The results clearly showed the extent to which the shared nature of ordinary understandings is dependent on the joint application of shared methods of reasoning. His work also demonstrated that the application of these methods by social actors has a *normative* background: those who departed from the use of these methods were met with anger and demands that they explain themselves and their actions. His investigations thus displayed the inherent *morality* of social cognition and that the sense making procedures we all use are themselves part of the moral order (Garfinkel, 1963, 1967; Heritage, 1984).

Garfinkel concluded that shared methods of reasoning generate continuously updated implicit understandings of what is happening in social contexts – a ‘running index’, as it were, of what is happening in a social event. It is through the creation of this running index that social activity is rendered intelligible or, as Garfinkel puts it, ‘account-able’. To make sense, the overt descriptions and explanations (or accounts) which actors provide for their actions must articulate with these already established implicit understandings.

Both ethnomethodology and conversation analysis are thus concerned with two levels of ‘accountability’. On the one hand, there is the taken-for-granted level of reasoning through which a running index of action and interaction is created and sustained. On the other, there is the level of overt explanation in which social actors give accounts of what they are doing in terms of reasons, motives or causes. In this chapter I shall mostly be concerned with the latter level. But I shall later show that an understanding of the properties of accounts at this second level cannot be fully achieved without reference to how the running index works.

#### *Methods of analysing sequencing in conversational interaction*

Conversation analysis (henceforth CA) has developed primarily as an approach to investigating the normative structures of reasoning which are involved in understanding and producing courses of intelligible interaction. The objective is to describe the procedures by which speakers produce their own behaviour and understand and deal with the behaviour of others. The central resource for analysis is interaction itself. Interaction forms such a resource because during its course the parties, whether intentionally or

not, implicitly display their understanding and analysis of what is happening as it happens. These implicit displays are embedded in the participants’ own actions. CA represents the development of an analytic technology that capitalizes on this fact. Its central focus is on the analysis of sequences of interaction and of turns within sequences. Thus CA is centrally concerned with the study of the sequential organization of interaction and of the reasoning that is inherently embedded within it.

A central assumption of interactional sequencing is that, unless otherwise signalled, each turn is addressed to the matters raised by the turn preceding it. The most powerful expression of this assumption arises in the form of *adjacency pairs* (Schegloff, 1968; Schegloff and Sacks, 1973), in which the production of a first conversational action or first pair part (for example, a greeting, a question, an invitation, a request, an offer and so on) both projects and requires the production of a second (for example, a return greeting, an answer and so on). This projection and requirement is *normative* in character. Thus a questioner, for example, whose question has not been answered will usually have the right to repeat it or to request that the intended respondent answers it, to sanction the non-respondent, or to draw sanctionable inferences from the respondent’s lack of response. It is in terms of adjacency pair rules, which relate a first to a second action, that speakers can influence or even constrain the conduct of their coparticipants.

However, rules that relate first to second actions are not just important resources by which interactants can shape the trajectory of sequences of action. They are also important resources through which interactants can grasp how others understand their actions. Consider the following example. (Note that in each example the convention is to indicate where the talk comes from. In this case it is SBL, which is the code for a large number of telephone calls collected in Santa Barbara, California. Fuller details of these conventions can be found in Atkinson and Heritage, 1984). In this example a speaker B responds to a question:

(1) (SBL:10:12)

A: Why don’t you come and see me some times.  
B: I would like to.

Here B’s response exhibits an analysis of A’s question. Specifically, in being shaped as an ‘acceptance’, it treats A’s initial question as an *invitation* geared to the *future*, and this treatment is plainly available both to A and to us (the analysts). However, suppose that B had responded as follows:

## (2) (Invented variation on (1))

A: Why don't you come and see me sometimes.

B: I'm sorry. I've been terribly tied up lately.

Given that this response takes the form of an 'apology', it would be clear to A (and to analysts) that B had understood A's question as a *complaint* directed at B's conduct in the *past*. The relationship between actions in sequence thus provides an interpretative resource both for participants and for those who are concerned with the scientific analysis of interaction, because each action in a sequence inherently displays its producer's interpretation of the prior actions in the sequence.

Using the sequential organization of action as a data resource in this way has allowed CA to unravel many complexities in the organization of actions and sequences and in the reasoning that informs their construction and interpretation. In developing these analyses, CA has made a number of assumptions. These are:

- 1 Interaction is structurally organized.
- 2 The significance of each turn at talk is doubly contextual in that (a) each turn is shaped by the context of prior talk and (b) each turn establishes a context to which the next turn will be oriented.
- 3 No order of detail in interaction can be dismissed *a priori* as irrelevant to the parties' understandings of what is occurring (see Heritage, 1985, forthcoming for further details).

These assumptions have strongly shaped CA's approach to data and its analysis, to which we now turn.

*Data collection and analysis*

CA is primarily concerned with analysis of the organization of mundane social action. Researchers have proceeded by collecting materials from ordinary conversational interaction which is as uncontaminated as possible by social scientific intervention. These materials are invariably collected using audiotape or videotape. Audiotape is particularly suitable for the telephone medium where, because there is no visual channel available to the participants, there is no need for researchers to have access to a video recording. In collecting data from face-to-face interaction, video recording is by far the most appropriate means.

This emphasis on the use of tape as a means of collecting data from natural settings is based on the following considerations. First and foremost, the analysis of interaction in detail cannot proceed without repeated reviewing of materials. The use of

note taking or on-the-spot coding of behaviour cannot allow the researcher to recover the details of original materials, and is indeed already analysis in itself. Naturally occurring data are strongly preferred to the development of data generated through the use of role plays or experimental techniques because, although these methods are undoubtedly valuable, they tend to restrict both the range and the authenticity of the data that they generate, no matter how cleverly they are contrived.

In place of these methods, CA has adopted the naturalist's strategy of building up large collections of data from as many natural sites as possible. Like a good collection of naturalist's specimens, these growing data bases contain many variations of particular types of interactional events whose features can be systematically compared. Analysts constantly seek for new variants and may focus their searches on particular settings in the expectation of finding them.

Once possessed of a corpus of data, CA operates in the first instance using inductive search procedures. An analyst who is interested, for example, in how invitations are accepted or rejected will begin by building up a collection of invitations and will attempt to establish regularities in the organization of positive and negative responses to them. At the core of this task is the demonstration that these regularities are methodically produced and oriented to by the participants as normative organizations of action.

To achieve this end, 'deviant case analysis' is commonly used. This means taking cases where the established pattern is departed from and showing the ways in which the participants, through their actions, orient to these departures. If both dimensions of the analysis can be adequately accomplished, then the empirical task of showing that a particular normative organization is operative in interaction (that is, underlying both the production of and reasoning about a particular social action or sequence of actions) will have been achieved. Beyond this point, there is the theoretical task of specifying the role which the organization that has been discovered plays in the communicative and social matrix of interaction.

In what follows a brief demonstration of these tasks will be accomplished using explanations or accounts in social interaction as illustrative material. It is emphasized, however that this is an illustrative sketch and is not to be treated as a full-blown analysis.

**Empirical examples**

We begin by delimiting the domain of interest. Our focus will be on the use of explanations or accounts that are provided in the immediate context of the activities they account for. We thus

ignore narrative explanations of events that are external to the conversation in which the account occurs, and explanations which are external to the particular sequence of conversational interaction in which the account occurs. Those kinds of explanations would have to be treated in different ways.

#### *Establishing a pattern*

Our subject matter has already been the object of considerable philosophical and social scientific exegesis (for example Antaki, 1981; Gilbert and Abell, 1983; Mills, 1940; Peters, 1958; Scott and Lyman, 1968). This literature converges in the judgement that explanations and accounts are routinely provided or demanded in contexts where projected or required behaviour does not occur. A comparison of our case (1) (repeated here) with another case will begin to illustrate this phenomenon:

#### (1) (SBL:10:12)

- A: Why don't you come and see me some times.  
B: I would like to.

In this case the invitation, which projects an acceptance, gets a simple unvarnished acceptance. No account is provided for the acceptance. In effect, the acceptance is treated as projected or 'provided for' by the invitation. By contrast in (3), which is taken from the same conversation, a subsequent and more specific invitation is rejected in an elaborated fashion.

#### (3) (SBL:10:14)

- A: Uh if you'd care to come over and visit a little while this morning I'll give you a cup of coffee.  
B: 1 → hehh Well that's awfully sweet of you,  
2 → I don't think I can make it this morning  
3 → .hh uhm I'm running an ad in the paper and-and uh I have to stay near the phone.

It can be readily observed that in (3) the rejection of the invitation is accounted for with an explanation (arrow 3). Moreover, the account is the final component of a turn that also includes an appreciation of the invitation (arrow 1) and a mitigated or 'cushioned' rejection component (arrow 2). All three features are highly characteristic of rejections of invitations and related actions and have been extensively documented elsewhere (Davidson, 1984; Wootton, 1981). These same features can be readily illustrated in relation to other domains of action, for example in responses that reject offers:

#### (4) (Her:OII:2:4:ST) (B's wife has slipped a disc)

- A: And we were wondering if there's anything we can do to help  
B: [Well 'at's]  
A: [I mean] can we do any shopping for her or something like that?  
(0.7)  
B: 1 → Well that's most kind Anthony  
2 → .hhh At the moment no:::  
3 → Because we've still got two boys at home.

And a similar, though less elaborate, pattern is observable in the context of responses to questions:

#### (5) (Trio:2:II:1)

- M: What happened at (.) work. At Bullock's this evening.=  
P: =.hhh Well I don'know::w::.

Here the question relevances the production of an answer which, in this case, is not forthcoming. In its place, the intended answerer provides an *account* (ignorance) for the absent answer. A more complex version is to be found in the following:

#### (6) (W:PC:1:MJ(1):18) (Concerning how boat-trains work)

- J: But the train goes. Does th'train go o:n th'boat:?  
M: .h .h Ooh I've no idea. She ha:sn't sai:d.

Here the intended answerer not only accounts for her inability to respond by asserting ignorance, but also then accounts for her ignorance by reference to a third party, whose forthcoming journey is the occasion for the sequence in which this question arises.

Here then are a range of instances in which a second speaker's failure to accomplish a projected, or looked for, action is accompanied by an explanation or account of some kind.

#### *Deviant case analysis*

The second stage of the analysis involved establishing that the provision of accounts in such contexts is treated as a normative requirement and this, it will be recalled, can be done through the analysis of deviant cases. The latter are inevitably less common than examples of the normal pattern and are often more complex to explicate.

A relatively straightforward case is the following, in which S has announced a disastrous examination result which will prevent her from entering law school. Her coparticipant asks her if she will take the examination again using a turn design that clearly presupposes that she will.

## (7) (Frankel:TC:1:1:4)

- G: So yih g'nna take it agai:n?=  
 S: =nNo.  
 (0.5)  
 G: 1 → No:?  
 S: No.  
 (0.3)  
 G: 2 → Why no:t =  
 S: = .t.hhhh I don't rilly wan'to.

This sequence shows a number of significant features. Most notably, after S's initial and unexplained reply, G waits for fully half a second (a long time in a conversational context) for some explanatory elaboration before prompting it with a turn (arrow 1) that queries S's announced decision. S's next response is also unelaborate and G waits for a further period before initiating an overt request for an explanation. Thus G's conduct throughout the sequence evidences her belief that an explanation is due. And S's apparent reluctance to volunteer one, in effect, manoeuvres G into the overt pursuit of one.

A more complicated case involving a similar form of covert manoeuvring around an absent account is the following. This example is taken from a situation in which a group of men are engaged in sharing out goods and fittings from a store which has closed down. From time to time their talk turns to who will take possession of particular goods. M's question, which opens the example, is clearly heard as a request for a fish tank which V subsequently rejects flatly and without explanation (arrow 1):

## (8) (US:simplified)

- M: What are yuh doing with that big bowl- uh tank.  
 Nothing?  
 (0.5)  
 V: ((Cough))  
 V: Uh:  
 (1.0)  
 V: 1 → I'm not intuh selling it or giving it. That's it.  
 M: Okay.  
 (1.0)  
 M: 2 → That was simple. Khhhh huh huh heh=  
 V: 3 → =Yeh.  
 (0.7)  
 V: 4 → °Yeh.°  
 (1.0)  
 V: 5 → Becuz selling it or giving it I::, that's (all there is)

Here's M's ironic remark ('That was simple) and slight laugh (arrow 2) audibly sanctions V's brusquely unaccounted for rejection. V meets it with a further reassertion of his decision (arrow 3),

another *sotto voce* repetition of 'Yeh' (arrow 4) and, subsequently, the initiation of an explanation (arrow 5) that ultimately trails away into nothing. Here, subsequent to the rejection, the conduct of both parties evidences their orientation to the absent explanation.

Similarly, in the following sequence B's unexplained failure to phone his vicar (arrow 1) is waited out over a number of turns by A, who thereby gets B to offer the looked-for explanation (arrow 2) without having to request it overtly:

## (9) (Campbell 4:1)

- A: Well jis:ten, (.) tiz you tidyu phone yer vicar ye:t.  
 (.3)  
 B: 1 → Nq I ain't.  
 (A): 1 → (.hhh)  
 A: Oh:  
 (0.3)  
 (A): .hhhhh-  
 A: Ah:::  
 B: 2 → [I w'z gonna wait 'ntil you found out about....

Once again both parties exhibit an orientation to the moral requiredness of an account for the reported failure. In A's case, this is exhibited by not advancing the talk beyond the place where an account could be provided. In B's it is exhibited by the subsequent offering of an account in response to A's conduct.

In sum, through deviant case analysis we can determine that account giving is not merely an empirically common feature that is associated with unexpected or unlooked for actions, but is a normatively required feature of such actions. Since failures to provide accounts attract either overt or covert pursuits of them or sanctions, we can conclude that the giving of accounts in such contexts is itself a morally accountable matter.

*Embedding the analysis of account giving in a wider analytical context*

So far, we have sketched some aspects of a demonstration that account giving is a normatively organized feature of sequences of interaction in which one of the parties acts in an unlooked-for way. Now we can proceed to the final analytical task mentioned earlier, namely the attempt to locate our normative organization within a larger framework. What I want to do here is to show that the short extracts we have been looking at so far can be placed in a broader context. There are more general aspects of social interaction that only emerge when one stands back and looks at a more inclusive range of issues. Here I shall sketch two broad themes: what accounts tell us about the management of self-other relationships, and their role in sustaining the underlying normative structure of social interaction.

*Accounts and self-other relations*

A number of the details of the organization of account giving suggest that they are strongly sensitive to issues of 'face' (Goffman, 1955; Brown and Levinson, 1978). Among a number of features, we will briefly deal with the content of accounts, the internal organization of the components of the turn containing the account, and the temporal placement of such turns.

*Content.* In many of the cases shown in this chapter (for example (2), (3), (5) and (6)), second speakers account for their failure to carry out the proposed or required conversational action by reference to their *inability* to do it (cf. Drew, 1984). Patently, the speakers could have accounted for their actions in other ways. They could have asserted an unwillingness to carry out the proposed action, or denied either the right of the first speaker to propose it or their own obligation to respond. It is significant, however, that the latter accounts would all, in one way or another, have threatened the 'face' of their co-interactants. By contrast, the accounts which invoke inability (and in case (4) a lack of need for the help offered) all have a 'no-fault' quality (Heritage, 1984). None of them implicates a lack of willingness to respond in the proposed way, or challenges the other's rights in the situation. All of the responses avoid any threat to the other speaker, and they also avoid any threat to the social relationship between the parties.

*Internal organization of turn components.* The turns that do not accomplish a projected activity often exhibit a careful balance between self- and other-attentiveness. Thus it can be noted that in the rejections of the invitations and offers (examples (4) and (5)), the speakers appreciate what is offered before they produce their refusals. Through this temporal ordering of the components of their responses, the refusing speakers attend to the others' viewpoint *before* attending to what is relevant from their own perspective. That this other-attentiveness is significant can be illustrated by considering what can emerge when speakers don't show it. In the following sequence, which is analysed in detail in Schegloff (1988), a student returning to a group of friends has evidently failed to come back with a promised ice-cream sandwich.

(10) (SN 4:7)

- S: You didn' get an ice-cream san'wich.  
 C: → I know, hh I decided that my body didn't need it.  
 S: Yes but ours di:d

Here C's conduct fails to display any element of other-attentiveness. She does not apologise for her lapse, and her account is framed exclusively in terms of her own desires and concerns. Indeed, in

the way that she presents the lapse as the result of a deliberate decision rather than, for example, a failure of memory, she in fact aggravates the original failure. Her self-attentive account is immediately sanctioned by a matching self-attentive riposte by S, which is purportedly produced on behalf of the group, and C subsequently remains at odds with the rest of the group until she leaves a little later with the issue still unresolved.

*Temporal placement of account turns.* A further dimension of other-attentiveness that is built into the structure of rejections also centres on temporal ordering. In (3) and (4) the rejection is delayed by being placed after a variety of other turn components: an appreciation component, standard pre-rejection objects like 'uh' and 'well', and, in (4), by a delay of 0.7 seconds before the turn is initiated. These delay features, which are systematically present in rejections, have been shown to create opportunities for first speakers to revise their prior actions so as to make them more acceptable (Davidson, 1984; Pomerantz, 1984; Wootton, 1981). Where such revision is successful and second speakers find that they can then go on to carry out the proposed action, they have enabled first speakers to 'save face' by being accepted after all, and they have also enabled second speakers to avoid threatening the other's face by a rejecting action. The building of delay features into the design of rejecting actions is thus also intrinsically other-attentive.

All three of these features of accounts for rejecting actions – their content, internal organization and temporal placement – converge in extracts (11) and (12) below. In (11) the invitation recipient produces an initial appreciation of the invitation (arrow 1) which is sufficient to indicate to the inviter that a rejection is in the course of being produced. In response, the inviter specifically enquires (arrow 2) about circumstances that might make the invitee *unable* to accept:

(11) (NB:II:2:14: slightly simplified)

- E: Wanna come down'n 'av a bite a'lu:nch with me:?=  
 =I got s'm bee:r en stu:ff,  
 (0.2)  
 N: 1 → Wul yer ril sweet hon:, uh::m  
 (.)  
 N: [1 e t- I: ha(v) ]  
 E: 2 → [or d'yuh'av sum-p'n else (t')]

Notice here that E's last utterance (arrow 2) works to save the face of both speakers. It anticipates and invites a rejection account from N rather than just leaving it to her to produce it on her own behalf. And the kind of account that it invites (that is, one based on ability)

is, as we have seen, least face threatening for E herself.

A similar process is apparent in (12), with one important difference:

(12) (JG:II(b):8)

G: Whenih you uh: what nights'r you available.

1 → (0.4)

M: .k.hhhhh.hh

G: 2 → Are you workin' nights et all'r anything?

M: I do: I work, hhh a number o:f nights Gene....

Here the inviting party G anticipates that there will be a difficulty with the invitation simply from the delay (arrow 1) in the response from his co-interactant. In this instance, as in (11), the inviter proposes a difficulty about the invitee's ability to accept and his action again serves to save face all round.

All of the features discussed in this section are socially standard, or institutionalized, features of 'dispreferred' action sequences. The motivation for their use ultimately derives from this fact of social standardization. Speakers are treated as having the capacity to produce or avoid producing these features. They may thus find themselves being accountable for and evaluated in terms of how they design and package their utterances. Thus, given that accounts are institutionalized, the speaker who fails to provide an account may be sanctioned as wilful and self-attentive, as one who 'would not, or could not, be bothered to provide an account'. One who fails to provide a no-fault account can be construed as hostile or insinuating or, at the least, careless of the face of a co-interactant. One who disorders the relative placement of an account and an appreciation (so as to produce, for example, a rejection followed by an account followed by an appreciation) may be heard as self-centred, if not downright selfish. One who rejects something 'too quickly' may be heard as rude.

The social logic underlying these judgements is socially institutionalized along with these institutionalized features of the rejections themselves. Both are embodied in a web of moral accountability whose binding character rests on its seamlessness. Within this web of accountability, the pressures are consistently towards other-attentiveness and towards the maintenance of face, of social relationships and of social solidarity. The personal sensibilities of face are intelligible through this logic, and in turn these sensibilities motivate its maintenance as an institutional form.

#### *Accounts and the structure of social action*

Earlier in the chapter, I proposed that ethnomethodology and CA are concerned with accountability in two senses of the term. The

first is the issue of intelligibility – the running index through which interaction is given constantly updated interpretation – while the second concerns the occasions and the ways in which participants explain their actions. I also proposed that the two dimensions are deeply interwoven. In this section, I want to comment on the connections between the two levels and to suggest a social role for ordinary accounts which cuts still deeper than the maintenance of social solidarity and self–other relations. This role has to do with the maintenance of the methods or procedures through which the organization of social action is sustained.

As we have seen, CA focuses on shared methods or procedures as the central resources through which actions are both produced and understood. The maintenance of these methods is a crucial feature of maintaining both the social organization of action and the social intelligibility of action. Both dimensions stand or fall together. As we have seen, for example, the fact that answers to questions normally and properly follow the questions to which they respond is a facet of the social organization of action, but it is also a resource in the social organization of interpretation – a resource which supplies the presumptive basis on which to interpret utterances which follow questions as 'answers'. For speakers, then, this presumptive linkage between questions and answers is both primary and presuppositional on the one hand and normative on the other.

Take the following rule: after the production of a first utterance recognizable as a question, a second speaker (the addressee) should produce an utterance that is hearable as an answer to the question. This, as we have seen, is both a rule of conduct and a rule of interpretation. The role of accounts in relation to the maintenance of this rule can be approached by considering the following problem. Our rule is one of a multiplicity of methodic procedures through which social action and social interpretation proceed. But, like all rules, it is not always complied with. The fact that social rules are often not complied with could conceivably lead to a situation in which, at the social level, the rule ceased to be respected and, at the psychological level, the rule's cognitive salience was eroded. In short, the incidence of non-compliant actions might imaginably create a process of attrition in which the social reality of the rule progressively decayed. How then do accounts function to prevent this? We can begin to address this issue through the following consideration.

When a speaker remains silent in the face of a question, two major types of interpretative option are available. The first is that the rule that questions should be answered no longer makes sense of, or applies to, the current situation and that some other rule (yet

to be determined) applies instead. We scarcely ever contemplate this option, let alone implement it. If we did, the social organization of action (and with it the social intelligibility of action) would have to be treated as contingent and haphazard. Rather than adopt this option, we cling to the presupposition that questions relevance answers and, in this sense, 'should' be answered.

The second interpretative option is that the silence requires explanation. It may be explained by the speaker's deafness, failure to recognize the question, rudeness, lack of willingness to answer, inability to answer without self-incrimination, or whatever. At all events, *the failure is treated as requiring explanation* and, indeed, it is a positive signal for us to initiate a search for an explanation that is appropriate to the circumstances. The explanations which may be arrived at under such circumstances are almost always negative in their implications for non-responding parties, and this factor may be a major motivation for them to produce either compliant actions or to produce their own accounts for non-compliance in order to forestall the negative conclusions which might otherwise be drawn.

It is crucial to recognize that this second interpretative option embodies the presupposition that questions relevance answers. For speakers there are only two options: either the rule linking questions and answers is complied with and the question is answered, or the lack of an answer is an exception to the rule which requires some kind of 'secondarily elaborative' explanation. In either case, the cognitive centrality of the rule is maintained by treating the rule, together with the explanations for non-compliance with the rule, as exhaustive of the full range of possible contingencies. The exceptions with their explanations thus become 'the exceptions that prove the rule' because the provision of such explanations maintains the rule's presuppositional status both as a rule of conduct and as a rule of interpretation. Once again, we encounter a closed circle of interpretation. Presuppositional rules of action and interpretation interlock with the organization of account giving to form a seamless web – a self-motivating, self-sustaining and self-reproducing normative organization of action.

Generalizing this analysis, we can suggest that rules of action and interpretation are sustained in the first instance by an accumulation of instances that exhibit compliance with them. But they are also maintained by the provision of accounts which 'explain away' instances of non-compliance in ways that, by their very provision, sustain the presuppositional status of the rules. Thus at the deepest level of cognitive and social organization, the role of accounts is intrinsically bound up with the maintenance of the methods

informing social cognition and the social organization of action. Accounts function to 'repair' the ubiquitous relevance of rules of conduct by protecting them from the 'entropic' process of attrition that could otherwise arise from the incidence of non-compliant actions. Ordinary explanations of action, no matter how trivial and apparently inconsequential, thus play a crucial role in maintaining the foundations of social organization itself.

#### Advantages and disadvantages

While it is not easy to evaluate the usefulness of a methodology as complex and multifaceted as CA in a few words, some basic comments can be made. As already noted, CA has been developed as a methodology which is specifically geared to the analysis of the structural organization of social action. During the past 15 years or so, many hundreds of detailed studies of interactional organization have been developed using this methodology in a number of countries. This widespread use of CA techniques testifies to their 'transportability' both within and across national boundaries.

The effectiveness of CA techniques comes from their exploitation of fundamental facts about how interaction is organized. These techniques are therefore specific to the analysis of interaction. It is unlikely, for example, that CA techniques would be as effective in the analysis of explanations provided in a pencil-and-paper procedure that was relatively disengaged from interactional organization and constraints. CA analyses are also highly focused. For example, in the analysis of the provision of accounts for rejected invitations, empirical analysis might well show that, where accounts of the rejection are given to third parties as opposed to the inviting individual, many of the features of accounts sketched above would be absent or considerably modified.

In terms of its specific empirical techniques, the strengths of CA are balanced by corresponding limitations. The discussion of both can be grouped under two headings: data collection and data analysis.

#### Data collection

The concern for naturally occurring data has resulted in data collection techniques which, like the naturalists' specimen hunting expeditions, have so far been largely unfocused. These techniques are geared to the specific tasks of conversation analysis and, as such, have important justifications. First and foremost, CA is at present a fundamentally descriptive exercise which is concerned with the 'natural history' of social interaction. Its aim is to describe the struc-

tural organization of social interaction and its associated reasoning in as many social settings (and as many languages) as possible. The focus is on fundamental structures and the ways in which they both create and influence choices among courses of action. It is important to recognize that this task has only been seriously addressed in the past few years and that we have no reason to suppose that it will be completed in a short period. It is also important to recognize that an understanding of how the structural organization of interaction works is not a descriptive or theoretical luxury, but an essential basis on which the interpretation of a wide range of social, social psychological and communicational data may depend.

Much of CA research is focused on data derived from mundane conversational interaction, and this approach is the product of a considered analytical strategy. It is based on the recognition that ordinary conversation is the predominant medium of interaction in the social world and the primary form to which children are first exposed and through which socialization proceeds. There is thus every reason to suppose that the structures of mundane talk form a kind of benchmark against which the more specialized forms of communication, characteristic of for example the courts, the classroom, the news interview, doctor-patient interaction and so on, are recognized and experienced. This supposition has been confirmed by an increasing body of CA studies focused on these forms of institutional interaction. It is clear, therefore, that the study of ordinary conversation offers a principled approach to describing the distinctive character of these more specialized forms of interaction and also interactions involving the asymmetries of status, gender, ethnicity and so on.

There is an undeniable temptation to accelerate the investigative process by using role plays to focus the collection of data or to use experimental techniques to gain control over variables which may influence the character of interaction. However, these procedures may seriously limit the range and kind of social interaction that is produced and, more generally, may compromise the naturalness of interaction in a variety of ways.

Thus, although it can be slow and cumbersome, the CA style of data collection does hold out the hope that a full range of interactive procedures will eventually be captured. Moreover, there are other advantages to be gained from the CA approach. In particular, the taping of natural interaction creates enduring data bases of interaction which, because they have not been shaped by the constraints of a particular research design, can be reused in a variety of investigations. Any strip of interaction will contain exhibits of a very large range of different interactional phenomena

which can be compared with other exhibits from other data corpora. The accumulation of data corpora into banks of data will greatly facilitate the process of comparison.

These are some of the positive features of the CA approach to data collection. These features are intrinsically associated with the fact that CA is primarily geared to the analysis of the structural organization of interaction (see Duncan and Fiske, 1977 for an account of structural versus variable analysis approaches to the analysis of interaction). They are also associated with significant limitations in the use of CA data. In particular, the data are collected without the use of experimental controls on the content of interaction or controls on the sociological or psychological characteristics of the participants. The absence of these controls may contribute to the roster of acknowledged difficulties in assessing the impact of sociological (for example, gender, ethnicity, social class and so on) and psychological (for example, personality) variables on the specific outcomes of interactions.

In sum, the data collection techniques used by CA reflect a specific set of research objectives and strategies. By their very nature, they occlude other research objectives. This is not to say that the research techniques of CA are ultimately incompatible with other approaches. On the contrary, there is every reason to anticipate the development of complementary research programmes that integrate the findings of structural and variable analysis approaches. The adoption of its chosen approach to data collection reflects CA decisions about the priority of structural analysis in the research process at present.

#### *Data analysis*

In this chapter a basic three-phase framework for data analysis has been sketched, comprising (1) the inductive search for regularity, (2) deviant case analysis and (3) theoretical integration with other findings. Once again, this framework is specifically appropriate for the analysis of normative structural organization in interaction. It cannot be applied to patterns of interaction which are not normatively organized because in such data deviant case analysis, in particular, is inappropriate.

Although this methodology can be simply stated, it is complicated to apply. The complexity and specificity of the structural organization of interaction is such as to make the mechanical application of research technologies inappropriate. Much therefore depends on the ability of the analyst to isolate regularities and pattern in data cleanly and without overgeneralization. CA data analysis has developed as an operation in which empirical advances in particular

domains have increased descriptive purchase in other, related areas of investigation. For example, the discovery that response tokens (such as 'mm hm', 'yes', 'oh' and so on) are not a set of undifferentiated 'back channel' utterances, but are systematically differentiated in terms of their placements, valences and tasks, has enabled researchers to gain access to new understandings of how 'topics' in conversation are organized and shaped. Effectiveness in CA research is not guaranteed by the application of a fixed set of methodological canons, but rather by resourceful use of the corpus of current knowledge.

CA research thus involves careful attention to the contextual and sequential details of interaction. It requires extensive listening or viewing of tapes, careful transcription of interactional detail, and exhaustive analysis. These tasks are time consuming but their results have proved rewarding and influential.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to explore some of the interests which ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts have in lay accounts and in the more generic phenomenon of interactional accountability. I have also tried to illustrate some aspects of CA methodology by examining some cases in which conversationalists account (or fail to account) for their conversational actions. And I have examined aspects of the fundamental role played in social interaction and social life by interactional accountability and the giving of accounts. From an ethnomethodological and conversation analytic point of view, the last aspects lie at the very heart of the normative organization of social life. Accounts and accountability are fundamental features of social organization itself and their foundational significance is not restricted to the domain of social interaction (Pollner, 1974, 1975, 1987; Mulkay and Gilbert, 1982; Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984; Heritage, 1984). Accordingly the topics of this book have a particular relevance for those social scientists who are concerned with the phenomena of social organization. They are also of concern to anyone who has an interest in the fact that, from the point of view of social participants, the members of the social world are *agents* who treat one another as morally and socially accountable for their actions.

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### Completion and dynamics in explanation seeking

*Ivan Leudar and Charles Antaki*

#### Theoretical background

In this chapter we want to talk about a framework for analysing what happens when speakers ask each other for explanations. This kind of dialogue is causing a degree of puzzlement in artificial intelligence and human-computer interaction circles, as some articles in, for example, Norman and Draper (1986) show. The workers in the field know that, without an explanation, the information given by a so-called 'advice system' can be sterile; but they have had severe problems in designing computers better able to volunteer explanations, or to understand the explanatory requests that users sometimes make and to give them satisfactory replies (Alvey KBS Club, 1987).

It seems that what is missing is a theory to guide the design of systems which could engage in explanatory dialogues (or, at worst, which would explain why such systems are not feasible), despite the fact that conversations have been studied intensively in psychology, sociology and linguistic pragmatics. The problem is that not enough attention is paid to the variety of dialogue types, to dynamics of conversation or to the interplay between the individual and the social, and all of these are essential in understanding explanations.

We shall outline some concepts we have been developing which would allow the study of such aspects of dialogues. We shall not say much about explanations themselves, but shall try to persuade the reader that some of the ideas of turn-of-the-century pragmatic philosophers are useful tools, especially if used in conjunction with the methods and findings of modern pragmatics.

The focus here is on the work of G.H. Mead and, in particular, on his notion of *completion*. This is developed and used in analysing how participants in dialogues construct each other's (and their own) moves as explanations, conceiving of conversations in terms of a