

Intention, Meaning and Strategy: Observations on Constraints on Interaction Analysis

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In developing this response to Moerman's beautifully rendered study, I mean to dwell on his observation that

Every thing that matters socially — meanings, class, roles, emotions, guilt, aggression and so forth and so on — is socially constructed. Theories about how such things are learned and experienced, and about how to study them, which are not built to the specifications that interaction requires are wrong. (Moerman, 1988 p. 1)

In this essay, I want to sketch some of the constraints on analysis that are involved in building theories to the "specifications that interaction requires" and some reasons for taking these constraints seriously. Specifically, I take up some of the issues that arise when we address the analysis of social action and interaction in terms of received notions of "intention," "meaning" and "action" deriving from the sociological and anthropological traditions, and some of the difficult judgements that can be involved in the attribution of procedural and cultural knowledge to the participants. As a sociologist, I am not competent to discuss what is culturally specific in Moerman's examples and my observations will be drawn from interactions involving native speakers of English in ordinary conversational contexts. I will

focus primarily on difficulties that can arise in attributing explicit or “conscious” *procedural* knowledge and “intent” to the participants.

Traditional sociological and anthropological notions of meaning and intention are commonly associated with a range of cognate ones that include the following: Subjectivity, consciousness, goals, strategies, rationality, choice and agency. In traditional social science schemata, they are variously linked. Weber (1947), for example, distinguishes between behavior and action by proposing that “action is behavior to which subjective meaning is attached” and goes on to develop a typology of the subjective meanings that may be “attached” to action in terms of their rational, emotional or traditional character. Subsequently, in Parsons’ (1937) influential treatment, actions are to be understood as implemented by *agents* who consciously entertain and pursue *goals*, selecting *means* to achieve these goals by reference to *standards of appropriateness* which may be more or less consciously entertained. Foremost among these “standards of appropriateness” is that of rationality in which it is assumed that the actor selects a course of action in terms of consciously held calculative or “strategic” considerations. Parsons treated these elements as constitutive of the nature of action (more precisely, of the “unit act”), and used this conception to define the subject matter of social science in such a way as to distinguish it from the behavioral and biological sciences (Camic, 1989).

More recently Searle (1969, 1979, forthcoming), basing himself on Grice (1957), has developed an intentionalist view of meaning and action (Searle, 1969, pp. 42-50) to undergird his speech act theory. Significantly, intentions in this analysis are not treated as merely a matter of attribution among the parties in their construction of the meaning of one another’s actions but are also to be understood as causally efficacious in the *explanation* of action (see also Searle, forthcoming).

In developing this position, Searle is clearly aligned with a long tradition of philosophical argument to the effect that understanding the meaning of action must necessarily involve grasping the intention that lies behind it (see Louch, 1966). And this tradition, in turn, embodies commonsense ideas about meaning and action. Human

beings are, apparently, incorrigibly anthropomorphic in their reasoning about action (Tversky & Kahneman, 1977; Kahneman, Slovic & Tversky, 1982). Yet, as Levinson (forthcoming) observes, reasoning from intention to behavior is difficult enough, but reasoning from behavior to intention — which is the central procedure involved in grasping the meaningful character of an action — involves processes that are both computationally complex and logically intractable. Such reasoning, he suggests, involves a range of non-logical heuristics. These heuristics invoke and trade off contextual knowledge — including real world knowledge of objects and their properties, culturally specific knowledge including knowledge of possibly relevant social statuses and roles (cf. Levinson 1979). They also invoke and trade off procedural knowledge — concerning the normative organization of action and action sequences. Grasping the behavior/intention gestalt that provides for the meaning of an action, then, involves solving a kind of simultaneous equation through which behavior and context are brought into a mutually elaborative alignment with one another (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984a).

If these are the resources and the processes which inform the participants’ construction of social action and of meaning-in-interaction, they are, by the same token, the objects of investigation for those of us who are pre-occupied with the analysis of interaction. In this discussion, I want to address some issues that can arise when, *as analysts*, we seek to attribute intention, planning or strategy to courses of action that are pursued by one or both parties to an interactional exchange.² I will begin by discussing interpretations of interaction in terms of “strategy” and subsequently raise some more general areas of difficulty with attributions of conscious intent to interactants.

THE CONCEPT OF STRATEGY

In developing these issues it is useful to distinguish between two senses in which the term “strategy” has come to be used in the social science literature. Historically speaking, the term reaches back to

utilitarianism and beyond to Macchiavelli. In contemporary social science theorizing, it has received a major impetus from attempts to analyze means-ends decision procedures for contingent implementation in zero-sum situations of conflict and choice. Here the analytical effort has been to develop “decision trees” that could be followed by a rational agent who has a conscious goal and who has preferences that can be factored into the decision procedure (Luce and Raiffa, 1957). This concept of strategy — which I shall term *strategy_{cs}* — has close affinities with commonsense outlooks on the nature of choice and rationality and it has largely been developed from them.

A second way in which the notion of strategy is employed arises out of cognitive psychology and has become increasingly used by students of interactional data. This usage — which I shall term *strategy_{cog}* — has involved a wholesale, if metaphorical, transfer of the term from its original home in conscious reasoning and action into a specialized cognitive domain. The move is plain, and properly so, in basic discussions. Thus, while Miller, Galanter and Pribram (1960) introduced their famous discussion of “plans” as TOTE units with the homely example of striking a nail into a piece of wood as a goal under the conscious direction of an agent, their subsequent discussion of the complex sub-plans underlying this action rapidly moves away from action elements which could, by any stretch of the imagination, be treated as under the direct conscious supervision of an agent.

The attraction of this use of *strategy_{cog}* in its appropriate domain derives from the fact that the models of cognitive process that employ it exhibit properties which are such that, if they had been devised by an agent, we should think of them as rational. For example, in accounts of reading strategies that hypothesize that a competent reader will initially adopt a “holistic” procedure in reading a sentence but will revert to an “item by item” parsing of the sentence in the event of difficulty, we see the rationality both of the switch in procedure and of the overall priority of the quicker “holistic” approach. Similarly, we see the generalized rationality of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness strategies in their adaptation to particular circumstances. Or again, in the complicated TOTE hierarchies described by Miller et al., we see the rationality of the hypothesized structured sequence of

“small actions” that are coordinated as sub-plans with respect to the achievement of some overall goal. In none of these cases, however, are we tempted to attribute these strategies to the conscious awareness of an agent. They function firmly within the realm of *strategy_{cog}*.

It is important, however, to recognize what has been lost in the transfer from the realm of *strategy_{cs}* to *strategy_{cog}*. First, we have lost the notion of conscious goal direction in all but the most macro sense of the term — e.g., the goal of reading the sentence or hammering the nail. In the latter, there are no conscious “goals” of, for example, “checking to see whether the arm is appropriately raised” or “initiating a leftward rotation of the tibio-fibula”. Similarly we have in all probability, and for a majority of cases, lost the *conscious* selection of means and, by the same token, the *conscious* evaluation of outcomes. These elements have been “driven into the organism.” They are (or have become through experience) part of its software or even its neurobiology. Thus *strategy_{cog}* is a property predicated of an organism or its program. It is not available to the organism’s (or the program’s) unaided inspection. It is relevant, therefore, to distinguish between a “*strategy_{cog}*” that *fits* behavior and a “*strategy_{cs}*” that *guides* behavior. Psychology, cognitive science and communication theory have thus taken on models that involve the metaphorical extension of notions derived from conscious activity to “unconscious” domains. These extensions are justified by their heuristic utility and they are licensed by the consideration that while these models are not consciously “followed” or “applied”, they are *ex hypothesi* “embodied in” conduct.

Provided one holds on to the unconscious character of the rationality or strategy being attributed to an agent, there need be no difficulty in using these models or concepts in the analysis of conduct. However, these usages can be quite problematic when we turn to the domain of talk-in-interaction. Within this domain, we are building analyses of the conduct of persons who treat one another as agents, who assume that one another’s talk is under “voluntary control” and who hold one another morally accountable for what they say. These conditions create an endlessly fluctuating borderline between circumstances in which, as analysts, we would want to say that a speaker is employing *strategy_{cs}* and those in which we would want to say that some element

of talk is a product of strategy_{cog}. In what follows, I want to explore some of the problems in attributing conscious strategy (strategy_{cs}) in interpreting conversational data.

INTENTIONALITY, RATIONALITY AND STRATEGY IN TALK

Under what circumstances do we, as analysts, tend to conclude that an interactant “intended” to use a particular conversational procedure or employed it “strategically”? One common context, I suggest, arises when in the course of examining some interactional data, the analyst concludes that “A is up to something and B knows it” or “A is up to something and B doesn’t seem to have noticed it or is disattending it”.³ These contexts routinely involve observing in interactional data that a participant has produced two or more actions (sometimes alternative actions, sometimes not) that appear to be directed towards the same goal. Often these contexts involve some kind of manipulation or, in its absence, some attempt by a participant to “stack the odds” in favor of a desired outcome.

The clearest examples of the latter are “pre-sequence” objects (Terasaki, 1976; Schegloff, 1980). When a speaker says “What are you doing tonight?”, we are inclined to treat this conduct as strategically motivated and often, we find, recipients of such utterances do the same.⁴ In such instances, the use of the pre-sequence object is understood in terms of an ultimate objective and the procedure is apt to be interpreted as an instance of strategy_{cs}. By the same token, regardless of whether the recipient replies “no” or, non-jokingly, “I’m washing my hair,” we may be inclined to see that the recipient too may be acting strategically_{cs}. These cases can have this kind of transparency because they involve the *conventionalization* of a strategic move whose efficacy within a game of pure cooperation (Schelling, 1960) rests on its conventional transparency.

Another “awareness context” in which an analyst may be tempted to view an action as reflecting a strategy_{cs} emerges when,

having failed to achieve a desired outcome with one interactional procedure, a speaker seems to employ a second to achieve the same end. Consider the following:

(1) (Frankel TC:I:1:2)

- 1 G: ...d’ju see me pull up?=
 2 S: → =.hhh No:. I w’z trying you all day.=en the
 3 → line w’z busy fer like hours.
 4 G: Ohh:::, ohh:::, .hhhhh We::ll, hhh I’m
 5 g’nna c’m over in a little while help yer
 6 brother out
 7 S: Goo::d
 8 G: .hhh Cuz I know he needs some he::lp.
 9 S: .hh Ye:ah. Yes he’d mention’t that tihday.=
 10 G: =Mm hm.=
 11 S: → =.hh Uh:m, .tlk .hhh Who wih yih ta:lkng to.

Pomerantz (1980) has argued that S’s first turn (lines 2-3), in citing ‘limited access’ to a known-to-recipient event, can be heard as requesting information about that event using a cautious procedure which she terms “fishing.” she characterizes datum (1) in the following terms:

S’s turn “I w’z trying you all day.=en the line w’z busy fer like hours.” may be seen as a first attempt to have G disclose the party she was talking to. One way of characterizing that attempt is as a telling or a reporting of an experience. If the telling is an attempt to have G volunteer information, it fails to succeed. A few turns later, S directly asks for that information with “Who wih yih ta:lkng to.” (Pomerantz, 1980, p. 187)

Pomerantz’s description is a cautious one and may appear to many readers to be unwarrantably so. For one way of construing the datum is to suggest that S initially attempts to solicit information from G using a cautious or delicate procedure and, upon the failure of her first

- 29 B: Yeah'n the church yesterday thih .hhh fla:shin the
 30 ca:m'ras on um when teh w'r there yihknow went in
 31 tuh pr:a:y and an' (.) Go:d g-
 32 (.)
- 33 B: [J a h-
 34 A: [Ah think iss terrible.=
- 35 B: =.hh Jackie looked u:p .h Hey that wz the same spot
 36 we took off fer Ho:nuhlulu
 37 (0.3)
- 38 B: Where they puut him o:n,
 39 (0.6)
- 40 B: et that chartered pla:ce,
 41 A: Oh: rill y?
 42 B: y::Ye::ah,
 43 A: Oh: fer heaven sa:kes.

Following B's initial mention of the topic (line 5), her observation that she "won't even turn the TV on" (lines 10-11) elicits a response from her recipient (A) that indicates that A has been following the post-assassination events on television. There follows some critical discussion of the media's intrusive coverage of the Kennedy family's activities post the assassination (data not shown) which culminates with B's mention of the flashing cameras in church (lines 29-31). B then interrupts her own (line 35) continuation of this theme with an apparently "touched off" recollection: "Hey that wz the same spot we took off fer Ho:nuhlulu". Thus it turns out that the post-assassination disposition of Kennedy's body has a special (and "newsworthy") circumstantial relevance for B. Her chartered flight for Honolulu had taken off from "the same spot" that Kennedy's body had been loaded for

transportation back to the East. She has her own adventitious connection with the affairs of "the great and the good." Her co-participant subsequently responds to this news (at lines 41 and 43) and the talk is progressed by reference to this topic for some subsequent turns.

There is nothing in the data, thus described, to suggest that B has proceeded strategically to this sudden recollection — indeed most aspects of the sequence seem to indicate quite the contrary: that the "recollection" is just that — something unlooked for that was triggered by the talk. However, there is — fortuitously — some evidence that B's talk in extract (2) may be more "strategic_{cs}" than we might otherwise believe. The evidence derives from the immediately preceding telephone call which B made to another party (C). Here it will be seen, B engages in an almost identical series of actions to arrive at the same point — the mention of her relationship to the post-assassination events. In this case, the fragment opens after a misunderstanding over dates has been cleared up, whereupon B announces "That's ri' God'v lost track a'time." She then immediately exploits her own prior utterance to introduce a virtually identical reference as in her conversation with A (at line 3): "This's rilly been a wee:k hasn'tit." (compare extract (2), line 5).

(3) (NB:II:1:R:3)

- 1 B: Oh this week. th[at's ri'] God'v lost track a'time=
 2 C: [Ye:ah.
 3 B: =This's rilly been a wee:k hasn'tit.
 4 C: Oh: Go:d a lo:ng wee:k. Yeah.
 5 B: [Oh : my] God I'm (.) glad
 6 it's over I won't even turn the teevee o:n.
 7 C: [I
 8 won'eether.
 9 B: °aOh no. They drag it out so° THAT'S WHERE THEY WE
 10 TOOK OFF on ar chartered flight that sa:me spot

- 11 didju see it?,
 12 (0.7)
- 13 B: .hh when they took him in the airplane,
 14 C: [n : N o : : :] Hell I
 15 wouldn't ev'n watch it. I think it's so ridiculous.
 16 I mean it's .hhh it's a horrible thing but my: Go:d.
 17 play up that thing it it's jst horrible.

((7 lines omitted))

- 25 B: .hh We:ll they have too much tee:vee I think
 26 teevee's ruined the wo:rdl myse:lf,
 27 C: Ye: ah.
 28 B: Da:mn teevee: .hh hh
 29 C: Ye: ah.
 30 B: That's where we took
 31 off.=The exact spot: on that chartered flight.
 32 (0.4)
 33 C: Oh: =
 34 B: =^owhere the^o plane came in. I j'st watched tha:t
 35 but
 36 (0.3)
- 37 B: [hhh
 38 C: Uh I wouldn't ev'n turn it o:n I [mean I] : js .t.hhh
 39 B: [Uh-uh

- 40 C: Iss too depres [sing.]
 41 B: [Oh: : : :] it is terr:uhble=what's
 42 ne:w.

Again in this fragment B introduces the TV coverage with “I won't even turn the teevee o:n.” (line 6). While C's response to this remark seems to indicate that she too has not been following the coverage, B nonetheless introduces her own connection to the events at lines 9-11. Her place reference does not get recognition from her recipient and her claim is not topicalized. After some intervening talk which, once again, is critical of the post-assassination media coverage, she again attempts to topicalize her tenuous association with the Kennedy funeral arrangements (lines 30-31) and, notably, incorporates an attempt to sustain her own earlier claim to have avoided watching the TV coverage (lines 34-35) of which both parties have been critical. Once again, the issue is not taken up and B abandons the topic at lines 41-43.

We have now come far enough to achieve a substantial re-reading of extract (2) above which, it will be recollected, is the second in the real time sequence of telephone calls. Examining extract (3) above, we have seen B's determined and repeated effort to record her circumstantial connection with the Kennedy funeral. We have also seen the procedures — in particular the references to the television coverage of the events — by which the relevant particulars were topicalized. Returning to extract (2) with its previously “invisible” strategy, the virtually identical internal structuring of the successive moves towards what we now see as the “target” announcement strongly suggests that extract (2) is the product of a strategic sequence of actions. Moreover, as it happens, B's strategy is one which, far from being peculiar to B, is of very general provenance. B here employs a general device — “stepwise” topical movement (Sacks, 1971, 1972; Jefferson, 1984) — as a means to progress from an initial “place” in conversation (in extract (2) a death in another person's family, and in extract (3) a muddle over dates) to get to a point where she can present — under the guise of a “touched off” recollection — an otherwise

“unconnected” matter — her association with the post-assassination events. The device exploits

a general feature for topical organization in conversation [that] is movement from topic to topic...by a stepwise move, which involves linking up whatever is being introduced to what has just been talked about, such that, as far as anybody knows, a new topic has not been started, though we're far from wherever we began. (Sacks, 1972, pp. 15-16)

And her employment of this device involves a procedure which, as Sacks describes it, runs as follows:

If you have some topic which you can see is not connected to what is now being talked about, then you can find something which is connected to both, and use that first. (Sacks, 1971, pp. 15-16)

If it can be argued that such a procedure is consciously employed, then its use can evidence a form of strategy_{cs}.

INTENTION, CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE PROCEDURAL BASIS OF SOCIAL ACTIONS

In the discussion of examples (1)-(3) above, I have pointed to a range of problems which inhabit attempts to warrant descriptions of actions as informed or guided by strategic_{cs} intent. I now turn to some more mundane conversational activities with a view to showing how difficult it can be to treat social actions in terms of an intentionalist account of meaning.

Searle's intentionalist account of meaning is based on examples which, when presented as they are out of context, seem so transparent as to make any dissent from his conclusions seem churlish. In examples like “Do you have the time?” it can seem pointless to deny that the questioner's desire to know the time (or some related illocutionary or perlocutionary intent) is the conscious intent that lies behind and gives meaning to the utterance (though see Goffman, 1981, pp. 68-70). It can seem similarly futile to deny that the answerer's response is

motivated by, given meaning by and interpreted in terms of, a correspondingly conscious intention to supply the information that the questioner lacks. Here, at least, it seems that analyses of the meaning and motivation of actions in terms of conscious intent may be based on solid ground. Yet much of the data of social interaction cannot be analyzed in these terms.

Consider, for example, the particle “oh” which is commonly used in response to informings of various sorts and which, in such contexts, generally conveys that the information was “news” to the “oh”-producer (Heritage, 1984b) — as in the following case:

(4) (Frankel TC:1:1:13-14)

- 1 S: .hh When d'ju get out. Christmas week or the week
 2 before Christmas
 3 (0.3)
 4 G: Uh::m two or three days before Ch_rristmas,
 5 S: [Oh :,] .hh

Here, regardless of whether an intentionalist analysis will or will not do for the first two utterances of the sequence, it will clearly not do for the third. For there is no conscious vernacular knowledge that “oh” is a resource for showing that one has been “informed” and, correspondingly, there can be no conscious intention to utter “oh” to show that one has been informed by what a previous speaker has just said.⁶ Here then, an intentionalist account of meaning has no place.

Similar issues can be raised in regard to pre-sequences. Take, for example, the “pre-pre” (Schegloff, 1980). It will be recalled that through the use of this type of object — prototypical exemplars are “Can I ask you a question” or “Let me tell you something” — speakers attempt to secure an opportunity to present some intervening talk, often “background” information, prior to asking the question or doing the telling that the “pre-pre” projects. But while there may be some vague or fleeting “intention” to achieve this aim, the role of the “pre-pre” in its achievement will almost certainly be thoroughly

opaque to both the speaker and the recipient of the utterance.⁷ Here too, an intentionalist account of meaning is beside the point.

Just as intentionalist accounts may be inapposite for the “semantics” of utterances like “oh” and for the role of the “pre-pre” in conversational sequences, so too they may be of little import in understanding the procedural bases of social action. In their well known paper on turn-taking, Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) identify procedural rules through which utterances are parsed into units and these units are allocated to speakers. It is clear from their account (and from the subsequent debate with Searle; see Schegloff, forthcoming), however, that these rules are not the objects of conscious orientation by the participants. And, although the participants may fleetingly orient to the *normativity* of these rules when they are departed from, the substance of the rules themselves remains opaque.

I have here mentioned a few, easily accessible examples of conversational actions for which accounts of meaning shaped in terms of consciousness and intention simply will not do. But the complex procedural resources for engaging in interaction permeate every aspect of its realization. Searle, indeed, gets us to acknowledge the transparent “intentionality” of his examples precisely by disengaging them from the unconscious procedural infrastructures through which their particular character as actions is produced and apprehended.

For the lay observer of tennis, the difference between a well positioned top-spin serve and a reflex volley is that the first is the product of conscious intent while the second is the product of unconscious skill. But *both* actions — together with all the shots between these two poles — embody an immense reservoir of unconscious skilled practices. In interaction, actions can emerge which look most like a skilled serve in tennis. On these occasions, the conscious intentionality of an action can seem obvious and inescapable. Yet interactants are more practiced in their conduct than the most professional of tennis players and, like the serve, the carefully designed conversational action is also based on layer upon layer of unconsciously learned and mobilized capacities. Moreover in conversation, as in tennis, most actions cannot be treated as so deliberate. When a tennis player moves in anticipation of a return shot, runs towards the

pitch of the ball and finally executes a passing shot down the line, conscious intent may play only a fleeting role in the process. The whole course of action is based in unconscious or, at best, quasi-conscious anticipations, recognitions and objectives which are all embodied in the tacit infrastructural skills of the player. Many, perhaps most, conversational actions are based on similarly vague anticipations, understandings, recognitions and protentions. Indeed Freud’s famous metaphor of the horse and rider may not be inapposite for depicting the deeply intricated relationship between the unconscious procedural resources for understanding and producing courses of action on the one hand and the formation and recognition of intention on the other. These considerations suggest that analyses of interaction predicated on notions of consciousness and intention can be desperately problematic and downright misleading.

DISCUSSION

We are now in a position to formulate three main areas of difficulty in assigning intent to the producer of an utterance.

First, even in what may be cases of “strategy” there is the problem of discerning “intent” in contexts where such intent may be designedly ambiguous or invisible. Such invisibility is certainly a feature of B’s talk in extract (2) above. For even if we now recognise B’s procedure in extract (2) above as strategic, it did not originally present itself to us (or B’s co-participant?) as such. In conversation, as in chess, one might argue, “invisibility” is often a specific feature of the design and the “success” of a strategic procedure. It is certainly a feature of B’s procedure in extract (2). That invisibility was only fortuitously breached (for us, the analysts) by the fact that B used the exact same procedure in two successive telephone calls to two different recipients. This “invisibility” problem and the difficulties it raises for the attribution of strategic intent to interactants is a quite general problem in analyzing conversational interaction. It is only in institutionalized settings where the participants have mutually identifiable

social roles and socially sanctioned goals — law courts are perhaps the paradigmatic example (Levinson, 1979; Atkinson & Drew, 1979, pp. 105-178) — that intentional strategies can be ascribed to the participants with substantial confidence. It is notable, in this context, that Moerman is at his most confident in attributing intention to his participants in just such a setting (Moerman, 1988, pp. 60-67).

Second, it can be strikingly difficult — even when the employment of some intentionally strategic move seems beyond dispute — to determine the point at which such an “intention” was formed and thereby to determine its range or scope. This problem is quite apparent in extract (1) above where it was difficult to determine whether S entertained a “strategic intent” at lines 2-3 with her initial account/“fish”, or somewhere over the course of lines 7-11 when it had become apparent that her account/“fish” had not elicited who G was talking to, or even at line 12 where she explicitly issued the question.

Finally, I have wanted to indicate how problematic “intentionalist” analyses of action and the understanding of action can be. The sheer depth of unconscious skill and mastery of conversational procedures in talk is deeply opaque to intentionalist attributions. Here, I believe, that Moerman and I are at one in rejecting an intentionalist conception of meaning. Concluding his chapter on overlapping talk, Moerman writes that:

all of these meaningful, consequential, structurally complex, and densely cultural overlaps were certainly undeliberate, unanticipated, unconscious, and unremembered. No individual human actor is their author. We build our experienced, lived in, significant social reality out of a mesh of interactive processes too tiny and too quick for the thinking, planning “I” to handle. (Moerman, 1988, p. 30)

Here then, we return to strategy_{cog} and the contingently fluctuating line between activities that are strategic_{cog} and those moments when they reach the threshold of strategy_{cs}. It is for this reason that conversation analysts have sought, wherever possible, to avoid a terminology of social action that invokes mentalistic predicates and thereby anthropomorphizes processes that may be less anthropomorphic than we

conventionally believe (Sacks, 1967a, 1967b; Heritage & Atkinson, 1984; Jefferson, 1989).

In the end, I believe, the judgement that conscious intent lies behind an action or a course of action is something that is locally occasioned and determined within the vernacular reasoning practices of particular cultures (Duranti, 1984; Ochs, 1982, 1984; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). As the object of vernacular practices, intention ascription is properly analyzable as a locally produced object of interactional analysis but it may not function as a global interpretive resource in such analysis. The “procedural” terminology of conversation analysis is happily agnostic both about “intention” generally and, more specifically, between strategy_{cs} and strategy_{cog}. This agnosticism is apt for a domain in which the parties treat one another, and rely on treating one another, as accountable agents but where the medium of their conduct — natural language — is both immensely complicated and institutionalized and, for these reasons, stands only imperfectly under the conscious control of any of them.

NOTES

- 1 Some of the arguments of this paper were first developed in a paper prepared for the British Association of Applied Linguistics Seminar on Interpretive Strategies (September 1981). In re-developing them for this publication, I have had the opportunity to reconsider them in the light of some recent contributions — in particular those by Drew, Levinson and Streeck — to the Workshop on the Social Origins of Human Intelligence, Wissenschaftskolleg, Berlin (in Goody, frth.). I have also benefitted from valuable comments by Manny Schegloff who has induced me to write in better ways than I otherwise might have managed.
- 2 The term “course of action” here might be analogized to Searle’s (forthcoming) observation that “often big speech acts are made up of little speech acts. So, for example, if I am explaining to you the operation of an internal combustion engine, or justifying my behavior at last night’s party, I will characteristically make a series of subsidiary speech acts all of which add up to the big speech act of explaining or justifying.”
- 3 A second major set of contexts arises when a participant appears to be *avoiding* the commission of some action — either a relevant next action or a context in

- which a particular action might become relevant. Some examples of this second set of cases are discussed in Drew (forthcoming) and will not be addressed here.
- 4 And, as Drew (forthcoming) and Levinson (forthcoming) observe, an orientation to the strategic character of these objects is easily shown in examples where recipients of the pre-sequence object address its (inferred) ultimate goal, rather than what it specifically projects.
 - 5 It may be that that B's utterance is helped to achieve this elliptical reference by its juxtaposition with her prior mention of a death in someone else's family.
 - 6 This point is nicely illustrated by the following. In the course of a telephone call in 1978 in response to a conference invitation, I was asked what I would talk about. I replied that I would talk about the particle "oh." "Oh," said conference organizer, "the surprise particle." The interesting feature of this utterance was that my co-interactant, who had long known of my work in this area, was *not* surprised. Here a lay or vernacular version of the particle's work, as described by a highly sophisticated linguist, was belied by his actual usage of the particle not as a marker of "surprise," but as an acknowledgement of information.
 - 7 It is sometimes difficult to recall the feeling of genuine revelation that was associated with the original explication of devices like the "pre-pre." Such analytical understandings as this one that are now deeply embedded "in the literature" can come to seem commonplace with the passage of time but, although the use of such procedures has become transparent to the analyst, every effort should be made to avoid the unwarranted projection of these transparencies to the participants — thereby committing the fallacy of "intellectualizing" the participants.

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