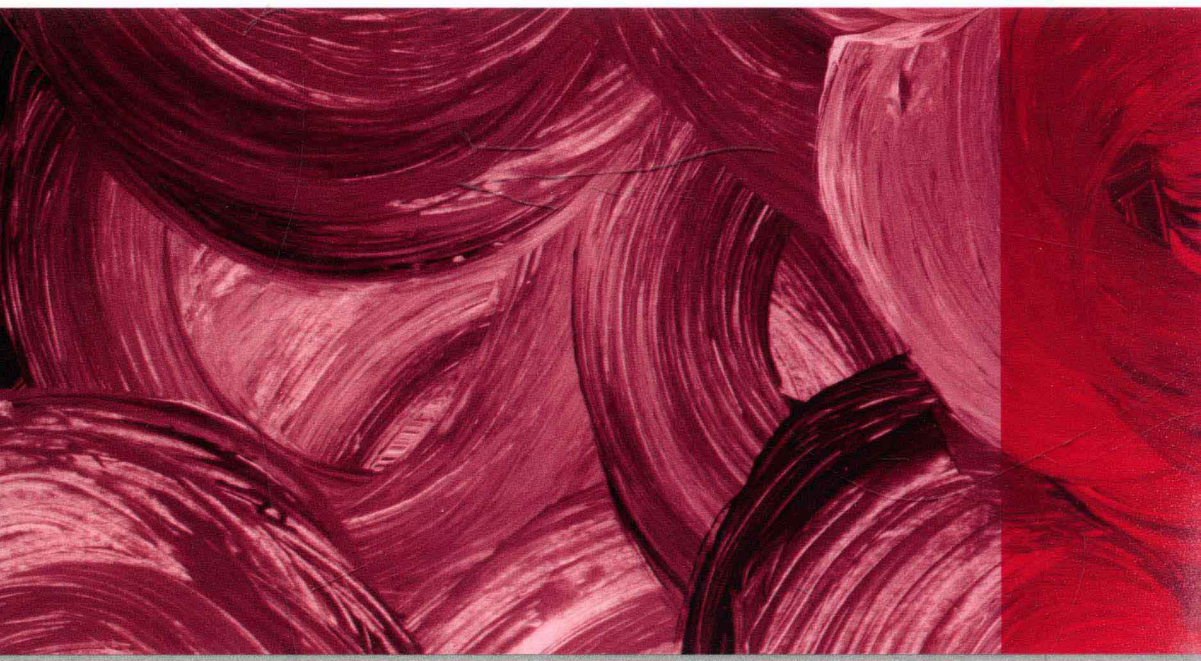
John Heritage
and Steven Clayman

Talk in Action

Interactions, Identities, and Institutions



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INTERACTIONS, IDENTITIES, AND INSTITUTIONS

John Heritage
and
Steven Clayman

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The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Talk in Action

Language in Society

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This book is dedicated to our students.

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1

Introduction

This book is about the workings of language and interaction in the everyday life of institutions. It arose from our long-standing conviction that, while it was all but ignored in conventional analyses of occupational worlds, professions, and organizational environments, the study of interaction had much to offer to the analysis of these domains of social life. Accordingly, in the early 1990s we decided to start a seminar that applied the emerging findings of conversation analysis to occupational environments of various kinds. At that time, studies of this sort were few and far between, and concentrated in a limited range of domains, notably courtroom interaction, 911 emergency, and mass communication. Our seminar was correspondingly small, attracting perhaps a dozen intrepid participants.

Since that time, the field has expanded dramatically. Conversation analytic (CA) research, once all but absent from the doctor's office, has now become an established presence in the field of medicine, where it is used to examine everything from genetic counseling to surgery. It has also colonized the world of business, from business meetings and decision making to, perhaps especially, the examination of technology-in-use. In education, CA has advanced from classroom lessons to embrace more far-flung enterprises such as one-on-one pedagogy, disciplinary hearings, and parent–teacher conferences. In the socio-legal area, a focus on formal trials has given way to a more differentiated range of studies encompassing the more informal legal proceedings such as mediation, arbitration, and plea bargaining. The study of 911 emergency has broadened to embrace an ever-widening array of help lines and support services. Mass media research has exhibited a similar diversification, with the initial news interview research joined by studies of campaign debates, radio call-in shows, and talk shows of various stripes. This growth and diversification is not confined to the English-speaking world; it is a world-wide phenomenon embracing many languages and diverse cultures.

In the meantime, our small seminar expanded to a large-scale lecture course that has been taken by students who now number in the thousands. Naturally there are limits to what can be covered within the confines of a 10-week course and, rather than spread ourselves too thinly, we chose to cover a smaller range of environments in a sustained way. Accordingly, while our teaching registered the many advances of an evolving field, three main criteria determined our selection of topics. We focused on domains of interaction that, first, have intrinsic interest as specimens of the everyday world; second, have significant outcomes for individuals and the society of which they are a part; and third, have an exemplary status

within a continuum of social contexts: private versus public, formal versus informal, and professional versus bureaucratic. This book is based on those choices.

It is important to emphasize that our aim is not to draw a dividing line between ordinary conversation and interaction that is professional, task-focused, or "institutional". This is because we do not believe that a clear dividing line can be drawn. Most important in this regard is the fact that practices of interaction in the everyday world are unavoidably drawn on in every kind of institutional interaction. For example, a witness in court may be confined by a variety of rules of legal process, but she will still deploy her ordinary conversational competences in constructing the details of her testimony. By the same token, the kind of rhetorical formulations used to persuade others in political speeches are also to be found in argumentative conversations over the dinner table and at the office water cooler. For this reason, we do not propose any hard-and-fast distinction between "ordinary conversation" on the one hand and "institutional talk" on the other. Rather, we investigate the ways in which ordinary conversational practices are brought to bear in task-focused interactions. Because the tasks of these interactions are recurrent, so too are the specific practices that they frequently engage. For this reason, we can fairly readily observe systematic relationships between practices of interaction on the one hand, and institutional tasks and identities on the other. It is the intersections between interactional practices, social identities, and institutional tasks that lie at the heart of this book.

These intersections take many forms. To prepare for their analysis, we begin with a theoretical and methodological overview of conversation analysis and its application to occupations and institutions. These chapters (2–4) provide an account of the theoretical origins of CA in the work of Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel, and explicate the methodology of CA and how it can be applied to institutional settings. We then offer an overview of different levels of analysis of institutional interaction that will be in evidence throughout the book.

The body of the book centers on four main institutional domains: calls to 911 emergency (chapters 5–7), doctor–patient interaction (chapters 8–11), courtroom trials (chapters 12–14), and mass communication (chapters 15–18). The pioneering work of Don Zimmerman and his colleagues established 911 calls as one of the first applications of CA to an institutional task. The domain is a useful starting point both because of its intrinsic interest and also because the overwhelming task focus of these calls starkly exemplifies the extent to which a task's organizational imperatives can shape multiple aspects of interactional organization and practice. 911 calls also highlight the extent to which the personal circumstances and emotional states of participants are enmeshed with, and become adjusted to, the demands of the business at hand.

In our second domain, doctor–patient interaction, we focus on primary care, in part because it is the largest part of the health care system, and also because of its clear exemplification of professionalism in action. Here we focus on the twin themes of professional authority and personal accountability in medical decision making by both doctors and their patients, and also on ways in which authority and accountability are challenged and contested.

For the third domain, we focus on one of the earliest applications of conversation analysis to a social institution: formal trial proceedings. In contrast to our first two domains, which essentially involve private interactions, trials are public events and are regulated by public and highly codified rules of conduct. Here we address the bookends of the trial process: examination of witnesses, and jury deliberations. In both areas, our analysis concerns how legal codes, rules of procedure, and the "facts of the case" are selectively deployed and

creatively articulated in the give and take of often contentious interactional processes. We also examine processes of informal dispute resolution, which have assumed an ever-increasing role in the legal system.

Our final domain, mass communication in the form of broadcast news interviews, news conferences, and political speeches, is also highly public in character. Our primary focus is on how the competing journalistic norms of objectivity and adversarialness are reconciled and implemented in practice, and how interviewees strive to stay on message in an environment of interrogation. We also consider political speeches, which are of course a context in which it is relatively easy to stay on message. However, in this form of interaction en masse, public speakers face the task of keeping audiences attentive and mobilizing their support. We examine the rhetorical resources that speakers deploy to this end, and show some ways in which these resources can, outlasting the speech itself, pass from utterance to history.

In our class at UCLA, we found that we were not only examining particular institutional domains, but also introducing our students to the methodology of conversation analysis. Studying institutions, we found, was a motivation for our students to learn the techniques of interactional analysis necessary to get at the workings of human organizations. Our class necessarily had a kind of double curriculum, which is carried over into this book. Accordingly, our aim is to be exemplary rather than encyclopedic in the hope that we will attract interest in both the institutions and the interactional practices through which they are talked into being.

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I

Conversation Analysis and Social Institutions

2

Conversation Analysis: Some Theoretical Background

Social interaction is the very bedrock of social life. It is the primary medium through which cultures are transmitted, relationships are sustained, identities are affirmed, and social structures of all sorts are reproduced (Goodwin & Heritage 1990). It is, in Schegloff's (1996) phrase, "the primordial site of human sociality". In almost every imaginable particular, our ability to grasp the nature of the social world and to participate in it is dependant on our capacities and resourcefulness as social interactants (Enfield & Levinson 2006).

In the past, as Goffman (1964) noted, social scientists have had little to say about how interaction works, treating it as an inscrutable black box that is beyond coherent description. In particular, it was believed that individual episodes of interaction are fundamentally disorderly, and that attempts at their systematic analysis would only be a waste of time (Sacks 1984a). Lacking systematic knowledge of how interaction works, social scientists had even less to say about the relationship between interactions and institutions. Yet it is through interaction that institutions are brought to life and made actionable in the everyday world.

Consider the following segment of talk from a medical consultation. The patient is a divorced, middle-aged woman who lives alone and works a sixty-hour week in a restaurant she owns and manages. At line 4, the doctor asks a lifestyle question. Though compactly phrased, the question clearly raises the issue of her alcohol consumption. She responds with an apparently bona fide effort to estimate it as "moderate" (line 6). Pressed further, she elaborates this in a turn that conveys, without directly stating, that her drinking is social and infrequent (lines 9–10). The doctor is not satisfied with this, and pursues a more objective numerically specified estimate (lines 11–12). After a brief struggle, a compromise quasi-numerical estimate is reached (lines 15–16) and accepted (line 18):

(1)

1	Doc:	tch D'you smoke?, h
2	Pat:	Hm mm.
3		(5.0)
4	Doc:	Alcohol use?
5		(1.0)
6	Pat:	Hm:: moderate I'd say.
7		(0.2)
8	Doc:	Can you define that, hhhehh ((laughing outbreath))

```
 9  Pat:   Uh huh hah .hh I don't get off my- (0.2) outta
10         thuh restaurant very much but [(awh:)
11  Doc:                                 [Daily do you use
12         alcohol or:=h
13  Pat:   Pardon?
14  Doc:   Daily? or[:
15  Pat:            [Oh: huh uh. .hh No: uhm (3.0) probably::
16         I usually go out like once uh week.
17         (1.0)
18  Doc:   °Kay.°
```

Consider some questions which are absolutely central to understanding this sequence of interaction. What considerations led the patient to evaluate her drinking as "moderate" (line 6) and, when challenged, to frame her response in terms of not "going out" very much? Why did the doctor ask "Daily do you use alcohol or:=h" with the "Daily" at the beginning of the sentence and the "or:" at the end of it? Why did the patient say "Pardon?" at line 13 when she plainly heard the question? Why, after all this, did the patient still end up talking about how much she "goes out" (lines 15–16)? And how are all these details about the actions and reasoning of the participants connected to the roles of doctor and patient?

If you had been presented with this segment in 1960, you would have found few systematic resources with which to answer these questions, and none that could offer any significant clues as to the details of the actions the participants are engaged in. The dominant systems of analysis involved standard categories (e.g., "shows solidarity", "gives suggestion", "asks for opinion", "shows tension" [Bales 1950]) which were simply imposed on the data even though, as in our example, they frequently had little or nothing to do with what participants were actually doing in their interactions.

The advent of conversation analysis in the 1960s changed all this. Today, the details of this segment can be specified with a high degree of resolution. This is possible because we now recognize not only that there is a "world" of everyday life that is available to systematic study, but also that it is orderly to a degree that was hitherto unimaginable. Our aim in this chapter is to introduce you to the basic ideas that underlie this revolution in thought.

Two great American social scientists – Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel – laid the groundwork for this conversation analytic revolution. Both of them dissented from the view that the details of everyday life are an inherently disorderly and unresearchable mess, so we begin with them.

Origins: Erving Goffman

Erving Goffman's fundamental achievement, developed over a lifetime of writing (see Goffman 1955, 1983), was to establish that social interaction is a form of social organization in its own right. Interaction, he argued, embodies a distinct moral and institutional order that can be treated like other social institutions, such as the family, education, or religion. Goffman came to term this the *interaction order* (Goffman 1983) and, he argued, it comprises a complex set of interactional rights and obligations which are linked both to "face" (a person's immediate claims about "who s/he is" in an interaction), more enduring features of personal identity, and also to large-scale macro social institutions. Goffman further argued that the

institutional order of interaction has a particular social significance. It underlies the operations of all the other institutions in society, and it mediates the business that they transact. The work of political, economic, educational, legal and other social institutions is in large part discharged by means of the practices comprising the interaction order.

Goffman's central insight was that the institution of interaction has an underlying structural organization: what he called a "syntax". In the Introduction to *Interaction Ritual* (Goffman 1967) he observes: "I assume that the proper study of interaction is not the individual and his psychology, but rather the syntactical relations among the acts of different persons mutually present to one another" (Goffman 1967: 2). The participants use this syntax – which provides for the sequential ordering of actions (see Goffman 1971: 171–202) – to analyze one another's conduct. By looking at the choices people make within this structure, persons can arrive at judgments about personal motivations and identities. The syntax of interaction, Goffman argued, is a core part of the moral order. It is the place where face, self, and identity are expressed, and where they are also ratified or undermined by the conduct of others.

Thus, in contrast to his predecessors, Goffman viewed the normative organization of practices and processes that makes up the interaction order as a domain to be studied in its own right. He repeatedly rejected the view that interaction is a colorless, odorless, frictionless substrate through which social processes operate (Goffman 1964, Kendon 1987), and asserted instead that the interaction order is an autonomous site of authentic social processes that inform social action and interaction. With this framework, Goffman carved out a new conceptual space, and with it a new territory for systematic analysis: the interaction order as a social institution.

Goffman's inspired conceptualization, while influential, also presented limitations. He was interested in how face and identity are associated with action, and how moral inferences about them can *motivate* interactional conduct. However, he was much less interested in, and did not pursue, a second equally fundamental issue concerning how participants *understand* one another in interaction. How does this process of understanding work? And, just as important, how do persons know that they share the *same* understandings within interaction? Without this crucial component it is not obvious how the interaction order could operate as a working institution. Largely for this reason, Goffman's approach – brilliant though it was – failed to stabilize as a systematic approach to the analysis of interaction. There is no "Goffman School" of interaction analysis, and his seminal insights might have been stillborn but for their intersection with a quite separate emergence of interest in cognition and meaning in the social sciences during the 1960s.

Origins: Harold Garfinkel

This emergence can be traced, above all, to the extraordinary researches of Harold Garfinkel (1967). Garfinkel argued that all human action and human institutions, including Goffman's interaction order, rest on the primordial fact that persons are able to *make shared sense* of their circumstances and act on the shared sense they make. He further argued that coordinated and meaningful actions, regardless of whether they involve cooperation or conflict, are impossible without these shared understandings. Garfinkel wanted to know how this is possible, and he hit on the notion that persons use *shared methods of practical reasoning* (or "ethno-methods") to build this shared sense of their common context of action, and of the

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