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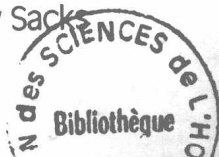
Talking Culture

Ethnography and Conversation Analysis

MICHAEL MOERMAN

With an Appendix by Michael Moerman and Harvey Sacks

 University of Pennsylvania Press | Philadelphia



University of Pennsylvania Publications In Conduct and Communication

Erving Goffman and Dell Hymes, *Founding Editors*

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Moerman, Michael.

Talking culture.

(University of Pennsylvania publications in conduct
and communication)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Conversation. 2. Language and culture.
2. Ethnology—Methodology. I. Title. II. Series.

P95.45.M64 1987 401'.9 87-14973

ISBN 0-8122-8072-5

ISBN 0-8122-1246-0 (pbk.)

Design: ADRIANNE ONDERDONK DUDDEN

For

Leo Moerman

Harvey Sacks

Ahmed El-Senoussi

Albert Grodner

my teachers still.

Preface

This book examines relationships among language, society, culture, and thought. Less grandly, it connects conversation analysis with ethnography. The words “conversation” and “analysis” are not protected by copyright. Such distinguished scholars as J. L. Austin, Erving Goffman, P. Grice, John Gumperz, and William Labov have contributed to our understanding of conversation. But the mode of study that I endorse and represent is the research lineage founded by the late Harvey Sacks. Whenever this book mentions “conversation analysis,” it is to this research tradition that the term refers. Early chapters are intended to provide sufficient introduction to the aspirations, flavor, techniques, and findings of conversation analysis for this book to stand on its own. But more dedicated readers would do well to consult Stephen C. Levinson’s (1983: 284–370) excellent overview, and to then go (in this order) to: Schenkein 1978: 1–6, Appendix B of this book, Sacks 1974, Schegloff & Sacks 1973. These are sufficient preparation for the more technical papers in conversation analysis. Of these, Sacks, et al. 1974 is canonic.

The term “ethnomethodology” has become such a banner and bugbear that I hesitate to use it. But it is the proper name for viewing “the objective reality of social facts as an ongoing accomplishment of the concerted activities of daily life” (Garfinkel 1967: vii), and for “discovering the formal properties of commonplace . . . actions ‘from within’ actual settings, as ongoing accomplishments of those settings” (ibid.: viii). Ethnomethodology is thus the intellectual tradition in which conversation analysis and this book were formed. I cannot define my debt to Harold Garfinkel, but I know that it is great, am glad to acknowledge it, and am unable to discharge it.

Conversation analysis awaited the invention of the portable sound recorder that freed the student of speech from the distortions of standardization, self-interest,

and memory. Its data consist of audio and video recordings of naturally occurring occasions and of transcripts of those recordings. Conversation analysis studies the organization of everyday talk, of language as actually used in social interaction. Its hallmark is exacting transcripts of naturally occurring talk analyzed for what the talkers orient to in producing its orderliness. By explicating elements of the social organization of speech, conversation analysis provides a component that has been critically missing from the realistic examination of such issues as how language relates to thinking, how "structure" relates to "practice" and institutions to experience, or how actors can be both agents and objects in the social world. But conversation analysis can do this only when it is coupled with ethnography, informed by the context in which speech occurs, and sensitive to the apparent purposes of speakers.

Ethnography is directed toward understanding and explicating how people make sense of their lives. As a fieldworker, I had become convinced that such standard research strategies as asking questions, or even announcing one's professional interests (Moerman 1967:66, ff.), distorted the native relevancies that it was my task to uncover. I devised ways of working that seemed to circumvent them (Moerman 1969a), and, by trying to merely listen in on native talk, became an ethnographer-consumer of conversation analysis (1972, 1973). But the dismayingly accurate predictions that conversation analysis permitted (partially reported in Chapter Three of this book) forced me to interrupt ethnography in order to learn the techniques of conversation analysis. This was a difficult, exacting, and time-consuming task: intellectually rewarding, but less satisfying than fieldwork.

Anything ever said is said by someone, to someone, at a particular moment of some specific socially organized and culturally informed occasion. Casual everyday conversation is the most common, frequent, and pervasive way in which speech is socially organized. It is also the most thoroughly and successfully studied. By attending to the specific here and now, to embodied and actual details as demonstrably oriented to by participants, conversation analysis could be a paragon of ethnographic practice. But ethnographers have so far shown little interest in its findings, and some distaste for its procedures. One reason is that they have not known much about it. This book is directed toward correcting that. But to know conversation analysis is not necessarily to love it. Its high-powered lens sacrifices range, breadth, and *mise-en-scène*. Moreover, the world it has discovered is startling and strange. There are general, powerful, and intricate abstract structures and processes of human conversation that do not correspond to the social order we commonly recognize or to the cultural world that we admire. This can make conversation analysis seem bloodless, impersonal, and unimportant to anthropology's central concerns. Few of our lineage's publications connect the technical organization of conversation to richly experienced human reality. Instead, there is the

clacking of “turns” over their “possible completion points” (Sacks, et al. 1974), the neat scattering of “repair initiators” in their three-turn space (Schegloff, et al. 1977; Moerman 1977): dry bones of the talk with which roles, passions, institutions, and private strategies are embodied and lived.

Harvey Sacks understood with deep compassion that we are fated to live in a world of talk. We are successively exalted or bored, enraptured, embarrassed, made anxious largely by talk organized as conversation: talk with which we seduce, threaten, or pour out our hearts to one another. In every moment of talk, people are experiencing and producing their cultures, their roles, their personalities. Not just “the natives,” but you and I live lives of talk, experience the social world as motivated talkers and listeners, as tongued creatures of the social order; each with our own bursts of pleasure and pain, each with our own proud differences of personal style. Conversation analysis has some promise of precisely locating and describing how that world of talk works, how the experienced moments of social life are constructed, how the ongoing operation of the social order is organized. Its transcripts are tracings of social events, analogous to the cloud chamber photographs that record physical events. But our events are human events, events of meaning. Their description, explication, and analysis require a synthesis of ethnography—with its concern for context, meaning, history, and intention—with the sometimes arid and always exacting techniques that conversation analysis offers for locating culture *in situ*. That melding is this book’s goal.

Some conversational phenomena—overlap, person identification, and repair—will be given more attention than others. This is a matter of convenience and pedagogic utility. My insistence that conversation must be studied in ways sensitive to the languages, cultures, and settings in which it occurs extends to all conversational phenomena, and certainly to those such as announcements, assessments, category-bound activities, discovery markers, downgrades and upgrades, instructions, laughter, noticings, orders, stories, summonses, tokens, understanding, and word searches—that we will have occasion to examine. For my insistence to be more than programmatic, and your reading to be other than pro forma, you must study each transcript (Appendix A) when I comment on it. If you do not, you will not have really read this book.

The first chapter presents the scholarly setting and aspirations of culturally contextualized conversation analysis. Chapter Two, by showing that even sherds of marred talk have rich contexts of source and meaning, entices you to examine transcripts. It points to identities of sequential organization between Thai and American conversation, proposes some technical specification of “context,” and suggests that the conscious actor cannot be the author of his or her talk. Chapter Three, “Nature and Culture,” is more technical. It demonstrates that the sequential organization of American references to persons holds for Thai, an unrelated language spoken in

a quite different society. This should please conversation analysts, and surprise other students of speech. It then argues that ignoring the context and purpose of such references distorts their description. This will not surprise anthropologists, but may discomfit conversation analysts. The next two chapters make use of the sequential organization of repair and of references to persons to explore some central questions of social order. Chapter Four, "Motives in Action," uses Thai courtroom talk for investigating the relationship between actions and intentions. It examines Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, and criticizes Weber's and Schutz' model of the actor. "Society in a Grain of Rice," the fifth chapter, is an exercise in micro-ethnography. Its line-by-line examination of some three minutes of talk in a Thai village is intended to expose and to teach the methods of culturally contexted conversation analysis. The chapter rejects the Saussurian notions of meaning that underlie structuralism and symbolic and "interpretive" anthropology. It also discusses some ways in which the ethnographer affected the talk he participated in and recorded. "Talking About the World," the last chapter, investigates "noticings." Its main argument is that since talk about the world is socially organized on the occasions of its occurrence, consensus—the criterion used by philosophers of science—cannot guarantee the nature of reality. The final chapter and the first transcript-bearing chapter, "Finding Life in Dry Dust," are lighter in tone and less formal than the others. But their purposes are no less serious.

These essays about conversation are conversational in origin. They stem from talk with others in various places over quite a few years. It was my privilege to participate in seminars and classes in conversation analysis at UCLA and UC Irvine, my pleasure and nourishment to have Gail Jefferson, Anita Pomerantz, and Emanuel Schegloff as senior colleagues, and my blessing to have been a friend of Harvey Sacks.

The initial stimulus for this book was the 1978 conference on "The Construction of Realities" sponsored by the EST Foundation, a princely host. Among the participants whose help and challenge I remember most clearly are Gregory Bateson, Alton Becker, Werner Ehrhardt, Heinz von Foerster, Ernst von Glassersfeld, Erving Goffman, Joseph A. Goguen, Charlotte Linde, Humberto Maturana, Gabriel Stolzenberg and Francisco Varela. My ideas developed at the Naropa Institute—a world of discipline, freedom, and fellowship from which it would be inappropriate to single out individuals to thank.

For the environment that encouraged and permitted me to write this book, I am grateful to the Australian academic community, most specifically to the Working Group on Language and Culture of the Department of Anthropology in the Research School of Pacific Studies of the Australian National University where I was a Visiting Fellow in 1981–82 and briefly in 1983. I appreciate UCLA's providing

leave for the first visit, airfare for the second, support for a 1979 trip to Asia, and the always efficient services of the Central Word Processing Office.

Since each chapter arises from a somewhat different mix of discussions, each addresses somewhat different audiences: here a linguist, there an anthropologist, sometimes a student of literature. But each of us at various times might be any one of those. And anyone can occasionally benefit from overhearing a remark addressed to another.

My arguments are cumulative and modulated. In order to budge a linguist one way, an ethnographer another, I sometimes tack rather than sail before the wind. In juggling Wittgenstein and Popper, I may occasionally try to derive poise from a blur. I will be concerned to demonstrate the universality of conversational structures, yet point to their manipulability and contextedness. I will cite transcripts as hard data, chiding other scholars for not providing any comparable evidence. Yet I will insist that meaning lies neither in an apparent object nor a privately experienced subject, but in a world composed by the interaction and interpenetration of the seeming two. I approach social interaction with a rough-and-ready applied phenomenology which recognizes that the phenomenon is neither objective nor subjective; not unitary in its significance; essentially "witnessed," yet part of the natural world which it is my obligation to describe rather than "obliterate in the name of science" (Wieder 1980:77). My empiricism is that of the art critic who cites the pigments and brush strokes of the paintings he interprets.

Another way in which this book is like conversation is that no theme ever dies, no issue is ever sure to be finished. Arguments are hinted at in one place to be developed in others; conversations and segments are repeatedly re-cited and re-analyzed. Re-attending to the same talk will show how elaborately organized it, and all the natural world, really is. Re-inspection of these "data," repeated interactions with them, "hanging out with" them, will help to open their worlds to us. It is in those worlds, the worlds of its participants, that all talk has meaning.

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1

Conversation Analysis Among the Disciplines¹

Social Interaction and Social Theory

The existence and survival, and hence the character, of *Homo sapiens* is profoundly social. For other species, "social organization" principally means the ways in which individuals regulate their co-presence. Man deserves no pre-Darwinian exemption, with face-to-face interaction accorded some minor, secluded status. While there are certainly other legitimate concerns for social science, face-to-face interaction is the constitutive substrate of social phenomena. 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. The theories may be elegant, erudite, morally uplifting, or politically useful. But they are, in the first and critical instance, wrong.

Those to whom this view of the centrality of interaction seems too extreme might agree with, and be reassured by, Cicourel's (1980: 18) observation that "the status of normative rules during social interaction still remains unclear in sociological research," and that this requires "Building a bridge from microphenomena such as discourse or social interaction to macronotions such as occupational careers, social indicators, dominant cultural values, and patterns of inequality in a population." In this book, as I think is universal and unavoidable, that bridge is built out of normal talk and thought and writing. It is tempting to take up Cicourel's (perhaps unconscious) distinction between *microphenomena*, out there in the world, and *macronotions*, housed solely in our heads. The tedium, frustrations, and career delays occasioned by listening to a tape recorder, sometimes altering the speed of what is said, and straining to write it all down as marks fixed on

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paper; staring at a frozen image on a video screen, timing it in hundredths of a second, and replaying it in slow motion are all sustained by mythologizing myself a scientist, a humble pure conduit through which the majesty of a real, separate, independent, objective world speaks unimpeded. But if there is a pure score of conversational structures, it is plucked and played and sung by embodied instruments and voices, each with its own resonances. And the pipers are always paid, a supper always being sung for. I and you are of that world, our ears and minds no less totally situated in our time and place, our observation and arguments no less furnished and motivated by our circumstances than any pickpocket's.²

■

Anthropology has lately (e.g., Kapferer 1976; Moore 1978) come to realize that such traditional explainers of social action as "class," "ethnicity," "values," etc., are not *things*, but processes—processes manipulated or, more radically, composed during the course of interaction. More conservatively, insofar as different social rules modify each other in particular circumstances, and insofar as such rules somehow "manage to produce practical action as part of a locally defined set of circumstances" (Cicourel 1980: 19), we must study the actual scenes and occasions that constitute those circumstances. It is in interaction that people encounter, experience, and learn the principles, institutions, and ideals that characterize their society and culture. It is only in interaction that things social are manipulated. It is on occasions of interaction that they, and language, and persons live. The main reason for an interest in "macronotions" is what they tell us about the actual encountered life experiences and circumstances of the people we study.

Because its procedures and findings provide our best access to the features of face-to-face interaction, conversation analysis is central to understanding the social order. To learn from it, for example, that such categories as role and gender are motile and locally invoked, that social activities require but cannot assure the close-grained cooperation of the interacting parties, or that ongoing accomplishments are contingent and defeasible, is to learn some of what any respectable theory of society must take into account.

■

Conversation analysis focuses on talk. But talk, and other human sound, is only one component of interaction. Like all components, it is neither impermeable nor functionally specific.³ A word, a wink, an intonation, can each, in context, do the same job. The undoubtedly great weight of setting, costume, or physical orientation cannot be found in this book's transcripts. But the student of talk inherits a rich tradition of writing language and of studying what was written. We must make the best use of it we can.

We pay a price for writing. Just as Ong (1982) claims, writing down sounds as words and marks on paper encourages us to rip life from its context, to mask processes as products and fields as objects. It “arrests” those objects (Volosinov 1973:78), freezes continuous and contingent flows into irreversibility, and “condemns us,” in Husserl’s phrase, “to see all practice as a spectacle.” We must guard against, but can never completely avoid, these dangers. But we do know how to write down words and the grosser features of other sounds, and so can hold the smoke of interaction still for study. The absence of a natural orthography delays the absolutely necessary contributions that the technology of film and video will make to the analysis of interaction.

Conversation is not talk’s sole form, but it does seem to be its most general one, composing many social scenes, leaking into others, and probably providing the source from which other forms of speech and writing derive. There is no doubt that some societies are more silent, some more terse, some more formal than others. Some communities—the deaf, for example—do not talk at all. The social occasions which feature conversation in one society might contain only veiled glances in another. The tasks for which we converse, or hold to Robert’s Rules of Order, might elsewhere be done with songs or staves. These are all important issues that await empirical investigations based on recordings, transcripts, and analysis of actual occasions of natural interaction. It is all too easy, even irresistibly tempting, to suppose that some persons might have said this or that, to imagine that in some other place or time they do some other thing. But imaginings have no standing unless supported by data.

Conversation Analysis and Ethnographic Practice

Most of the speech-occasions that conversation analysts have examined have been in English and among Americans.⁴ My investigation of Thai talk is thus a contribution of a straightforwardly anthropological sort. It asks to what extent are procedures and findings for our culture useful and correct for another, unrelated, one. That issue echoes in most chapters and dominates some. But mentioning it makes it appropriate to at least acknowledge a frequent question: “Well, *is* Thai conversation like American conversation?” The question is basic and important, but its initial answer not very interesting. “The same, but also different, much as the Thais and the Americans are.” The extent to which it is the same came as a surprise, even a shock, to me. Like most ethnographers, I am fascinated by the different, the exotic, by the ways in which living with and studying an alien people could stretch my sense of what it means to be human. In some very important ways, Thai conversation *is* different from American conversation. Not only is it in

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Thai, but the people doing it are being Thais together, an activity rather different from being an American. Indeed, being a Thai official is different from being a Thai woman, peasant, priest, child, and so forth through all the categories that compose Thai society. Inasmuch as face-to-face interaction is the major analytic and experiential locus of social organization, and conversation a major component of interaction, Thai conversation *must* be radically different from American in what it substantively communicates, expresses, and represents.

Adam Kendon (1972, 1975) rightly insists upon an essential distinction between interaction as a vehicle through which individuals express themselves and through which the society (with its classes, races, dialect groups, etc.) is represented, and interaction as the system by means of which co-presence is organized.

Conversation, as the system through which turns at talk are coordinated, is—so far as we now know—essentially the same in Thailand as in America. Subsequent chapters will demonstrate this with respect to such features as the occurrence and negotiation of simultaneous talk, of repair, of references to persons. These correspondences depend upon the organization of turn-taking being the same, such that SELF and OTHER are the basic parties, and the turn-constructive-unit the basic metric. This, in turn, permits the conversation analyst to trace such apparently more cultural matters as assessments, agreement, questions, commands, significant absence, and even laughter. The ethnographer is thereby provided with rather refined instruments for investigating substantive divergences between cultures and complementary differences within them.

Anthropologists have criticized conversation analysis for ignoring cultures other than our own. This book addresses that: both by attending throughout to Thai materials, and by proposing that regularities of sequential organization be used to locate, describe, and provide a metric for cultural variations.⁵ The criticism, and this response to it, is based on a rather simple notion of “culture” as the uniformly owned property of a discrete society. A more complex concept emphasizes that culture is a set—perhaps a system—of principles of interpretation, together with the products of that system. In this sense, the materials of all conversation analysis are inextricably cultured. When an American analyst handles American conversation, he or she can fail to notice this. All natives take their native knowledge for granted, take it to be nothing other than the nature of the world (Geertz 1975). But how could the conversation analyst recognize an utterance as a pre-invitation, for example, without trading on covert native knowledge of dating practices and the special significance for them of Saturday night? It is with a native’s recognition of an exaggeratedly Yiddish accent, and of what that means for participants of this

kind, that the analyst locates an attempted, and possibly offensive, joke. Attending to exotic (Thai) materials exposes the processes and the problematicity of culture.

Ethnographers comment on, translate, and embellish the native world. The transcripts will anchor us in that world. Rather than pretending to read a culturally standardized finished text over the shoulder of an imagined native, we will be living in the line-by-line production of ongoing actual native talk. Techniques for the analysis of the sequential organization of conversation will locate such recurrent patterns and perturbations in that talk as "overlap" or "repair." To show how those conversational events were meaningful parts of the world created and inhabited by their participants, I will have to point to such larger features of the social world as the obligations of friendship, or fealty, or fear;⁶ to the power of the Thai state and the practices of its police;⁷ to the programs and proclivities of its officials.⁸ It will be my task to show that it was from those particular institutions that what was actually said or, by means of specified pauses and hitches of speech, *not* said derived its meaning. Searching my knowledge (And what more can any ethnographer or any native ever do to make sense of something?) for the structures specifically invoked in making actual situated talk meaningful for its talkers reverses the ethnographer's usual practice of selecting bits of the native world as illustrations for pre-existing theories.



I do not know whether culturally contexted conversation analysis provides a "discovery" or a "verification" procedure for ethnography. Rather, I think it alters the terms and diminishes the importance of that distinction, making discovery and verification more complements than alternatives. Both become less matters of abstract correctness than of situated salience. I will be gratified when Thai participants show by their actions that things I had found important enough to describe as an ethnographer are used by them for doing significant face-to-face activities. But readers who have not studied Thai culture should be able to use sequential organization for locating important activities (like co-categorizing, ordering, insulting, etc.). Having found them, the reader can inspect some of the ideas, principles, or meanings that the natives then and there invoked and used in order to accomplish those social actions. Or so it might be if transcripts spoke for themselves. They don't. I speak for the Thai data segments in at least two ways.

First, I make them talk English. Those who do not know Thai will be reading my translation. This puts you at my mercy somewhat less than you might suppose. When presenting Thai materials at seminars, I have often been surprised when a student or colleague who knew no Thai challenged, sometimes successfully, a gloss or translation. Line #588 of Segment XXXIII is a convenient instance.

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Lazily relying on dictionary Siamese, I had translated it as “And then::,”. A student objected that line #588 was not like an English “And then,”. Topically, it starts something new; sequentially, it seems to be a summons. These are unlikely jobs for “And then::,”.

Culturally contexted conversation analysis simplifies and helps to fulfill the criteria of adequate translation. Nida's stricture (1959: 190) that “the relevant unit of meaning for the translator is not the word, but the message,” is helpful. But what kind of message? Poet, psychiatrist, historian, and missionary translators would rarely agree, nor should they. Each is concerned with a different notion of meaning. Culturally contexted conversation analysis strives for a translation in which the item in the receptor language does the same job as the item in the source language, a translation whose criteria of equivalence are *sequential and interactional*. This is not always easy to do. But the goal is straightforward. “And then::,” for XXXIII: #588 failed to accomplish it.

It is encouraging that the failure is evident to those who study the transcript. In every transcript, because in all talk, each utterance is tied, however loosely, to the conversational and interactional place furnished by other utterances. The net of proximate utterances guides, constrains, and tests the translation. In translating *Mencius on the Mind*, I.A. Richards observed (1932: 6, emphasis added) that issues of meaning and intention

are not settled by inspection of the syntax of the passage. They are to be settled, if at all, only by the influence of our interpretation of other passages—many of them almost equally indeterminate *by themselves*.

In natural conversation, unlike Richards' written text, utterances do not occur “by themselves.” Nor are the interpretations solely ours: What participants said next guides them. Translation remains an “indirectly controlled guess” (Richards 1932: 7), not a mechanically determined process whose products are straightforwardly correct/incorrect. But these differences between written texts and interactively organized talk narrow the possibilities. Strangers to these materials and dialects can continually judge and challenge my translations of them.

Second, having translated the utterances, I tell you about them. No native, and no ethnographer, can hear a conversation or see its transcript with virgin ears and eyes. Nor can readers without a word of Thai preserve their innocence. Whenever I dip you into a segment, you emerge with mind increasingly plated by it. The segment thus becomes each time a new, yet progressively and restrictedly known, text. Culturally contexted conversation analysis cannot silence that knowledge. It aims to explicate it.

Organization and meaning, expression and coordination, skeletal anatomy and