# ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

VOLUME III

SAGE BENCHMARKS IN
SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODS

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## VOLUME III

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Edited by

Michael Lynch and Wes Sharrock

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# Section Five: Language, Categories and Membership

# 37

# On the Analyzability of Stories by Children

*Harvey Sacks*

In this chapter I intend, first, to present and employ several of the more basic concepts and techniques which I shall be using. Since most of those I shall use at this point may also be found in the paper "An Initial Investigation of the Usability of Conversational Data for Doing Sociology" (Sacks 1972), the discussion here may be seen as reintroducing and extending the results developed there.

Second, I shall focus on the activity "doing describing" and the correlative activity "recognizing a description," activities which members may be said to do, and which therefore are phenomena which sociologists and anthropologists must aim to be able to describe. It will initially be by reference to an examination of instances of members' describings that my attempts to show how sociologists might solve their own problem of constructing descriptions will be developed.

Proceeding in the fashion I have proposed will permit a focus on several central and neglected issues which social science must face, most particularly, the problem of members' knowledge and the problem of relevance. Let us then begin.

## Problems in Recognizing Possible Descriptions

The initial data are the first two sentences from a "story" offered by a two-year-and-nine-month-old girl to the author of the book *Children Tell Stories*.[1] They are: "The baby cried. The mommy picked it up." I shall first make several

**Source:** John J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes (eds), *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1972), pp. 325–345.

observations about these sentences. Before doing so, however, let me note: If these observations strike you as a ranker sort of subjectivism, then I ask you to read on just far enough to see whether it is or is not the case that the observations are both relevant and defensible. When I hear "The baby cried. The mommy picked it up," one thing I hear is that the 'mommy' who picks the 'baby' up is the mommy of that baby. That is a first observation. (You will, of course, notice that the second sentence does not contain a genitive. It does not read, "Its mommy picked it up," or variants thereof.) Now it is not only that *I* hear that the mommy is the mommy of that baby, but I feel rather confident that at least many of the natives among you hear that also. That is a second observation. One of my tasks is going to be to construct an apparatus which will provide for the foregoing facts to have occurred; an apparatus, i.e., which will show how it is that we come to hear the fragment as we do.

Some more: I take it we hear two sentences. Call the first $S_1$ and the second $S_2$; the first reports an occurrence $O_2$ and the second reports an occurrence $O_2$. Now, I take it we hear that as $S_2$ follows $S_1$, so $O_2$ follows $O_1$. That is a third observation. And also: We hear that $O_2$ occurs because of $O_1$:i.e., the explanation for $O_2$ occurring is that $O_1$ did. That is a fourth observation. I want the apparatus to show how we come to hear those facts also.

If I asked you to explain the group of observations which I have made, observations which you could have made just as well – and let me note, they are *not* proposed as sociological findings, but rather do they pose some of the problems which social science shall have to resolve – you might well say something like the following: We hear that it is the mommy of the baby who picks the baby up because she's the one who ought to pick it up, and (you might eventually add) if she's the one who ought to pick it up, and it was picked up by somebody who could be her, then it was her, or was probably her.

You might go on: While it is quite clear that not any two consecutive sentences, not even any consecutive sentences that report occurrences, are heard, and properly heard, as reporting that the occurrences have occurred in the order which the sentences have, if the occurrences ought to occur in that order, and if there is no information to the contrary (such as a phrase at the beginning of the second, like "before that, however"), then the order of the sentences indicates the order of the occurrences. And these two sentences do present the order of the occurrences they report in the proper order for such occurrences. If the baby cried, it ought to have started crying before the mother picked it up, and not after. Hearing it that way, the second sentence is explained by the first; hearing them as consecutive or with the second preceding the first, some further explanation is needed, and none being present, we may suppose that it is not needed.

Now let me make a fifth observation: All of the foregoing can be done by many or perhaps any of us without knowing what baby or what mommy it is that might be being talked of.

With this fifth observation it may now be noticed that what we've essentially been saying so far is that the pair of sentences seems to satisfy what a member might require of some pair of sentences for them to be recognizable as "a possible description." They "sound like a description," and some form of words can, apparently, sound like a description. To recognize that some form of words is a possible description does not require that one must first inspect the circumstances it may be characterizing.

That "possible descriptions" are recognizable as such is quite an important fact, for members, and for social scientists. The reader ought to be able to think out some of its import for members, e.g., the economies it affords them. It is the latter clause, "and for social scientists," that I now wish to attend to.

Were it not so both that members have an activity they do, "describing," and that at least some cases of that activity produce, for them, forms of words recognizable as at least possible descriptions without having to do an inspection of the circumstances they might characterize, then it might well be that social science would necessarily be the last of the sciences to be made doable. For, unless social scientists could study such things as these "recognizable descriptions," we might only be able to investigate such activities of members as in one or another way turned on "their knowledge of the world" when social scientists could employ some established, presumptively correct scientific characterizations of the phenomena members were presumably dealing with and knowing about.

If, however, members have a phenomenon, "possible descriptions" which are recognizable per se, then one need not in the instance know how it is that babies and mommies do behave to examine the composition of such possible descriptions as members produce and recognize. Sociology and anthropology need not await developments in botany or genetics or analyses of the light spectra to gain a secure position from which members' knowledge, and the activities for which it is relevant, might be investigated.

What one ought to seek to build is an apparatus which will provide for how it is that any activities, which members do in such a way as to be recognizable as such to members, are done, and done recognizably. Such an apparatus will, of course, have to generate and provide for the recognizability of more than just possible descriptions, and in later discussions we shall be engaged in providing for such activities as "inviting," "warning," and so forth, as the data we consider will permit and require.

My reason for having gone through the observations I have so far made was to give you some sense, right off, of the fine power of a culture. It does not, so to speak, merely fill brains in roughly the same way, it fills them so that they are alike in fine detail. The sentences we are considering are after all rather minor, and yet all of you, or many of you, hear just what I said you heard, and many of us are quite unacquainted with each other. I am, then, dealing with something real and something finely powerful.

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## Membership Categorization Devices

We may begin to work at the construction of the apparatus. I'm going to introduce several of the terms we need. The first term is *membership categorization device* (or just *categorization device*). By this term I shall intend: any collection of membership categories, containing at least a category, which may be applied to some population containing at least a member, so as to provide, by the use of some rules of application, for the pairing of at least a population member and a categorization device member. A device is then a collection plus rules of application.

An instance of a categorization device is the one called 'sex': Its collection is the two categories (male, female). It is important to observe that a collection consists of categories that "go together." For now that may merely be seen as a constraint of the following sort: I could say that some set of categories was a collection, and be wrong. I shall present some rules of application very shortly.

Before doing that, however, let me observe that 'baby' and 'mommy' can be seen to be categories from one collection: The collection whose device is called 'family' and which consists of such categories as ('baby,' 'mommy,' 'daddy,' . . .) where by ". . ." we mean that there are others, but not any others, e.g., 'shortstop.'

Let me introduce a few rules of application. It may be observed that if a member uses a single category from any membership categorization device, then they can be recognized to be doing *adequate reference* to a person. We may put the observation in a negative form: It is not necessary that some multiple of categories from categorization devices be employed for recognition that a person is being referred to, to be made; a single category will do. (I do not mean by this that more cannot be used, only that for reference to persons to be recognized more need not be used.) With that observation we can formulate a "reference satisfactoriness" rule, which we call "the economy rule." It holds: A single category from any membership categorization device can be referentially adequate.

A second rule I call "the consistency rule." It holds: If some population of persons is being categorized, and if a category from some device's collection has been used to categorize a first member of the population, then that category of other categories of the same collection *may* be used to categorize further members of the population. The former rule was a reference satisfactoriness" rule; this latter one is a "relevance" rule (Sacks, in press).

The economy rule having provided for the adequate reference of 'baby,' the consistency rule tells us that if the first person has been categorized as 'baby,' then further persons may be referred to by other categories of a collection of which they are a member, and thus that such other categories as 'mommy' and 'daddy' are relevant given the use of 'baby.'

While in its currently weak form and alone, the consistency rule may exclude no category of any device, even in this weak form (the "may" form – I shall eventually introduce a "must" form), a corollary of it will prove to be useful. The corollary is a "hearer's maxim." It holds: If two or more categories are used to categorize two or more members of some population, and those categories can be heard as categories from the same collection, then: Hear them that way. Let us call the foregoing "the consistency rule corollary." It has the following sort of usefulness. Various membership categorization-device categories can be said to be ambiguous. That is, the same categorial word is a term occurring in several distinct devices, and can in each have quite a different reference; they may or may not be combinably usable in regard to a single person. So, e.g., 'baby' occurs in the device 'family' and also in the device 'stage of life' whose categories are such as 'baby,' 'child,' ... 'adult'). A hearer who can use the consistency rule corollary will regularly not even notice that there might be an ambiguity in the use of some category among a group which it can be used to hear as produced via the consistency rule.

It is, of course, clear that the two categories 'baby' are sometimes combinably referential and sometimes not. A woman may refer to someone as "my baby" with no suggestion that she is using the category that occurs in the 'stage of life' device; her baby may be a full-fledged adult. In the case at hand that problem does not occur, and we shall be able to provide the bases for it not occurring, i.e., the bases for the legitimacy of hearing the single term 'baby' as referring to a person located by reference both to the device 'family' and to the device 'stage of life.'

With this, let us modify the observation on the consistency rule as follows: The consistency rule tells us that if a first person has been categorized as 'baby,' the further persons may be referred to by categories from either the device 'family' or from the device 'stage of life.' However, if a hearer has a second category which can be heard as consistent with one locus of a first, then the first is to be heard as *at least* consistent with the second.

Given the foregoing, we may proceed to show how the combined reference of 'baby' is heard for our two sentences, and also how 'the mommy' is heard as 'the mommy of the baby.' We shall deal with the latter task first, and we assume from now on that the consistency rule corollary has yielded at least that 'baby' and 'mommy' are heard as from the device 'family.' We assume that without prejudice to the further fact that 'baby' is also heard as 'baby' from the device 'stage of life.'

The device 'family' is one of a series which you may think of by a prototypical name 'team.' One central property of such devices is that they are what I am going to call "duplicatively organized." I mean by the use of that term to point out the following: When such a device is used on a population, what is done is to take its categories, treat the set of categories as defining a unit, and place members of the population into cases of the unit. If a population is so treated and is then counted, one counts not numbers of daddies, numbers

of mommies, and numbers of babies but numbers of families – numbers of 'whole families,' numbers of 'families without fathers,' etc. A population so treated is partitioned into cases of the unit, cases for which what properly holds is that the various persons partitioned into any case are 'coincumbents' of that case.

There are hearer's maxims which correspond to these ways of dealing with populations categorized by way of duplicatively organized devices. One that is relevant to our current task holds: If some population has been categorized by use of categories from some device whose collection has the "duplicative organization" property, and a member is presented with a categorized population which *can be heard* as 'coincumbents' of a case of that device's unit, then: Hear it that way. (I will consider the underscored phrase shortly.) Now let it be noticed that this rule is of far more general scope than we may seem to need. In focusing on a property like duplicative organization it permits a determination of an expectation (of social scientists) as to how some categorized population will be heard independently of a determination of how it is heard. It is then formal and predictive, as well, of course, as quite general.

Now, by the phrase "can be heard" we mean to rule out predictions of the following sort. Some duplicatively organized devices have proper numbers of incumbents for certain categories of any unit. (At any given time a nation-state may have but one president, a family but one father, a baseball team but one shortstop on the field, etc.) If more incumbents of a category are proposed as present in the population than a unit's case can properly take, then the 'can be heard' constraint is not satisfied, and a prediction would not be made.

## Category-Bound Activities

The foregoing analysis shows us then how it is that we come to hear, given the fact that the device 'family' is duplicatively organized, and the "can be heard" constraint being satisfied, 'the mommy' to be 'the mommy of the baby.' It does, of course, much more than that. It permits us to predict, and to understand how we can predict, that a statement such as "The first baseman looked around. The third baseman scratched himself." will be heard as saying "the first baseman of the team on which the third baseman is also a player" and its converse.

Or, putting the claim more precisely, it shows us how, in part – "in part" because for the materials at hand it happens that there are other means for providing that the same hearing be made, means which can operate in combination with the foregoing, otherwise sufficient ones, to further assure the hearings we have observed. That will be done in the next section. Let us now undertake our second task, to show how 'the baby' is heard in its combined form, i.e., as the category with that name from both the 'stage of life' device and from the 'family' device.

Let me introduce a term which I am going to call *category-bound activities*. While I shall not now give an intendedly careful definition of the term, I shall indicate what I mean to notice with it and then in a while offer a procedure for determining that some of its proposed cases are indeed cases of it. By the term I intend to notice that many activities are taken by members to be done by some particular or several particular categories of members where the categories are categories from membership categorization devices.

Let me notice then, as is obvious to you, that 'cry' is bound to 'baby,' i.e., to the category 'baby' which is a member of the collection from the 'stage of life' device. Again, the fact that members know that this is so only serves, for the social scientist, to pose some problem. What we want is to construct some means by reference to which a class, which proposedly contains at least the activity-category 'cry' and presumably others, may have the inclusion of its candidate-members assessed. We will not be claiming that the procedure is definitive as to exclusion of a candidate-member, but we will claim that it is definitive as to inclusion of a candidate-member.

It may be observed that the members of the 'stage of life' collection are 'positioned' ('baby' . . . 'adolescent' . . . 'adult' . . .), an observation which, for now, we shall leave unexamined. I want to describe a procedure for praising or degrading members, the operation of which consists of the use of the fact that some activities are category bound. If there are such procedures, they will provide one strong sense of the notion "category-bound activities" and also will provide, for any given candidate activity, a means for warrantably deciding that it is a member of the class of category-bound activities.

For some positioned-category devices it can be said as between any two categories of such a device that A is either higher or lower than B, and if A is higher than B, and B is higher than C, then A is higher than C.

We have some activity which is a candidate-member of the class 'category-bound activities' and which is proposedly bound to some category C. Then, a member of either A or B who does that activity may be seen to be degrading himself, and may be said to be 'acting like a C.' Alternatively, if some candidate activity is proposedly bound to A, a member of C who does it is subject to being said to be acting like an A, where that assertion constitutes "praising."

If, using the 'stage of life' categories, we subject 'crying' to such a test, we do find that its candidacy as a member of the class "category-bound activities" is warrantable. In the case of 'crying' the results are even stronger. For, it appears, if a 'baby' is subject to some circumstances which would for such a one warrant crying, and he does not, then his 'not crying' is observable, and may be used to propose that "he is acting like a big boy," where that assertion is taken to be "praise."[2]

The foregoing procedure can, obviously enough, be used for other devices and other candidate activities. Other procedures may also be used; e.g., one way to decide that an activity is category bound is to see whether, the fact of

membership being unknown, it can be "hinted at" by naming the activity as something one does.[3]

Having constructed a procedure which can warrant the candidacy of some activity as a member of the class "category-bound activities," and which warrants the membership of 'cry' and provides for its being bound to 'baby,' i.e., that category 'baby' which is a member of the 'stage of life' collection, we move on to see how it is that 'the baby' in our sentence is heard in the combined reference we have proposed.

We need, first, another "hearer's maxim." If a category-bound activity is asserted to have been done by a member of some category where, if that category is ambiguous (i.e., is a member of at least two different devices) but where, at least for one of those devices, the asserted activity is category bound to the given category, then hear that *at least* the category from the device to which it is bound is being asserted to hold.

The foregoing maxim will then provide for hearing "The baby cried." as referring to at least 'baby' from the 'stage of life' device. The results obtained from the use of the consistency rule corollary, being independent of that, are combinable with it. The consistency rule corollary gave us at least that 'the baby' was the category from the device 'family.' The combination gives us both.

If our analysis seems altogether too complicated for the rather simple facts we have been examining, then we invite the reader to consider that our machinery has intendedly been "overbuilt." That is to say it may turn out that the elaborateness of our analysis, or its apparent elaborateness, will disappear when one begins to consider the amount of work that the very same machinery can perform.

In the next section I will attempt to show that the two sentences "The baby cried. The mommy picked it up." constitute a possible description.

## Identifying Possible Descriptions

I shall focus next on the fact that an activity can be category bound and then on the import of there being a norm which provides for some second activity, given the occurrence of a first, considering both of these with regard to the "correctness," for members, of "possible description."

Let me for the moment leave aside our two sentences and consider some observations on how it is that I see, and take it you see, describable occurrences. Suppose you are standing somewhere, and you see a person you don't know. The person cries. Now, if I can, I will see that what has happened is that a baby cried. And I take it that you will, if you can, see that too. That's a first pair of observations. Suppose again you are standing somewhere and you see two people you don't know. Suppose further that one cries, and the other picks up the one who is crying. Now, if I can, I will see that what has happened is that a baby cried and its mother picked it up. And I take it that you will, if you can, see that too. That's a second pair of observations.

Consider the first pair of observations. The modifying phrases, to deal with them first, refer simply to the possibility that the category 'baby' might be obviously inapplicable to the crier. By reference to the 'stage of life' collection the crier may be seen to be an adult. And that being so, the 'if . . . can' constraint wouldn't be satisfied. But there are certainly other possible characterizations of the crying person. For example, without respect to the fact that it is a baby, it could be either 'male' or 'female,' and nonetheless I would not, and I take it you would not, seeing the scene, see that "a male cried" if we could see that "a baby cried."

The pair of observations suggest the following "viewer's maxim": If a member sees a category-bound activity being done, then, if one can see it being done by a member of a category to which the activity is bound, then: See it that way. The viewer's maxim is another relevance rule in that it proposes that for an observer of a category-bound activity the category to which the activity is bound has a special relevance for formulating an identification of its doer.

Consider the second pair of observations. As members you, of course, know that there is a norm which might be written as: A mother ought to try to soothe her crying baby. I, and you, not only know that there is such a norm but, as you may recall, we used it in doing our hearing of "The baby cried. The mommy picked it up." In addition to the fact of duplicative organization, the norm was relevant in bringing us to hear that it was the mommy of the baby who did the picking up. While we would have heard that it was the mommy of the baby for other pairs of activities in which the two were involved (but not any pair), the fact that the pair were relatable via a norm which assigns the mother of the baby that duty may have operated in combination with the duplicative organization to assure our hearing that it was she who did it.

Leaving aside the hearing of the sentence, we are led to construct another viewer's maxim: If one sees a pair of actions which can be related via the operation of a norm that provides for the second given the first, where the doers can be seen as members of the categories the norm provides as proper for that pair of actions, then: (a) See that the doers are such members and (b) see the second as done in conformity with the norm.

This second viewer's maxim suggests an observation about norms. In the sociological and anthropological literature, the focus on norms is on the conditions under which and the extent to which they govern, or can be seen by social scientists to govern, the relevant actions of those members whose actions they ought to control. While such matters are, of course, important, our viewer's maxim suggests other importances of norms, for members.

Viewers use norms to provide some of the orderliness, and proper orderliness, of the activities they observe. Via some norm two activities may be made observable as a sequentially ordered pair. That is, viewers use norms to explain both the occurrence of some activity given the occurrence of another and also its sequential position with regard to the other, e.g., that it follows the other, or precedes it. That is a first importance. Second, viewers

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