Relevance and Consequentiality

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C ONSIDER THE ORGANIZATION of routine courtroom interactions be tween judges and defendants, a recurrent set of work-related and thus institutional activities involving professionals and lay persons. One grossly apparent feature of these naturally occurring communicative activities might be stated as follows: There are frequently and noticeably different sets of "occupational relevancies" displayed in the talk and conduct of the participants. It is not uncommon for judges to treat defendants' explanations and requests as somehow removed from, irrelevant to, at times in opposition with the practical goals and priorities off the "court." Similarly, defendants often appear bewildered by foreign technicalities and assembly-line proceedings they do not fully understand, but are nevertheless caught up in and for which they are held legally responsible. Occasionally defendants make reference to and even complain (though rarely) about their predicament to the judge, interjecting their concerns and agendas in the midst of ongoing "court" business. These and related actions can be tricky business, of course, and especially for defendants, since not just any choice of method or modus operandi will do in formalized settings of these sort. There are, after all, certain constraints "at work" in courts that shape and are shaped by the unfolding character of speech exchange. For example, the pre-specified role and task-specific character of interaction, the basic asymmetry of resources and choices available to participants, a delimiting of the range and type of actions deemed more or less appropriate and thus allowed into the stream of discourse and/or sanctioned as inappropriate and illegitmate, and so on (cf. Drew and Heritage, 1992). Such constraints collectively and institutionally privilege and empower judges to "take control" in the course of processing and disposing cases, handing down decisions, and dealing "authoritatively" with contingencies comprising the courts' business.

Assuming this present essay and contribution to the symposium were a **conversation analytic** (CA) study, which it clearly is not, it is at or near this juncture that evidence to support such observations and claims would begin to be explicitly provided rather than left implied. Such evidence would emerge from basic concerns and commitments of CA,

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involving: (1) the collection and analysis of naturally occurring interactional (casual and institutional) events; *(2)* by means of repeated inspections of audio and/or videorecordings in unison with subsequently and carefully produced transcriptions of vocal and non-vocal activities; in order that; *(3)* the practices and patterns of interactional conduct might be identified and substantiated (in part by providing readers with transcribed segments for their own critical inspections). The ongoing task for analysts is to provide readers with evidence of the very possibility of social order in the first instance, on its own merits, as relevant to and consequential for the participants themselves as they make available, each to the other, their understandings of the moments and occasions of which they are an integral part (Schegloff, 1991). For these reasons and more, CA represents a corpus of research practices designed to capture, and in these ways are fashioned after the social phenomena being examined. Preoccupations rest with generating observations sensitive to and thus capable of re-presenting real-time (displayed and detetected) orientations of speakers and hearers in the ordinary course of conversational and institutional involvements.

As with the court interactions highlighted above, CA seeks to exemplify just how the judge/defendant interactions under investigation are organized in a fashion meriting descriptions offered (i.e., that the kinds of phenomena purported to exist warrant one kind of characterization in lieu of, perhaps in unison with another), that claims put forth regarding the social world are *actually* there and not simply a figment of researchers' unexamined intuitions. In this sense, and as one distinguishing feature of an empirical social science, CA evidence is designed to avoid the "believe me, I was there and observed it" claim of legitimation and entitlement so common to lay members' reconstructions of some experienced events via simply reporting and telling about them. On the other

hand, CA methods (e.g., recordings, transcriptions, repeated listenings) make available such reportings and tellings, as well as recipients' orientations to them, in order to reveal the systematic tendencies of ways in which interactants collaboratively organize stories. Both CA and interactants' methods reveal their own sets of relevancies, criteria for believability, standards for acceptance/rejection, and techniques for achieving the work that is accomplished. Yet there is a reflexive correspondence between CA and interactants' methods: Both share the responsibility of utilizing methods for detecting, displaying, and thus evidencing social order; both are constrained by the tasks of selecting and identifying key practices for achieving particular kinds of actions; both "are methodical achievements, understandable as managed attempts to enact certain procedures in the process of structuring and making sense of ordinary talk (and demonstrating the machinery through which sense gets made)" (Beach, 1990, p. *238).*

It is exactly these as well as related concerns and commitments of CA that, perhaps not surprisingly, reveal an instinctive impatience with

discussions **about** the problematic topic of "evidence" rather than inspecting, for example, **actual data** revealing ways interactants repeatedly create and resolve problems inherent to language and social interaction. We might refer to this as the "introspection/inspection" problem, thinking, talking, and writing about the current symposium question:

"What criteria should be used to judge admissibility of evidence and how does the choice of methodology limit and enhance that which we consider to be evidence?"

However fruitful for revealing contrasting positions and reflexive insights about the research process as a series of orchestrated achievements, it will ultimately yield severely limited knowledge about the social world and its constituent features. Such distant viewings and reflexive musings regarding the empirical/theoretical nature of our social science may or may not enhance future abilities to observe and discern constituent features of the social world; that remains to be seen. This is not to say we should refrain from these stocktaking exercises, for such dialogues facilitate understandings of and appreciations for the richness, diversity, and phasic development of our related fields of inquiry. But neither should we fool ourselves that such tasks even remotely resemble the kinds of phenomena only direct observations of communicative phenomena can provide. Coming to grips with the embodied details and distinctive character of talk-in-interaction reveals altogether unique relevancies, tasks, resources, and consequences. And while everyday interactions can be idealized via imagined and intuited recollections and examples, as can the research process itself, the moment-by-moment contingencies of choice and action are inevitably glossed and "irretrievably lost" (Heritage, *1984, p. 236)* to the extent actual, situated conduct is overlooked as a methical achievement.

We must ask ourselves, therefore, to what extent and with what consequences symposiums of this sort promote and/or forestall the "process of idealization" (Heritage, *1984, p. 236).* By mandating a necessary and exclusive focus on thinking **about** evidence/criteria/ methods, we are not only limited in the claims we can make regarding the details of communicative phenomena, but also hamstrung by our inability to adequately assess other researchers' work void of actual (rather than typified) "evidence."

Yet even without CA evidence, readers might reasonably conclude that embedded in the aforementioned judge/defendant interactions are forms of practical reasoning evidencing different criteria for submitting and assessing matters of importance. Though in the noticeable absence of evidence to support these claims, key questions are left hanging: What do such criteria look like, in what kinds of collaborative actions are they packaged, and by what means do "submitting" and "assessing" get brought off? How are such activities as "taking control" and "interjecting agendas" interactionally achieved, in the first instance by and for

judges/defendants, and in just these ways made available for researchers? (and readers') critical inspection? Moreover, what **are** the practical consequences of recruiting particular interactional methods (practices, techniques, devices) to pursue specific courses of action? In short, by what recognizable means do participants construct and evaluate (e.g., accept or reject) the criteria

employed and thus the evidence put forth to explicate and defend their positions?

Implicit in these queries is a basic re-formulation of the 1977 *WJSC* symposium, where emphasis was given to the priorities, promises, and paradoxes of theory building and testing emerging from stocktakings of communication researchers' methodologies and the social scientific enterprise in general. The alternative addressed herein is to re-direct focus toward the achieved character of interaction **on its own merits,** and in so doing seek to understand the bedrock and contingent details of "criteria," "evidence," and "methods" as **member's phenomena.** While these basic concerns were not systematically addressed in the 1977 symposium, the ways in which they were hinted at deserve brief mention here. In their introduction, for example, Cronkhite and Liska (1977) set-up a brief discussion of the work of attorneys, judges, and juries by noting that "argumentation is distinguished from popular persuasion in that it **operates on the basis of certain rules to which the participants subscribe"** (p. *4)* [italics added]. One of Fisher's (1977) criteria was: "Is the evidence consistent with a central focus on human communication?" (p. 18). Even more to the point was Scheidel's (1977) concern that **"we seldom encounter the basic data (call it first level evidence) upon which scientific advance in communication theory is based...** Perhaps we should do more to get at that evidence" (p. 22). And Delia and Grossberg (1977), by suggesting that "the essential question needing reflective scrutiny, therefore, is `what is a fact?'" (p. 32), begin to raise the possibility that empirical findings and researchers' accounts are often best understood as abstractions failing to capture the "concrete world of everyday life" (p. 33).

These touched upon concerns are quite resonant with CA's priorities-to explicate the rules (practices) participants subscribe to (employ), to treat talk-in-interaction as direct reflections of human communication, to gain access to and provide readers with first level evidence, to understand facts as interactionally constituted, and to minimize abstractions between the activities of everyday life and our scientific renderings of these routine involvements. In these important ways, regardless of approaches taken and methods employed, connecting threads with CA are made apparent some sixteen years later. It is also clear that in 1977 the basic seeds for CA's integration into the communication discipline were planted and beginning to sprout.' While Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology* was published in 1967, and colleagues were literally building a foundation and paving the way for future CA studies

throughout the 60's and 70's (e.g., Sacks, 1992), it has taken the 80's and 90's for the interdisciplinary nature of CA research to establish momentum and become well grounded in the field of communication **per se.** But there is little space in this symposium for geneological sketchings and historicizing, however relevant such developments might be for understanding relationships among criteria, evidence, and methods.

What is essential, and as a means of concluding this essay, is a brief nod toward selected notable impacts and debatable issues engendered by CA's empirical examinations of situated interactions. We might begin by underscoring how the programmatic and now considerable body of empirical exemplars resulting from CA investigations amounts to what many treat as undeniable evidence regarding key aspects of social order. These sets of findings have emerged from "context-intrinsic" rather than "context-extrinsic" understandings of communication (cf. Mandelbaum, 1991; Schegloff, 1987, 1991), such that matters of importance are given priority to the extent, and in the precise ways, phenomena are observed to be working within interactants' orientations to actual circumstances of choice and action. These concerns rest with generating technical descriptions of "larger macro" phenomena (e.g., culture, sex, race, ethnicity, social class, identity, and power), as evident in the ways participants themselves create and resolve interactional problems, and not in a prior or externalized notions of perceptual orientations, intentionality, background understandings, dominance, and/or individual/cultural differences (Beach & Lindstrom, 1992). The working assumption here is **not** that such phenomena fail to exist and impact communication, but that if and when such factors influence interaction, they must enter the stream of discourse via particular mechanisms of production. Failures to identify and explicate such mechanisms (e.g., that judges are "powerful," that men "interrupt" women more frequently) as organized features of conversational interaction, promote a priori stereotypes and ungrounded notions eventuating in "premature theorizing" due to underspecification of the phenomena under investiga

tion.[2]

Similarly, as previously noted, in the ways idealized and reconstructed data are treated as insufficient for claiming social order in real-time events, so is CA markedly different from alternative methodologies (Heritage & Atkinson, 1984) employed as resources for understanding interactional conduct: Experimental manipulations imposing order on how subjects behave, pre-fabricated coding schemes (Beach, 1990; Hopper, 1989), and the reliance upon field notes and interviews as replacements for repeatable and direct observations of interactional conduct. Needless to say, as these positions are often "at odds with the procedures generally favored in social science at large" (Zimmerman, 1988, p. 407), many are confused by CA priorities and perhaps even more are in disagreement over basic issues. Debates over the **locus** of social

action (e.g., Boden & Zimmerman, 1991) are alive and well; on many issues a basic incommensurability of positions is inevitable, not just among various naturalistic and experimental researchers as might be expected, but among those whose main priorities are language, culture, and interaction.

One final and brief example will have to suffice. A recent special section of *Research on Language and Social Interaction* (Hopper, 1991a) was devoted to investigating the aftershocks of Moerman's (1988) book *Talking Culture: Ethnography and Conversation Analysis.* Through an analysis of Thai language and culture, and in raising the possibility of conversational universals, Moerman's basic proposal argued for the necessity to integrate talk-intrinsic concerns with structure and talk-extrinsic concerns with background variables (e.g., cultural history, relationships, meanings, and intentions). To gloss, just as ethnographers need to ground their observations in empirical details of recordings and transcriptions to minimize idealizations and embellishments of the social world, so does CA need to gain better access to humans' lived experiences by looking beyond "sequences," "repairs," "overlaps," "adjacency pairs," and "the clacking of `turns' " (Moerman 1988, pp. x-xi; 22). The proposed synthesis remedies these dichotomized problems by yielding a sensitivity to the realities of cultural experience as well as contextual resources of speakers/hearers, *or so the "theory" goes.* Interested readers are invited to evaluate the details of such a proposal, and responses by authors waving same and different banners representing an assortment of allegiances, on some future occasion. Only a hint can be provided here: there is much to say about the relevance and consequentiality of evidence/criteria/methods central to this ongoing symposium.

ENDNOTES

1. For purposes of contrast see, for example, the Special Issue of *Communication Quarterly, 1977, 25,* entitled "Naturalistic Study of Communication: A Symposium and a later overview of ethnomethodological and CA influences on communication research in
Beach *(1982).*

2. See, for example, Heritage's *(1984)* summary of Garfinkel's critique and extension of Parson's "theory" of social action. Similarly, see Schegloff's *(1988)* response to the "theory" of speech acts proposed by Searle. These concerns carry over to a general concern with the rush to premature theorizing within communication inquiries, especially when phenomena purported to exist have not been adequately specified, (i.e., when the
identifying details of how speakers and hearers collaboratively produce such phenomena have been overlooked and thus glossed).

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