

Does ethnomethodological CA have a ‘soft underbelly’?

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ABSTRACT

Steven Levinson in his 2013 remarks on “action formation and ascription” finds a “loose hermeneutics” of “intuitive characterizations” as the “the soft underbelly of CA”. It is a remarkable formulation, and by tugging on its filaments we hope to bring into view the radical departures taken by Garfinkel, Sacks and Schegloff from the normative appointments of social science, and also how we may find an impulse to return to those appointments in the literature of the Epistemic Analytic Framework (see below). EAF treatments of assessment sequences show it well. A transcript anchors the argument.

INTRODUCTION

This paper continues an extensive collaboration in the company of Jonas Ivarsson, Oskar Lindwall, Gustav Lymer, Michael Lynch, Wendy Sherman-Heckler and Jean Wong. For the last four years we have been taking up what strike us as significant new readings of EMCA. Discussed under the rubric—our rubric—of the ‘Epistemic Program’, a literature substantially though not solely authored by John Heritage, a useful point of reference is the 2012 special issue of *ROLSI* devoted to his Epistemic initiatives. Our 2016 special issue of *Discourse Studies*, “The epistemics of Epistemics” wrote a persistently critical review, both conceptually and technically, which was followed by a vigorous rebuttal by Professor Heritage posted to academic.edu (2016), and then a 2018 special issue of multiple rebuttals in *Discourse Studies*.

¹ These arguments and materials were developed for the meeting on “Radical Ethnomethodology”, held at Manchester Metropolitan University on 22–23 June 2016, and for the July 2017 biennial meeting of the International Institute of Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis under the title “Alternate analyses: seeing transcripts differently”, held at Otterbein University, Columbus, Ohio.

This paper is thus part of an on-going exchange, and our differences are quite sharp. However, there may be one useful point of consensus to have issued so far. To our genuine surprise, the phrase “epistemic program” was in no way agreeable to the proponents of an epistemic CA. There have been strenuous and multiple objections (cf., Steensig and Heinemann, 2016, Heritage, 2016, and Raymond, 2018). Fortunately, Geoffrey Raymond in his contribution to the 2018 special issue has crafted an alternative phrasing: “In a series of articles, Heritage (2012a, 2012b, 2013) consolidates and significantly advances previous research on epistemics by developing an *analytic framework* for explicating its systematic import for aspects of action formation and sequence organization” (Raymond, 2018:64; emphasis added). We wish to only slightly amend the highlighted phrase to the “Epistemic Analytic Framework”, and are committed to its use henceforth [EAF].

Our work in producing the 2016 special issue entailed the study of a 30 year corpus of publications (measured from Heritage, 1984a). It also entailed a return to many of those readings that instructed us 10, 20 and 30 years ago, returning to Garfinkel’s manuscripts, Sacks’ lectures, CA’s corpus studies (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, Sacks and Jefferson, 1977, *passim*), and clarifying extensions by many others.

ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL CA

With this background, I want to tease out the two central phrases of our title. The notion of an “ethnomethodological CA” expresses the common ground of these “radical programs”.² What was, and is, radical about EMCA was the sighting of a world already in possession of its methods, its analysts, its achieved structures of order, regularity and recurrence, before the first credentialed social scientist ever stepped onto the scene. Perhaps especially ‘radical’ was the abandonment of modern social science’s competition with ordinary worlds of vernacular reckonings, as though ‘practical sociological reasoning’ were a peasants’ estate, to be eclipsed by the achievements of academic sociology. In their now-classic paper “The everyday world as phenomenon” (1970) Zimmerman and Pollner formulate the competition directly:

The factual domain to which sociological investigation is directed is coterminous, with but mild variation, to the factual domain attended by lay inquiries. Each mode of inquiry affords the phenomena formulated... the status of accomplished activities whose properties are objectively assessable... One may ask at this point “So what?”

² Lynch (2000) speaks of the “ethnomethodological foundations of conversation analysis”. Livingston and Lynch (20017) speak of “the conversational analytic foundations of ethnomethodology”. See also Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970; Psathas, 1979; Heritage and Watson, 1979; Sacks, 1984; Heritage, 1984b; Button, 1991; and Watson 2008, among many other treatments and commentaries.

So what if lay and professional sociologists are oriented to a common factual domain? After all, the operations of social scientists are less subject to bias, distortion, unreliability and a whole host of methodological devils characteristic of everyday methods of fact assembly and testing...

The "so what" argument assumes sociology to be a disciplined investigation that is fully *competitive* with members' relaxed investigations... Indeed, as the competitive argument has it, those notoriously loose procedures, whatever they are, are destined to be replaced by the operations of sociology as a means for securing scientifically warranted depictions of society's orderly ways. (1970: 81–83, original emphasis)

Their remarks remind us that EMCA was leveraged on a penetrating critique of the ambitions of professional social science. How the criticism has been pursued could be a useful device for collecting the conceptual history of EMCA. It has entailed a disciplined effort to set aside formal–analytic relations and appointments, and a question for our contemporary dispute—perhaps 'the' question in my reading of it—is whether and how those very appointments are being re-issued. This is where the second title phrase, borrowed from Levinson (2013), comes in.

Our recent studies of the EAF have made for a delicate task—a few of them. Beyond rebuttals and replies from the principal authors and appreciation from colleagues, we've also heard rumblings of disapproval but not quite disagreement, mostly on the tweetosphere. Conceptual disputes are, of course, not entirely conceptual. There are communities attached, and communal alignments, economies, hopes and likes. A further hazard is that in leveraging a discussion of the EAF through the larger history and literature of EMCA, a dispute over whose reading is the sensible one is assured. The question is quite alive in the 2016 special issue, and no less central to the 2018 special issue that rebuts it (see Clift and Raymond, 2018, Raymond, 2018, and especially Maynard and Clayman, 2018). Nonetheless, it's entirely possible that there is some useful lifting about 'readings' to be done, and Levinson may be a useful way into it, as he isn't writing on behalf of the EAF, and has been both appreciative and critical of sequential analysis.

Here, in his 2013 remarks on "Action Formation and Ascription" and sequential analysis more generally, he is critical:

[D]irect empirical investigations in CA (e.g., under the rubric of 'action formation' or 'recognition') are few and far between. This result is unfortunate. For many of the *other* findings in CA rely on intuitive characterizations of the actions embedded in turns... But that identification is largely based on an appeal to our knowledge as societal 'members' or conversational practitioners. This loose hermeneutics is the soft underbelly of CA, and it is one of the reasons that other disciplines sometimes think of CA as a branch of the occult. (2013: 105)

Of course, Levinson is not alone in his assessment. Far from it. In ethnomethodology's early days, Lewis Coser (1975), then president of the American Sociological Association, and Ernest Gellner (1975) complained that ethnomethodology was a "cult" (a "west coast cult") and the continuity of the characterization across 40 years is striking. The arguments are different, but they lead to very similar dismissals of an enterprise disloyal to professional programmatic commitments.

Our title thus borrows from Levinson's notion of a 'soft underbelly', loose, intuitive, and none too far removed—certainly not far enough—from the reckonings of ordinary members. One might even say this "soft underbelly" is CA's 'engine', but our first use for it is to suggest how closely, even precisely, Zimmerman and Pollner anticipate Levinson's critique.

The critique is that the competition with practical sociological reasoning has not been fully engaged nor the separation fully achieved, achievements that have been anticipated by social science throughout the 20th century and into this one. Worse, EMCA has found its topics in these 'loose hermeneutics', without complaint. On this account, *per* Zimmerman and Pollner, EMCA could *itself* be "destined to be replaced" along with the occult affairs it studies.

ACTION FORMATION

Three publications, closely consecutive, have leveraged the topic of 'action formation' in contemporary EMCA discussions, or how it is that turns are actions and how what actions they are is made evident to the parties, and how those evidences can be analyzed by overhearing analysts (Heritage 2012c; 2013; and Levinson, 2013). That turns-at-talk are social actions was Austin's first topic (1976), yielding the conceptualizations of 'performatives', 'speech acts' and their 'felicity conditions', and the tasks of bringing order to their enormous diversities (Turner, 1970). 'Illocutionary' actions proved to be the commonplace of natural language use, and what 'speech act theory' and its conditions then became in Searle's hands has long been discussed (see Derrida on Searle as Austin's 'auto-authorized' successor (1988:37); see also Schegloff, 1992b). For Searle (1969), the question becomes one of the logical conditions whereby the identification of an utterance's action can be affirmed. And though the contemporary interest in "action formation" has no use for Searle's conditions, arguably it does have use for a kind of 'felicity' account. It shares an interest in the production of single turns—how evident actions are produced and secured from single utterance constructions—and what contingencies of circumstance and construction may yield, felicitously, credible, analytic [and vernacular] identifications.

Levinson's remarks above are, of course, quite critical of CA. But while he begins with what is perhaps a cultural critique of CA's treatment of turn constructions and the work they do, his central concern is with the identification of 'first',

initial, and thus single–turn actions.³ The critique of CA accounts of those actions—that they are cast in vernacular registers, terms such as ‘complaints’, ‘compliments’, etc., as of our natural language competence to hear them, and thus are “largely based on an appeal to our knowledge as societal ‘members’ or conversational practitioners”—is a preliminary move. That CA’s identifications ‘appeal’ in these ways suggest and promise other, more fully scientific, appeals.

“Action formation” is clearly a competitive program for its proposers, in several ways. There is no question that CA speaks of many actions in vernacular terms, though of course not entirely so. Actions such as repair, tellings of jokes and stories, members’ measures and MCD analysis, recipient design and references to persons, side sequences and preferred and dis–preferred nexts, etc., aren’t member formulations, though we orient to them in our largely unflinching competence to their productions. But Levinson’s critique and question is whether CA’s turn to natural language isn’t, at once, an unexamined affiliation with native accountings that renders CA’s analyses vernacular too. Recalling Zimmerman’s and Pollner’s (1970) larger discussion, is CA then using natural language as a resource, rather than a topic, to its inquiries? This is what’s ‘furry’ about CA analyses on Levinson’s account, and Schegloff agrees with the characterization so far as it goes, while finding due and ignored topics there:

[I]t is misleading to start to account for such categories of action as questions, promises, and so on as the analytic objects of interest. They are commonsense, not technical, categories and should be treated accordingly. (1984: 30)

EMCA has been an inquiry into the practical grammars of common understanding from the beginning. From the beginning, the distinction and relations between our topics and our resources for inquiry have been on the table, and distinctively so.⁴ And rather than attempting to re–settle them now, we might sketch a path by asking: can *any* student of natural language or practical sociological reasoning fail to make use of vernacular talk and reckonings? The insight of the

³ “The challenge for participants, then, is to assign at least one major action to a turn they have only heard part of so far. But to do so they must have parsed what they have heard and understood its grammar well enough to predict both its content and its structure, so that they can predict when it will come to an end (otherwise their response may come too early or too late).” (2013: 103) Levinson relieves the tension of his account by allowing that a recipient’s ‘ascription’ of an initial turn’s action–so–far is good enough to permit next turn productions. (2013: 104) In this fashion, however, he seems to create a space between the tasks and capacities of the recipient, and those of the over–hearing analyst. ‘Action formation’ as an analytic task seems to promise more than ascription.

⁴ As in Garfinkel’s (1967) opening proposal: ‘In doing sociology, lay and professional, every reference to the “real world,” even where the reference is to physical or biological events, is a reference to the organized activities of everyday life’ (Garfinkel 1967: vii)

topic–resource pair is not to recommend an aesthetic of abstinence; it is rather to suggest how all inquiry is anchored in common ground, *as a topic for inquiry*. In this way, Schegloff’s formulation is identifying of EMCA studies, having to do with how sociology engages vernacular accounts of everyday life, and how those accounts and account–abilities are themselves constituents of order, structure and recurrence (see Garfinkel, 1967, *passim*, among many other discussions). The question runs throughout CA’s treatments of turn construction and sequential organization, its categories of adjacently–paired turns and measures of adequacy for the achievements of common understanding, viz., an apt next turn, produced on time (Moerman and Sacks, 1971/1988). We can expect that every analyst takes in these furry vernacular reckonings too. How else could we work within sensible worlds already in place? Borrowing from Geertz (1974) [itself a borrowing], it may well be that we are dealing with soft underbellies all the way down.

FIRST TURNS

Taking a somewhat different path, Heritage (2012c) writes an EAF for action’s formations and identifications that is anchored to the primacy of information transfer for talk–in–interaction. He takes up the alternation between declaratives and interrogatives, or the work of delivering and requesting information, and finds in ‘requests’ a ‘paradigm’ of first actions.

Given all this, how do utterances function as requests for information? How are requests for information as a specific form of social action built and made actionable as such? This is not an idle question. Requests for information are the ultimate paradigm of an adjacency pair first action... (2012a: 3).⁵

As it develops, his account of the development of CA through its critique of ‘speech act theory’ then argues that CA has *missed* the paradigmatic play of

⁵ The status of these turn types is critically taken up by Lynch and Wong (2016) and Lindwall et al. (2016), to which Heritage replied in his academic.edu 2016 post:

Note that I do not assert, as claimed by Lynch and Wong (2016: 530) that "requesting and asserting information makes up the ultimate paradigm of an adjacency pair first action" (Heritage 2012a: 3) (sic). Rather I assert that requesting information represents such a paradigm. This is at variance with a point made by Schegloff (1988) to the effect that there are no 'paradigm' cases of adjacency pairs point [sic], though the basis for my departure is too complex to address here and now. [footnote 13]

We believe the 2016 rebuttal in academic.edu has been removed. We find no comparable discussion in Heritage, 2018.

information exchange—asking and giving—as foundational to talk-in-interaction [see below].

But what is to be seen throughout is that the locus of ‘first turns’ is the identifying interest of action formation analyses; it lends distinction to the EAF enterprise. Of course, the status of a turn as ‘first’ can be a fugitive thing; we are on more secure ground when we speak of single turns. And an analysis of a single turn, as of its production features across its construction space, *but no further*, marks a genuine difference, if not departure, from *sequential* analysis.⁶

The play of first-turn action formation is central in the work of Heritage, Raymond and their colleagues in their every discussion of morpho-syntactic turn constructions, prosody, and the play of ‘epistemic status’ in smoothing out any ambiguity of turn design—and actions formed—as between the founding pair of “declaratives” and “interrogatives” (for discussions, see Drew, 2018:174, Heritage, 2012a, 2012b, Lindwall, Lymer & Ivarsson, 2016, Lymer, Lindwall & Ivarsson, 2017, and Lynch and Wong, 2016). I want to speak of these proposals through Heritage’s remarks on the formative history of CA, and the play of the ‘next turn procedure’.

THE ANALYTIC PROBITY OF NEXT TURNS

Lindwall et al. (2016) provide a closely argued and trustworthy summary of action formation—“the recognizability of social actions”—in the EAF, including Heritage’s (2012a) discussion of the insufficiencies of CA’s accounts of first turns. That *every* turn at talk reveals an understanding of its prior is replete in CA’s analyses of production trajectories and what understandings they achieve, *as* social actions. Whether and how a given turn constitutes a ‘complaint’, for example, is a fine question to ask, and would seem to be directly engaged in questions of ‘action formation’. But the ‘soft underbelly’ has to do with turning to what the parties *make* of it. This is Levinson’s objection to how CA sets out to build production accounts of how [and what] things are recognizably said and done. And it is where CA has *use* for the parties vernacular reckonings that Heritage (2012a: 2) joins Levinson’s complaint, not about intuitive underbellies, but about a close cousin: “ad hoc stipulation”, in lieu of “empirical research”.

One can hear Levinson’s (2013) discontents with vernacular accounts in Heritage (2012a). It’s a forgiving treatment in its way, written through a whiggish account of the intellectual history of CA and the early labors of Sacks and Schegloff.

⁶ See Lindwall’s et al., 2016:503–504 discussion of the putative production differences between ‘first’ and ‘next’ turns; as they [and Levinson, (2013:109)] observe, every sequence-initial turn is itself a next within a sequential environment.

Although the CA approach to action and interaction stands in marked contrast to the speech-act tradition (Schegloff, 1988a; 1992a, pp. xxiv-xxvii; 1992b), the paradoxes and difficulties encountered by speech-act analysis undoubtedly had a chilling effect on CA's approach to first actions. Some initiating actions such as "hello" and "goodbye" were simple enough to handle and became paradigmatic instances of adjacency-pair firsts. Others, like questions, invitations, requests, and offers were primarily addressed by considering second or subsequent responses to them. Their character as actions was either treated as transparent or became largely a matter of ad hoc stipulation "in the midst" of analysis and not a systematic topic of empirical research. Thus, for many of the more significant first pair-parts, action was examined through the lens of reaction, and the consideration of sequential position took precedence over examination of the composition of the turns themselves (Goffman, 1983). (Heritage, 2012a: 2)

This is a remarkable passage: that the paradoxes of Speech Act Theory had a 'chilling' effect on those who so cleanly set them aside is a peculiar account of this intellectual history. When Schegloff engaged Searle (1992b), he seemed none too chilled. And that CA has relied on "ad hoc stipulation" may well be a characterization that returns to haunt the EAF, just as it is an odd account of sequential analysis to speak of it as a "lens of reaction" [this obviously refers to the next turn procedure]. The account seems to have no use for the 'projectability' of sequential organization, or turn constructions themselves. And then in the last phrase, that "sequential position took precedence over examination... of the turns themselves" seems not only to miss the force of a program that finds *every* turn as a turn within a *sequence* of turns, and then examines them closely—"turns themselves" are inseparable from their sequential productions—it also relies on Goffman (1983) for the authority of its turn to "turns themselves".

The passage offers a tendentious history, and ties to a second brief passage that further makes its point.

... [To] understand the underlying mechanics of first actions, including but not exclusively the role of epistemics in their formation and recognition, 'next turn' will not always be a source of unequivocal validation. (Heritage, 2012c, p. 80)

There are two things to pull into immediate view here: One is how we see again the move to 'first actions' as the *space* of 'action formation', a turn plucked from its sequential context and whose actions are assembled from morpho-syntax, intonation and, as the disambiguator when needed, epistemic status possessions. (See Heritage, 2012a, *passim*, and Lindwall, Lymer & Ivarsson, 2016.) This is a profoundly different conceptual landscape from what is found in Sacks' or Schegloff's discussions of turn construction. It speaks as though actions are readied and formed in single turns, then and there, and *then* released into the slipstream of

sequential order. It shows a kind of 'paradigmatic' disposition towards first turns as the 'site' of action formation that owes very little to the sequential production of talk-in-interaction. It suggests a venerable account of actors [and analysts] writing messages in a bottle. If temporality—and sequentiality—is to be salvaged, it will be the temporality of a single turn's construction. And it was, of course, dissatisfactions with single turns, or analyses never beyond the level of 'the phrase', that animated Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) dissatisfactions, among others, with the state of linguistics, and their proposal for an "analysis of discourse".⁷

The contingent and operational achievements of common understanding (see Garfinkel, 1967; Moerman and Sacks, 1988; Sacks et al., 1974) are, by the EAF account, pre-dated by the clarity of a *first* action formation, secured within a single turn and available to the parties, and also the overhearing analyst. (The relationship between these two hearings, as in whose comes first, and with what authority, is often uncertain.) But by either account, there is no need to doubt that questions, for example, are routinely heard as questions. Yes, of course. But what, then, do such productions 'unequivocally validate' in their production, beyond prosody or syntactical form? And can claims of 'epistemic status' be 'unequivocally validated' at all? In conversation, questions aren't simply heard as questions; they are heard as questions-in-the-course-of doing things like irony, skepticism, teasing, flirtation, interrogation, tutorials, 'pre' sequence initiations, *etc.* These actions and their formations seem well beyond the hearing of a single turn's request for information. Thus the insufficiency of accounts of action formation built from single turns, *simpliciter*.

Second, to be clear, the 'next turn proof procedure' of consulting what a next turn comes to, for our understanding of the recipient's understandings of what a prior turn aimed to achieve, doesn't *prove* anything. 'Proof procedure' is a useful phrase, but 'proofs' aren't the language of EMCA. Grammars of practice are. The procedure addresses what was heard and analyzed by recipients engaged in the practical tasks of achieving common understanding and the progression of sequential action.⁸ The 'procedure' gives *evidence* of their orientations, not proof, evidence that is instructive for the overhearing analyst. In consulting next turns as evidence of the parties' demonstrable orientations, we begin to see the discipline of their inquiries, *and thereby discipline our own*. All this, by Levinson's account,

⁷ It is a small point to observe that Sinclair and Coulthard conducted their studies in classrooms in the certainty that "desultory conversation was perhaps the most sophisticated and least overtly rule-governed form of spoken discourse and therefore almost certainly not the best place to begin" (1975:4). Though published in 1975 they make no reference to Sacks et al. 1974. This may only be a matter of production calendars.

⁸ As Schegloff (1996) observes, were next turns to 'prove' a prior, the possibility of misunderstanding would be erased.

is of the fuzzy fabric of an occult operation. For Heritage, it fails the bar of ‘unequivocal validation’.

But by EMCA’s account, we travel a world of occasioned expressions. Order, structure and recurrence are shot-through with expressions whose definite sense and meanings are tied to the occasions of their production and use. For such a world, it’s hard to reckon the measure of “unequivocal validations” as *other than* one of the tropes and knots of the long-standing promises of formal analysis. It is not for ‘unequivocal validation’ that CA’s next turn procedure is so revealing, a point to which we’ll return. Nor has the conceptual history of EMCA ever proposed to secure such a thing.

When we collect these remarks about action formation and single turn productions as action’s ‘locus of order’, I think we see the outline of a retreat from the sequential analyses of turns, sequences, and actions in their course. And I think we see it vividly in the EAF’s treatments of assessments sequences, in Heritage, 2002, Heritage and Raymond, 2005, and Raymond and Heritage, 2006.⁹

ASSESSMENTS

There are three things we want to get at in the EAF treatment of assessment sequences (see Macbeth et al., 2016 for a fuller discussion), and their summary expression is taken up in the treatment of the transcribed sequence below. The first is that it is here, in epistemic discussions of assessment sequences, that we see clearly the development of talk-in-interaction as an agonistic venue, a contest of epistemic authorizations, a matter of ‘Territories of Knowledge’ (Heritage, 2012b), experience, and/or possessions, whose borders are constantly monitored, and whose conceptualization is underwritten again and again through the work of Erving Goffman.¹⁰

⁹ In their commentaries to the 2012 special issue of *ROLSI*, both Drew and Clift cite the Heritage and Raymond, 2005 and Raymond and Heritage, 2006 as the first presentations of a programmatic identity for the EAF.

¹⁰ One cannot miss Goffman’s presence in the EAF. In the 2016 special issue it was noted how in publications spanning from 1984 to 2013 or thereabouts, we had not encountered a single reference to Schegloff’s 1988b discussion of the history and conceptual disputes that Goffman pursued with sequential analysis, and the depth of his [Schegloff’s] critique. It leaves little of Goffman’s enterprise standing in the good stead of empirical study. Heritage (2016, 2018: 46, footnote 10) forcefully replies: “In fact, Schegloff’s attack was methodological, focused on how Goffman collected and analyzed data and not focused on Goffman’s program per se.” Holding aside the distinction he proposes between methods and ‘programs’, and because we have been taken to task more than once for failing to cite an entire discussion, we want to acknowledge that his reply says more than that. But to our reading, Schegloff’s critique was deeply conceptual. He speaks of Goffman’s oeuvre as “...sociology by epitome with a vengeance,” and observes:

Second, in its re-treatment of assessment sequences as we know them in CA, we find a new use for and understanding of 'upgrades' and 'downgrades' as social actions, and the conceptual relations that organize them. And third, *through* those conceptual revisions we find, again, a decisive turn away from sequential organizations, and to the formal space of a single turn's construction.

As all would agree, sequential analysis does of course routinely take keen interest in turn constructions, their ties to prior turns and sequential environments, their projectability, implicativeness and place within a sequence of turns, the work of the turn and of speaker selection, and the achievements of common understanding they display. These domains and others are constitutive of the work of turn construction. Nor can one read Schegloff's "On questions and ambiguities" (1984), as but one example, and imagine that his interests in first turns and turn construction are not central. But we find a very different discussion of first turns and their construction in the EAF's discussion of 'upgraded' and 'downgraded' first [and next] turn assessments.

UPGRADES & DOWNGRADES

This review assumes a reading of assessments sequences through Sacks et al. and thus an understanding of upgrades and downgrades as descriptions of second assessments that are measured to their firsts.¹¹ First assessments are implicative of second assessments, and seconds may be produced as an upgrade or downgrade of the first, and are also heard through the production features of preferred and dis-preferred next turns, and orientations to agreement (Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks et al., 1974). Upgradings and downgradings are clearly expressed in *sequential* organizations.

This conceptual landscape is radically revised by the EAF, such that there, we have upgraded and downgraded *first* assessments, and one could well be baffled by the formulation. If 'gradings', whether 'up or down', are produced within local sequential environments, you might ask 'What is the sequential environment of a *first* assessment, and what is it *of* that environment that affords the ground

It will not deliver the field which Goffman has helped bring us to the verge of, both because analysis proposed about such material is of equivocal relevance when confronted with hard empirical detail, and because of the sorts of occurrences which never come up for analysis at all when proceeding in Goffman's way. (1988b: 102)

This is a programmatic critique.

¹¹ Upgrading and downgrading is of course not provincial to assessments; we find them in greetings, complements, stories and insults, for examples. But a sequential organization recurs: an up or downgraded remark is a second position remark, leveraged from its first.

whereby an upgraded or downgraded *first* assessment cuts its figure?’ More simply, what is an up or down graded first assessment upgraded or downgraded from?

The answer is roughly, sequentially, nothing, meaning that an up or down-graded first assessment is a *second* to nothing, and thus the puzzle of a graded *first* assessment won’t be solved by consulting sequential environments.¹² Rather, the reader must note how the object of the grading—the *what* of the up or down-grade—has been recast. *What* is being ‘graded’ in EAF assessment sequences, in *both* turns of the sequence, is the epistemic endowments of the speaker herself.

This entails a substantial departure from the conceptual orbit of sequential analysis, and perhaps a first departure has to do with the rendering of “position”. ‘Position’ becomes in these treatments an *ordinal* object relieved of a sequential production history; perhaps it has one, but it has no bearing on the work of the graded assessment. We see the ordinal rendering in a discussion of what is consequential about ‘going first’. That is, being the first one to assess

... can index or embody a first speaker’s claim to what might be termed ‘epistemic authority’ about an issue relative to a second or to ‘know better’ about it... [and] where a state of affairs is separately experienced or known by the parties, going first can have a greater impact in implicitly establishing superior access, expertise, authority and rights to assess the matter in question... (2002: 200) (cf., Heritage and Raymond, 2005: 200; Raymond and Heritage, 2006: 684–685).¹³

¹² See Macbeth et al., (2016: footnote 13) for a discussion of how Heritage and Raymond (2005:16, footnote 3) discuss how first assessments, “commonly emerge in environments that have been made ‘ripe’ for them in various ways.” This ripeness does not, however, address their productions as up or down-graded. *That* production has no sequential environment; there is only the single turn’s production and the epistemic status possessions of the speaker that authorize it.

¹³ Note the phrase “...where a state of affairs is separately experienced or known by the parties...” ‘Experienced’ seems to refer to a kind of ‘sense-impression empiricism’ (see Macbeth and Wong, 2016:577). But there’s a good deal we *know* without experiencing, as in the notion of ‘background knowledge’. Nor need we experience *this* game of baseball, to *know* the game of baseball. These are matters of ‘ways of knowing’, and there are many. But we find no discussion of those ways in the EAF, and without it, what ‘epistemics’ *means* in any actual treatment seems *ad hoc* and uncertain. ‘Information’ seems to be the default meaning. As for ‘going first’, I again want to acknowledge that the discussion provided in the Heritage (2002: 200) text is larger than what we have produced above. It consists of three numbered points. The passage quoted above is edited from the first and third points. The second refers to the social-psychological hazard wherein “respondents may be vulnerable to the inference that their response is fabricated on the instant to achieve agreement or disagreement and is thus a dependent or even a coerced action within a field of constraint that is established

Thus, first-*said* assessments are “upgraded assessments”. Their upgraded claim of epistemic authority is in hand before any next turn is produced. In this fashion, both the sense of ‘position’ and the *object* of the grading—epistemic authority—are re-written. They have no particular need for a sequential analysis because they do not owe to sequential productions. Upgrades and downgrades are now produced in the course of single turns, as of their ordinal production, as claims on behalf of epistemic rights to produce whatever the assessment may be.

But the ordinal placement of the turn [whether first *or* second] is not solely determinative of the turn’s assessment’s grading. Second turn assessments can be up-graded too [just as first assessments can be downgraded; see below]. Given the advantages of ‘going first’, if a person producing a second assessment “wishes to convey that he/she has *previously and independently* formed the same view or opinion as the first speaker” (Heritage 2002:201, original emphasis), there are ways to do that, commonly by Oh-prefacing the next assessment. As Heritage observes: “Oh-prefaced second assessments, in short, embody a declaration of epistemic independence” (2002: 201), and there are ample exhibits offered on behalf of the claim, including the one we will discuss.

But what we then see from these discussions is that assessment sequences in their entirety—across both turns—become sites for the play of epistemic claims and counter-claims and plays of authority and/or subordination (the title phrase of Heritage and Raymond, 2005). Each turn can give evidence of a contest of epistemic assertions, and *both* turns have regular devices for upgrading *and* downgrading their claims of authority via morpho-syntactic features of the turn (such as down-grading negative interrogatives and tagged questions that write equivocations onto the assessments they express; see Heritage and Raymond, 2005).

But I want to re-emphasize what strikes us as the most significant revision that has been set in play. Assessment sequences are well known in sequential analysis for how they articulate a sequential grammar. They appear in EAF treatments too, familiar, on the one hand, but quite differently laden and organized.

The play of up-gradings and down-gradings are no longer remarks on the *objects* of assessment. They are rather measures of the rights and authorizations to *produce them*. In this way, a conceptual architecture of sequential productions is displaced, and an organization of epistemic status endowments is placed in its stead, as the engine of turn construction. One could miss the substitution, and how the formative organization is no longer sequential, at all. Rather, it is a turn to turns themselves, to the syntactic features that assemble the turn, and the hidden and ‘inexplicit’ epistemic claims that animate it (see below). We find a ‘hand in glove’ account of single turn productions, and a great deal of the interest we see in the EAF seems to follow from the proposal to fill the turn space with both novel

by the first.” It’s imaginable. But how an analysis would establish its ‘validation’ seems uncertain. The third point returns to the first. So, going first—first in line, as it were—has ‘greater impact’.

and familiar constitutive organizations of epistemic endowment, morpho-syntactic structure, and the action formations they claimedly launch. It seems, in this architectural sense, to be a return to an amended ‘speech act’ account of action, the very account that CA reverse engineered.

In sum, we are pointing to a pivot away from sequential grammars as the analytic fabric of members’ demonstrable orientations, produced and measured in real time as of their disciplined practices of speaking and listening as they take the measure of what’s said and done. Said differently, EMCA brought into view sociology’s canonical questions (order, structure and recurrence, where meaning underwrites them all) as grammars of what *any* competent member knows, as in the grammars of conversation’s implicativeness, of repair, recipient design, greetings, person reference, pre-sequences, membership categories, *etc.* It is in *all* of these ways that talk-in-interaction is shot through with knowing action and competent practice. Yet the EAF, it seems, sets aside interest in what *any* member knows of talk-in-interaction and the grammars of common understanding, and writes instead a stratifying ‘engine’ of epistemic gradients, plusses and minuses. This seems to be central to the great conceptual difference between the two ‘frameworks’. And often enough, it seems to complicate EAF analyses of actual transcript, as evidenced in more than a dozen re-analyses of EAF treatments in the 2016 special issue.

A CASE¹⁴

With these remarks in hand, I want to turn to a single exhibit of the EAF’s treatment of assessment sequences and what it finds, and also what it seems to take no notice of. Presumably, it is an exemplary sequence for the EAF, as it is for us. It involves a conversation between two dog breeders about plans by one of them for breeding a young female. The one who raises the topic is not the owner, but she has doubts about the wisdom of the plan, and clearly knows about breeding herself, and also about the recent experiences of the owner. ‘Territories of knowledge and experience’ (Heritage, 2011) are clearly on the table, but here, the parties know a same territory, and, it seems, a same history.

I want to review the transcript and what the EAF makes of it in Heritage (2002) before saying anything more, except this: the ‘what more’ trades on Sacks’ observation that a great virtue of working from real-time records and closely transcribed materials is the possibility of ‘re-analysis’, meaning that “... others could look at what I had studied and make of it what they could, if, for example, they wanted to be able to disagree with me” (Sacks, 1984: 26). Re-analyses are central

¹⁴ These materials were discussed in Macbeth and Wong (2016). The treatment here is somewhat more extensive.

to our 50 year corpus, and indeed the EAF has been leveraged from re-analyses of that same corpus. So we trust there is consensus on the wisdom of the exercise.

This sequence is part of a discussion of “Oh–Prefaced Responses to Assessments” in Heritage (2002) (see also Heritage and Raymond (2005) and Heritage (2012a). A recurrent theme across many EAF analyses of transcript is one of ‘proprietary relations’, or how one may ‘own’ things like knowledge, experience, witnessings, spouses, children, dogs and cats. This ownership can be central to epistemic status and authority. In the particulars here:

[T]wo dog breeders—Norman and Ilene—have been talking about the readiness of one of Norman's younger dogs to have a first litter... And at line 9, Ilene ventures a comment about one of Norman's other dogs (Trixie), who apparently began breeding at a young age:¹⁵

(2)

[Heritage 2002:204-205, Ex. (11), Heritage 1:11:4]

1. Ile: No well she's still a bit young though isn't [she<ah me] an:=
2. Nor: [She::]
3. Ile: = uh[:
4. Nor: [She wz a year: la:st we:k.
5. Ile: Ah yes. Oh well any time no:w [then.]
6. Nor: [Uh:::]:[m
7. Ile: [Ye:s. =
8. Nor: = But she [:'s ()]
9. Ile: [Cuz Trixie started] so early [didn't sh[e,
10. Nor: [°Oh:: [ye:s.° =
11. Ile: = 'Ye:h' =

The narrative resumes:

Here Norman's oh-prefaced agreement (line 10), in conveying the independence of his assessment from Ilene's, also alludes to his epistemic priority with respect to the information in question... At the same moment, Ilene's tag question (line 9) downgrades the epistemic strength of what would otherwise be a flat assertion.

And further:

... the epistemic priority of the second, oh-prefacing speaker is available from the topic and context of the interaction and inexplicitly indexed in the talk. (2002: 205)

¹⁵ In Heritage 2012a, it is “Norma”, not Norman.

There are several things to tease out here, and they come into view by pursuing a sequential analysis. The sequence begins with Ilene suggesting that the pup in question is 'still a bit young'. Norman cites her age in line 4, and Ilene seems to receive it as settling the matter. But she returns with the recollection about Trixie in line 9, and her ending "didn't she", seems less a downgrade, than a call for recollection, and agreement, which she gets in Norman's line 10, in overlap of her first possible completion. Her turn seems to be the touch off for Norman in line 10, in his softly spoken 'Oh:: yes', where soft speaking, and Oh prefacing, can indeed mark 'changes of state'. [Note also Norman's line 6 and his latched turn of line 8 in what sounds like the beginning of a continuing rejoinder to Ilene's first turn.]

The EAF analysis has it that Norman is pressing his "epistemic independence" in line 10, and that it also "alludes to his epistemic priority". Here, it seems, the edges of knowing and owning take on a reflexive relationship. The dogs in question are certainly Norman's dogs, and thus as of Western canons of ownership, he's entitled to make decisions about his property [whether 'knowingly' or not]. And the EAF literature is filled with discussions of owning 'knowledge', 'access', territories, grandchildren, and the rest. But I want to suggest that the real puzzle here is a puzzle we have encountered time and again in the EAF literature, and in the particulars it sums to this:

Ilene's pursuit of her assessment is, *from the beginning*, oriented to just whose dog it is. It's quite clear that she is speaking of "his" dogs. She shows it in her assessment and solicitation of agreement in line 1 [and her turn beginning shows a tie to a prior turn we don't see, and perhaps the temporizing of a dis-preferred next]. And she shows it again in her back-down in line 5, and again in her next assessment of the experience with Trixie in line 9. She knows Norman's dogs.

To then propose that an orientation to 'epistemic priority'—or at least ownership—first or markedly shows up in Norman's 'Oh-prefaced' agreement in line 10 ignores how his sequence has been oriented to ownership throughout. 'Ownership' and the privileges of estate—if not an epistemic estate—have been in evidence from the beginning of the sequence, and thus we can ask, as we have many times in our larger review of the EAF corpus, by the time we hear an "Oh-prefaced 2nd assessment"—assuming line 10 is a second assessment *at all*—just what work has this "inexplicit indexing" expression to do?

How has an orientation to 'who owns what' not been explicit and demonstrable in the orientations of the parties—and formative of the sequence—all along? And what is it that is 'hidden' here that only line 10 indexes or reveals? With these questions in mind, we want to develop the sequence differently, and offer a sequential treatment that will both orient to the play of 'ownership', and assign it no particular theoretical, epistemic or 'inexplicit' privilege. I want to briefly consider the sequence through Sacks' remarks on "The inference-making machine" (1992), and Schegloff's treatment of "Confirming allusions" (1996).

AN ALTERNATE ANALYSIS

In his lecture on “The inference–making machine” (1992: v. 1, part 1: lect. 14), Sacks is addressing grammars of account construction, and how one needn't be a witness to the affairs a telling tells to have penetrating noticings about how the account has been assembled, and how ‘account–able things’ have or have not been produced. One can ‘know’ such things by analyzing the account’s production. We have something like that here, but from a different direction, and an inference is central to both. An account is the thing Ilene is working to achieve, by pointing to a shared history and experience that is account–able in the way she proposes. Ilene is leading Norman to an account–able conclusion that her assessment—“she’s still a bit young”—projects, but does not say, and she is working to produce next–turn resources whereby Norman might find the direction of her remarks so that the conclusion or inference is his to make—perhaps further orientation to his ownership. And indeed he seems to find it, in his “Oh:: ye:s.°” of line 10. What the work of the sequence comes to, by this alternate account, is Norman’s belated recognition of what Ilene has been pointing to from the beginning, and Ilene’s work of leading him to see it.

We can also understand the sequence through Schegloff’s 1996 discussion of the grammars he calls “Confirming Allusions”. Two things should be noted: first off, he doesn’t “stipulate” to the practice. Rather, he proposes that it is a possibility, and pursues the possibility in materials. Second, he uses the term “allusion” broadly.

... I use the term ‘allusion’ here very broadly, including diverse usages from ‘hinting’ to such ‘nonliteral’ tropes as metaphor, metonymy and analogy... Although semiotically speaking it may well be that anything can mean anything, it is striking that in ordinary uses of the vernacular, participants do not behave that way... They wrest the ordinary from the indefinitely many possibilities and from the possibilities of indefiniteness. (1996: 181–182)

So we can say that Ilene is gently, thoughtfully ‘hinting’. And we can also note in her agreement in next turn to Norman’s line 10—her “°Ye:h°”, produced with the same soft speaking of Norman’s prior—that we have some next turn evidence—not ‘proof’—of how Norman was heard, in two respects:

First, it is difficult to hear the proposed work of Norman’s ‘Oh prefacing’—that it ‘reaffirms epistemic independence’—as the thing to which Ilene’s next turn is oriented. *That* work, in this case and many others, is said to be “inexplicitly indexed in the talk”. But this seems no more than stipulation, insofar as it’s difficult to imagine how any transcript could deliver that which is ‘inexplicitly indexed’; whatever could be so indexed seems to be ‘removed’ from the surfaces of interaction, times two.

Note also how in the measure that Ilene’s ‘Ye:h’ sounds all the world like an agreement—but not at all an agreement to Norman’s ‘independence’—it is mindful of Schegloff’s treatment of his excerpt 2 in “Confirming allusions”. I want to take the liberty to paraphrase one of his central points, writing in the names of our speakers here. In Ilene’s line 11—and here comes the paraphrase—‘... it is not that *she* is agreeing with *Norman*... but that *Norman* was agreeing with her...’, and was in the same moment finding the history that she had been pointing to from the beginning.

On these sequential accounts, Ilene is writing a trail of remarks to point to and nurture an “inference”. It seems that Norman has belatedly discovered Ilene’s allusion to ‘troubles’ produced in her first turn assessment, and artfully pursued in her reference to Trixie in line 9. And that he discovers how she has been speaking in his line 10, and then receives Ilene’s softly latched confirmation in next turn, shows us some of the work of next turns in revealing and confirming the work to which the parties—or at least one of them here—has been oriented. The sequence is indeed a study in action formation, but by a very different path that finds a very different field and sequential history of actions.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

This account attaches to the detail of the transcript rather than to ‘inexplicit’ priorities or statuses. It treats the record in evidence. Having critiqued such things as ‘next turn procedures’ the EAF has pushed itself away from the very analytic commitments that might discipline its overhearings. Absent a discipline grounded in the endogenous organizations of turn-by-turn productions, pretty much anything might be said about a next turn at talk, and sometimes is.

Of the difference, we think that Schegloff’s measure of “convincing analysis of single episodes of conversation” (1991: 153) continues to be very useful.

One of the key tasks of researchers in developing claims for a phenomenon is not to sacrifice the detailed examination of single cases on the altar of broad claims—especially when the cases are meant as evidence for the broad claim; *one of the key tasks of readers* is to examine the detailed analysis of single cases as episodes with their own reality, deserving of their own rigorous analysis without respect to their

¹⁶ There could be still different accounts, especially of line 10, if the tape could be heard. The example set by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, whereby the materials they studied, both audio and transcript, were made available to scholars, seems to be in decline. In working up the 2016 special issue, there were many materials—tape and extended transcript—that we could not discover. This is a significant development in the EMCA community. It risks voiding Sacks’ promise of how disputes can be pursued.

bearing on the larger argument for which they are being put forward. (Schegloff, 2010: 42, italics in original)

If there *is* a duly soft and occult underbelly in our remarks here, then perhaps the characterization is no more than a demeaning of the vernacular practices and organizations whose achievements—common understanding central among them—have been the centerpiece of ethnomethodological CA from Sacks' earliest lectures. The complaint about the insufficiencies of next turn as an 'unequivocal validation' of its prior, even more so talk of 'occult' registers, seems to follow from dissatisfactions with the idea that analysts must in relevant respects be members too, and masters of the natural language in play. Schegloff says the same in his extensive 2003 interview with Cmejrkova and Prevignano, reproduced in his 2017 *festschrift* (Raymond, Lerner & Heritage, 2017).

The implication, through Levinson's and Heritage's remarks, is that the suspect 'underbelly' lies *there*, in the play of members' competence for the understanding of members' competence, and thus in the very premise of ethnomethodology's program. One could have thought that *that* complaint had been vetted long ago. The life-world of vernacular practice may well be 'soft under-bellies all the way down', and if so empirical study is obliged to take them up. But by whatever imagery, the radical conceptual programs of EMCA have been in pursuit of whatever bellies they may be, as grammars that bear the enormous weight of ordinary worlds in the detail of their each and every expression.

While EMCA—and especially CA—is known for its technical rigor, there is a conceptual rigor that underwrites the enterprise. Sacks' *Lectures* (1992) never take their leave of enormous conceptual innovation, and I want to conclude with a remark early in his lecture on "The Inference Making Machine" that felt surprising:

One of the first things I want to be able to give you is an aesthetic for social life. By that I mean in part that we should have some sense of where it is deep, and be able to see, and to pose, problems. I'll try to do somewhat more than that. I'll also try to develop a variety of notions of what kind of business sociology is, what its problems look like, what the form of the solutions to those problems are, and perhaps to some extent, some of those solutions.

In this light, the contest that Levinson and others announce may have been an aesthetic one from the beginning, a dispute over where the depth and polish of social life and order lies, and a complaint with how else we imagine it, and what else its study might lead us to see, conceptually and technically, right on the surfaces of things.

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