

Harvey Sacks

Turn-taking in conversations

Influenced by Harold Garfinkel (1994[1969]) and ethnomethodology as well as by his teacher Aaron Cicourel, the American sociologist Harvey Sacks (1935–1975) devised an approach to the study of conversations and interactions which is today known as Conversation Analysis (CA). Together with Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, he developed a taxonomy of verbal interaction, focusing first on telephone calls and other routinized and clearly defined, brief genres of interaction. Through the careful and detailed transcription and analysis of sometimes small text extracts, intricate systems of interruptions, turn-taking, repairs, question-answer sequences and so forth could be established which characterize all conversations to a certain degree. CA became most influential when studying relevant social interaction in hospitals, with traffic controllers, and in broadcast and TV interviews and debates. As a methodological principle, conversation analysts typically insist on taking the context into account only if it is made relevant by the discourse participants, which excludes contextual information not directly available to them. Such an approach to context has led to much controversy, for example the debate about text and context between Schegloff (1997) and Billig (1999) in *Discourse & Society*. CA has also adopted some concepts from Goffman, such as the notion of a 'participant framework' which denotes patterns of interaction determined by the positioning of various interactants in a conversation who negotiate and co-construct specific 'frames' together. Below, we reproduce parts of Lecture 1 of Sack's seminal *Lectures on Conversation*, which serves as an excellent introduction to the detailed analysis of the rule-governed organisation of our daily interactions.

References

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The Discourse Studies Reader

Main currents in theory and analysis

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Oxford, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

I'll start off by giving some quotations.

- (1) A: Hello.
B: Hello.
- (2) A: This is Mr Smith, may I help you?
B: Yes, this is Mr Brown.
- (3) A: This is Mr Smith, may I help you?
B: I can't hear you.
A: This is Mr Smith.
B: Smith.

These are some first exchanges in telephone conversations collected at an emergency psychiatric hospital. They are occurring between persons who haven't talked to each other before. One of them, A, is a staff member of this psychiatric hospital. B can be either somebody calling about themselves, that is to say in trouble in one way or another, or somebody calling about somebody else.

I have a large collection of these conversations, and I got started looking at these first exchanges as follows. A series of persons who called this place would not give their names. The hospital's concern was, can anything be done about it? One question I wanted to address was, where in the course of the conversation could you tell that somebody would not give their name? So I began to look at the materials. It was in fact on the basis of that question that I began to try to deal in detail with conversations.

I found something that struck me as fairly interesting quite early. And that was that if the staff member used 'This is Mr Smith may I help you?' as their opening line, then overwhelmingly, any answer other than 'Yes, this is Mr Brown' (for example, 'I can't hear you,' 'I don't know,' 'How do you spell your name?') meant that you would have serious trouble getting the caller's name, if you got the name at all.

I'm going to show some of the ways that I've been developing to analyze stuff like this. There will be a series of ways fitted to each other, as though one were constructing a multi-dimensional jigsaw puzzle. One or another piece can be isolated and studied, and also the various pieces can be studied as to how they fit together. I'll be focusing on a variety of things, starting off with what I'll call 'rules of conversational sequence'.

Looking at the first exchange compared to the second, we are struck by two things. First of all, there seems to be a fit between what the first person who speaks uses as their greeting, and what the person who is given that greeting returns. So that if A

says, 'Hello,' then B tends to say, 'Hello.' If A says, 'This is Mr Smith may I help you?' B tends to say, 'Yes, this is Mr Brown.' We can say there's a procedural rule there, that a person who speaks first in a telephone conversation can choose their form of address, and in choosing their form of address they can thereby choose the form of address the other uses.

By 'form' I mean in part that the exchanges occur as 'units'. That is, 'Hello' 'Hello' is a unit, and 'This is Mr Smith may I help you?' 'Yes, this is Mr Brown' is a unit. They come in pairs. Saying, 'This is Mr Smith may I help you?' thereby provides a 'slot' to the other wherein they properly would answer, 'Yes, this is Mr Brown.' The procedural rule would describe the occurrences in the first two exchanges. It won't describe the third exchange, but we'll come to see what is involved in such materials.

Secondly, if it is so that there is a rule that the person who goes first can choose their form of address and thereby choose the other's, then for the unit, 'This is Mr Smith may I help you?' 'Yes, this is Mr Brown,' if a person uses 'This is Mr Smith...' they have a way of asking for the other's name – without, however, asking the question, 'What is your name?' And there is a difference between saying 'This is Mr Smith may I help you?' – thereby providing a slot to the other wherein they properly would answer 'Yes, this is Mr Brown' – and asking the question, 'What is your name?' at some point in the conversation. They are very different phenomena.

For one, in almost all of the cases where the person doesn't give their name originally, then at some point in the conversation they're asked for their name. One way of asking is just the question, 'Would you give me your name?' To that, there are alternative returns, including 'No' and 'Why?' If a caller says 'Why?' the staff member may say something like, 'I want to have something to call you' or 'It's just for our records.' If a caller says 'No,' then the staff member says 'Why?' and may get something like 'I'm not ready to do that' or 'I'm ashamed.'

Now, I'll consider many times the use of 'Why?' What I want to say about it, just to begin with, is that what one does with 'Why?' is to propose some action that it is an 'accountable action'. That is to say, 'Why?' is a way of asking for an account. Accounts are most extraordinary. And the use of accounts and the use of requests for accounts are *very* highly regulated phenomena. We can begin to cut into these regularities by looking at what happens when 'May I have your name?' is followed by 'Why?' Then you get an account; for example, 'I need something to call you.' The other might then say, 'I don't mind.' Or you might get an account, 'It's just for our records.' To which the other might say, 'Well I'm not sure I want to do anything with you, I just want to find out what you do' – so that the records are not relevant.

What we can see is that there are ways that accounts seem to be dealable with. If a person offers an account, which they take it provides for the action in question being done – for example, the caller's name being given – then if the other can show that

the interest of that account can be satisfied without the name being given, the name doesn't have to be given. That is, if the account is to control the action, then if you can find a way that the account controls the alternative action than it proposed to control, you can use it in that way.

It seems to be quite important, then, who it is that offers the account. Because the task of the person who is offered the account can then be to, in some way, counter it. Where, alternatively, persons who offer an account seem to feel that they're somehow committed to it, and if it turns out to be, for example, inadequate, then they have to stand by it.

The fact that you could use questions – like 'Why?' – to generate accounts, and then use accounts to control activities, can be marked down as, I think, one of the greatest discoveries in Western civilization. It may well be that that is what Socrates discovered. With his dialectic he found a set of procedures by which this thing, which was not used systematically, could become a systematic device. Socrates will constantly ask 'Why?', there will be an answer, and he'll go on to show that that can't be the answer. And that persons were terribly pained to go through this whole business is clear enough from the Dialogues. And it's also clear in our own experiences. And in the materials I'll present.

We see, then, one clear difference between providing a slot for a name, and asking for a name. Asking for a name tends to generate accounts and counters. By providing a slot for a name, those activities do not arise.

We can also notice that, as a way of asking for the other's name, 'This is Mr Smith...' is, in the first place, not an accountable action. By that I mean to say, it's not required that staff members use it and they don't always use it, but when they do, the caller doesn't ask why. 'This is Mr Smith...' gets its character as a non-accountable action simply by virtue of the fact that this is a place where, routinely, two persons speak who haven't met. In such places the person who speaks first can use that object. And we could say about that kind of item that the matters discriminated by its proper use are very restricted. That is to say, a call is made; the only issue is that two persons are speaking who presumably haven't met, and this object can be used.

Furthermore, the matters are discriminated in different terms than those which the agency is constructed for. That is, they are discriminated in terms of 'two people who haven't met' rather than, for example, that an agency staff member is speaking to someone calling the agency for help. And where one has some organization of activities which sets out to do some task – and in this case it's important for the agency to get names – then if you find a device which discriminates in such a restricted fashion, you can use that device to do tasks for you.

Now, given the fact that such a greeting as 'This is Mr Smith...' provides for the other giving his own name as an answer, one can see what the advantage of 'Hello' is for someone who doesn't want to give their name. And I found in the first instance that

while sometimes the staff members use 'Hello' as their opening line, if it ever occurred that the persons calling the agency spoke first, they always said 'Hello.'

Persons calling could come to speak first because, at this agency, caller and staff member are connected by an operator. The operator says, 'Go ahead please,' and now the two parties are on an open line, and one can start talking or the other can start talking. This stands in contrast to, for example, calling someone's home. There, the rights are clearly assigned; the person who answers the phone speaks first. If they speak first, they have the right to choose their form. If they have the right to choose their form, they have the right thereby to choose the other's. Here, where the rights are not clearly assigned, the caller could move to speak first and thereby choose the form. And when callers to this agency speak first, the form they choose is the unit 'Hello' 'Hello.' Since such a unit involves no exchange of names, they can speak without giving their name and be going about things in a perfectly appropriate way.

Now, there are variant returns to "This is Mr Smith may I help you?", one of which is in our set of three exchanges: 'I can't hear you.' I want to talk of that as an 'occasionally usable' device. That is to say, there doesn't have to be a particular sort of thing preceding it; it can come at any place in a conversation. Here is one from the middle of a conversation, from a different bunch of materials.

- A: Hey you got a cigarette Axum. I ain't got, I ain't got a good cigarette, and I can't roll one right now. Think you can afford it maybe?
 B: I am not here to support your habits.
 A: Huh? My helplessness?
 B: I am not responsible for supporting your habits ()
 A: My habits ((laughing))

Our third exchange from the psychiatric hospital has the device used at the beginning of the conversation.

- A: This is Mr Smith may I help you?
 B: I can't hear you.
 A: This is Mr Smith.
 B: Smith.

What kind of a device is it? What you can see is this: When you say 'I can't hear you', you provide that the other person can repeat what they said. Now what does that repetition do for you? Imagine you're in a game. One of the questions relevant to the game would be, is there a way in that game of skipping a move? It seems that something like 'I can't hear you' can do such a job. If you introduce it you provide for the other to do some version of a repeat, following which you yourself can repeat. And then it's the other's turn to talk again. What we find is that the slot where the return would go – your name in return to 'This is Mr Smith...' – never occurs.

It is not simply that the caller ignores what they properly ought to do, but something rather more exquisite. That is, they have ways of providing that the place where the return name fits is never opened. So that their name is not absent. Their name would be absent if they just went ahead and talked. But that very rarely occurs. The rules of etiquette – if you want to call them that, though we take etiquette to be something very light and uninteresting and to be breached as you please – seem to be quite strong. Persons will use ways to not ignore what they properly ought to do by providing that the place for them to do it is never opened.

I hope it can also be seen that a device like ‘I can’t hear you’ – the repeat device, providing for a repetition of the thing that was first said, which is then repeated by the person who said ‘I can’t hear you’ – is not necessarily designed for skipping a move. It is not specific to providing a way of keeping in the conversation and behaving properly while not giving one’s name. It can be used for other purposes and do other tasks, and it can be used with other items. That’s why I talk about it as an ‘occasional device’. But where that is what one is trying to do, it’s a rather neat device. Let me turn now to a consideration which deals with a variant return to ‘May I help you?’ That is, not ‘Yes...’ but ‘I don’t know’. I’ll show a rather elaborate exchange in which the staff member opens with a version of ‘This is Mr Smith may I help you?’ but the combination gets split. The name is dealt with, and when the ‘can I help you’ is offered, it occurs in such a way that it can be answered independent of the name.¹

Op: Go ahead please

A: This is Mr Smith (*B:* Hello) of the Emergency Psychiatric Center can I help you?

B: Hello?

A: Hello.

B: I can’t hear you.

A: I see. Can you hear me now?

B: Barely. Where are you, in the womb?

A: Where are you calling from?

B: Hollywood.

A: Hollywood.

B: I can hear you a little better.

A: Okay. Uh I was saying my name is Smith and I’m with the Emergency Psychiatric Center.

B: Your name is what?

A: Smith.

1. The fragment of data is reproduced pretty much as Sacks transcribed it, preserving his attempts to deal with simultaneous talk (i.e., *A:* This is Mr Smith (*B:* Hello) of the Emergency Psychiatric Center) and silence (e.g., *B:* I uh Now that you’re here...).

B: Smith?

A: Yes.

A: Can I help you?

B: I don't know hhheh I hope you can.

A: Uh hah Tell me about your problems.

B: I uh Now that you're here I'm embarrassed to talk about it. I don't want you telling me I'm emotionally immature 'cause I know I am.

I was very puzzled by 'I don't know' in return to 'May I help you'. I couldn't figure out what they were doing with it. And the reason I was puzzled was that having listened to so many of these things and having been through the scene so many times, I heard 'May I help you?' as something like an idiom. I'm going to call these idiom-like things 'composites'. That means you hear the whole thing as a form, a single unit. And as a single unit, it has a proper return. As a composite, 'May I help you?' is a piece of etiquette, a way of introducing oneself as someone who is in the business of helping somebody, the answer to which is 'Yes' and then some statement of what it is one wants. We can consider this item in terms of what I'll call the 'base environment' of its use.

By 'base environment' I mean, if you go into a department store, somebody is liable to come up to you and say 'May I help you?' And in business-type phone calls this item is routinely used. And if you come into a place and you don't know what it's like, and somebody comes up to you and uses such an item, that's one way of informing you what kind of a place it is. So, if a new institution is being set up, then there are available in the society whole sets of ways that persons go about beginning conversations, and one could, for example, adopt one or another of a series of them as the ones that are going to be used in this place.

Now the thing about at least some composites is that they can be heard not only as composites, but as ordinary sentences, which we could call 'constructives', which are understood by taking the pieces and adding them up in some way. As a composite, 'May I help you?' is a piece of etiquette, a signal for stating your request – what you want to be helped with. Alternatively, as a constructive, 'May I help you?' is a question. If one hears it as a question, the piece of etiquette and its work hasn't come up, and 'I don't know' is a perfectly proper answer.

Further, 'I don't know' may be locating a problem which 'May I help you?' is designed, in the first place, to avoid. In its base environment, for example a department store, it's pretty much the case that for a customer, the question of whether some person 'can help' is a matter of the department store having made them the person who does that. That is to say, lots of things, like telling you whether you can find lingerie in a certain size, is something anybody can do, and as long as the department store says this person is going to do it, that's enough. But we're dealing with a psychiatric hospital. In a department store, being selected to do a job and having credentials to do it are essentially the same thing. In a psychiatric hospital and lots of other places, however, they

are very different things. That is, whether somebody can help you if you have a mental disorder is not solved or is not even presumptively solved by the fact that they've been selected by somebody to do that job. The way it's solved in this society is by reference to such things as having been trained in a particular fashion, having gotten degrees, having passed board examinations, etc.

Now, in the base environment of the use of 'May I help you?' there is, as I say, no difference essentially between having credentials and being selected. If one can formulate the matter in a psychiatric hospital such that those things come on as being the same, then one needn't start off by producing one's credentials at the beginning of the conversation. And in my materials, again and again, when 'May I help you?' is used the person calling says 'Yes' and begins to state their troubles.

As a general matter, then, one can begin to look for kinds of objects that have a base environment that, when they get used in that environment, perform a rather simple task, but that can be used in quite different environments to do quite other tasks. So, a matter like 'credentials' can be handled by this 'May I help you?' device. There will be lots of other devices which have a base environment, which do some other task in some other environment.

Before moving away from 'May I help you?' I want to mention one other thing about it. If the base environment is something like a department store, then, when it's used in other places – for example, a psychiatric hospital – one of the pieces of information it seems to convey is that whatever it is you propose to do, you do routinely. To whomsoever that calls. That is, it's heard as a standardized utterance. How is that relevant? It can be relevant in alternative ways. First of all, it can be a very reassuring thing to hear. Some persons feel that they have troubles, and they don't know if anybody else has those troubles; or, if others do have those troubles, whether anybody knows about them. If someone knows about them, then there may be a known solution to them. Also, and relatedly, a lot of troubles – like mental diseases – are things that persons feel very ambivalent about. That is, they're not sure whether it's some defect of their character, or something else. That, in part, is why they're hesitant to talk about it. And it seems that one of the ways one begins to tell people that they can talk, that you know what they have and that you routinely deal with such matters, is to use manifestly organizational talk.

'May I help you?', then, can be a reassuring way to begin. It can alternatively be something else. Consider the exchange I just showed, in which such standardized utterances as 'May I help you?' and 'Tell me about your problems' are used.

A: Can I help you?

B: I don't know hhheh I hope you can

A: Uh hah Tell me about your problems

B: I uh Now that you're here I'm embarrassed to talk about it. I don't want you telling me I'm emotionally immature 'cause I know I am.

That is, the use of standardized, manifestly organizational talk can provide for the person calling that they're going to get routine treatment. But 'routine', for them, may not be such a happy thing. Because, for example, they've been through it before. But they may have gone through it, as psychiatrists would say, part way. For example, they were in analysis for three years and ran out of money, or the psychiatrist wouldn't keep them on, or they didn't want to stay. Part way, they may have come to some point in the analysis where they 'knew what was wrong with them'. That is, they knew the diagnostic term. But that diagnostic term may have had a lay affiliate. By that I mean, if a psychiatrist says you're regressed, it's a technical term. But 'regressed' is also a lay term, and as a lay term it doesn't have a great deal of attractiveness. If one finds oneself living with a lay understanding of such a term, where the term is not a very nice thing to have in its lay sense, then when you hear someone using such an item as 'May I help you?', you can hear that some procedure will be gone through, the upshot of which will be the discovery of what you 'already know' – the knowing of which doesn't do you any good.

Related to that are such things as some people seem to feel very much disturbed about the fact that their relationship to a psychiatrist or to other doctors is monetary. What they want, they say, is a personal solution. Ask them what they want, 'Well, that you don't have to pay for it.' When they hear 'May I help you?', they hear 'a professional'. But they feel that the way you get cured is by getting an affiliation to somebody which is like the affiliations that they failed to get in their lives. That is, they may already have come to learn from some other psychiatrist that the failure of love by their parents is the cause of their troubles. Then, what they come to see is that they need the love of somebody else. And they can't get that from a therapist. Because as soon as they don't pay, that's the end of the relationship.

Now let me just make a few general points. Clearly enough, things like 'This is Mr Smith', 'May I help you?' and 'I can't hear you' are social objects. And if you begin to look at what they do, you can see that they, and things like them, provide the makings of activities. You assemble activities by using these things. And now when you, or I, or sociologists, watching people do things, engage in trying to find out what they do and how they do it, one fix which can be used is: Of the enormous range of activities that people do, all of them are done with something. Someone says 'This is Mr Smith' and the other supplies his own name. Someone says 'May I help you?' and the other states his business. Someone says 'Huh?' or 'What did you say?' or 'I can't hear you,' and then the thing said before gets repeated. What we want then to find out is, can we first of all construct the objects that get used to make up ranges of activities, and then see how it is those objects do get used.

Some of these objects can be used for whole ranges of activities, where for different ones a variety of the properties of those objects will get employed. And we begin to see

alternative properties of those objects. That's one way we can go about beginning to collect the alternative methods that persons use in going about doing whatever they have to do. And we can see that these methods will be reproducible descriptions in the sense that any scientific description might be, such that the natural occurrences that we're describing can yield abstract or general phenomena which need not rely on statistical observability for their abstractness or generality.

There was a very classical argument that it would not be that way, that singular events were singular events, given a historian's sort of argument, that they just happen and they get more or less accidentally thrown together. But if we could find that there are analytically hard ways of describing these things – where, that is, we're talking about objects that can be found elsewhere, that get placed, that have ways of being used, that are abstract objects which get used on singular occasions and describe singular courses of activity – then that's something which is exceedingly non-trivial to know.

One final note. When people start to analyze social phenomena, if it looks like things occur with the sort of immediacy we find in some of these exchanges, then, if you have to make an elaborate analysis of it – that is to say, show that they did something as involved as some of the things I have proposed – then you figure that they couldn't have thought that fast. I want to suggest that you have to forget that completely. Don't worry about how fast they're thinking. First of all, don't worry about whether they're 'thinking'. Just try to come to terms with how it is that the thing comes off. Because you'll find that they can do these things. Just take any other area of natural science and see, for example, how fast molecules do things. And they don't have very good brains. So just let the materials fall as they may. Look to see how it is that persons go about producing what they do produce.