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TALK AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE¹

WHETHER STARTING FROM A programmatic address to the structure of face-to-face interaction or from a programmatic concern with the constitutive practices of the mundane world, whether in pursuit of language, culture or action, a range of inquiries in several social science disciplines (most relevantly anthropology, sociology and linguistics) have over the past 25 to 30 years² brought special attention to bear on talk-in-interaction. It is not unfair to say that one of the most focused precipitates of this broad interest has been that family of studies grouped under the rubric "conversation analysis." It is, in any case, with such studies of "talk" that I will be concerned in reflecting on "talk and social structure."

Although itself understandable as a sustained exploration of what is entailed in giving an analytic account of "a context" (as in the phrase "in the context of ordinary conversation"), various aspects of inquiry in this tradition of work have prompted an interest in neighboring disciplines in relating features of talk-in-interaction to "contexts" of a more traditional sort – linguistic contexts, cultural contexts, and institutional and social structural contexts. At the same time, investigators working along conversation analytic lines began to deal with talk with properties which were seemingly related to its production by participants oriented to a special "institutional" context; and, wishing to address those distinctive properties rather than ones held in common with other forms of talk (as Sacks had done in some of his earliest work based on group-therapy sessions), these investigators faced the analytic problems posed by such an undertaking.

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The interest in the theme "talk and social structure" comes, then, from several directions – the most prominent being technical concerns in the analysis of certain forms of talk on the one hand, and an impulse to effectuate a *rapprochement* with the concerns of classical sociology, and to do so by relating work on talk-in-interaction to those social formations which get referred to as "social structures," or generically as "social structure," on the other hand. My reflections will have this latter impulse as their point of departure, but will quickly seek to engage it by formulating and confronting the analytic problems which it poses.

Of course, a term like "social structure" is used in many different ways. In recent years, to cite but a few cases, Peter Blau (1977) has used the term to refer to the distribution of a population on various parameters asserted to be pertinent to interaction, claiming a derivation from Simmel and his notion of intersecting social circles. Many others have in mind a structure of statuses and/or roles, ordinarily thereby building in an inescapable normative component, of just the sort Blau wishes to avoid. Yet others intend by this term a structured distribution of scarce resources and desirables, such as property, wealth, productive capacity, status, knowledge, privilege, power, the capacity to enforce and preserve privilege, etc. Still others, have in mind stably patterned sets of social relations, whether formalized in organizations or more loosely stabilized in networks.

The sense of "social structure" intended in the thematic concern with "talk and social structure" does not range across all these usages. But almost certainly it includes a concern with power and status and its distribution among social formations such as classes, ethnic groups, age grade groups, gender, and professional relations. It is this sense which has animated, for example, the work by West (1979) and Zimmerman and West (1975) on gender and interruption, and West's work (1984) on doctor/patient interaction. And it includes as well a concern with the structured social relations which comprise organizations and occupational practice and the institutional sectors with which they are regularly identified (as, for example, in Atkinson and Drew's treatment of the courts (1979), in the work of Zimmerman and his associates on the police (for instance, Zimmerman 1984; Whalen and Zimmerman 1987), Maynard's work (1984) on the legal system, that of Heritage (1985) on mass-media news, or Boden's (1994) on organization.

[. . .]

Whatever substantive gains there are to be had from focusing on the relationship between talk and social structure in the traditional sense, this focus is not needed in order to supply conversation analysis with its sociological credentials. The work which is focused on the organization of talk-in-interaction in its own right – work on the organization of turn-taking,

or on the organization of sequences, work addressed to the actions being done in turns and the formats through which they are done, work on the organization of repair, and work directed to the many discrete practices of talking and acting through talk which do not converge into domains of organization – this work is itself dealing with social organization and social structures, albeit of a different sort than in the received uses of those terms, and is no less sociological in impulse and relevance (Schegloff 1987).

For some, the fact that conversation analysis (henceforth, CA) concerns itself with the details of talking has meant that it is a form of linguistics. Perhaps so, but certainly not exclusively so. If it is not a distinctive discipline of its own (which it may well turn out to be), CA is at a point where linguistics and sociology (and several other disciplines, anthropology and psychology among them) meet. For the target of its inquiries stands where talk amounts to action, where action projects consequences in a structure and texture of interaction which the talk is itself progressively embodying and realizing, and where the particulars of the talk inform what actions are being done and what sort of social scene is being constituted. Now, from the start, one central preoccupation of sociology and social theory has been with the character of social action and what drives it (reason, passion, interest, utility) – this is familiar enough. Another concern has been with the character of interaction in which action is embedded, for it is observations about some aspects of the character of interaction that motivated such hoary old distinctions as those between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, between status and contract, and the like. "Action in interaction" is, then, a longstanding theme of social analysis.

CA's enterprise, concerned as it is with (among other things) the detailed analysis of how talk-in-interaction is conducted as an activity in its own right and as the instrument for the full range of social action and practice, is then addressed to one of the classic themes of sociology, although to be sure in a distinctive way. Of the several ways in which CA shows its deep preoccupation with root themes of social science and sociology in particular, these standing conversation analytic preoccupations resonate more with the title of the Atkinson/Heritage collection (1984): they are concerned with "structures of social action" – structures of single actions and of series and sequences of them. Atkinson and Heritage's title is, of course, a thoroughly unveiled allusion to the title of Talcott Parsons's first major work, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), the work which launched the enterprise of Parsonian action theory. The difference between Parsons's title and the Atkinson/Heritage allusion, "*The Structure of Social Action*" versus "*Structures of Social Action*," may suggest some of the distinctiveness.

Parsons's tack was conceptual and global. For him there was "the structure," and it was arrived at by theoretic stipulation of the necessary

components of an analytical unit – the “unit act,” components such as “ends,” “means,” “conditions.” This was a thoroughly conceptual enterprise on a thoroughly analytic object. The Atkinson/Heritage “structures of” suggests not only multiplicity of structures, but the empirical nature of the enterprise. The units are concrete activities, and the search for their “components” involves examination and description of empirical instances.

But with all the differences in conception, mode of working, etc., there is a common enterprise here, and it has long been a central one for sociology and the social sciences more generally – to try to get at the character of social action and social interaction. In CA’s addressing of this theme and the varied problems and analytic tasks to which it gives rise, it is itself engaged in – “*echt*” sociology, even without the introduction of traditional sociological concerns such as “social structure.” But the claim that the problems which have preoccupied conversation analysis are sociological in impulse and import is without prejudice to our engagement with the work which tries to relate talk to more traditional conceptions of social structure. That engagement is already underway.

The reasons for thinking about the relationships of talk and social structure are ready to hand. Both our casual and our studied examination of interaction and talk-in-interaction provide a lively sense of the occasions on which who the parties are relative to one another seems to matter, and matter to *them*. And these include senses of “who they are” that connect directly to what is ordinarily meant by “social structure” – their relative status, the power they differentially can command, the group affiliations they display or can readily have attributed to them such as their racial or ethnic memberships, their gender and age-grade status, their occupational status and its general standing and immediate interactional significance, and the other categories of membership in the society which can matter to the participants and which fall under the traditional sociological rubric “social structure.”

The issue I mean to address is not: is there such a thing as gender/class/power/status/organization/etc.? Or: does it affect anything in the world? Rather, the question is: whatever observations we initially make about how such features of social organization as these work and bear on interaction, how do we translate them into defensible, empirically based analyses that help us to get access to previously unnoticed particular details of talk-in-interaction, and appreciate their significance. For the lively sense we may all share of the relevance of social structure along the lines I have mentioned needs to be converted into the hard currency (if you’ll pardon the cash nexus) of defensible analysis – analysis which departs from, and can always be referred to and grounded in, the details of actual occurrences of conduct in interaction.

Again, I do not mean to be addressing myself to two apparently neighboring stances, although there may well be implications for them. I am not centrally concerned with those investigators whose primary analytic commitment is to social structure in the received senses of that term, and who mean to incorporate examination of talk into their inquiries because of the role attributable to it in the "production" of social structure. And I do not take up the position (apparently embraced in Goffman 1983) in which the prima-facie relevance of social structure to the organization of interaction is in principle to be disputed (although I do suggest that some received notions may not be sustainable when required to come to terms with the details of actual occurrences). Rather, I mean to formulate and explore the challenges faced by those attracted to the interaction/social structure nexus. A solution must be found to the analytic problems which obstruct the conversion of intuition, casual (however well-informed) observation, or theoretically motivated observation into demonstrable analysis. For without solutions to these problems, we are left with "a sense of how the world works," but without its detailed explication.

My discussion will be organized around three issues: the problem of relevance, the issue of "procedural consequentiality," and a concern for the competing attentional and analytic claims of conversational structures and "social structure" respectively in the analysis of the data of talk-in-interaction.

The problem of relevance

First, *relevance* [. . .]

The original focus of the work by Sacks which I mean to recall was the way in which persons engaged in talk-in-interaction did their talk, specifically with respect to reference to persons. Sacks noted that members refer to persons by various category terms – as man/woman, protestant/catholic/jew, doctor/patient, white/black/chicano, first baseman/second baseman/shortstop, and the like. He remarked that these category terms come in collections. In presenting them above, they are inscribed in groups: [man/woman], [protestant/catholic/jew]; and so on; and that is the correct way to present them. It is not [man/woman/protestant], [catholic/jew]. This is what is being noted in the observation that the category terms are organized in *collections*.

Some of these collections Sacks called "Pn adequate;" they were adequate to characterize or categorize any member of any population, however specified, whether or not it had been specified (for example, counted, characterized or bounded) in some fashion (Sacks 1972: 32–3). Other collections were

not Pn adequate. [Male/female] *is* Pn adequate; [first baseman/second baseman/shortstop . . .] *is not* Pn adequate, because the latter is only usable on populations already specified or characterized as "baseball teams," whereas the former is not subject to such restrictions.

One of Sacks's main points was that there demonstrably are many Pn-adequate category collections. The collection of category terms for gender/sex and age are the most obvious ones, and these two alone serve to allow the posing of the problem of relevance. The point is that since everyone who is an instance of some category in one of those collections is necessarily (for that is the import of Pn adequacy) also an instance of some category in the other, or *an* other, the fact that someone *is* male, or *is* middle aged, or *is* white, or *is* Jewish *is*, by itself, no warrant for so referring to them, for the warrant of "correctness" would provide for use of any of the other reference forms as well. Some principle of relevance must underlie use of a reference form, and has to be adduced in order to provide for one rather than another of those ways of characterizing or categorizing some member. That is the problem of relevance: not just the descriptive adequacy of the terms used to characterize the objects being referred to, but the relevance that one has to provide if one means to account for the use of some term — the relevance of that term relative to the alternative terms that are demonstrably available.

Now, this problem was developed by Sacks initially in describing how members talk about members. It showed the inadequacy of an account of a conversationalist's reference to another as a "cousin" by reference to the other "actually being a cousin." But, once raised, the point is directly relevant to the enterprise of professional analysts as well. Once we recognize that whoever can be characterized as "male" or as "protestant," or as "president" or whatever, can be characterized or categorized in other ways as well, our scholarly/professional/scientific account cannot 'naively' rely on such characterizations, that is, cannot rely on them with no justification or warrant of their relevance.

Roughly speaking, there are two types of solution to this problem in the methodology of professional analysis. One type of solution can be characterized as the "positivist" stance, in one of the many senses in which that term is currently used. In this view, the way to warrant one, as compared to another, characterization of the participants (for example, in interaction) is the "success" of that way of characterizing them in producing a professionally acceptable account of the data being addressed. "Success" is measured by some "technology" — by statistical significance, a preponderance of historical evidence, and so forth. Sometimes there is an additional requirement that the characterization which produces "successful" analysis be theoretically interpretable; that is, that the selection of descriptive terms for the participants converge with the terms of a professional/scientific theory relevant to the

object of description. In this type of solution, which I am calling "positivistic," it does not matter whether or not the terms that are used to characterize the participants in some domain of action, and which have yielded "significant" results, are otherwise demonstrably orientated to or not by the participants being described. That is what makes this solution of the problem "positivist."

The alternative type of solution insists on something else, and that is that professional characterizations of the participants be grounded in aspects of what is going on that are demonstrably relevant to the participants, and at that moment – at the moment that whatever we are trying to provide an account of occurs. Not, then, just that we see them to be characterizable as "president/assistant," as "chicano/black," as "professor/student," etc. But that for them, at that moment, those are terms relevant for producing and interpreting conduct in the interaction.

This issue should be of concern when we try to bring the kind of traditional sociological analysis that is implied by the term "social structure" to bear on talk-in-interaction. Much of what is meant by "social structure" in the traditional sense directly implicates such characterizations or categorizations of the participants as Sacks was examining. If the sense of social structure we are dealing with is the one that turns on the differential distribution of valued resources in society, whether status or power or money or any of the other "goods" whose distribution can be used to characterize social structure, then that implies a characterization or categorization of the participants on that occasion as one relevantly to be selected from that set of terms. But then the problem presents itself of the relevance of those terms to the participants for what they are doing. Without a show of that warrant, we are back to a "positivistic" stance, even though the animating concerns may be drawn from quite anti-positivistic theoretical sources or commitments.

Now let us be clear about what is and what is not being said here. The point is not that persons are somehow not male or female, upper or lower class, with or without power, professors and/or students. They may be, on some occasion, demonstrably members of one or another of those categories. Nor is the issue that those aspects of the society do not matter, or did not matter on that occasion. We may share a lively sense that indeed they do matter, and that they mattered on that occasion, and mattered for just that aspect of some interaction on which we are focusing. There is still the problem of *showing from the details of the talk or other conduct in the materials* that we are analyzing that those aspects of the scene are what the parties are oriented to. For *that is to show how the parties are embodying for one another the relevancies of the interaction and are thereby producing the social structure.*

The point here is not only methodological but substantive. It is not just to add a methodological apparatus supporting analyses already in hand. It is

rather to add to, and potentially to transform, the analysis of the talk and other conduct itself by enriching our account of it with additional detail; and to show that, and how, "social structure" in the traditional sense enters into the production and interpretation of determinate facets of conduct, and is thereby confirmed, reproduced, modulated, neutralized or incrementally transformed in that actual conduct to which it must finally be referred.

This is not, to my mind, an issue of preferring or rejecting some line of analysis, some research program or agenda. It is a problem of analysis to be worked at: how to examine the data so as to be able to show that the parties were, with and for one another, demonstrably orientated to those aspects of who they are, and those aspects of their context, which are respectively implicated in the "social structures" which we may wish to relate to the talk. If we treat this as a problem of analytic craft, we can use it as leverage to enhance the possibility of learning something about how talk-in-interaction is done, for it requires us to return again to the details of the talk to make the demonstration.

Procedural consequentiality

The issue just discussed with respect to the characterization of the participants in some talk-in-interaction also is relevant to a characterization of "the context" in which they talk and interact. "Context" can be as much a part of what traditionally has been meant by "social structure" as attributes of the participants are. So, for example, remarking that some talk is being conducted "in the context of a bureaucracy, in a classroom," "on a city street," etc. is part of what is sometimes intended by incorporating the relevance of social structure.

Such characterizations invoke particular aspects of the setting and not others. They involve selections among alternatives, and among subalternatives. For example, one type of formulation of context characterizes it by "place," and this is an alternative to various other sorts of context characterization. But within that context type, various forms of place formulation are available, all of which can be correct (Schegloff 1972). So, although the details of the argument have not been fully and formally worked out for the characterization of context or setting in the way that Sacks worked them out for the characterization of participants, it appears likely that the issue of relevance can be posed in much the same way for context as it has been for person reference.

What I want to do here is add something to this relevance problem for contexts. It concerns what I am calling the "procedural consequentiality" of contexts.

Even if we can show by analysis of the details of the interaction that some characterization of the context or the setting in which the talk is going on (such as "in the hospital") is relevant for the parties, that they are oriented to the setting so characterized, there remains another problem, and that is to show how the context or the setting (the local social structure), in that aspect, is procedurally consequential to the talk.

How does the fact that the talk is being conducted in some setting (say, "the hospital") issue in any consequences for the shape, form, trajectory, content, or character of the interaction that the parties conduct? And *what is the mechanism by which the context-so-understood has determinate consequences for the talk?*

This is a real problem, it seems to me, because without a specification of such a linkage we can end up with characterizations of context or setting which, however demonstrably relevant to the parties, do little in helping us to analyze, to explain, to understand, to give an account of how the interaction proceeded in the way in which it did, how it came to have the trajectory, the direction, the shape that it ended up having. When a formulation of the context is proposed, it is *ipso facto* taken to be somehow relevant and consequential for what occurs in the context. It is the analyst's responsibility either to deliver analytic specifics of that consequentiality or to abjure that characterization of the context. Otherwise, the analysis exploits a tacit feature of its own discursive format, but evades the corresponding analytic onus. A sense of understanding and grasp is conveyed to, and elicited from, the reader, but is not earned by the elucidation of new observations about the talk.

So, this is an open question, somewhat less formally stated than the other: how shall we find formulations of context or setting that will allow us (a) to connect to the theme that many want to connect to – social structure in the traditional sense, but (b) that will do so in a way that takes into account not only the demonstrable orientation of the participants, but, further, (c) that will allow us to make a direct "procedural" connection between the context so formulated and what actually happens in the talk. Otherwise we have a characterization that "hovers around" the interaction, so to speak, but is not shown actually to inform the production and grasp of the details of its conduct.

As with the issue of "relevance," I am here putting forward not principled objections to the invocation of social structure as context, but jobs to be taken on by those concerned with the intersection of talk and familiar senses of social structure. They challenge us to be alert to possible ways of showing such connections.

[. . .]

Consider, for example, the case of the courtroom in session (cf. Atkinson and Drew 1979; my remarks here rest on a much looser, vernacular and unstudied sense of the setting). To focus just on the turn-taking organization, it is the "courtroom-ness" of courtrooms in session which seems in fact to organize the way in which the talk is distributed among the persons present, among the *categories* of persons present, in the physical setting. So, for example, onlookers (members of the "audience") are not potential next speakers, as the official proceedings go on. And among the others who are potential next speakers at various points – the judge, the attorneys, the witness and the like, there are socially organized procedures for determining when they can talk, what they can do in their talk, and the like. It could be argued, then, that to characterize some setting of talk-in-interaction as in a court-in-session characterizes it with a formulation of context which can not only be claimed to connect to the general concern for "social structure" (for it certainly relates to institutional context), but can be shown to be procedurally consequential as well. Insofar as members of the audience sitting behind the bar never get up and talk but rather whisper to one another in asides, whereas the ones in front of the bar talk in defined and regular ways, by the very form of their conduct they show themselves to be oriented to the particular identities that are legally provided by that setting and show themselves to be oriented to "the-court-in-session" as a context.

[. . .]

Social structure or conversational structure?

The third concern mobilized by the present theme is for the balance between the focus on social structure and the focus on conversational structure in studying talk-in-interaction. These two thematic focuses (we would like to think) are potentially complementary. But are they really? We must figure out how to make them complementary, because they can also be alternatives in a more competitive sense. Each makes its own claims in organizing observation and analysis of the data, and one can pre-empt the other. In particular, the more familiar concerns with social structure can pre-empt new findings about conversational phenomena.

Let me offer some illustrations of this tension, and exemplify them from a recent paper of Zimmerman's, "Talk and its occasion" (1984), whose object of interest is "calls to the police" (an object with which I have also had some experience, cf. Schegloff 1967). The paper's enterprise appears directed specifically to attending both to the concerns of social structure and to the concerns of conversational structure. It offers a full account of this type of

talk-in-interaction, and it does so with a sensitivity not only to the social structure involved, but also to the conversational structure of these occurrences. For example, the paper begins with an account of the kind of overall structural organization of the calls, and then focuses on the particular sequence type that makes up most of the calls, namely, an extended request or complaint sequence.

Despite this commitment to both concerns, it seems to me, there is a tendency for the formulated social-structural context to "absorb" and "naturalize" various details of talk. These features of the talk are thereby made unavailable, in practice if not in principle, for notice and analysis as accountable details of the talk. Their character as aspects of the talk produced by reference to some conversational or interactional organization is vulnerable to being slighted, in favor of assimilation to some social-structural, institutional, or vernacularly contextual source. How to balance these competing claims on our attention, when the competition takes this form, will be a matter to which analysts who are concerned with the thematics of talk-and-social structure will have to remain sensitive. [. . .]

A methodological canon is suggested: establishing relevance and establishing procedural consequentiality should not be "threshold" issues, in the sense that once you have done "enough" to show it, you are finished. Rather they are questions for continuing analysis. And not necessarily in the "loaded" form of "how are they now doing 'calling the police'?", but in "open" form — "what does the form of the talk show about recipient design considerations and about orientation to context (institutional, social-structural, sequential, or whatever)." Because we "know" that not everything said *in* some context (institutional or other) is relevantly oriented to that context.

If the focus of inquiry is the organization of conduct, the details of action, the practices of talk, then every opportunity should be pressed to enhance our understanding of any available detail about those topics. Invoking social structure at the outset can systematically distract from, even blind us to, details of those domains of event in the world.

If the goal of inquiry is the elucidation of *social structure*, one might think that quite a different stance would be warranted, and one would want to give freer play to the effective scope of social structure, and to do so free of the constraints I have been discussing. Though this stance has much to recommend it, it could as well be argued that one does not best serve the understanding of social structure by attributing to it properties which are better understood as the products of other aspects of organized social life, such as interactional structure, or by failing to explicate how social structure is accomplished *in* the conduct. In any case, the understanding of social structure will be enhanced if we explicate how its embodiment in particular

contexts on particular occasions permeates the "membrane" (Goffman 1961) surrounding episodes of interaction to register its stamp within them.

[. . .]

Conclusion

These then are three sorts of issues mobilized, or remobilized, for me when the talk turns to "talk and social structure." However lively our intuitions, in general or with respect to specific details, that it matters that some participants in data we are examining are police, or female, or deciding matters which are specifically constrained by the law or by economic or organizational contingencies, however insistent our sense of the reality and decisive bearing of such features of "social structure" in the traditional sense, the challenge posed is to find a way to show these claims, and show them from the data in three respects:

- 1 That what is so loomingly relevant for us (as competent members of the society or as professional social scientists) was relevant for the parties to the interaction we are examining, and thereby arguably implicated in their production of the details of that interaction.
- 2 That what seems inescapably relevant, both to us and to the participants, about the "context" of the interaction is demonstrably consequential for some specifiable aspect of that interaction.
- 3 That an adequate account for some specifiable features of the interaction cannot be fashioned from the details of the talk and other conduct of the participants as the vehicle by which *they* display the relevance of social-structural context for the character of the talk, but rather that this must be otherwise invoked by the analyst, who furthermore has developed defensible arguments for doing so.

In brief, the issue is how to convert insistent intuition, however correct, into empirically detailed analysis.

This is a heavy burden to impose. Meeting it may well lead to exciting new results. But if it is not to be met in one or more respects, arguments will have to be put forward that the concerns I have discussed are no longer in point, are superseded by other considerations, or must yield to the new sorts of findings that are possible if one holds them in abeyance. Simple invocation of the burden of the sociological past will not suffice.

With respect to social structure, then, as with respect to other notions from social science's past such as "intention," the stance we might well consider is treating them as programmatically relevant for the parties, and

hence for us. In principle, some one or more aspects of who the parties are and where/when they are talking may be indispensably relevant for producing and grasping the talk, but these are not decisively knowable a priori. It is not for us to *know* what about context is crucial, but to *discover* it, and to discover *new sorts* of such things. Not, then, to privilege sociology's concerns under the rubric "social structure," but to discover them in the members' worlds, if they are there.

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Notes

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- 2 Editors' note: this article was published in 1991.

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