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Ethnomethodology and Conversational Analysis*

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Abstract

In a speech community, people utilize their communicative competence which they have acquired from their society as part of their distinctive sociolinguistic identity. They negotiate and share meanings, because they have commonsense knowledge about the world, and have universal practical reasoning. Their commonsense knowledge is embodied in their language. Thus, not only does social life depends on language, but language defines social reality. With practical reasoning, people in a speech community use, appropriately, their commonsense knowledge in different social settings in order to negotiate suprasentential meanings. All of this knowledge is acquired without overt, explicit and intentional training. Proceeding along linguistic ethnography and functional lines, we may attempt to specify just what it means to be a truly successful and competent speaker of a particular language within the framework of a speech community.

Key words: ethnomethodology, commonsense knowledge, practical reasoning, communicative competence, social order.

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Introduction

Language is by far the most sophisticated means by which we are able to communicate our meanings to one another and thereby build what we call social order. The focus on the creative use of language by human beings reaches its extreme with *ethnomethodology*, in which the nature of human language itself becomes the topic for sociolinguistic investigation. Thus the technicalities of how it is used by humans to reveal the contents of each other's minds is the concern of the best known ethnomethodological research device – conversational analysis. Rather than assume that reality is something 'out there', the symbolic-interaction paradigm posits that reality is created by people in everyday language encounters. Actually, the argument is that since conversation represents the principal symbolic means by which members construct order in social situations, how this is accomplished must be understood by any sociology concerned with members' methods. Language and the ability to use it, reflects the distinguishing feature of human life; it demonstrates our possession of consciousness and our ability to interpret, and attach meaning to, the world around us. For example, how exactly do we define reality for ourselves? What is the logic through which we make sense of everyday life? How do we know how to interact, sociolinguistically, in a given situation? Answering these questions constitutes the objective of the present theoretical approach: ethnomethodology and conversational analysis.

Ethnomethodology and conversational analysis

The term '*ethnomethodology*' means 'people's methods' and was first used by the Californian-based sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1967) to describe a theoretical branch of sociology that he developed.(1) The term itself consists of two parts; the Greek '*ethno*' which refers to people and how they understand and interpret their surroundings; '*methodology*' designates a set of methods or principles. Combining them makes '*ethnomethodology*', *the study of the way people make sense of their everyday life*. By definition, ethnomethodology is the study of the commonsense knowledge that people use to understand the social and or sociolinguistic situations in which they find themselves. Ethnomethodology contrasts with other sociological approaches in focusing on how human social activities

are orderly, in the sense of being intelligible to participants. It argues that this order is locally produced, through the use of shared methods by which people make sense of others' actions and construct their own. Ethnomethodologists study these methods as they are used in practice within different settings. Ethnomethodological analysis focuses on the participants' own understandings and interpretations insofar as these are demonstrated in everyday activities, including language, rather than trying to impose analysts' preconceptions on the interpretation of an event. In fact, ethnomethodology is a sociological discipline that places emphasis on methods and procedures employed by the people when they define and interpret everyday life. It is the study of *commonsense knowledge*, its creation and use in natural settings. For example, how people interpret language by using cultural knowledge and clues from the social contexts. In fact, ethnomethodologists examine how ordinary people in everyday settings apply tacit rules to make sense of social life. Thus, the term ethnography may be considered to refer to a culture and understanding another way of life from native point of view. It is a radical and extreme form of field research, based on *phenomenological philosophy* and specialized, high detailed analysis of micro-situations (e.g. transcript of short conversation or videotapes). The term 'ethnography of speaking' (and often interchangeably, 'ethnography of communication' was first coined and used by Dell Hymes in 1962 to refer to the ethnographic study of the ways of speaking evident in a speech community. Dell Hymes has proposed an ethnographic framework which takes into account the various factors that are involved in speaking. An ethnography of communicative event is a description of all the factors that are relevant in understanding how that particular communicative event achieves its objectives.(2) According to Dell Hymes (1975:12) the nature and purpose of ethnolinguistics should include :

“ ... the culturally significant arrangement of productive statements about the relevant relationships among locally defined categories and contexts (of objects and events) within a given social matrix. These non-arbitrarily ordered statements should comprise, essentially, a cultural grammar. In such an ethnography, the emphasis is placed on the interpretation, evaluation and selection of alternative statements about a

particular set of cultural activities within a given range of social contexts. This in turn leads to the critical examination of intra-cultural relations and ethno-theoretical models. ”

Language is viewed here as a cultural activity that needs to be studied in context rather than as a more abstract decontextualized system. A particular concern is with speakers' communicative competence that what they need to know to interact appropriately within a particular (speech) community. Dell Hymes' ideas have influenced a large number of sociolinguistic studies carried out from the early 1970s to the present day.

An alternative approach to devising ethnographies is to attempt to describe the different functions of language in communication. Various linguists have proposed different categorizations of the functions of language from this point of view, e.g. Halliday and Robinson (3). What is clear from any scholar's list is that there is more to understanding how language is used than describing the syntactic composition of sentences or specifying their propositional content. Actually, when you learn to use a language, you learn how to use it in order to do certain things that people do with that language. The term *communicative competence* is sometimes used to describe this kind of ability.

Working with an ethnographic or functional approach, then, we may attempt to specify just what it means to be a competent speaker of a particular language. It is one thing to learn e.g. English language, but it is quite another to learn how to ask for an address in English. To do the first, you need a certain linguistic competence; to do the latter, you need communicative competence. Actually, in learning to 'speak', we are also learning to 'talk', in the sense of communicating and negotiating the meanings in the ways deemed appropriate by the linguistic community in which we are doing that learning. These ways also differ from group to group; consequently, as we move from one group to another, or from one language to another, we must learn the new ways if we are to fit into that new group or into that new language.

Linguistic ethnography is also an important component of research in the study of language use that draws on ethnographic methods and procedures. Ethnographically-oriented sociolinguistics may be used to distinguish sociolinguistic approaches that take an ethnographic

perspective. Thus the intersection of ethnography, as well as ethnomethodology, and linguistics (i.e. ethnolinguistics) overlaps with linguistics, anthropology and with sociolinguistics, including the ethnography of communication. The term also refers to how people encode and or decode language within the framework of a specific social and cultural context; and how they negotiate suprasentential meanings regarding to their existing metalinguistic norms and principles. In effect, our way of knowing about the world is provided for us in the languages which pre-exist us and which we learn. Thus, the aim is to reveal the methods used by the participants (‘members’) in any particular social setting to communicate to each other what they think is going on--what the situation means to them -- and the efforts they each make to have this interpretation corroborated by the others. Ethnomethodology is not interested in ‘the’ social world, but in specific pieces of interaction between its members. The stress is on how order in a social setting is the (unknowingly) accomplishment of its participants. H.Garfinkel , practically, challenged the then dominated view of society as a broad and abstract ‘*system*’ (recall the approach of French sociologist Emile Durkheim and Ferdinand De Saussure’s structural concept of ‘*language as a system*’).(4) In fact, Garfinkel was critical of the mainstream sociology for not recognizing the ongoing ways in which people create reality and produce their own world. Thus, ethnomethodologists focus on how people construct their social world; it investigates the background knowledge and assumptions that people hold and how they help to create and recreate social order. Garfinkel wanted to explore how we make sense of countless familiar situations by looking at the practical reasoning we employ in everyday situations. On the surface, we engage in intentional speech or action; but these efforts rests on deeper assumptions about the world that we usually take for granted. Thus, ethnomethodologists examine existing patterns of conventional behavior in order to uncover people’s background expectancies—that is, their shared interpretation of objects and events, as well as their resulting actions. According to ethnomethodologists, interaction is primarily based on the assumptions of *shared expectancies*. For example, when you are talking to someone, what expectations do you have that you will take turns? Based on your background expectancies, would you be surprised if the other person talked for an

hour and never gave you a chance to speak? Or think, for a moment, about what we assume in asking someone the simple question: 'How are you?' Do we mean physically? Mentally? Spiritually? Financially? Are we looking for an answer, or are we 'just being polite'? In fact, in a speech community, conformity to the expectations about greetings and other habitual behavior establishes the basic trust that is necessary for all social interaction.(5)

The ethnolinguistic and ethnomethodological approaches, in general, contribute to our knowledge of social interaction by making us aware of subconscious social realities in our daily lives. However, a number of sociologists regard ethnomethodology as a frivolous approach to studying human linguistic and non-linguistic behaviors because it does not examine the impact of macro-level social institutions – such as the economy and education – on the people's expectancies. For example, in women studies, scholars suggest that ethnomethodologies take ascribed statuses (such as race, class, gender, and age) as 'givens' not as '*socially created realities*'. In general, as with other interpretive approaches, there is an emphasis on how people give meanings to and interpret linguistic behavior. Thus, ethnolinguistics, too, is concerned with the methods used by the people to communicate with one another and negotiate meanings in their linguistic behaviors.

Ethnolinguistics, then, delves into the sense making process in any social encounter. Because so much of this process is ingrained, one effective way to expose how we make sense of events, is purposely to break the rules. Deliberately, ignoring conventional rules and observing how people respond, causes to tease out how people build reality. Taking this step further, some sociolinguists argue that the guiding feature of everyday interaction is language. To understand society and the everyday life through which it is made, we need to look at language and the rules through which we speak. Conversational analysts are interested in how people in a speech community construct their talk. They see this talk and conversation as a topic to investigate in its own right. They are not interested in what people actually say in terms of its contents (which they call resource). Rather, they are interested in its forms and rules, which they see as the underlying feature of social interaction. The main reason human social life works is that all of us assume it has an order to it. In fact, social

occasions only work because we use our sense-making abilities to make them work; but we do not realize this. We think there is already meaning and order in our world and we interact with each other sharing this assumption. Human realities are accomplished through talk. When we talk to others, we assume – and we are nearly always right – that they want the same thing out of the encounter as we do : that it will make sense. And this is why it nearly always does – we make sense of it together. For ethnomethodology, this is humankind's greatest gift—the ability to create order together. In order for human social life to work, it has to be collaborative enterprise; we have to want the same things when we communicate with each other; otherwise, we will make no sense to each other. As, e.g., conventional analysts are concerned with the 'sequencing' of talk: sentences generally follow on from one another. 'Normal' interaction depends upon this, and everyday life can only really be accomplished if people are willing to follow certain 'sequencing rules'. One of these, for instance, is 'turn taking'; the other is the 'adjacency pair' through which most greetings, openings and closings of conversations have an unstated rule that as one speaks a line, so another makes the most appropriate conventional response to it. Thus, for example, a standard opening line may be: how are you? And this, based on commonsense knowledge, requires a response, actually of the form: very well, thank you. Everyday life is in this way deeply regulated by social rules.

The interest in describing the practical abilities of members derives from a theory of reality called *phenomenology*. Ethnomethodologists adopt the phenomenological view of the world; that is, the world is something that people must constantly keep creating and sustaining for themselves. In this view, language plays a very significant and crucial role in that creating and sustaining. Ethnomethodologists regard 'meaning' and meaningful activity as something people accomplish when they interact socially. Since much of human interaction is actually verbal interaction, they have focused much of their attention on how people use language in their relationships to one another. They have also focused on how in that use of language people employ what ethnomethodologists call common sense knowledge and practical reasoning. Phenomenology emphasizes that things and events have no meaning in themselves. They only mean whatever human beings take them to mean. It stresses that for the

members of such a meaningfully created world to live together, meanings must be shared. Members must agree about what things are and the fact that social order depends upon shared meanings. Members do share meanings. This is because of the way they interpret reality. They do so by using 'commonsense knowledge' i.e. the understandings, recipes, maxims, and definitions that we employ in our daily living as we go about doing things. It is also knowing that there are types of people, objects and events. These types help us to classify and categorize what is 'out there' and guide us in interpreting what happens out there. This invaluable stock of common knowledge is acquired through experience; but since each person's experience is different from that of everyone else, the knowledge varies from person to person. Definitely, the stock itself is not systematic; and in fact it is quite heterogeneous, and often parts of it are inconsistent with other parts – at times even contradictory – but that fact does not usually prove very bothersome to most individuals. This commonsense knowledge is embodied in language. Through language we acquire an enormous amount of knowledge about the world – knowledge we take for granted and which others who speak our language possess too. We have actually experienced only a tiny number of the things that we know about. The rest of the knowledge, shared with other members, is sense that is common to us all. Thus, not only does social life depends upon language, but language defines social reality for us.

Because members can take for granted this shared knowledge about reality, they can also take for granted the reality it describes; because our experience tells us it is out there and so apparently does the experience of others. Philosophers may question that reality, and psychologists may wonder how we can ever make contact with what may be out there. Practically, at any time only bits and pieces of what is out there are relevant to our immediate concerns. Actually, the members of a particular speech community can assume that the world is a given objective place, that the world is consistent and independent of our particular experience. Situations and events in it not only occur, they reoccur. Things do not change much from day to day. Knowledge acquired yesterday and the day before is still valid today and will be valid tomorrow too.

The concept of shared, common knowledge may sound rather like the consensus theorist's notion of culture. But culture refers to a body

of rules which are obeyed by the participants, thereby producing social order. For the ethnomethodologist, commonsense knowledge is used by members to create order in a particular situation that would otherwise lack it. Ethnomethodologists define their task as showing how members do it.

In a specific speech community, in addition to commonsense knowledge about the world, language speakers have practical reasoning i.e. how to make use of their commonsense knowledge and how they should employ that knowledge in their conduct of everyday life. Definitely, it is quite different from scientific reasoning or logical thinking or the formation and testing of scientific hypotheses, both of which we usually learn in formal settings and have very specialized goals.

Armed with commonsense knowledge and practical reasoning, and with a confident belief in the factual, ordered character of the world, members can go ahead and make sense of any situation in which they participate; and, thus, social interaction flows through language in the speech community.

Ethnolinguistics and ethnomethodology stresses that each social situation is unique. The words people utter, the actions they take, are *indexical* – that is, they only make sense on that particular occasion in which they are used. But they also stress that members, unwittingly engaged in identifying order and an objective reality, see things differently. They identify the similarities of an event with other events. They select from all the other things happening around them evidence which supports the view that things which exist or which happen are *typical* of the world. For them, a social situation is ‘a lecture’, ‘a meeting’ or ‘a language class’ etc., and a pattern is imposed on it by the application of commonsense knowledge. By commonsense knowledge, too, gaps in the accounts of happenings by others are filled in, in similar ways by different listeners to reassure themselves that things are as they seem. The import of this is enormous, for if it is the case that competent users of, say English, language are able to find the same things from the same fragment of talk, then the methods that are used to do so must be of the highest order of generality. They must be part of the foundations of English common culture. It is these methods that ethnomethodology is interested in. Without realizing it, members of a speech community

use them as they work to create the meaning that they believe occasions or events have. Having done this unwitting work, and having arrived at an interpretation, they then engage in yet more unwitting work to have this confirmed by the corroboration of other participants. The founder of ethnomethodology, Harold Garfinkel delighted in showing how members identify sense in occasions, even when corroboration from others is actually lacking. (6)

Conclusion

Ethnomethodologists believe that the concept we can describe with certainty is the important thing we all do have in common: sense-making methods and processes that all humans, sociolinguists, or not, have to use to arrive at our respective accounts; and this is what sociolinguistics should study. People use language not only to communicate in a vast variety of ways, but also to bind themselves to one another in cooperative activities. The symbolic-interaction posits that reality is created by people in everyday social encounters. In this regard, ethnomethodologists are concerned with how human beings interact with the real world in dealing with mundane phenomena of human existence. They stress that human beings make use of common-sense knowledge, which is different in kind with scientific knowledge; and that they employ principles of practical reasoning, which are again somewhat different from scientific principles.

Notes:

1. Kendall, D. : 152
2. For more information, interested readers may consult: Hymes, D. : 3-28
3. For the elaboration of the categorization see : Robinson W.P. : 50-51
4. For more discussion consult :
 - a. Saussure, F. De, : 7-8
 - b. For Durkheim's 'Rules of Sociological Method' see: Dinneen F.P. : 192-195
5. For more discussion, see : Bassis, et al. : 50-51
6. Kendall, D. : 152-155

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