

# 13 Discourse and Interaction

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## 0 Introduction

When the editors of this volume first asked me for a contribution, they proposed the title “The interactional analysis of discourse”. However, it seemed to me that that title revealed but one perspective on a historical, intellectual relationship among approaches to the study of language practices which is in fact multifaceted. Historically, I think it is fair to say that a variety of disciplines (notably social psychology and sociology, later linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics) undertook the study of social interaction in order to understand how people construct the world around them. In this perspective, it has not necessarily been the case that the object of analysis has been understood or constructed as “discourse”. However, the notion of “discourse” has become increasingly important to this endeavor, as it has become clear that the specifics of linguistic practices are linked to more broadly shared, and ideologically framed, ways of using language. At the same time, the study of discourse has increasingly come to include the study of the conditions of production of discourse (whatever its form), and hence to draw on analyses of interactions. It is just as useful to talk about the discourse analysis of interactions as it is to talk about the interactional analysis of discourse. As a result, what I will focus on in this chapter is a variety of facets of the relationship between the two (and I have changed the title in order to reflect this attempt to place the one in relation to the other, although I could just as easily have called it “Interaction and discourse”). The common thread nonetheless remains the same: what we can learn by understanding what goes on in interactions as the production of discourse.

What we have thought we can learn has the following major threads: (1) the nature of the interactional, discursive mechanics of the social construction of reality, and, in particular, what dimensions of these mechanics are universal and what are culturally, socially, or historically contingent or even specific; (2) the nature of the relationship between those mechanics and the conditions of their existence. Put differently, our goals have been to explore the nature of discourse in interaction itself as a way of understanding how we construct social reality, and to explain what we understand to be the nature of discourse in terms of the (local or elsewhere, or, to use Mehan’s

(1987) terms, proximal or distal) social, political, and economic conditions of discursive production. At the same time, once the question of that relationship between discourse and conditions of discursive production is posed, it is no longer clear what it is that affects what, and our focus shifts to approaching discourse itself as a form of social action.

I will treat each one of these threads in turn, beginning with the issue of examining discourse in interaction as a way of discovering how social reality is constructed. Here it is important to situate this concern (how is social reality constructed?), which had long been expressed in a variety of ways within the disciplines of philosophy, social psychology (principally through the work of symbolic interactionists), sociology, and anthropology, in the context of new interests in focusing on the structure and function of talk. These new interests can be in part explained through reactions against universalist nonempirical tendencies in linguistic and social theory, in part perhaps simply through the availability of the tape recorder as a data collection device for fieldwork. In any case, what is central here is a combination of concerns rooted in the emerging disciplines (or subdisciplines, depending on your point of view) of ethnomethodology/conversation analysis, pragmatics, linguistic anthropology, and sociolinguistics (with echoes and influences in cognitive science and philosophy of language). These concerns focus on discovering the patterns of discourse as they emerge in interaction, and on understanding them as primary acts of meaning-making.

For some, a strict focus on discourse in interaction was, however, unsatisfying, since such a focus could not provide the kind of data needed to explain where any observable patterns might have come from, or what kinds of consequences they might have. The second thread consists, then, of work intended to link discourse patterns to the conditions of their production, that is, to situate them socially and historically. From this line of inquiry has emerged a slightly different way of posing the original question, in the form of work which sees discourse not as a product of conditions of interaction, but rather as dialectically embedded in them. In this (for the purposes of argument, third) perspective, discourse in interaction becomes a privileged site for analyzing social action and social structure (and the relationship between the two).

In the final section, I will discuss some theoretical issues which remain unresolved in this line of inquiry. One of the most significant among them is the problem of the extent to which language can be treated as an autonomous system, put into play in discourse, or whether, more radically, language cannot be understood at all outside of its use. Equally important is the counterpart of the first question, namely where discourse in interaction fits in the spectrum of forms of social action, and the extent to which such discourse deserves the privileged status it has enjoyed in recent decades among those who study the nature and functioning of social action. Both of these are important questions for linguists and for (other kinds of?) social scientists.

## **1 The Social Construction of Reality**

The question of the nature of reality has a long and noble history. Stances with respect to that question have constituted some of the most important fault lines in intellectual debates. The perspective that concerns us here is that which characterizes

reality as a social construct, and which locates the process of construction in the interaction between an individual and his or her world, most importantly as mediated by interaction with other people. For some, notably within the tradition of psychology and cognitive science, this has meant an empirical focus on the individual's experience of that interaction, and on the consequences of interactional processes for individual development (see Case 1996 for an overview). For others, it has meant a focus on interactional processes themselves, as revealing the social dimensions of the construction of reality. Here, I will concern myself with work in the second vein.

Approaches to the question of the nature of interactional processes can be loosely grouped into two categories: *ethnomethodological* and *interpretivist* (or *interactionist*). There are many ways in which the two are related, and in particular in which the first has influenced the second, but for the purposes of exposition it is useful to divide them. The major distinction which I want to make between them has to do with their stance with respect to data. Ethnomethodologists have a strong preference for restricting analysis to what is actually observable. Interpretivists or interactionists are prepared to bring other sources of data to bear on the analysis of interactional data. Needless to say, the distinction in specific cases may be largely heuristic, even inaccurate, but nonetheless it describes at least the difference between extreme outliers of each group, and captures something of the orientation of practitioners situated somewhere on the fuzzy boundary between the two groups.

An ethnomethodological approach to analysis of discourse in interaction has perhaps the strongest tendency to treat interactional data as text. The object of analysis is the text of the transcription of the interaction, whether the text is a literal, verbal one, based on audiotapes, or whether it combines verbal and nonverbal material, as has become possible with the availability of videorecording. (Indeed, as we will see below, one branch of ethnomethodology now prefers simply to think of itself as *conversation analysis*, reflecting this focus on observable interaction.) The reason for this is that social action is held to be ongoing and reflexive; one can only see how participants make sense out of the world by observing their actions in it, or more specifically, their reflexive interactions (Heritage 1984).

These interactions can be shown to be nonrandom; Garfinkel, the founder of ethnomethodology, showed that it was possible to uncover the normative order indexed by interactional routines by breaching those routines and watching all hell break loose. As Heritage points out, the patterns observed in interactional data are held to point to an "underlying pattern" (Garfinkel 1967, cited in Heritage 1984: 84). This "underlying pattern" is some form of social order. While it is not clear exactly what form of social order is involved here (this problem will be taken up in the following section), the ethnomethodological insight is that it is possible to see it by discovering its manifestations in the normative order of interaction, and especially helpfully where that normative order is breached. Other sociologists, notably Goffman, also were concerned to discover social order through the patterns of everyday life, arguing that much of what happens interactionally is the constant construction and reconstruction of forms of normative social order (cf. Goffman 1959, 1974, 1981).

While ethnomethodology did not begin by focusing on discourse in interaction, it is not surprising that it would turn to such data, given the primacy accorded to observable action. Heritage (1984: 235) cites Harvey Sacks' explanation for why he turned to tape-recorded data: "So the question was, could there be some way

that sociology could hope to deal with the details of actual events, formally and informatively? . . . I wanted to locate some set of materials that would permit a test." Together with Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, Sacks laid the groundwork for *conversation analysis*, ethnomethodology's major contribution to the analysis of discourse in interaction.

Conversation analysis focuses on the discovery of the patterns whereby people orient themselves (and each other) to specific dimensions of some underlying normative order. Frequently, these have concerned the normative order of talk itself, that is, how talk is supposed to be organized. Most important here have been studies concerned with: (1) how participants construct an orientation to talk, that is, how they make themselves available to each other for the purposes of interaction (for example, through the use of greeting routines; cf. Schegloff 1972) and otherwise organize their orientation to each other and to the activity at hand; (2) the distribution of talk among participants; and (3) how participants construct an orientation to a topic of conversation. In addition to a focus on observable routines, ethnomethodologists look at the structure of conversation, notably at such phenomena as turn-taking (beginning with the influential Sacks et al. 1974); sequencing and adjacency; and, of course, repair, which highlights the normative order by analyzing its breakdown and reconstruction.

There are a number of reasons why the normative order of talk might be interesting. For some, the underlying pattern it relates to is cognitive and potentially universal: what the normative order of talk reveals is the way in which we, as sentient organisms, organize our experience and understand it. For others, the interest lies in the direction of the social order, which requires relating the normative order of talk to other dimensions of social relations, that is, to the normative regulation of relations among people who, by virtue of their position with respect to (normatively salient) social categories, bear some set of (normatively salient) relations to each other as well as to others who can be said to be interactionally "present" (whether they are physically present or not), but who do not themselves speak (or write) in the interaction at issue. Here the underlying pattern might be universal, but is more likely historically contingent.

For those interested in problems of social order, ethnomethodological methods provide a way to do three things. One is to discover how interaction (as seen in actors' ways of knowing and being) contributes to the construction of a social order which extends far beyond any given analyzable interaction; conversely, another is to examine how the relationship between social action and social structure constrains how individuals can come to know and act in their world. The third is to identify the interactional manifestations of social problems (in which interactions are seen as potential sources of problems, as potential sites for discovering sources which are interactionally indexed, and as potential sites for intervention). As we shall see, however, pursuing these questions has provoked something of an ideological split. Some researchers continue to hold to the ethnomethodological principle of confining analysis to what is observable, and analyze interactions in and of (and for) themselves. Others have been posing questions about interactions and what goes on in them which lead them to consider phenomena beyond the bounds of the analysis of specific interactions. Some of these questions, as we shall see below, have to do with explaining why things happen the way they do, and others have to do with consequences of interactional patterns.

Indeed, while such work shares concerns and methods originating in ethnomethodology, one can also note parallel developments in sociology itself as well as in anthropology and linguistics, and a certain degree of convergence among some trends within sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology (the difference between these two subdisciplines is in fact becoming less and less evident). Within sociology, the work of Goffman (see above) has been highly influential. While Goffman shares with ethnomethodologists a concern for understanding interactional processes as fundamental to the construction of the social order, his work pointed to the importance of situating specific interactions not in the context of some abstract underlying pattern, but rather in the living tissue of everyday life, itself understood as part of a dynamic pattern of socially constituted frames (which he understood as the basis of social institutions).

In anthropology, the emergence of the ethnography of communication (Gumperz and Hymes 1972; Bauman and Sherzer 1974) opened the way toward yet another approach to interaction, one which borrowed ethnomethodology's respect for the routines and patterns of language use in interaction, but which went beyond that to consider those patterns as embedded in complex cultural processes. While one impetus for this work has been to contest the Chomskyan insistence on taking an abstract structural idea of language as the proper object of linguistic inquiry (and as the right way to think about what language is), many of the questions which have informed this work have been more oriented to issues traditionally treated within sociology and anthropology, namely questions about the social order, about the nature of culture, and about social problems (notably the consequences of social difference and social inequality; cf. Gumperz 1982a, 1982b). One of the major ideas behind the ethnography of communication was that long-standing questions in social and cultural anthropology could be addressed by problematizing language as social process, rather than taking it as a neutral and transparent reflection of the social order. Language had to be seen as a privileged site for the study of society and culture. Here it joined sociological concerns for capturing the nature of the construction of social reality.

Similar concerns surfaced in linguistics, in particular with respect to accounting for meaning within inquiries regarding linguistic structure. Here, work in semantics (influenced also by the philosophy of language, notably work by Austin, Grice, and Searle; cf. Austin 1965; Grice 1975; Searle 1969, 1971) turned into the field of pragmatics, with a focus on local practices of meaning construction as manifested in the communicative exploitation of linguistic form (see Blommaert et al. 1995; Verschueren 1999; Levinson 1993). In France, another take on this problem produced an approach called *la praxématique*, which takes meaning construction to be a form of praxis, and its object of inquiry the forms of linguistic praxis which can be shown to be central to the construction of meaning (see notably the journal *Cahiers de praxématique*; and, for example, Bres 1989).

In this line of inquiry, work has tended to focus on interactions in institutional settings, for a variety of reasons. One is that the problem of the relationship between interaction, culture, and social order can be seen as a problem of a relationship between interaction and social institutions, which themselves can be taken as social categories (such as gender) or as organized realms of activity (such as regulation of behavior, management of health, or socialization). In the English-speaking world,

there have been studies focused on the “doing” of social categories, for reasons having to do with movements for equity and justice in socially heterogeneous communities. As a result, we have work on “doing” gender, and on the construction of the other, that is, on the ways in which we do the work of setting up and maintaining social differences based largely on nationality, race, and ethnicity (see, for example, work on gender in Hall and Bucholtz 1995; Tannen 1993a; Ochs 1992; West and Zimmerman 1987; and on nationality, race, and ethnicity in Rampton 1995; Blommaert and Verschueren 1991). Work on the construction of the other overlaps with work on multilingualism, since multilingualism so often involves the interplay of identities (e.g. Oesch-Serra and Py 1996; Lüdi and Py 1995; Heller 1994, 1999). There are, of course, countless other social categories which could be investigated in the same way, such as Watts’s (1991) study of family relations or Dannequin (1976) on class; the ones we choose are the ones which pose particular problems for us.

Despite its social significance, work on the construction of specific social categories has not been quite as prominent as work in institutions taken as organized, normatively regulated realms of activity. This may have to do with the more ready accessibility and identifiability of data in such settings (where you find the activity of construction of gender categories may not be as immediately obvious as where you might find the construction of knowledge about the body or about what counts as illegal), and with the kinds of packages in which data seems to come in such settings. In schools, hospitals, and courts of law, interactions are often highly routinized and temporally circumscribed; one can easily identify the beginning and end of an interaction, and interactions are not so long as to be analytically unwieldy. It may also have to do with the salience of the social problems visible in institutions such as schools, hospitals, workplaces, and courts of law, where unequal treatment, for example, is often highly visible, and has profound consequences for society at large.

One can look at this body of work, then, as motivated in two ways. The first motivation consists of attempts to understand how interaction in institutional settings produces knowledge about what is important in the world and how to act in it (socialization at home, in the community and at school; cf. e.g. Ochs and Schieffelin 1979; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986; Mehan 1979); how it produces knowledge about the physical world, notably the body (as in intake and diagnostic procedures in medical settings; cf. e.g. Cicourel 1987; Heller and Freeman 1987; Freeman and Heller 1987; Fisher and Todd 1983; Mishler 1984); and how it produces and reproduces the moral order, notably through the legal and political systems (cf. e.g. O’Barr 1982; Conley and O’Barr 1990; Brenneis and Myers 1984; Mertz 1998; Philips 1998). This work involves relating what happens in interactions in these settings to institutional processes themselves, that is, it involves understanding the nature of social categories and forms of social organization that can be seen to be important both in terms of how they constrain interaction and in terms of how interaction affects them. This would include things like understanding what it means to be, say, a “patient” or a “doctor,” a “student” or a “teacher,” and so on, as well as what it means to do “diagnosis,” “legal defense,” or “learning” (or “marking homework” or “filing” or “pulling a chart,” and so on), and then understanding how they relate to each other.

The second kind of motivation concerns applying conversation analytic tools to the understanding of the kind of work institutions do, that is, what it is that they actually produce. Here, an interest in institutional activity frequently relates to addressing

some social problem, especially since so many institutional settings are sites of social selection and for the regulation of production and distribution of valued resources (that is, sites where people are evaluated in ways that make a difference to their lives, and where someone decides whether or not they get access to things that are important to them). Thus, for example, a look at educational settings allows us to understand how they contribute to the production and reproduction of social categories, and to the construction and distribution of what counts as knowledge. In this area, examples can be found, for instance, of work on the interactional bases of language learning and teaching (cf. e.g. Oesch-Serra and Py 1996; Lüdi and Py 1995) and on the social construction of literacy (Cook-Gumperz 1986; Heath 1983), as well as of knowledge in other subject areas, like mathematics or science (O'Connor and Michaels 1993). A critical take on these processes produces questions like these: why do schools privilege some forms of knowledge over others? Why is the knowledge brought to school by some categories of students treated as valuable and legitimate while that brought by others is devalued and marginalized? Why are some groups of students more academically successful than others?

In the area of education, a great deal of work has been devoted to precisely this question of the interactional dynamics of social and cultural reproduction in school. Class, race, ethnicity, and gender have all been examined (see, for example, Gumperz 1982b; Heath 1983; Erickson and Shultz 1982; Collins 1988, 1991; Swann 1992; Heller 1995a, 1999; Martin-Jones and Heller 1996, *in press*). Such analyses of interaction in school settings (usually, but not only, in classrooms) show that discourse in interaction is involved in the process of social and cultural production and reproduction (that is, the maintenance or transformation of relations of power and of social boundaries and categories) in a number of ways. First, the value attached to linguistic varieties shows up in the judgments made about the intellectual competence of their users (individually and collectively), judgments which are based on the use of elements of these varieties in all kinds of interactional performances. Second, the social organization of discourse itself (who gets to talk when, for example), allows certain actors to exercise such judgments over others, to control access to educational interactions where knowledge is constructed, and to control what gets to count as knowledge. Third, the structure of discourse generally indexes frames of reference which must be shared in order for an activity (like, say, learning) to be considered to be taking place; the ability of participants to build such shared frames on the basis of normatively conventionalized discourse structures affects their ability to do the work of doing "learning" together, to display their activity to each other, and to make appropriate judgments on the basis of the behavior displayed.

Similar kinds of questions have arisen with respect to other institutions, such as the workplace, medicine, and law, where other kinds of crucial judgments can be made about people, and where a great deal rides on the linguistic resources people can muster interactionally, and on the uses they put them to there (cf. Sarangi and Roberts 1999; Roberts et al. 1992; Goldstein 1997; Mertz 1998; Philips 1998). In particular, researchers in medical settings have been concerned to understand the differences between lay and practitioner understanding of health and illness, and their discursive construction in the process of formulating diagnoses and decisions regarding treatment (this kind of research can have immediate applications in areas like the development of computer-based screening procedures, which are designed to save on health care

costs). In areas concerning the law, researchers have also been interested in the discursive construction of legal arguments, on the extent to which they are received as being persuasive or not, and with what consequences for judges' and juries' decision-making. In the workplace, research has focused on the nature of knowledge required for the accomplishment of interactions between workers and clients, as well as among coworkers or between employers and employees. While the lay versus practitioner, or worker versus employee, distinction is clearly central to these inquiries (social position is connected to access to resources, including knowledge, and to the power to influence the production and distribution of knowledge and of other resources), it is also clear that that categorical distinction overlaps with others (not all lay people and practitioners, not all workers and employees, are the same). What is more, the salient dimensions of difference may shift over the course of an interaction.

While work in what might be called a strictly ethnomethodological vein certainly continues, in many other instances the initial insights of ethnomethodology have been taken over, incorporated and modified in the course of using ethnomethodological tools to answer a wide variety of what still remain fundamentally sociological and anthropological questions. In so doing, researchers have found that it is difficult to explain where observable interactional differences come from and what their consequences are (for the structure of the social order, for the content of belief systems, for the life chances of specific groups, and so on) if they stay focused on the observable routines of specific interactions. In the following section, I will describe further some of the problems that interaction analysis has tried to deal with, and some ways it has tried to preserve the central insights and descriptive and explanatory power of an interactional approach, while resolving some of the problems caused by its limitations.

## 2 Situating Interactions

Lines of questioning in work on the interactional construction of social categories and of social relations have led to a number of issues unresolvable by interaction analysis alone. For example, a central issue in the study of the construction of social categories has been the source and nature of the differences involved. Both studies of gender and of intercultural communication have pointed out that members of different social categories use different conversational routines (or discourse strategies, to use Gumperz's 1982a term), which in turn index different frames of reference (different sets of assumptions about the world and how to act in it). (The nature and functioning of indexicality and framing in discourse have, not surprisingly, become the object of much research as a result; cf. Goffman 1974; Tannen 1993b; Silverstein 1998.) The question is to what extent these palpable cultural differences are the result of distinct socialization experiences, and to what extent they are the result of different social positions with respect to the distribution of power (Cameron 1992; Kandiah 1991). The answer to that question has implications for understanding the ways in which such differences may enter into the construction of relations which are perceived (at least by somebody) as being problematic, normally because they lead to misunderstanding (and hence an inability to accomplish goals, to gain



access to valued resources), to conflict, or to some form of unequal treatment (as manifested for example in high dropout, alcoholism and unemployment rates among members of the Native North American population; coincidence of racial and educational stratification; gender bias in occupational specialization; and gender-based income stratification, to mention just a few). Of course, while these are central to understanding processes of production and reproduction of social categories and of social relations, they are not readily amenable to a conversation analytic approach. In addition, the linkage of the problem of social categorization and social relations through the concept of social problems becomes itself an important theoretical and empirical question.

Attempts to resolve these issues have led researchers to rethink the old problem of interaction and the social order. In particular, the question of how to situate interactions with respect to other forms of social life became a central analytical problem, one which came to be posed as a problem of understanding the nature of context.

Earlier work had established that one of the powerful means by which interaction functions to produce and reproduce the social order is by indexing the frames of reference with respect to which local action is interpretable. Clearly, those frames of reference were an important locus for understanding social order, but the only means to address their nature would be through understanding the process of indexing, or of *contextualization* itself, that is, the process by which frames of reference are called into play, defined and modified in interaction. Auer (1992: 4) defines it as follows: "(C)ontextualization . . . comprises all activities by participants which make relevant, maintain, revise, cancel . . . any aspect of context which, in turn, is responsible for the interpretation of an utterance in its particular locus of occurrence." Gumperz (1982a) was highly influential in calling attention to the importance of this process, and his work inspired that of others, who examined the wide variety of communicative means called upon in order to accomplish it (see notably Auer and di Luzio 1992).

While work on contextualization as an interactional process has clearly helped understand the nature of the linkages between local interactional processes and phenomena and the contexts or frames they index, it has not addressed the question of the nature of the relationship between interaction and context. In sociology, this relationship has long been thought of as one between so-called macrosocial processes and structures and so-called microlevel ones. This distinction connotes a separation of realms, which therefore should be empirically distinct. However, one of the results of the turn toward studying interaction as a locus of construction of social order has been to call that distinction into question. Empirically it does not seem possible to identify phenomena anywhere other than at the so-called microlevel (this is, of course, why people started examining interactional data in the first place). If the macrolevel is not empirically observable, what use is there in maintaining the concept? On the other hand, as we have seen, it is impossible to explain everything that goes in at the microlevel by focusing on particular interactions, no matter how carefully chosen.

Many authors have proposed ways of rethinking the macro–micro distinction (see, for example, Cicourel 1980; Collins 1981; Mehan 1987; Giddens 1984; Marcus 1986). All of them share the view that methodologically and theoretically it is necessary to begin with what is empirically observable, namely interactions and their traces. At the same time, it is clear that social order cannot be simply read off from any particular

interaction. The solution that all propose, in their different ways, is to explore the linkages among interactions.

There are two main ways in which people have tried to do this. One is through examining the traces within interactions of their linkages with others. The study of contextualization processes certainly forms part of this endeavor, but it has also taken other forms. Mehan (1987) and Cicourel (1987), for example, have examined interactions which have an observable outcome, usually in the form of a decision of some kind. Some of these are what Erickson and Shultz (1982) call "gate-keeping" encounters, because the decisions taken there affect petitioners' access to resources; examples of such encounters are job interviews, medical intake interviews, and educational placement committee meetings. In this way, interactional processes can be tied to outcomes, and it is possible to separate out the effects of local interactional processes (which Mehan calls "proximal" effects) and those of interactions which are removed in time and space from the one at hand (and which are, for Mehan, "distal"). In this approach, texts too play a particularly important role as institutional traces of other interactions (and other decisions), which turn up and are incorporated (interpreted and reinterpreted, applied in a variety of ways to new interpretive problems) into new interactions; these texts might be texts of laws or other regulations which constrain what it is institutionally possible to do, or texts like minutes of previous meetings, or diagnostic charts, which situate an interaction in a chain of temporally and institutionally interconnected encounters.

Another approach to this problem is to practice what Marcus (1986) calls "multi-locale ethnography," that is, to focus on more than one interaction in order to discover the spatial, temporal, and most importantly social linkages among them. Here Marcus joins the anthropological dimensions of sociolinguistic work carried out within the tradition of the ethnography of communication, since that tradition too privileged using ethnographic knowledge to choose sites where interactions would be particularly revealing of whatever issues were of immediate concern. It also developed concepts which can be understood in a similar way, in particular the notion of *communicative repertoire*, as well as the concept of *speech situation* or *speech event*. All these concepts, central to the ethnography of communication, are based on the assumption that people use language in ways which vary systematically in co-occurrence with other dimensions of their social relations. At the community level, there therefore exist communicative repertoires, that is, sets of linguistic resources, from which people can draw for the purposes of any given interaction. From this perspective, it is clear that only by making linkages among interactions in a variety of situations is it possible to arrive at some broader understanding both of the significance of any specific interaction and of the social system of which it is a part. In addition, individuals possess sets of linguistic resources which vary according to their access to the communicative situations in their community.

The major problem confronted by the ethnography of communication approach has been that it turns out to be empirically next to impossible (outside of highly routinized and institutionalized encounters) to draw boundaries around interactions, or repertoires, or communities. The concept of co-occurrence, which drew attention to the fact that behaviors and conditions of their production tend to cluster, permitted the development of a recognition of the social variability of linguistic practice, but was unable to account for the socially creative force of those practices, since it

emphasized conventional, repetitive associations, rather than change. Instead, the descriptive and explanatory potential of the ethnographic grounding of interactions had to be wedded to the ethnomethodological and sociological recognition of linguistic practice as social process, to the anthropological concern for understanding behavior in everyday life as the basis of cultural production and reproduction, and to a linguistic approach to the multiplexity and multivocality of language.

Hence a Marcus-type multilocal ethnography, applied to the concerns outlined here, entails using ethnographic methods to understand where any particular interaction comes from, and where it might be going, that is, what consequences it might have and for whom (whether they were actually present during the interactions examined or not). There is a certain amount of debate as to what the appropriate ethnographic methods might be, however, and this debate revolves around the ontological status of various forms of data, based on insights derived precisely from the study of interactions.

The specific concern has to do with the extent to which ethnographic methods should be confined to examining what is observable, or whether participant reports can provide useful information. Participant reports are of course interactional constructs (whether someone calling themselves a sociolinguist or a linguistic anthropologist or whatever is there or not), and so their narratives, elicited in interviews or captured in the course of a spontaneous exchange with a neighbor, have to be understood in the same way as we understand any interaction, namely as social process (Briggs 1986; Cicourel 1988; Lafont 1977). It is, however, generally accepted that this is merely one variant of an old problem in the social sciences, namely that of how the interpretation of data has to take into account the subjectivity of all involved. Bearing this in mind, it has nonetheless been possible to address some of these problems in a number of ways. One has been to triangulate data, that is, to collect data from a variety of sources to see to what extent they confirm or contradict each other. More important, perhaps, has been the use of interaction and discourse analysis techniques to understand the nature of the construction of data, and hence what kinds of claims can be made on the basis of it.

The question still remains, however, of the kind of ethnographic knowledge most appropriate to the selection of sites. Here the issue is profoundly theoretical. Some researchers have adopted principles based on political economic notions of explanation (Gal 1989; Heller 1995b, 1999), that is, on the idea that the symbolic order is closely tied to the material world, and that language practices can often be explained in terms of the interests people have with respect to valued resources (including language itself). This requires locating sites where valued resources are produced and distributed, and understanding what goes on there not only in terms of a site's relationship to other sites of resource production and distribution, but also in terms of the social position participants occupy (or would like to occupy) with respect to them. The study of interaction then becomes one of examining the workings of human agency with respect to the obstacles and opportunities presented by social conditions produced elsewhere. The workings of human agency are understood as discourse in the sense that they are a take on the world, an endeavor to construct meaning and to situate oneself and others with respect to it, but in ways that are also profoundly interested and situated in the material, as well as the social, world.

### 3 Conclusion

The interactional analysis of discourse is, then, at the intersection of our analyses of human understandings of the world, of the conditions which produce those understandings, and of their role in the construction of the social order. Debate remains as to what can be learned by examining interactions as it were from the "inside," in isolation from the conditions of their existence, as opposed to what can be learned by situating interactions as part of broader, long-term processes, only parts of which we can ever hope to apprehend.

The question of what affects what also remains open; while it seems clear that behavior is patterned at a number of levels, from linguistic structure through conversational and discourse structure to the social organization of interactions, the nature of the sources of those patterns and of the relations among them remains obscure, as does the extent to which they actually function autonomously (as opposed to being able to be described that way). It is not yet clear what kinds of methods might allow us to pursue those questions, although obviously methods derived from several disciplines (cognitive science, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, history) seem relevant.

Nonetheless, the interactional analysis of discourse opens up not just these questions, but also those related to the nature of the interests at stake in any given interaction. Social actors creatively exploit linguistic, discursive resources to accomplish local as well as long-term goals, whether consciously or not. In addition, what goes on among people has palpable, observable effects on the conditions of their own lives and on the conditions of the lives of others; our understanding of how things happen to people is thus enriched by seeing how they make it happen (or have it happen to them).

The interactional analysis of discourse is both a means for advancing theories of human cognition, of language, and of the social order, and a means for addressing social problems affecting numbers of lives. The integration of the two provides for a socially grounded and reflexive means for building theory, as well as a conceptually informed basis for social action.

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