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## Issues in Applied Linguistics

**Title**

*Talk at Work: Interaction in Institutional Settings* (Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics 8) edited by Paul Drew and John Heritage. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992. 580 pp.

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*Talk at Work* is, as its length indicates, a voluminous collection of papers that investigate the intricacies of talk and interaction within a variety of work settings, or "institutional" contexts. The articles included in this book base their analyses on the research tradition of conversation analysis (CA), a line of inquiry begun well over two decades ago by Harvey Sacks and his colleagues Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson.[1] Written primarily by scholars within sociology, a field with a tradition of interest in such settings as the criminal justice system and psychiatric and medical encounters, this collection of research focusing on the talk-in-interaction between "professionals and lay persons" (p. 3) is the first and most ambitious collection of work entirely dedicated to the examination of institutional interactions from a CA perspective. The collection also represents a welcome trend in studies of language and social interaction, and in particular in CA studies, in which a group of thematically-related papers is presented together rather than scattered throughout various journals and books across several fields. In addition, the publication of this volume within the Cambridge series, Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics, which includes such well-known works as *Discourse Strategies* (Gumperz, 1982), *Politeness* (Brown & Levinson, 1987), *Discourse Markers* (Schiffrin, 1987), and *Talking Voices* (Tannen, 1989), among others, moves the important work done within CA more directly into the arena of mainstream sociolinguistic inquiry, thus making research which might otherwise go unnoticed elsewhere more visible.

Though the volume contains articles concerned with "institutional interactions," the authors do not assume that the discursive devices taken up for analysis are wholly unique to the

settings from which the data are drawn. Nor do they assume that the settings alone are all that is needed to understand the kinds of talk which go on in them. Indeed, as Drew and Heritage state in the introductory chapter of the book:

> Just as people in a workplace may talk together about matters unconnected with their work, so too places not usually considered 'institutional,' for example a private home, may become the settings for work-related interactions. Thus the institutionality of an interaction is not determined by its setting. Rather, interaction is institutional insofar as participants' institutional or professional identities are somehow made relevant to the work activities in which they are engaged. (pp. 3-4)

Each of the papers included in this book examines some aspect of talk and interaction in a particular institutional context, ranging from news interviews and court proceedings to doctor-patient interactions and job interviews. In particular, the studies as a group investigate the work accomplished through question-answer sequences. As in many work-related settings which provide some service to a general public, the interactions between professionals and lay-persons are often conducted through and integrally built upon the gathering and exchange of information. The studies contained within this volume explore how the institutional identities of questioners and answerers are constituted through interaction, how the tasks and goals of particular institutions are carried out through discourse, how the recipients of these services manage their own discourse, and how both the representatives of institutional organizations and their clients manage together the ongoing, moment-by-moment contingencies of talk and interaction.

The book contains 15 chapters, divided into four sections: Theoretical Orientations, The Activities of Questioners, The Activities of Answerers, and The Interplay between Questioning and Answering. The first section, "Theoretical Orientations," consists of three chapters addressing theoretical and methodological issues related to the analysis of human interaction. Drew and Heritage's introduction (Chapter 1) to the book is an overview of the historical and methodological origins of CA and its study of institutional settings, situating this language- and

interaction-centered approach to the study of language use within a broader view of other contemporary (and sometimes competing) theoretical and methodological approaches in the fields of anthropology, linguistics, and sociology. Though Drew and Heritage suggest to readers who may already be informed about CA in general to proceed directly to the outline of the contents of the book (p. 5), it would be a shame for even the most informed of researchers to skip the remaining 48 pages of this well-crafted summary, for even those who think they know CA well will find the scope of the discussion integrative and insightful. Those who have not had much exposure to the CA tradition will find this introductory chapter essential for providing the background information necessary to make the readings which follow intelligible.

The second chapter in the theoretical section is "Activity Types and Language," a reprint of Levinson (1979). Levinson's essay addresses the issues involved in investigating what participants in any interaction must bring to bear in order to understand and produce question-answer sequences of various types. He proposes the concept of "activity types," which he bases on Wittgenstein's (1958a, 1958b) notion of "language games." Levinson argues that the types of activities that participants engage in are central to an understanding of language use because they delimit what is recognized as an acceptable contribution to the ongoing talk and, in part, determine what inferences can be understood from such talk.

The last chapter in the section on theoretical considerations is a contribution by Schegloff entitled "On Talk and Its Institutional Occasions." This revised version of an earlier paper (Schegloff, 1991) takes up the issue of the adequacy and relevancy of categorical terms used in the analysis of social interaction (a theme echoed by Drew & Heritage in the introduction and similarly engaged in Schegloff, 1987, 1991, and elsewhere). Schegloff focuses on two problems in the study of talk-in-interaction: the problem of "relevance" and the problem of "procedural consequentiality." As a case in point, Schegloff analyzes segments from the now famous Bush-Rather debate, and shows how what might be initially termed an "interview" quickly devolves into something other than an interview. He argues that a term such as "interview" may thus be inadequate to describe a

particular unfolding activity. This is an important argument, for, as Schegloff suggests, it is precisely in those moments when the analyst recognizes the failure of traditional, standard terminology to adequately describe and account for social structure that advances are made in our understanding of the intricacies of human conduct, and that "[i]nvoking social structure or the setting of the talk at the outset can systematically distract from, even blind us to, details of those domains of events in the world" (p. 127).

The second section of this edited volume, "The Activities of Questioners," consists of 4 articles which examine the design of questions by professional questioners and the ways in which these questioners deal with answers to their prior questions. Bergmann's contribution ("Veiled Morality: Notes on Discretion in Psychiatry"--Chapter 4) and Clayman's essay ("Footing in the Achievement of Neutrality: The Case of News-interview Discourse"--Chapter 5) both deal with the ways in which questions are designed to achieve and maintain particular stances in the course of their professional work. Bergmann's analysis of psychiatric intake interviews demonstrates how psychiatrists display caution, or "discretion," when they question patients about their state of mind. In a similar vein, Clayman shows how news interviewers cautiously engage in confrontational questioning yet maintain a neutral stance by avoiding the presentation of their own position.

The next two contributions, by Atkinson ("Displaying Neutrality: Formal Aspects of Informal Court Proceedings"-- Chapter 6) and Button ("Answers as Interactional Products: Two Sequential Practices Used in Job Interviews"--Chapter 7), examine how questioners deal with answers to their prior questions. Atkinson's study of arbitration proceedings in Small Claims Court shows how arbitrators avoid displaying their own assessment of witnesses' responses, and argues that this practice solves the arbitrator's central problem: that, unlike regular counsel who is expected to take a particular side in the proceedings, an arbitrator must maintain an air of neutrality during the questioning of the opposing parties, lest s/he be accused of bias in the final judgment. Button's study of an unsuccessful interview for the position of head of the arts faculty at a school in England, reprinted here as a revised version of an earlier paper (Button, 1987), examines how the interviewers came to conclude that the rejected candidate was

unable to understand what was being asked in the interview. From an analysis of the videotaped interview, Button concludes that the interviewers' withholding of affiliative responses combined with a similar lack of clarification of their own questions helps constitute the interviewee's answers as his final word, and, subsequently, as the "objective" basis for later passing judgment on the interviewee.

The third section, "The Activities of Answerers," contains three papers addressing the role of the answerer in the question-answer sequence. Chapter 8, entitled "The Delivery and Reception of Diagnosis in the General-Practice Consultation," by Heath, analyzes doctor-patient interactions in England and shows how patients refrain from responding to doctors' delivery of the diagnosis, even when the doctor invites the patients to reply. Heath argues that this systematic reluctance to respond to the doctor may explain why national health service clients are believed to be poorly informed and less likely to become active in seeking alternative treatments for their ailments. The ninth chapter, by Greatbatch, entitled "On the Management of Disagreement between News Interviewees," examines how conflicts can escalate between participants of news interview panels (involving two or more persons with opposing points of view). He shows how the interviewees' placement of turns at talk differ markedly from the ways in which disagreement is managed in ordinary conversation. Chapter 10, "Interviewing in Intercultural Situations," by Gumperz, reports on job-training interviews in England involving native and nonnative speakers of English. The study shows how native-speaker interviewers and nonnative-speaker interviewees rely on different systems of "contextualization conventions," and thus often find themselves misunderstanding and misinterpreting one another's talk. Gumperz argues that since the nonnative speakers are at a disadvantage in such institutionalized encounters, there exists the potential for more serious effects on their status and success in the larger society.

The last section, "The Interplay between Questioning and Answering," consists of five articles which investigate how questioners and answerers accomplish particular interactional goals through question-answer sequences. Maynard's examination (Chapter 11) of the delivery of bad news shows how clinicians delay the delivery of a diagnosis until after a series of turns, which he calls a "perspective-display series," through which the

recipient's own view of the situation is elicited. The clinicians then shape their delivery of a "bad news" diagnosis as a confirmation or co-implication of the recipient's perspective, thus potentially avoiding negative or confrontational situations.

Chapter 12, "Dilemmas of advice: aspects of the delivery and reception of advice in interactions between Health Visitors and first-time mothers," by Heritage & Sefi, examines the ways in which home Health Visitors in England manage the delivery of advice to first-time mothers who may or may not be receptive to such advice but who are, nonetheless, required by public policy to subject themselves to it. They analyze in detail how such advice is initiated during these home visits and how it is received (or not received) by the parents. The authors point out that the delivery of advice, perhaps especially in this context, assumes that the recipient(s) lack a particular kind of competence, though such an assumption may prove interactionally problematic.

In "The Interactional Organization of Calls for Emergency Assistance" (Chapter 13), Zimmerman shows how both the particular institutional requirements of emergency service organizations as well as the uniqueness of each emergency telephone call influences the ways in which the call-taker and callers manage their interactions. His analysis demonstrates that despite the differential needs of callers and call-takers, they locally manage their conversations so as to achieve their respective goals. Drew's chapter, entitled "Contested Evidence in Courtroom Cross-Examination: The Case of a Trial for Rape" (Chapter 14), looks at how both witnesses and lawyers attempt to undermine and discredit one another through particular non-cooperative and non-collaborative interactional moves. Drew shows that a witness may undermine and challenge a particular line of questioning by refusing to confirm particular incidents and by offering alternative descriptions. Likewise, a lawyer may attempt to discredit a witness by pointing out contrasts in a witness's testimony, thereby creating a "puzzle" which subtly suggests a credibility problem.

The final chapter, by Jefferson and Lee, "The Rejection of Advice: Managing the Problematic Convergence of a 'Troubles-Telling' and a 'Service Encounter'" (a reprint of their 1981 paper), shows how when the delivery of troubles-telling results in the offering of advice by the recipient of the telling, this advice is subsequently often rejected or resisted by the troubles-teller. By

way of contrast, they compare this outcome with troubles telling in service encounters, where the troubles teller may specifically be seeking advice. They conclude that, unlike in ordinary conversation, the receipt of advice in service encounters is treated by participants as nonproblematic and is often accepted.

*Talk at Work* is a must read for applied linguists interested in the organization of discourse, but it is equally informative for those primarily interested in the elucidation of linguistic structure or the communicative practices of particular professions. The chapters by Drew & Heritage and Schegloff are especially significant contributions to fundamental questions in the growing field of discourse studies. In addition, Gumperz's article is of particular interest to those studying second language learning, interlanguage, and acculturation, areas which have not generally been a focus of CA inquiry.

That being said, there are a few minor problems with this collection. First, it is not clear who the intended audience is for the book. Given its publication in the Cambridge series on Interactional Sociolinguistics, and the inclusion of several authors who do not strictly do CA-type work, the editors appear to be aiming at an audience wider than those interested solely in CA or in the discourse of particular professions. However, such a wider audience would include many without any background in CA. Thus, it would have been helpful if the editors included an appendix containing the transcription system necessary to read the many transcripts contained in this book. Only Gumperz includes a key to his transcription system in an appendix at the end of his chapter. But beyond the issue of the transcription conventions, the collection would appear to be quite challenging for a reader with no grounding in earlier CA research. This book, therefore, should not be any reader's first introduction to CA studies.

A second problem concerns the inclusion of Levinson's (1979) paper in this collection. In their introduction, Drew and Heritage detail the CA conception of context, which treats utterances and their actions as context shaped *and* context renewing (p. 18), thereby recognizing the moment-by-moment development of context within interaction. Levinson's essay argues for the importance of activities (as constitutive of context) as shaping utterances and actions; however, what the essay crucially fails to recognize is the context renewing capability of

utterances and actions as well, thus putting forth a particular theory of "context" which Drew and Heritage argue CA has successfully avoided (p. 19). This reader is thus perplexed at the inclusion of Levinson's (1979) paper in the section on "theoretical orientations" for it seems to provide and detail a somewhat different view of the role and constitution of "context" than that held by the editors of this book and by the research tradition of CA.

One final problem resulting from any selection process is the limited set of work settings studied in this volume: news interviews, health-related encounters, job interviews, court proceedings, calls to emergency services, and service encounters. In contrast, interactions between professionals and lay persons include a seemingly infinite number of other "work settings" in which the asymmetrical relationships existing between the professional and the lay person are more or less pronounced. In addition, while the editors of this volume have chosen to focus on interactions between lay persons and professionals, the 'doing of work' and the discourse practices which help constitute such activity are not limited to such identities. That is, institutional varieties of social interaction and language use also take place between professional colleagues (e.g., medical case consultations between physicians) whose asymmetries of knowledge and experience may be less of an issue (Cicourel, 1989).

All in all, *Talk at Work* is a welcome addition to a growing number of books which examine language and social interaction in various settings. For students of discourse research working in traditions other than CA, this collection serves as an excellent example of the power and richness that conversation analysis can provide in the detailed examination of talk and interaction. For CA researchers, this volume will provide an excellent resource for the continued inquiry into the defining characteristics of institutional interaction, in addition to the everyday conversations through which people live their lives.

## NOTE

[1] For detailed discussions of the methodological and theoretical roots of CA and its historical development see Atkinson & Heritage (1984), Heritage (1984), Goodwin & Heritage (1990), and Schegloff (1992).

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