



Branching out

Ethnomethodological approaches to communication

Carly W. Butler, Richard Fitzgerald, and Rod Gardner

Introduction

This special issue developed out of the 6th Australasian Symposium on Conversation Analysis and Membership Categorisation Analysis (CAMCA) held in Brisbane, Australia in November 2008. Conversation analysis (CA) and membership categorisation analysis (MCA) are approaches that fall under the rubric of ethnomethodology (EM) in that they explore the methods and practices people use to produce and make sense of the social world. CA and MCA focus specifically on the methods and practices used by people when they communicate with one another—through talk, gaze, gesture, and text. While these approaches have their roots in sociology, they are now widely used in a diverse range of disciplines, including linguistics and communication, psychology, education, and anthropology. The broad applicability of this line of work is indicative of both the fundamental role of communication in human life, and the potential of these approaches to contribute a truly transdisciplinary set of methods for studying communication.

Carly W. Butler, School of Journalism and Communication, University of Queensland, Australia;
Richard Fitzgerald, School of Journalism and Communication, University of Queensland, Australia;
Rod Gardner, School of Education & Professional Studies, Griffith University, Australia.

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In this issue, we present a broad spectrum of Australian research within CA and MCA that is tied together by a shared interest in the details of communication in naturally occurring contexts. The introduction begins with a discussion of EM and the implications of ethnomethodological approaches for communication research. We then outline the assumptions and practices of MCA and CA before introducing the contributions to this special issue.

Ethnomethodology

EM is the study of how people produce, organise, and make sense of their everyday lives (Garfinkel, 1967). Fundamentally, and as its name suggests, EM's overarching topic of study is 'people's methods', that is, the practical reasoning and sense-making methods that people themselves observably use when they go about their everyday affairs. The emergence of EM in the 1960s saw the problem of 'social order' that had been (and in many respects still is) the overarching concern of sociology, respecified as something that is enacted, revealed, and managed in the minutiae of everyday lives rather than through the larger social structures that have traditionally been understood to organise human life. People's social practices are examined not as a resource for finding out something beyond what people know but as a way of explicating the routine resources people use in order to communicate what they know with others.

EM is not a 'method', in much the same way that 'linguistics' and 'psychology' are not methods (Rawls, 2002). Rather, EM is a collection of methods used to 'discover the things that persons in particular situations *do*, the methods *they* use, to create the patterned orderliness of social life' (Rawls, 2002, p. 6). There is as much—if not more—diversity in ethnomethodological methods as there is cohesion. Accordingly, EM could be considered as more of a collection of 'subfields' than a homogenous program of research (Atkinson, 1988; Maynard & Clayman, 1991; Pollner, 1991; Sharrock, 1989). The papers in this issue offer a taste of the diversity of methodological approaches that fall within the rubric of EM, and the range of problems and analytic methods that are used in studying people's practices in communication.

A caveat is needed at this point to clarify the sense of the term 'communication' as it pertains to ethnomethodological research. EM is not so much interested in the notion of communication as the transmission of messages, but rather, for ethnomethodologists, 'communication' is seen, or 'respecified' (see Button, 1992), in terms of





how people *interact* with others in society. That is, what people say and how they say it is understood in terms of the activities accomplished in and through *interaction*. Further, these interactional activities are not construed as being distinct from the communicative practices through which they are produced: social action and communication are mutually constitutive. Text and talk are therefore studied not in order to access things such as speaker cognition or social structural features of the speaker or groups of speakers, but for the local production of social order and action that is accomplished through communication. Indeed, ethnomethodological approaches deliberately eschew looking for possible explanations and reasons for the production of talk and text that are not found within the talk and text being examined. Instead, EM operates with the principle that members, in going about their business, make that business observable in that 'the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members' procedures for making those settings "account-able"' (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 1).

While EM continues to focus on the methods and practices through which people produce and recognise their world as meaningful and ordered (i.e., the common-sense reasoning and knowledge that is used in accomplishing social order), one of the practices, interaction, has emerged as a specific and increasingly important area of research. The approaches of CA and MCA, both initiated by Harvey Sacks (1995), have become established methods of examining talk-in-interaction in a variety of settings, and it is to these specific methodologies we now turn.

Harvey Sacks's Ethnomethodology

Harvey Sacks¹ was a student of Garfinkel and shared with him an interest in the methods and practices through which social order is achieved. His work is distinguished from Garfinkel's, however, by its specific focus on the analysis of talk and text. The body of work produced by Sacks in his short lifetime saw the development of two distinct forms of ethnomethodological research: membership categorisation analysis (MCA) and conversation analysis (CA). Arguably, these approaches have played a crucial role in extending the relevance and applicability of EM beyond its sociological roots.

Sacks's (1995) work involved analysis of both textual data and—particularly—talk, in the form of recorded and transcribed social interactions. His use of conversational materials was not driven by

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any particular interest in conversation per se, but because the ability to replay such recordings, and to examine them through detailed transcripts², had the potential to reveal the sequential and inferential order people accomplished in talk. Sacks's work initiated what can be described as two subfields of EM. The first involves looking at people's descriptions and situated inferential practices in both text and talk through analysis of what he termed membership categories (e.g., Sacks, 1972a, 1972b). This particular approach has since been termed 'membership categorisation analysis' (see Eglin & Hester, 1992). The second subfield is that of CA, which examines the sequential organisation of talk in both 'ordinary' and institutional contexts (see Gardner, 2004, for a review).

a) Membership Categorisation Analysis

MCA involves looking at how descriptive and inferential aspects of the social world are generated and recognised. As with other areas of EM, the focus is on the action orientation of talk and text and the sense-making practices that people use to produce and make sense of descriptions. It follows from an understanding that any description—whether it is found in a newspaper headline (e.g., Lee, 1984) or in a spoken reference to a person (e.g., Sacks, 1972b)—involves a problem of selection, given that multiple descriptions might be available to use in any given situation. Analysis of the situated use of membership categories can therefore reveal something of the mundane reasoning and sense-making practices that are involved in the selection of that description and accordingly of the local production of social order.

Sacks (1972a, 1972b, 1995) suggests that descriptions are generated and made sense of through a set of cultural, common-sense understandings, and the operation of an 'inferential apparatus' he termed a membership categorisation device (MCD). An MCD is composed of a collection of 'membership categories' that go together; for example, father, mother, and daughter can be heard as categories that 'go together' using a 'family' device, and the categories 'teacher' and 'student' can be collected using a 'classroom' device³. There are activities and predicates (including rights and responsibilities and so on) that are 'bound' to particular membership categories in a way that provides for the generation and recognition of categories and their devices. In Sacks's (1972b) classic example of a story told by a young child—'The baby cried. The mommy picked it up'—we hear the 'mommy' as the 'mommy' of the crying baby, that she picked it up because it was crying, and so on. Categories are thus *inference-rich* and are used by observers to make sense of a scene as well as to produce





social action. The inferences and understandings invoked through using or hearing a description, or through observing an activity as category bound, also have moral and normative dimensions—that is, the mother ‘should’ pick up the baby (see Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009; Jayyusi, 1984).

MCA does not look only at instances where explicit descriptions of people, places, or activities are used. It also looks at how people orient to their (or others’) membership in the situated production of social action and social organisation. For example, Fitzgerald and Housley (2002) showed how membership as a ‘caller’ and ‘host’ in a radio phone-in was generated and displayed in the production and organisation of turns at talk. Butler (2008; Butler & Weatherall, 2006) discussed how membership within a children’s game was used by the members to generate activity and make sense of each other’s actions. In both cases, and indeed in all analyses of this sort, the social order created is understood as a locally situated one: it is produced in situ on a moment-by-moment basis. Thus, while we might understand, say, host-caller and their associated activities to be stable memberships within the radio phone-in context, what is of interest is how membership in these categories is actively produced in the instances under examination. In this way, membership and the social organisation of the call is viewed as a local accomplishment produced on a turn-by-turn basis in each and every call, rather than an enduring and static quality of the participants to a radio phone-in program. Furthermore, membership categories are also used in the accomplishment of specific social actions such as blaming (Watson, 1978), complaining (Butler, 2008), and denying (Stokoe, 2009).

Applications and developments of Sacks’s work on membership categorisation (e.g., Butler 2008; Butler & Weatherall, 2006; Eglin & Hester, 2003; Fitzgerald & Housley, 2002; Hester & Eglin, 1997; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2002, 2009; Jayyusi, 1984, 1992; Leudar, Marsland, & Nekvapil, 2004; McHoul & Watson, 1984; Watson, 1997) have shown how ‘categories can be understood as situated phenomena which are made recognisable by the methodical procedures of members’ interactional activity’ (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2002, p. 68). In addition to looking at how categorisation work is used in conversation, MCA has also been used to examine the sort of common-sense understandings that are used in both the production and recognition of meaning in text (Bridges & Bartlett, 2009; Hester & Eglin, 1992; Lee, 1984). As an approach to the study of communication, MCA offers a powerful way of looking at how inferential and cultural (where culture is

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understood in terms of situated applications of shared common-sense understandings) practices are invoked in generating and making sense of talk and text.

b) Conversation Analysis

The second legacy of Sacks's work, developed in collaboration with Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, is conversation analysis, the study of the sequential organisation of naturally occurring talk in interaction. The core of conversation analytic research is examination of the organisation of turns at talk (see Gardner, 2004; Schegloff, 2007c). In a foundational paper (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), two seemingly obvious observations about how people talk to one another were put forward: people speak one at a time and speaker change recurs. When speaker change happens, typically gaps and overlaps are minimal. The apparent simplicity of these observations is somewhat misleading, in that this organisation of talk is something that people actively work to achieve in interaction. What this paper showed is that these principles of conversation were organised systematically, and were endogenous 'rules' or norms that parties to an interaction themselves oriented to and used in managing conversation. Through detailed analysis of actual talk-in-interaction, CA sets out to explicate when and how these rules are applied and managed in situated talk.

These basic sequential features of the organisation of talk are the building blocks of conversation analytic research, and—more importantly—the situated organisation of social action. Conversation analysis thus demonstrates how social order is accomplished on a turn-by-turn basis, through examination of how each utterance is responsive to a prior turn, and has relevance for following turns at talk. Each turn at talk is examined for the understanding of a prior turn that is demonstrated in this turn, and the action that is being done with that particular utterance. This entails looking at features such as turn design and composition, silence between or within turns, corrections (or 'repair'; Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977), as well as how a turn is sequentially positioned. Subsequent turns reveal the other speaker's own analysis of what was meant and done in the prior turn. Thus, conversation analysis is grounded in members' own methods.

The interest in CA (at least originally) is not in conversation per se, but in social action and the machinery used to produce and make intelligible the methods, practices, and inferences observed in social interaction (Sacks, 1984). Turns at talk are understood as interactionally produced and relevant social actions. Examination of the sequential organisation





of talk (or more aptly 'social action') reveals the practical sense-making methods and procedures of everyday social life, and the interactional basis of social order. Clearly, then, CA is very different from more traditional models of communication where talk is understood as the transmission of information (see Neville & Rendle-Short, 2009).

Tensions and convergences

While both MCA and CA have their roots in EM and the work of Sacks, there are long-standing debates regarding their respective places within the wider ethnomethodological field and their relationship with each other. The title of McHoul's paper in this issue, 'What are we doing when we analyse conversation?', speaks directly to some of the tensions and methodological issues that emerge within this field. With the 'branching out' of EM, one finds a growing number of studies that look for recurring, or context-specific, patterns in conversation in order to explicate the sorts of methods used by people to produce social interaction, without speaking to the broader issue of how a local social order is accomplished through these methods. McHoul calls for a grounding of interaction research in its ethnomethodological roots—that is, the concern with the problem of social order—and voices a criticism regularly levelled against CA in that it is becoming an increasingly linguistic exercise. As Sharrock (1989) suggests:

The influence of studies of conversation as models for ethnomethodological inquiry means that the stereotypical study in ethnomethodology will feature a transcript and will engage in analysing its formal features, giving the impression that ethnomethodology's studies are essentially of the organisation of social interaction. (p. 673)

The point Sharrock is making here is that social interaction, per se, is not EM's primary topic. Rather, social interaction is an element within, and thus a resource for, looking at the 'witnessable social order' (Livingston, 2008; McHoul, this issue). As it stands, EM—even within the subfields of CA and MCA—is multifaceted. There is as much variation within these fields as there is between them and other ethnomethodological methods. To return to the matter of using EM to study communication, then, respecifying communication as social action is just one facet of this domain of research, with the possibility of then respecifying social action in terms of locally produced and relevant social order. This is not to suggest that some CA or MCA research does not engage with the notion of social order, as the moment-by-moment production of

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social order is an underlying and fundamental supposition of all work in this area. The point of distinction is the extent to which social order itself is engaged with, and the extent to which the authors address, the 'field propositions' (McHoul, this issue) of the field. While EM is a sociological approach, the value of this approach as a transdisciplinary one has implications for the relative importance of social order versus social action. McHoul's position, however, is that CA (and for that matter MCA) needs to maintain an orientation to EM's roots.

The tensions and convergences that McHoul's paper points to were reflected in the 'branching out' theme of the 2008 CAMCA conference and underpin the collection of papers in this special issue, which represent both the branches and roots of contemporary EM. But in addition to speaking to the genealogy of the theoretical (or as McHoul describes it, metaphysical) aspects of EM, these papers also demonstrate some of the empirical and contextual branching out within the field: the ideas and analyses draw on both foundational and contemporary research, on historical and 'modern' data, on spoken and written communication, and on both everyday and institutional settings. There is also a strong methodological slant to many of the papers, in that they not only present findings about social interaction, but also demonstrate *how* social interaction (and social order) can be studied and understood. This special issue thus speaks to debates within EM, as well as to broader debates about how human communication works.

The papers

The papers in this special issue share a focus on looking at language use in context, and do so through the use of ethnomethodological methods to uncover the in situ production and organisation of social action. Although the papers are bound by this common thread, the reader will note as much diversity as uniformity in the range of methodological approaches and applications represented in this collection. In part, these various concerns and approaches are indicated by the range of disciplines authors come from, including sociology, education, linguistics, psychology, communication, and cultural studies—but in many ways the disciplinary backgrounds of the contributors are secondary to their shared concern with understanding social interaction.

The papers cover a spectrum of work within the ethnomethodological field—from sequential and applied CA through a combination of CA and MCA to ethnomethodological analysis. Furthermore, the domains

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of communication examined vary widely: Fitzgerald et al. examine conversational, or 'everyday', talk between people known to one another, as do Gardner et al., who also consider a political debate; Danby et al. look at talk and online interaction in an institutional setting; Adkins and Nasarczyk examine online communication through a public Internet forum; and Plunkett looks at an historical newspaper advertisement. While the papers represent a wide spectrum of applications of ethnomethodological methods and interactional settings, there is an underlying coherence through the exploration of the situated methods and practices used by people in the production of social interaction.

Alec McHoul's paper, taken directly from his plenary address to the conference, sets the backdrop for the papers that follow through a discussion of the philosophical lineage of EM and some of the emergent tensions between the different strands. As the research field expands and the relationship between the different fields and their ethnomethodological roots sometimes becomes opaque, McHoul's discussion raises a number of challenges for future work that are reflected in the rest of the papers.

Reece Plunkett's paper draws upon MCA and EM to examine an advertisement published in the personal column of a 1971 Perth newspaper that served to invite members to a new public lesbian and gay social movement, 'CAMP'. Through a close examination of the categorisation work used to 'do the invitation', Plunkett demonstrates how the advertisement also served as a solution to the problem of making visible a previously hidden group of people in a movement that was administered by them. This is shown through analysis of how the advertisement mobilised the generation of a new category of persons and predicated knowledge as a method for accomplishing social change. The paper demonstrates the potential for ethnomethodological research to deal with historical issues and the matter of social change in a way that foregrounds the actual methods and practices through which such change is generated, by looking at how social problems, and the properties and use of membership categories, are transformed through communicative activities. In this way, the paper shows how membership categories are not merely used to describe the world and the things in it, but are actively produced and transformed as a method for generating and changing social order. Plunkett thus illustrates how analysis of communication on a micro level can serve as a means of addressing 'big' social issues.

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Richard Fitzgerald, William Housley, and Carly Butler address a core methodological issue within ethnomethodological research—how does one deal with potentially tenuous notions such as identities and context in a way that is grounded in the details of the interaction being examined? They combine MCA—particularly Sacks’s (1995) discussions of ‘omnirelevant devices’—and CA to show that and how ‘who people are’ and the activities in which they are engaged form part of an underlying sense-making resource that is revealed in the cracks and seams of an interaction. The paper examines a conversation between friends, and instances within a story-telling sequence where the story is put on hold in order to address matters relating to reference to other people. The analysis demonstrates how shared knowledge is revealed in these instances, and has an ongoing relevance for the interaction at hand in terms of displaying and producing the locally situated context. On a methodological level, the paper demonstrates how membership categorisation is produced and invoked in the sequential organisation of interaction, and in doing so contributes an understanding of how identities and context are generated in and made relevant for situated communication.

The paper by Rod Gardner, Richard Fitzgerald, and Ilana Mushin addresses the question of sociocultural context in relation to the gross observations about turn-taking described in the foundational paper by Sacks et al. (1974). While that paper suggested that gap minimisation and overlap were common, Gardner et al. present cases from Australian conversations where lengthy gaps or considerable overlap occur without being oriented to as being ‘non-normative’. The data includes conversations between Anglo couples, three elderly indigenous women in a remote Aboriginal community, and a televised political debate. The authors suggest that, despite these apparent departures from the turn-taking model, the same principles apply, but in a way that is sensitive to interactional—rather than cultural—contexts. It is argued that the long silences in the indigenous data, and the extreme overlap in the political data, do not reveal cultural communication differences, but, rather, provide evidence that variations in turn-taking practices are tied to the specifics of local interactional contingencies. In addition to contributing to debates around the cultural specificity of turn-taking, the paper also warns against the reification of the turn-taking rules and methods in a way that seems to stabilise the notion of ‘ordinary conversation’. By pointing to the flexibility of these rules and methods, and their mutually constitutive relationship with situated tasks and contexts, the paper demonstrates how the study of turn-taking practices is grounded in the ethnomethodological drive towards understanding social order.

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Susan Danby, Carly Butler, and Michael Emmison apply conversation analytic findings to a unique interactional and institutional context—counselling on an Australian helpline for children and young people. The paper compares the opening sequences of telephone counselling interactions with those of online ‘chat’-based counselling sessions, and examines the implications of each modality for counsellors’ displays of ‘active listening’. They show how counsellors’ use of response tokens such as ‘mm hm’ (see Gardner, 2001) in telephone counselling facilitates callers’ presentation of their problem and the sequential organisation of the opening to calls, and how formulations are used to summarise and reinterpret what the caller has said. In online counselling, however, the impossibility of using response tokens in the course of clients’ problem presentation limits the extent to which counsellors can display their ongoing attention to the clients’ presentation of their problem. Furthermore, the textual and quasi-synchronous format of the online sessions can complicate the recognition of the client’s completion of their problem presentation, which introduces ambiguity in regard to when and how a transition to a next counselling phase is managed. The paper illustrates how conversation analytic methods can be applied to studies of new modes of interaction, and can reveal the situated interactional practices of professionals in institutional settings.

Barbara Adkins and Jason Nasarczyk examine a relatively new form and type of communication through analysis of interaction on the photo sharing website Flickr. Working from an interaction-order perspective combining the theoretical and analytic insights of Goffman, Garfinkel, and Sacks, the authors look at how an online social order is produced through annotations and commentary relating to a photo of Barack Obama that is posted by a Flickr member. The paper examines the use, or ‘performance’, of annotation—the posting of comments on a member’s photo—and describes how memberships are invoked through epistemic displays and claims, sequential organisation, and the ‘face work’ accomplished through the posts. The analysis focuses on the asynchronicity (i.e., non-simultaneity) of this interactional context, and how time/space contingencies are accomplished through the practices of annotation and commentary and are constitutive features of the generation of social action and social order. Through this, the authors demonstrate how the unique time and space features of Internet-based communication are not simply external constraints on interaction, but can be understood as interactional resources and products that are used to produce an online interaction order. The paper thus contributes more broadly to discussions about the creation of ‘communities’ in online environments, and how this communicative modality both shapes and is shaped by interactional practices.

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We have thus in this collection a range of contributions under the broad umbrella of EM that are on the one hand very different from each other in the objects of their enquiry and the specific issues they address, but on the other are united by an interest in social order and a commitment to discovering that social order through attention to the minutiae of interactional and emergent textual detail.

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Notes

1. A small collection of Harvey Sacks's lectures were first published in *Human Studies* in 1989, and then in full in book form in 1992 (with a reprint in 1995), and represent a wealth of work and ideas produced between 1964 and 1972, before his death in a car accident in 1975.
2. See Appendix for the transcript conventions used in this issue.
3. Sacks also discusses rules for applying these categories to a population of people, which are crucial in understanding the use and application of devices in everyday social interaction. Briefly, the consistency rule holds that, if a category from a particular device is used to describe one member of a population, then that device may be used to categorise other members of the same population. The economy rule refers to the adequacy of just one category for doing reference to a person. See Sacks (1972a) for more on the implications of these in the application of categories and devices. (For other discussions of MCDs also see Butler, 2008; Hester & Eglin, 1997; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2002; Jarryusi, 1984; Schegloff, 2007a, b).





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