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# Beyond Turn-taking

## Reflections on Different Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Educational Talk

### Summary

The article discusses several epistemological and methodological issues related to the analysis of discourse in general and of educational talk in particular. The theoretical framework provided by conversation analysis (CA) is applied and critically discussed in the analysis of an empirical example of educational talk. Several questions seem pertinent: Can we – as analysts – have direct access to talk “as it actually occurs”, independent of any kind of theorizing and predefined categorization? What is the epistemological status of the conversation analytic categories? What are the limitations of applying turn-taking as an analytical category in the study of talk? To what extent can we presume the knowledgeability of the interlocutors as a premise in our analysis? On the background of my own attempts at applying CA in the analysis of educational discourse, I argue for a widening of the perspective from a narrow, empiricist focus on conversational turn-takings and sequential organization of talk, for example in the handling of issues like silences and absences in talk. On the other hand, I also warn against the pitfalls of historicist, abstract social theory; here exemplified with some texts from theorists applying abstract philosophical categories from dialectical and historical materialism like “the law of contradiction” as explanatory tools in the study of situated action. In the study of educational meaning making we should avoid empiricist as well as historicist approaches and explanations.

### Introduction

In this theoretical paper I discuss some epistemological and methodological issues related to the analysis of discourse in general and of educational talk in particular. My discussion connects to recent debates in the journal *Discourse and Society* (Schegloff, 1997, 1998; Wetherell, 1998; Billig, 1998) and activity theory (Engestrom, 1999, which is a direct response to the discussion in *Discourse and Society*) where the research status and relevance of conversation analysis (CA) has been the focus of discussion. In this article I want to address some fundamental epistemological questions in the study of talk as social action in general and educational talk and meaning making processes in particular: Can we – as analysts – have direct access to talk “as it actually occurs”, independent of any kind of theorizing and predefined categorization? What is the epistemological status of the conversation analytic categories? What are the limitations of applying turn taking as an analytical category in the study of talk? To what extent can we presume the knowledgeability of the interlocutors as a premise in our analysis?

My own approach can probably best be labeled *discourse analytic*, inspired by the later philosophy of Wittgenstein, by discursive and rhetorical psychology (e.g., Edwards,

1997; Harré and Gillet, 1994; Billig 1996) and also by ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Lynch, 1992). Although my approach is inspired by ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, I think it is also important to recognize the limitations and what I consider empiricist tendencies in conversation analysis. On the background of my own attempts to try to apply CA on educational discourse, I will argue for a widening of the perspective from a narrow focus on conversational turn-takings and sequential organization of talk. On the other hand, I am also critical against the pitfalls of historicist, abstract social theory, here exemplified with some texts from activity theorists applying abstract philosophical categories from dialectical materialism like “the law of contradiction” as explanatory tools in the study of situated action. In the study of educational meaning making we need to avoid empiricist as well as abstract, historicist approaches and modes of explanations.

The focus of the paper is primarily on epistemological and general theoretical issues, but some methodological implications are also briefly discussed as examples and illustrations of the principled theoretical arguments.

## Basic assumptions and concerns

My basic theoretical and methodological approach is aligned with the ethnomethodological program, attempting to reconstruct order through the ways in which people themselves make this order available to each other. Any setting organizes its environment of practical activities to make it

“detectable, countable, recordable, reportable, tell-a-story-aboutable, analysable – in short, *accountable*” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 33, emphasis in the original).

The impact of this programme has been broad in the social sciences. See for example how Bruno Latour recently explained the basic idea of actor-network theory:

“For us ANT (*that is: Actor Network Theory*) was simply another way of being faithful to the insights of ethnomethodology: actors know what they do and we have to learn from them not only what they do, but how and why they do it. It is us, the social scientists, who lack knowledge of what they do, and not they who are missing the explanation of why they are unwittingly manipulated by forces exterior to themselves and known to the social scientist’s powerful gaze and methods.” (Latour, 1999, p. 19)

Harold Garfinkel once formulated his fundamental conception of the study of social action in contrast to that of Durkheim:

“Thereby, in contrast to certain versions of Durkheim that teach that the objective reality of social fact is sociology’s fundamental principle, the lesson is taken instead and used as a study policy, that the objective reality of social facts as an ongoing accomplishment of the concerted activities of daily life, with the ordinary artful ways of that accomplishment being by members known, used and taken for granted, is for members doing sociology, a fundamental phenomenon.” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. vii)

In contrast to Durkheim, Garfinkel argues in a radical way that instead of departing from a strong essentialist view taking “the objective reality” for granted, social scientists should rather focus on how this “objective reality” is locally produced, as an ongoing accomplishment of and in participants’ daily life and activities. This is an epistemological argument, not an ontological one. Garfinkel is not in the postmodernist, relativist business of denying the existence of an objective world. On the contrary, he would argue that in order to be able to get a more realistic view of the world, the social scientist cannot take this world for granted but show how it is understood and produced through the participants’ own practices and daily life.

Ethnomethodological researchers have pioneered the use of audiotape and videotape of social interaction – which has now become standard across qualitative and interpretive sociology and education. Several advantages of data in this form should be noticed: “1. They enable the analyst to attend to the fine detail of talk and interaction, and 2. Through their reproducibility, they enable the analyst’s observations to be assessed in relation to the very data which those findings refer to.” (Hester and Francis, 2000, p. 4) An even more important corollary of the ethnomethodological commitment to the study of local order should be mentioned. The focus on local order implies that the studies themselves “are shaped by the distinctive and specific character of the phenomenon they investigate” (ibid., p. 4). Studies of this kind will hence necessarily be diverse in style and methodological approach. Therefore, ethnomethodology does not provide one particular “method” in their analyses.

Garfinkel also notices how this objectivity is “taken for granted” as something which is “seen, but unnoticed”. This means that the analyst should also focus not only on what is explicitly said and noticed, but also on the tacit, the un-said and what seems absent from the conversation. This means that an empiricist, narrow focus on studying the sequential organization of spoken utterances may be insufficient, especially in the study of school work.

### **A discourse analytic perspective on social action and learning**

The discursive analytic perspective on social action and learning which constitutes the general framework for my understanding, focuses on studying discursive interaction and cognition in a situated context. Discourse analysis has become a broad and multifac-

eted research tradition comprising a broad range of approaches and research strategies. In Margaret Wetherell’s formulation “the boundary lines are drawn between styles of work which affiliate with EM and CA and analysis which follow post-structuralist or Foucauldian lines.” (Wetherell, 1998) In this study I will discuss EM and CA as elements in a broader discursive analytic approach, albeit not the post-structuralist or Foucauldian versions. Foucauldian studies tend to view discourses as cultural totalities<sup>1</sup>, and these are also the focus of analysis. This methodological approach differs substantially from a view which focuses on examining the ways in which people use utterances in specific contexts. As Michael Billig formulates this: “Foucault’s notion of ‘discourse’ is, to use Saussure’s distinction, more *langue* than *parole* – concerned with the hypothetical total structure rather than particular usage.” (Billig, 1996)

Following the ideas of discursive psychology (especially as formulated by Edwards, 1997; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Parker, 1992), language is not analysed as symptoms of inner processes, and it is assumed that the traditional topics of psychology (e.g., emotions, memory etc) refer to phenomena which are outwardly observable. For example, if one wishes to study how or to what extent students “learn” in interaction with computers, the researcher should be paying attention to what students are actually doing and saying when they use computers in their daily work.

EM, CA and also important parts of the broader discourse analytic tradition take inspiration from the philosophical tradition of

<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that I consider Foucault a less interesting theorist. On the contrary, I regard his ideas of knowledge and power as highly relevant in the study of pedagogy and institutional knowledge production. My point here is more related to the methodological focus and the unit of analysis in the study of educational meaning making and talk.

Wittgenstein's later philosophy. CA is "fundamentally an ethnomethodological enterprise." (Potter, 1996) and is to be understood as EM applied on conversations and especially "mundane, everyday talk". Discursive psychology applies this to psychological phenomena and argues that phenomena which traditional psychological theories have treated as "inner processes", are, in fact, constituted through social, discursive activity. Accordingly, discursive psychology argues that psychology should be based on the study of this outward activity rather than hypothetical, and essentially unobservable, inner states.

As I showed above, Wittgenstein stated in *Philosophical Investigations* that, "an 'inner process' stands in need for outward criteria (1953, remark 580). He claimed that "the characteristic mark of all 'feelings' is that there is expression of them, i.e. facial expression, gestures", (1967, remark 513). The implication is profound. Analysts should not search for the unobservable essences, which are presumed to lie behind the use of feeling-words. They should be examining in detail the ways people make claims about psychological states and what they are doing when they make, or dispute, such psychological claims: they should be asking "*what is the purpose of this language, how is it being used?*" (Wittgenstein, 1967, remark 716)

I shall emphasise three particularly central points in my conception of discourse analysis: *action, rhetoric, and accountability*.<sup>2</sup>

The first point is that cognitive phenomena are *recast as actions*. "Discursive psychology generally is concerned with people's practices: communication, interaction, argument; and the organization of those practices in different kinds of settings." (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p. 156) The concern is with how people carry out reasoning and problem solv-

ing as part of their practical activities. Analytically we, as researchers, should be cautious in applying analytical categories to do with phenomena such as degrees of shared knowledge, depth of understanding and impact of technology on discourse, and instead be sensitive to what social actors actually do through talk and text.

The second point highlights how discourse is always produced from a position, which is to say that it has a *rhetorical organization*. It is people situated in space and time, with different interests, stakes and concerns, who produce actions. Actions are therefore never neutral in any simple sense; they are produced with specific goals in mind. These, however, are features of the content and organization of discourse, not of people's individual motivations or thoughts. This means that people treat each other as competent knowledgeable members with motivations, abilities and interests, and that these concerns are displayed in their discourse. An important objective in discourse analysis is to analyse the organization of these actions, as well as identify the devices that the participants rely on to accomplish this in different settings.

The last point concerns *accountability*, that is to say, speakers routinely deal with issues of agency and responsibility when giving accounts or descriptions of events and other phenomena. How teachers orient to accountability when providing assessments of students, would be an interesting topic to pursue further. When students fail to accomplish a task, is this attributed to bad teaching or to the students' lack of reasoning ability? These are common concerns in teacher-pupil interaction. In this regard educational discourse is about social relationships, where issues related to students learning and abilities are practical concerns for the teacher, and do not refer merely to what the pupils actually know. In this regard the students' "thinking" is interlinked with a matrix of social relationships and concerns.

2 The following paragraphs are based on Arnseth and Solheim (2002).

To sum up, the focus of this approach is not on cognition conceived as psychological entities located “beneath the skull”, but on discourse and its sequential organization grounded in people’s activities and social practices. We, as analysts, are interested in how specific formulations are deployed, and how they are related to the particular context in which they appear. This context is established in activities that are pragmatically organized. Therefore, instead of considering cognition, problem solving and remembering as merely psychological phenomena, they enter into this model as discursive resources which teachers and students use to do specific interactional work. People think together and engage in collaborative activities by continuously trying to understand each other’s motives, understandings and ideas.

### Basic concepts of conversation analysis

The techniques of CA and EM enable analysts to investigate the micro processes of speech acts in which language is used. Analysts can study how, for example, claims to have particular emotions or psychological states are seen to be socially constituted and accomplished (Edwards, 1997). For example, traditional psychologists assume that ‘remembering’ is something which takes place within the cognitive system of the isolated individual. By contrast, discourse analysts treat remembering as a social and collective activity (Edwards and Potter, 1992). They examine in detail the speech acts involved in making claims about remembering and forgetting, and they ask what such claims are accomplishing socially (Middleton and Edwards, 1990). Instead of treating remembering as an unobservable, internal process, it becomes a directly observable, social activity based upon speech acts.

One central concept within conversation analysis is *the speaking turn*. According to

Harvey Sacks (the founder of CA), it takes two turns to have a conversation. However, turn-taking is more than just a defining property of conversational activity. The study of its patterns allows one to describe contextual variation (examining, for instance, the structural organisation of turns, how speakers manage sequences as well as the internal design of turns). At the same time, the principle of taking turns in speech can be claimed to be a universal feature of talk, and it is something that speakers (normatively) attend to in interaction. A second central concept is that of *the adjacency pair*. Underneath this concept is the idea that turns minimally come in pairs and the first of a pair creates certain expectations which constrain the possibilities for a second. Examples of adjacency pairs are question/answer, complaint/apology, greeting/greeting, accusation/denial, etc. The occurrence of adjacency pairs in talk also forms the basis for the concept of *sequential implicativeness*: each move in a conversation is essentially a response to the preceding talk and an anticipation of the kind of talk which is to follow. In formulating their present turn, speakers show their understanding of the previous turn and reveal their expectations about the next turn to come.

### Virtues of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis

Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis represent an alternative<sup>3</sup> to the traditional methodical focus on measurement of learning output which often reflects a strongly cognitivist (and in the 60s and 70s also a behaviorist) approach to learning and also the study of the interplay with artifacts and technology.

<sup>3</sup> A survey and overview over EM and CA contributions to educational research since the 60s is provided by Hester and Francis (2000, pp. 1-21).

CA insists on studying in detail the actual interaction taking place. The study of “talk-in-interaction” gives a detailed account of the actual interaction. Taking into consideration the complex interactional patterns that are unfolding when a complex technological artifact is “intervening” in the communication process, there will clearly be a need for methods mapping this complex interaction in the best possible way. The major strength of CA lies in the idea that conversational meaning is to be situated in the sequence. Its most powerful idea is undoubtedly that human interactants continually display to each other, in the course of interaction, their own understanding of what they are doing.

It seems that EM and CA can be especially valuable in the study of the role of the technological artifact as a part of social practices and a number of interesting studies have shown that EM and CA may be fruitful in this field<sup>4</sup>. These processes are often very complex involving interaction not only between humans, but also between humans, computers and the social, organizational and physical/spatial environment. Through focusing on actual interaction between, for example, the educational computer software and the students, the researcher will be able to trace not only how the students interact with one another, but also how they simultaneously interact with the computer. It is certainly very interesting if CA could be used to describe this interaction more accurately.

The traditional ethnographers use their own participation, either actual or vicarious, as a basis for building an understanding, and this is often supplemented by field notes. In contrast to this, the conversation analyst will

4 Among others, the seminal work of Lucy Suchman (1987) has been particularly important, especially because her work also has had strong influence in computer science and cognitive science. Recent important contributions which also provide overviews are Heath and Luff (2000) and Hutchby (2001).

be concerned with how the actor’s account is established as *literal and objective*, and what it is being used to do. This implies a focus on the detail of interaction: the hesitations, repetitions, repairs and emphases. Conversation analysts have shown just how important these things are to interaction, and I shall agree with Jonathan Potter when he says that “they are virtually impossible for an ethnographic observer without a tape recorder and high-quality transcript to capture adequately”. (Potter, 1996, p. 105)

A final virtue of taking a conversation focus is that the transcribed record of discourse gives the reader a unique opportunity to evaluate the researcher’s interpretations. Conversation analyst Harvey Sacks had a goal of producing a form of analysis “where the reader has as much information as the author, and can reproduce the analysis” (1992, vol. I, p. 27). This might be slightly unrealistic, but expresses at least a democratic approach towards academic research practices.

### **The virtues and limitations of conversational turn taking. An empirical example from project work in school**

As a point of departure for a more systematic theoretical discussion I will first present and discuss an empirical example. The following scene is quite common to many younger students trying to use the Internet for educational purposes, and it illustrates difficulties with finding appropriate information on the Internet. Before this particular dialogue occurred, three fourteen-year-old girls had spent a couple of hours searching the Internet for material about the situation of women in Africa. They were supposed to use a video about women in Burkina Faso to define themes and problem statements for their project work. Before this sequence they had already defined and formulated their problem

statements but without discussing or consulting the teacher. According to the guidelines they are supposed to have some kind of recognition from the teacher of their choice of problem statements.

The class was divided into groups of 3-4 students, and the groups worked in separate

rooms. The teacher rotated between the groups to see how they were getting on, but this group did not summon her. The dialogue starts as the teacher enters the room. This fragment comprises the first part of the dialogue between the teacher and the student group on the first day of the project work.

*Fragment 1.*

1. Teacher: Have you got any help? (1.0)
2. Monica: We think it is difficult. We cannot find much material.
3. Anne: The only thing we found was a legal bill concerning polygamy in Uganda, but
4. we cannot enter that website.
5. Teacher: But how do you define the problem statements?
6. Monica: How much do African mothers decide over their son's family.
7. Linda: Or to what extent they have the right to [decide.
8. Cathrine: [How much they decide, that's it.
9. Teacher: Uh:: there may be something wrong with your problem statements, if you can't find
10. any material about it. Because then it is clear that a lot of this is unwritten laws
11. and rules so that perhaps you may (0.5) may be you should add two or three more
12. questions.
13. Cathrine: What:: [else ( )
14. Teacher: [What are you saying Cathrine?
15. Cathrine: What else is the video about [than uh
16. Teacher: [It has to do with women's rights.
17. Anne: We have searched a lot for that. Women's rights and all that stuff. We've got
18. just a lot of crap ( )
19. Teacher: Have you looked for ( ) literature?
20. Cathrine: (..) We have seen a survey or something like that.
21. Teacher: Have you tried to search for 'Burkina Faso'?
22. Anne: Yes (0.5) No.
23. Linda: We found something about Burkina Faso but it [was like facts about the country
24. Anne: [perhaps we shall try once more

This piece of interaction can be analyzed from a number of different angles, but in the context of this article the basic question is the relevance of focusing on conversational turn-taking, sequentiality and talk organization in the study of educational discourse. I find it obvious that several CA devices can be successfully applied here, for example, how the conversation begins in line 1 with a teacher's announcing question, how two students respond which in turn is followed with a new question from the teacher, then a response from a student and a succeeding explanation from the teacher, then from line 13 and the

following lines one can find a classical repair sequence, an apparent repair-acceptance etc. And this kind of analysis can be done for the whole sequence and clearly shows, for example, how conversational devices are deployed. From a CA perspective, a fairly simply structured "turn taking machinery" can be said to be deployed in this sequence in which the teacher asks questions and the students respond, sometimes with repair sequences, sometimes not. I shall argue that this is analytically valuable and relevant. Both commonsensically and conversation analytically, we can identify *project work*

*events* and *interaction* around project work assignments, and we can specify the interactional pattern in detail. We can even analyze this according to the (not CA, but related) IRE-format of educational discourse<sup>5</sup>, that is, how the discourse is organized according to the format of I(nitiation), R(espone) and E(valuation), and in this sense show how this interaction can be analyzed in its moment-to-moment sequentiality as a presumably typical, normal interaction in a middle school classroom reproducing an even more typical asymmetry of teacher-student relations.

Nevertheless, I would initially question to what extent this kind of analysis is sufficient if the research task is to analyze the discourse from a pedagogical perspective. Focusing on this task I would be interested in finding out several things, for example: What is actually the “pedagogical business” performed here? What are the participants’ concerns and goals related to this business? Is there any development of meaning making or learning, e.g., instances of ‘appropriation of meaning’<sup>6</sup>? I will not discuss this in detail here, just mention one essential point which in my view clearly would question some of the fundamental premises of CA and which at the same time raises a number of questions of relevance for research on educational discourse. This point is related to the analysis of the social interactional patterns between teacher and student in this project work. A CA based analysis does not provide us with the appropriate tools to analyze the nature of this relation because it is focusing solely on the utterances and the relation between them, not on the content of the talk, nor on the flaws, silences or absences. The repair sequence in line 13-18 is particularly interesting because, if we apply a CA approach, we may conclude that this is a

repair sequence in which the students are made aware of the teacher’s interpretation of what the video is about (women’s rights). Seemingly, there is a structurally defined intersubjective consensus on the matter: the students seem to understand what the teacher says. However, as educational researchers we are not primarily interested in the repair structure of the conversation but, for example, in what the students actually say and do about the teacher’s proposals and advice. This will tell us something about any actual intersubjective development between the interlocutors, or in that case we may also potentially talk about an instance of learning or *appropriation of meaning*. But a narrow focus on turn-taking does not provide us with clues about these processes. Instead, it may lead us to understand this as a traditional, asymmetrical teacher-oriented discourse with a focus on how the teacher deploys conversational devices in order to bring her messages home. Here is an excerpt of how the group dealt with the teacher’s proposal just minutes after the first session. The teacher has now left:

#### *Fragment 2*

1. Linda: Search [for Burkina Faso
2. Monica: [search for 'Africa's women'
3. Anne [search for Burkina Faso  
(.....)
4. Cathrine: Enter, just push Enter
5. Eva: Ok
6. Anne: Eva is really desperate (*laughs*)
7. Cathrine: 'Latest news from Burkina Faso'. (.)
8. Monica: "Click on this" (.)
9. Anne: Scroll further down
10. Cathrine: 'Women have always' bla bla bla"
11. Anne: Yes [YES hallo
12. Cathrine: ["Women in Burkina Faso""]–  
COME ON !
13. Monica: [YES YES WE HAVE GOT INTO  
SOMETHING

This fragment shows that the students did not follow the teacher’s basic advice which was to redefine their problem statement. Instead,

5 An updated, extensive discussion of the IRE-format in educational research can be found in Wells (1999)..

6 Wertsch (1985) introduced this term..



they immediately tested the teacher's suggestions for key words for Internet search, and they also hit upon something they found valuable, see line 37-39. Not until we look at this later sequence can we get any insight into the actual processes of meaning making in this project work session. The students show that they stick to their initial overall strategy and do not change their problem statement as the teacher proposes. Now we can also make more sense of the repair sequence in the first fragment: it is not about a teacher giving the students directives of how to understand the task, but rather a teacher suggesting her own interpretation of the task. The students' responses in the repair sequence are inconclusive about how they assess the teacher's ideas, actually any assessment is *absent* from the dialogue, except for their comment in line 32 where Anne says that they have searched for "women's rights" but without any success. However, their assessment becomes evident, although *implicitly*, in the next fragment where they show in practice that they do not follow the teacher's advice. The turn-taking organization does not tell us anything about this. Interestingly, by going beyond the analytic frame of turn-taking we can also learn a good deal about the social organization and power structures involved here. The students are allowed to decide themselves what to do with the teacher's proposal, indicating that in this project work we do not have the ordinary asymmetrical power structure between teacher and student. Without discussing this in detail here, a clearly relevant research question would be to analyze the importance and impact of this seemingly reversed power structure. But this would certainly go beyond the perspectives and theoretical commitments of conversation analysis.

Basically, this example illustrates a need for a broader perspective than just looking at turn-takings and the sequential organization of utterances in the study of processes of meaning making and of educational practices.

On the other hand, it also illustrates the need for a detailed interactional study in order to grasp the actual meaning making processes. In order to understand the dynamics of educational meaning making processes, it may be fruitful to take a closer look at some fundamental concepts and theoretical assumptions of discourse analysis and conversation analysis. I shall discuss these issues more systematically focusing on the notions of accountability, the concept of knowledgeability and the concept of turn-taking.

### **A critical discussion of conversation analysis as a research strategy and methodology in discourse analysis**

In the following I shall discuss some epistemological and methodological issues in the study of discourse. In doing so, I also present an outline of the most prominent traditions or directions in the field of research in discourse and communication: ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis and activity theory.

I shall concentrate my discussion on three fundamental<sup>7</sup> concepts and premises of CA: the concept of rationality as accountability, the premise of the knowledgeable actor, and the premise of how social action is structured as sequenced in talk-in-interaction.

#### *Rationality and accountability*

It is probably correct as Anthony Giddens remarks that the philosophical basis of EM (and also CA) as "an essentially ethnomethodological enterprise ... remains unelu-

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<sup>7</sup> The centrality of these concepts are made clear by many CA theorists, e.g., Sacks (1992), Schegloff (1997), Hutchby (2001).

culated" (Giddens, 1993, p. 58). There is an allegedly<sup>8</sup> strong connection between theory and method in EM and CA, and both the advantages and the limitations of this approach become more evident through a brief reconstruction and discussion of the basic theoretical concepts.

According to Garfinkel there are irreconcilable differences of interest between what he calls "constructive analysis", or orthodox sociology, and EM because the latter is confined to the descriptive study of indexical expressions in all their empirical variety. This attitude is proclaimed as one of "ethnomethodological indifference". EM and CA is essentially an anti-Cartesian and Wittgensteinian approach where "the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members' procedures for making those settings 'accountable'." Garfinkel claims that while "a model of rationality is necessary in social science for the task of deciding a definition of credible knowledge", no such "model" is needed when "coming to terms with the affairs of everyday life". (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 270) This, basically, means that action is to be treated as "rational" precisely only in so far as it is "accountable". Both Garfinkel, the conversation analysts and the discursive analysts of the 90s, underline the importance of situatedness and indexicality: "Ethnomethodological conversation analysis suggests that interaction is pervasively and inescapably indexical." (Potter, 1996, p. 24) *But*, if one is to take this seriously, this must also be the case for the CA itself. Should not also this analysis be understood as a situated, local, indexical and particularistic analysis and, therefore, only be of interest for the actors "doing ethnomethodology"? Is perhaps CA just another meaning producing context and one just as strange as the con-

8 Allegedly, because I shall argue that you might successfully apply CA techniques without subscribing fully to the theoretical foundations.

structive sociology which CA so aptly criticizes? I think not, but the lack of reflection on these matters in many CA studies should be considered a problem.<sup>9</sup> According to CA, analysts should not import their own categories, theories or claims into participants' discourse. Instead, we should focus on participant orientations. However, this does not entail that no analytic concepts will be applied. The CA analyst actually applies concepts like "adjacency pairs" and "third-turn-repair" in studying talk and in creating an ordered sense of what is going on. The epistemological status of these concepts is not at all clear. An influential ethnomethodologist, Michael Lynch, is clearly aware of these challenges and criticizes CA for its scientific and positivistic tendencies in its unreflected application of what he calls the "turn-taking machinery"<sup>10</sup> of CA. (Lynch, 1993, p. 233).

The problem of CA's own reflexivity towards its own contributions is illustrated in the recent debate between the conversational analyst Emanuel Schegloff and the discourse analyst Margaret Wetherell. Schegloff argues that:

"[Critical discourse analysis] allows students, investigators, or external observers to deploy the terms which preoccupy *them* in describing, explaining, critiquing, etc. the events and texts to which they turn their attention. (...) – there is a kind of theoretical imperialism involved here, a kind of hegemony of the intellectuals, of the literati, of the academics, of the critics whose theoretical apparatus gets to stipulate the terms by reference to which the world is to be understood – when there has already *been* a set of terms by reference to which the world was understood – by those endogenously involved in its very coming to pass." (Schegloff, 1997, p. 167)

9 This is also recognized by some CA theorists: "These arguments do, indeed, represent a serious problem for CA, the problem of how to account for its own reflexive contributions to its results". (Paul ten Have, 1990, p. ).

10 This term was not Lynch's own invention, Harvey Sacks himself introduced the notion of 'turn-taking machinery'.

Margaret Wetherell responded to the critique by pointing out that CA practices theoretical imperialism in its own way.

“(...) for Schegloff, participant orientation seems to mean only what is relevant for the participants in this particular conversational moment. Ironically, of course, it is the conversation analyst in selecting for analysis part of a conversation or continuing interaction who defines this relevance for the participants. In restricting the analyst’s gaze to this fragment, previous conversations, even previous turns in the same continuing conversation, become irrelevant for the analyst but also, by dictate, for the participants. We don’t seem to have escaped, therefore, from the imposition of theorists’ categories and concerns.” (Wetherell, 1998, p. 403)

It could be argued that although Wetherell is correct that CA analysts have not managed to escape from the imposition of theorists’ categories and “constructive sociology” approaches, Schegloff is also right in insisting on the importance of focusing on the perspective of the participants, their concerns and orientations reflected through their talk-in-interaction. Nevertheless, the idea of the epistemological primacy of accountability seems to haunt CA when it tries to explicate its own premises. There is hardly any doubt that Schegloff’s “purely technical” analysis is more than just that: he is applying theoretical concepts derived from a kind of “constructive” and traditional research process rooted in many years of “doing conversation analysis.”

But in my view this cannot be considered a serious problem in the evaluation of CA as a research strategy. As the CA analyst Paul ten Have puts it:

“Practitioners of CA are less given to philosophical reflection than to hard work.... The solution of CA’s basic problems, which stem from the way it has developed from its basic problematic by way of a strong empirical commitment, is to be found in those same practices.” (ten Have, 1990, p. 27)

This statement is perhaps not assuring from a purist philosophical or logical point of view, but in my view this “philosophical indifference” cannot be considered an important problem for CA as a methodological strategy. These problems would occur if the (constructive!) idea of rationality as accountability is applied to practical research in an empiricist way which e.g. excluded obviously important, but not easily accountable empirical material, e.g. visible gestures, gaze and non-vocal communication. Fortunately, it seems that many CA-analysts do not exclude these other forms of communicational modes and some of the most interesting CA based studies have focused on non-vocal phenomena (Goodwin, 1981; Heath, 1986).

Although the basic concepts of rationality in EM and CA may appear unelucidated, there also are some other concepts which are considered more important by the CA theorists, and I shall discuss these in the following: the premise of the knowledgeable actor and the premise of the fundamental importance of analysis of turn-taking and sequential organization of talk.

#### *The premise of the knowledgeable actor*

Conversation analysts, as well as ethnomethodologists, frequently claim that one of the strengths of their approach is that they focus on “how participants themselves produce and interpret each other’s actions” (Pomerantz, 1984, pp. 360-1). Conversation analysts do not seek to explain interaction in terms of sociological structures, which lie ‘behind the backs of the participants’ (Heritage, 1984; Boden, 1994). Instead, they observe how participants make sense of, and account for, the social world. In this respect, CA assumes that “human beings are knowledgeable agents in the production (and reproduction) of their lives and their history” (Boden, 1994, p. 13). This assumption of knowledgeability forms the core of the eth-

nomethodological enterprise: “By giving back to social agents their knowledgeable ability of their own social actions, it was then possible to sit back and observe the structuring quality of the world as it happens” (ibid., p. 74).

As I have underlined in this paper, an extremely valuable virtue of CA is that analysts are bidden to take seriously what people actually say and do, rather than assume that actors are simply re-enacting given roles within a hypothetical social structure. On the other hand, the assumption of the actor’s transparent knowledgeable ability may also cause analytic problems if understood in an empiricist way. As Sfard and Kieran show in a recent study of students’ talk while working with mathematics (2001, p. 63), studying talk-in-interaction may be a deceptive endeavor. A student does reasonably well on final tests, but this result is contrary to what can be expected from the detailed analysis of the boy’s mathematical activities in the daily class room. The videotaped analysis of the boy’s daily mathematics lessons shows hardly any sign of mathematical reasoning from this boy, according to the researcher’s well documented report. What becomes clear is that the student’s achievement in the institutional setting seems to reflect that the students find school mathematics uninteresting and/or boring. What he has learned, he has probably learned from his father outside school, in the evenings or weekends.

Obviously, as also my initial example shows, one cannot get a good impression of the students’ knowledgeable ability or lack of the same by only studying the organization and sequentiality of their talk. This clearly calls for a broadening of the CA framework in the direction of the critical discourse analysis approach.

It is important for the analyst to look for instances of not only lack of knowledge, but also *how repression of knowledgeable ability* might be accomplished. It could be argued

that it is possible to use the (albeit broadened) framework of CA in order to analyze such questions without applying more traditional speculative interpretations and “grand theorizing” of what “might have happened” without any analysis of the actual discourse. Billig (1997) shows how such mechanisms as repression and absences can be observed and traced back to actual talk in interaction, but only if we abandon the analytic framework of conversational turn-taking.

#### *The turn-taking as the focus of social action research*

Traditional CA’s problem with how to cope with unspoken communication and its meaning is illustrated even more vividly when looking more closely at another basic feature of CA, turn-taking and the sequenced structuring of action. The observable speaking turn constitutes the basic unit of analysis. It may seem that CA here demonstrates some almost empiricist ideas.<sup>11</sup> Several ethnomethodologists have criticized CA in this point (see e.g. Lynch, 1993).

According to Boden, “turn-taking and the sequenced structuring of action” lie “at the heart” of social interaction ((1994, p. 63). The organizational pattern is presumed to be discoverable through understanding the sequential constraints on speakers. Drew claims that ‘turns’ in conversation are treated “as the product of the sequential organization of talk” (1995, p. 70). The organization is presumed to be present in the accounts which

11 Pierre Bourdieu (1992) also underlines EM and CA’s problem of reflexivity about its own project: “In their struggle against the statistical positivism they (i.e. the ethnomethodologists) seem to accept some of the prerequisites of their opponents. Facts against facts, video recordings against statistics....Those who are satisfied with doing recordings do not ask about the problems of editing/cutting, and accept what has been constructed in advance, and this does not necessarily comprise the principles of their own interpretation.” (*my translation, I.S*)

speakers themselves give. Thus, the analyst seeks to note conversational devices, which “are demonstrably or observably relevant to the participants themselves” (ibid., p. 76; emphasis in the original). By so doing, analysts hope to discover the “stable and organized properties of conversational structures” (ibid., p. 76).

I think that silence can be studied by applying ethnomethodological methods. But more traditional, so-called “canonical CA”<sup>12</sup> seems unable to do that in a satisfactory way. The well-known ethnomethodologist Jeff Coulter uses this example in a discussion on the email list EthnoOnline in 2000:

A: What are you hiding for me?

B: Nothing

Coulter points out that these utterances may be analyzed in terms of the adjacency pair ‘question-answer’, but this would miss the point in the talk that what was “being done in the talk, by the talk, was the making of an accusation and the rebuttal, the denial, of that accusation.” (Coulter, unpubl., cited in Crabtree, 2000)

The central focus on turn-takings as “atoms” in the CA framework raises several problems of a methodological character which are directly relevant to my initial problem of how to account for absences and unspoken utterances.

First, the focus on the coherent and stable organization of conversational structures actually excludes absences. The analyst’s interest is directed towards the observable utterances and how these are structured in a coherent manner. As Michael Billig formulates it:

“What was, and what will be spoken, provide the means for understanding the function and meaning of what is said. In this respect, the analysts put themselves in the same position as the participants. What this means is that analysts search for the connections between utterances which are present in the conversation. What is absent from the conversation tends to be absent from the analysis.” (Billig, 1997, p. 147)

Second, a presumption of the actor’s knowledgeability in turn-takings and focus on the presence of the utterances may lead to serious flaws in the interpretation of the actual communication. As Derek Edwards demonstrates in a case study from a conversation in a classroom, the participants’ “meaning” in a sequence of dialogue may be misunderstood unless a broader argumentative context is taken into consideration. (Edwards, 1993) What some pupils say in one sequence should be understood in the context of previous discourses. This is actually no argument against the application of CA because a detailed account of the communication is necessary in order to depict the actual misunderstandings. But it is an argument for the importance of a broader unit of analysis than the individual sets of speaking turns.

Third, the focus on speaking turns and sequential organization is also said (e.g. by proponents of activity theory, see for example Nardi, 1996) to imply that analysis of more persistent social structures that span speaking turns (or sequences of these) are not relevant units of analysis for traditional CA and, therefore, illustrate the limited value of CA. To some extent this may be a relevant critique for some CA studies, but one could also argue that CA inspired analysis may be very valuable and perhaps a necessary tool in securing that an understanding of these “structures” is built on empirical analysis of the actual interaction, situated in the practices of the people concerned.

12 A term frequently used in the discussion on the Ethno Hotline in 2000, also by CA analysts like Paul ten Have.



## Activity theory – an alternative to conversation analysis?

In a recent paper (Engeström, 1999), a leading proponent of activity theory, intervenes in the discussion between Schegloff and Wetherell and presents activity theory as a “third alternative” between more traditional CA and the broader (often Foucauldian) critical discourse analysis. The paper is interesting not primarily because, in my view, it substantiates some of my own critical evaluation of CA, but because the alternative proposed illustrates some of the problems of more traditional, abstract theorizing in the social sciences that Schegloff and others have criticized.

Inspired by Soviet psychologists (Vygotsky and Leont’ev, in particular) and ideas from (Marxist) dialectical materialism, activity theory argues that what organizes social life into meaningful units is practical object-oriented activity, which may also be called productive activity, understood in a broad sense (Leont’ev, 1978; Cole, 1996). As Engeström formulates this: “Practical activities have this strong organizing potential due to their objects. Objects should not be confused with goals. Goals are primarily conscious, relatively short-lived and finite aims of individual actions. The object is an enduring, constantly reproduced purpose of a collective activity system that motivates and defines the horizon of possible goals and actions.” (Engeström, 1999, p. 4).

In Leont’ev’s (1981) account, activity systems arise with the division of labor. He uses the example of a tribal hunt. When the object of the hunt is sufficiently demanding, members of the tribe divide the labor: some chase the game away, while others wait in ambush and kill it. Taken in isolation, the action of chasing away the game makes no sense. Seen against the background of the collective activity system and its division of labor, the action is perfectly sensible. (Engeström, 1999)

In the following I will briefly discuss some specific issues concerning activity theory’s (in Engeström’s interpretation in the article) potential as an alternative methodological approach to EM and CA. I do not attempt to present an overall evaluation of activity theory, but focus on issues directly relevant to the discussion in this paper.

First, for activity theory, the basic unit of analysis is “the situated activity system” which is considered to be the reasonable middle ground between the “artificially isolated fragment of discourse and the global argumentative social fabric.” (Engeström, 1999, p. 6) Activity theory is, therefore, understandably critical towards what is called the “insistence on discourse as a privileged and more or less self-sufficient modality of social conduct and interaction. This insistence is largely taken for granted and shared by both conversation analysts and critical discourse analysts”. (Engeström, 1999) It is argued that “organizations are not reducible to small fragments of discourse; they carry histories and operate as meeting grounds of multiple argumentative threads.” In line with my previous discussion concerning CA, I agree that this critique seems relevant for several CA inspired studies. I would argue that it seems to be a sound methodological strategy to start with the most accessible aspects of what is done in conversations, the speaking of words, and pursue the analysis of less easily isolatable ones later when one has learned more about the whole organization through the first. Thus starting with the verbal aspects is not a principled choice, but a practical one. As mentioned already, a growing collection of CA studies of non-vocal phenomena shows that these may very well be included in the CA framework.

Second, activity theory argues for not only asking retrospectively why an action or an utterance occurred, but also for asking, “What dynamics and possibilities of change and development are involved in the action?” In ap-

plying theoretical tools<sup>13</sup> developed in this tradition, activity theory wants to present a supplementary perspective in focusing on the conditions and the development of more persistent social structures and not only focusing on the micro-sociological objects of speaking turns. It could be argued that it would also be possible to integrate this focus on conditions for change in a broader discourse analytic framework, albeit not without underlining that such “conditions for change” should be observable or at least traceable in the actual discourse.

Third, an important virtue of activity theory and its broader perspective on social action is the insistence on analyzing action related to physical and mental activities, including the use of artifacts and technologies as tools. According to this perspective, different kinds of tools, of intellectual/linguistic as well as physical tools, are seen as *mediators* between the actor and the world. When studying the use of computers in classrooms, the focus will be on analyzing these artifacts as parts of social practices, not as isolated technologies *per se*. This is a view which is underlined by activity theorists and which constitutes one of the most important differences to the more traditional cognitivist view of thinking and rationality. (Säljö, 2000)

Fourth, Engeström argues for the importance of “intermediate theoretical tools between the specific data and the general model of an activity system.” (Engeström, 1999, p. 10) This differs from the EM/CA perspective. Because EM and CA rejects the whole idea of a “general model”, there is no need for intermediating tools; it is just another form of “theoretical imperialism” which means to “turn lived experiences and embod-

13 A key concept is “the zone of proximal development” which may be understood as “spaces for potential radical transformation, achievable through resolving and transcending its contradictions” (Vygotsky, 1978).

ied practices into general lexicons and associated models.” (Suchman, 2000, p. 13).

Engeström argues for the application of specific, conceptual, intermediate tools derived from activity theory research. If CA may sometimes be “abstract empiricist”, a problem with some of Engeström’s concepts and complex models of activity systems seems to be that they tend to be what Richard Merton (1957) called “grand theorizing” An example is the concept “contradiction” which is introduced by Engeström as an intermediate theoretical tools. Contradiction is described as “the idea of contradictions as the driving force of change and development in human organizations”. (Engeström, 1999, p. 12) It is also said that “a contradiction is a historically accumulated dynamic tension between opposing forces in an activity system.” (ibid., p. 10)<sup>14</sup> This seems to be quite close to what Karl Popper (1986) called “historicist” explanations in his critique of Marxist-inspired ideas of “objective laws of dialectics” and so-called inevitable “laws of history”. It is not so well-known that this seems also to be exactly the kind of abstract Marxism that Lev Vygotsky once warned against:

“The *direct* application of the theory of *dialectical materialism* to the problems of natural science and in particular to the group of biological sciences or psychology *is impossible*, just as it *is impossible to apply* it directly to history and sociology. In Russia it is thought that the problem of “psychology and Marxism” can be reduced to creating a psychology which is up to Marxism, but in reality

14 This interpretation of the universality of “contradiction” stems from Friedrich Engels’ conceptualization in his infamous “dialectical laws”. According to Engels and the tradition of dialectical materialism, “contradictions” are universal law-like mechanisms, not intermediate concepts between “laws” and “descriptions” (or between “social structures” and “discourse”). Arguably, this way of applying Hegelian concepts was not central in Marx’ own writings; it is also clear that Marx occasionally warned against it (Elster, 1985, p. 43).



it is far more complex. Like history, sociology is in need of the intermediate *special theory* of historical materialism which explains the *concrete* meaning, for the given group of phenomena, of the abstract laws of dialectical materialism. (.....) Dialectical materialism is a most abstract science. The direct application of dialectical materialism to the biological sciences and psychology, as is common nowadays, does not go beyond the formal logical, scholastic, verbal subsumption of particular phenomena, whose internal sense and relation is unknown, under general, abstract, *universal* categories. At *best* this leads to an accumulation of *examples* and illustrations.” (Vygotsky, 1997, emphasis in the original)

Moreover, any more clear or detailed definition or operationalization is not presented in Engeström’s line of reasoning. The concept of “contradiction” is actually not used in the analysis as an intermediate tool (as Vygotsky recommends in his defense of “intermediate special theory of historical materialism which explains the concrete meaning...”), but only as a tentative hypothesis of what the basic forces behind the actual interaction are, actually expressing – in philosophical terms – a clearly realist (or essentialist) approach devoted to “find out about the hidden workings of social existence.” (Smith, 1998, p 319) An ethnomethodologist would say (and I would agree) that this means to construct theories “behind the back of the participants.” One problem with this conceptualization of “contradiction” is that it seems to come close to what Merton (1957) called “*post factum* interpretations” which are frequently so flexible, vague, or open that they can “account” for almost any data. More importantly, instead of mediating between “discourse” and “social structure” and contribute to a better understanding of situated practices, (for example in a classroom) this kind of abstract conceptualization may actually be a hindrance in the research process and lead to an unfortunate focus on “objective”, hypothetical, unobservable, but law-like mechanisms, operating “behind the back” of the ac-

tors. Recent evaluations of activity theory indicate that activity theory may seem attractive to many because it provides a general framework for the understanding of socio-cultural activities, but that it fails to offer significant insights into “the fine-grained aspects of interaction between individuals within this setting.” (Issroff and Scanlon, 2001) A possible explanation for this may be the very focus in recent activity theory on establishing general, “multi-level” models and historicist explanations<sup>15</sup> at the expense of the more local, emerging, detailed moment-to-moment analysis recommended by ethnomethodology and different kinds of discourse analysts.

## Conclusion and some methodological consequences

The conclusion must be that in the study of situated educational activities we must avoid not only the empiricist pitfalls of what I have called “canonical CA”, but also the historicist abstractions of more traditional social theory in its invoking of different kinds of “grand theorizing” categorizations. There is no such thing as a “pure reality” which may be objectively observed and depicted by the analyst. Of course, the CA analyst is not only doing “technical analysis”. As Wetherell and others have argued, the analyst cannot escape from the fact that he will always apply some kind of categories or theoretical presuppositions in the analysis. The crucial question then becomes what kind of theories and cate-

15 Activity theory often recommends this kind of reasoning invoking “socio-historical dimensions”, for example in the application of the abstract notion of “division of labour” as a central explanatory idea even in analysis of educational discourse in classrooms (see e.g. Wertsch, 1985; Engeström, 1995). I think this is a blind alley. Appeals to institutional structures like division of labour simply cannot explain the mechanisms of meaning making and appropriation of meaning, or the important processes of decontextualization of concepts.



gories, and on what level of abstraction, may be appropriate in the study of educational talk and meaning making processes, which is our case here. I shall discuss this very briefly by underscoring a couple of points. First, in the discussion of some texts by activity theorists I have already argued against the ideas of invoking general philosophical or historicist categories like “the law of contradiction” or “division of labor” in the study of educational meaning making. I have argued that you simply cannot understand, for example, the processes of educational decontextualization and conceptualization on the basis of an analysis of how labor is socially distributed. (Williams, 1998)

Secondly, in line with the ethnomethodologically inspired critique of CA, I would argue that it is important for further research to address what Harold Garfinkel has called the problem of the “the missing whatness” in the traditional social sciences. It seems to be a fundamental problem with the “turn taking machinery” of CA that it also often, in its own peculiar way, tends to study social interaction as formalizable patterns of the sequential organization of talk instead of displaying *the participants’* own categories and orientations. Paying attention to the “missing whatness” requires a methodological strategy that is much closer to how, for example, educational work is produced and made recognizable as the work that it is for participants. This is illustrated by the empirical examples in this article which underscore the need for detailed analysis not only or primarily of conversational turn taking but of the actual, pedagogical business performed. I think Garfinkel’s “unique adequacy requirement principle” is particularly relevant here:

“In its weak use the unique adequacy requirement of methods is identical with the requirement of methods for the analyst to recognize, or identify, or follow the development of, or describe phe-

nomenon of order in local production of coherent detail. The analyst must be vulgarly competent in the local production and reflexively natural accountability of the phenomenon of order he is ‘studying’”. (Garfinkel and Wieder, 1992, p. 197)

This means that the analyst should focus on displaying the participants’ competence and actions in their everyday activities as well as their lack of knowledge or how knowledgeability may be repressed. The analyst must also understand the activities he/she is studying. In the study of project work in schools, it should be required that the analyst understands the fundamental ideas, practices, methods and implementations of this kind of pedagogical activities. Of course, this means studying the actual interaction very closely, but it also means that the analyst knows what may be relevant about the tasks and the broader social and educational context of the activity. It follows from this that no special methodological apparatus is required or defined a priori: the actual methods must be developed and adjusted in accordance with the unique adequacy requirement principle. Analysts should also elucidate their own theoretical, analytical points of departure. The categories and theories should be developed inductively, grounded in the social interaction of the participants and their activities; not only their defined goals, tasks and knowledge, but also their silences, absences and how their knowledgeability may be repressed.

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