

Introduction

Membership Categorisation Analysis. Technologies of social action



1. Introduction

The origin of this special issue was a panel organised at the International Institute of Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis (IIEMCA) on Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA), held at Kolding in Denmark in 2015. The panel, in memory of Stephen Hester who died in 2014, brought together a number of researchers to discuss the current state of the field and present new directions in research in MCA. Building on the pioneering work of Harvey Sacks and the later work of Hester and others the special issue highlights the contemporary development of MCA as a rigorous empirical approach to the study of situated identity within the flow of social interaction. The papers, placed at the intersection between pragmatics and sociology in examining multiple sequentially organised layers of category work, examine the organisation of social knowledge and knowledge entitlement, of moral ordering and the deployment of social norms, but also new and emergent areas of interest around spatial and embodied social action within the frame of technology and technologies of interaction.

The interface between technology and talk has always been understood as a multi-faceted relation. Technology in the guise of portable tape recorders was pivotal in the development of conversation analysis and the study of talk while the increasingly ubiquitous recording devices and the explosion in communicative practices and media in the digital age has generated new domains for the study of talk-in-interaction and new ways for recording and approaching these practices as 'data'. At the same time, although not an uncontroversial analogy, talk and interaction can be understood to exhibit technological characteristics; a ubiquitous methodological apparatus through which social life is both organised and accomplished. The ethnomethodological paradigm, including CA and MCA, as a 'primitive natural science' (Sacks, 1995; Lynch and Bogen, 1994), embraced both naturalism and technical descriptions in order to render visible the highly organised and granular features of this shared 'technological' apparatus.

2. MCA and pragmatics

Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) has developed and expanded as a rigorous approach, particularly as applied to the study of social organisation and social identity through its focus on social-knowledge-in-action (Housley and Fitzgerald, 2015). Based on the original work of Sacks (1974, 1995), MCA has become recognised as a rigorous empirical form of qualitative analysis that has proven remarkably adept and analytically valuable in recovering and examining the social cultural resources people use in their everyday interactions and cultural encounters. While based in Sacks' original categorisation work in the 1960s it was the publication of Hester and Eglin's (1997) collection *Culture in Action* 20 years ago that heralded the renewed interest and re-examination of membership categorisation practices and a growing cumulative body of analysis and methodological development which now underpins contemporary MCA research (Housley and Fitzgerald, 2002; Fitzgerald and Housley, 2015). This engagement and development of Sacks' ideas has also seen MCA expand beyond the original sociological focus to become a recognised interdisciplinary approach for studying the locally organised practices of social knowledge-in-action in linguistics, psychology, communication, media studies, and anthropology.

Sacks' Categorisation Analysis and Membership Categorisation Analysis has a rich tradition within pragmatics and has been present in the *Journal of Pragmatics* since the early beginning with the paper [Rod Watson](#) looking at Black American Speech published in 1977. Since then there has been a steadily increasing presence of the approach applied as a single method of analysis, alongside CA or as a component of a methodological approach. Topics covered include being a 'foreigner' ([Fukuda, 2017](#)), political talk radio ([Dori-Hacohen, 2012](#)), social research interviews ([Myers and Lampropoulou, 2012](#)), family meal times ([Butler and Fitzgerald, 2010](#)), face ([Samra-Fredericks, 2010](#); [Ruhi, 2010](#)), and business calls ([Hougaard, 2008](#)) to name a few. Moreover the *Journal of Pragmatics* has been pivotal to the increased engagement of MCA and pragmatics through the publication of a key paper by [Schegloff \(2007\)](#) in which he critically discusses Sacks' category work alongside MCA. In this paper Schegloff offers some critical comments on the development of MCA and its relation to both Sacks and the potential for what he terms analytic promiscuity, where the analyst imposes their own understanding onto the data rather than demonstrating members orientations. While the critique may serve as a caution for many approaches when badly executed, including Conversation Analysis, for MCA this spurred a critical examination of the core methodological engagement between data and analysis which is now threaded through the approach ([Carlin, 2009](#); [Stokoe, 2012](#); [Fitzgerald, 2012](#); [Fitzgerald and Rintel, 2013](#)), underpinning the papers in this special issue and directly addressed in the first paper by Francis and Hester.

3. Technologies of social action

In line with Ethnomethodology, Sacks' work and MCA has always encompassed a broadly multi-modal and ethnographic disposition towards data, drawing on a range of available data including texts such as newspaper headlines and stories, adverts, children's drawings as well as overheard and recorded spoken interaction and video. In recent years high quality video recordings have become widely available which has allowed this form of data to become an increasingly important mode of data, and brought about a subsequent widening of the analytic scope for the exploration of the ethnomethods of interaction and category work through physical and embodied action. The theoretical focus of such research draws its operative focus from Sacks' viewer's maxim ([Sacks, 1995](#); [Hester and Francis, 2004](#); [Paoletti, 1998](#)) to explore how and in what ways visible action and embodiment are reflexively bound up with social orderliness. Adding to this is the proliferation of easily accessible social media data and other forms of online interactional work that further opens up the possibilities for examining multiple layers of members category work. Questions regarding the primacy or hierarchy of these layers in relation to each other is beyond the scope of this introduction, however, we suggest the answer to that question lies in the careful analysis and study of the situated and local organisation of these matters as member's phenomena.

While the concern with embodied action provides further analytic insight into categorical implicature, information structures, and, of course, performativity, MCA is also turning towards issues of technology and communication. Here the use of technology as, and as part of, interaction has begun to explore a range of categorical issues, from platform-specific categories and technologising of interaction itself, through to ways in which the constraints and affordances of media have revealed more general categorical features of interaction that had been difficult to see in face-to-face encounters ([Rintel, 2015](#)).

As these new forms of data and new phenomena become common this also raises new sets of issues around current methodologies and forms of analysis. Given the proliferation of multi-channel data capture, social media and computer mediated interaction it is also critical to consider how fit for purpose the current suite of methodological approaches might be. For example, is it possible simply to apply methodological techniques from an approach to the new forms of data or should current methods be reexamined and tested in order to see if they are fit for purpose albeit within the situated parameters of the local production of social order? This on going reflexive process resonates with both the early work of Ethnomethodology, Conversation Analysis and Pragmatics where the innovative approach to data using naturally occurring interaction was facilitated by the ability to tape record action and conversation and so play it back repeatedly in order that others are able to examine the data and the analytic claims made from the data. It is a testament to CA's insistence of the primacy of naturally occurring data, and through this the rigour of analysis more generally, that the approach has developed and achieved the major position in the field it now holds. However if we are able to take a step back a bit to where this began, Sacks lectures provide an insight into both his use of technology and his central concern for the data.

So I started playing around with tape recorded conversations, for the single virtue that I could replay them; that I could type them out somewhat, and study them extendedly, who knew how long it might take. And that was a good enough record of what happened, to some extent. Other things, to be sure, happened. But at least that happened. It wasn't from any large interest in language, or from some theoretical formulation of what should be studied, but simply by virtue that; I could get my hands on it, and look at what I had studied, and make of it what they could, if they wanted to be able to disagree with me.

([Sacks, 1995](#), vol. 1, 622)

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