Stephen Hester on the problem of culturalism

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Abstract

At his death in April 2014, Stephen Hester left behind an unfinished manuscript of a book, entitled 'Descriptions of Deviance'. In this book he takes an MCA approach to examining how categorial formulations of deviance are interactionally constructed and negotiated in talk in educational settings. The data comprise transcriptions of pupil review meetings involving teachers and educational psychologists in an education authority in Northern England. In analysing this data, and consistent with the approach he had championed throughout his career, Hester emphasises the occasionality of categorial formulations. Recognising that this emphasis is not unproblematic and requires careful consideration, before turning to the data he discusses the problem of 'culturalism'. He argues that Sacks' distinction between 'occasioned' and 'natural' category devices does not lend support to the culturalist view of category use. Furthermore, while Schegloff's cautions concerning the methodological pitfalls of MCA are serious and well made, the analysis of categorial data, especially texts, need not fall into the trap of 'culturalism'.

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1. Introduction

Membership categorisation analysis was a central focus of Stephen Hester's work, throughout his career. Hester considered himself an ethnomethodologist who was committed to the enterprise of revealing the unexamined ways in which the social activities that comprise the everyday commonsense world are actually accomplished in specific cases. He was hugely influenced and inspired by Harvey Sacks. He spent his academic career carefully reading Sacks' lectures in order to mine what he called 'powerful resources for the analysis of the everyday commonsense world as it was accomplished by members of society'. Hester took the view, from his earliest work to his latest, that membership catorization was an occasioned matter, engaged in by society's members for their situated purposes. In this paper, which presents thoughts that Hester was working on right up until his untimely death, we consider the problem of 'culturalism' in MCA and illustrate, through discussion of data which he was working on, the thoroughly contextual approach that he took in his analysis.

The term 'membership categorization analysis', was first proposed by Eglin and Hester (1992) as a replacement for 'MCD analysis' (the term under whose rubric the distinctive categorial dimension of social life had been analysed during the 1970s and 1980s).[1] The reasons for this proposal were not merely aesthetic, nor were they name-changing for its own sake, they were that 'MCD analysis' privileged the analysis of membership categorization devices, and whilst this privileging acknowledged the originality of Sacks' notion of category collections, it obscured the fact that whilst

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[1] For a review of the work conducted under the auspices of 'MCD analysis', see Eglin and Hester (1992).

membership categories always belong to some collection and whilst their intelligibility depends crucially on their membership in a collection, it is also equally the case that category collections are dependent for their intelligibility upon which categories they collect together. If neither collections nor categories are intelligible without the other, then a term which recognised this fact seemed appropriate to say the least, hence the term 'membership categorization analysis' as a term which covered the full range of categorization practices without giving priority to any particular concept or practice. Hester and Eglin (1997) described the scope, range and focus of membership categorization analysis as follows:

> The use of membership categories, membership categorization devices and category predicates by members, conceptualized as lay and professional social analysts, in accomplishing (the sociology of) 'naturally occurring ordinary activities.' MCA directs attention to the locally used, invoked and organized 'presumed common-sense knowledge of social structures' which members are oriented to in the conduct of their everyday affairs, including professional sociological inquiry itself... 'Analysis,' in 'membership categorisation analysis,' refers both to members' use of categories, devices and predicates, that is to say these and other categorial objects, and to professional ethnomethodological studies of such use.

2. Membership categorization analysis as culture in action

In a partial critique of Sacks, Hester and Eglin (1997) drew attention to a tendency towards cultural decontextualisation in some of Sacks' remarks, particularly about membership categorisation devices. With respect to the occasional or situated character of membership categorization practices, it was emphasised by Hester (1994) and Hester and Eglin (1997) that MCA takes a particular stance towards 'culture'. The 'machinery' of MCA – category collections, membership categories, category predicates, etc. – can be thought of as one aspect of a society's culture but in the sense of 'culture-in-action' or as improvisational cultural practices rather than as a body of decontextualized knowledge, practice and convention. One way to appreciate the occasionality of the machinery is to recognise the 'branching texture' of collections and categories in their use. A category can become a collection, and vice versa. Categories may belong in collections but they may then also be collections themselves, that is, provide for a new 'branch' of categories. It is important to recognise that this is not just an abstract formulation of the apparatus; the features of categories and collections are to be found in their use in communication (Hester and Hester, 2012). Whether something is being used this time as a category or a collection is an empirical matter. Furthermore, it may well be that certain consequential matters and actions turn on whether it is being used in one way or the other, that is, as either a category or a collection.

Sacks' sometime tendency to reify membership categorisation devices and membership categories is evident in certain stipulative statements and definitive comments on the categories making up a categorisation device. For example, he states that:

> 'An instance of a categorisation device is the one called 'sex'; its collection is the two categories (male, female)'.[2] Similarly, 'while many devices... are not Pn-adequate ones, it is perfectly obvious that there are at least two Pn-adequate devices that Members do have available to them and do use. For example, there are the devices whose collections are (1) sex (male, female), and (2) age (young, old). There are of course others.'[3]

With respect to the device 'family', Sacks states:

> ..let me observe that 'baby' and 'mommy' can be seen to be categories from one collection: the collection whose device is called 'family' and which consists of such categories as ('baby', 'mommy', 'daddy'...) where by '...' we mean that there are others, but not any others, e.g. 'shortstop'.[4]

In these extracts, it is possible to infer that Sacks is saying that the categories making up the sex device are male and female, and that the device family consists of the categories baby, mommy, daddy, etc. Furthermore, Sacks appears to exclude from these collections other possible categories. In this stipulative conception, the meaning of the collections 'sex' and 'family' appear to be offered in some pre-given and decontextualised sense; the constituent categories of these devices appears to have been settled in a once-and-for-all manner.[5] However, to take this view is to fail to appreciate that MCA is an occasioned or situated activity in a much deeper sense. In Hester's view there is ample evidence in Sacks's writings to show that he was very aware of the occassionality of category use. In this regard, it is useful to recall that Sacks (1992: April 17th 1968) drew a distinction between 'occasioned' and 'natural' collections of categories in one of his

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[2] Sacks, H. 1974, op.cit., p. 219.
[3] Sacks, H. 1974, op.cit., 33.
[4] Sacks, H. 1974, op.cit. p. 219.
[5] For a critique of this 'once-and-for-all' conception of decontextualised meanings, see Coulter (1971).