Spontaneous or controlled: Overall structural organization of political phone-ins in two countries and their relations to societal norms

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Abstract

This study describes the differing overall structural organization of political radio phone-in interactions in Israel and the USA. The American phone-in is highly organized, tightly controlled by the host, who knows and introduces the caller at the opening, and closes the interaction unilaterally. In the Israeli phone-in, the opening resembles the mundane phone call: the call-taker acts as if he responds to a summons, there are greeting sequences, and the caller has the task of self-identification, since hosts do not know with whom they talk. Closings in Israel are negotiated and include pre-closings and closing sequences. Unlike the US structure, the Israeli structure promotes non-hierarchical institutional relations between participants, akin to mundane relations, often taken as relations between equals. The conclusion connects the overall structural organizations with the communication patterns in each society, suggesting phone-ins are one site that resonates and recreates societal norms.
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1. Introduction

Garfinkel (1963) suggested that the game tic-tac-toe provides a vehicle for demonstrating norms – their creation, the way people follow them, and their role in making sense of the world. Repeating Garfinkel's experiment several times in the contemporary context with students, I found its familiar layout (crossing two horizontal and vertical lines) indeed creates predictable actions from students. Granted, in a decidedly digital-age perception, one student recently did not play, as he saw the layout as a Twitter hash tag (!). But the vast majority has understood the layout immediately as a tic-tac-toe game. I have found this recognition happens in both Israeli culture and that used by Garfinkel, i.e., the USA culture.

Beyond basic game recognition, however, things change. In Garfinkel's experiment, he had the students alter the rules by shifting the first X and then placing an O. Playing with (or against) American students, I have usually received responses similar to Garfinkel's to this altered game plan. Although students have rarely expressed anger (my status as the professor no doubt playing a role here), I have often observed puzzlement, as students have first frozen, and then labored to understand this entertainment become social predicament. They have found it hard to accept my changing of

the rules, at times calling me ''a cheater.'' Where I usually have won or gotten into a tie when playing against American students, I have found no such advantage with Israelis. Their typical responses have been ones Garfinkel found to be least common in his study—amusement and fast adaptability to the playability of the altered norm. In the end, I tend to lose tic-tac-toe games when playing against Israeli students.

The application of Garfinkel's experiment in these two cultures helps to introduce various findings discussed below. To begin with, these cultures share a basic knowledge about the tic-tac-toe game. The two vertical lines crossing two horizontal lines are known in both cultures to be a specific game encapsulating a specific set of norms, put into practice immediately in the first move, the placing of the X. Yet, reflecting the influence of norms on behavior in a given cultural context, the playability of the game in relation to norm changes is not shared. American society, as demonstrated in the experiment, has somewhat rigid norms. The dissonance players in the American context had with the changes in the norms of the game suggests rigid societal norms. In other words, the cultural code (Philipsen, 1997) is of respecting the rules and having social force behind norms. By contrast in Israel, quick adaptation to breaking norms suggests a society where norms are taken to be open to negotiation and spontaneity is a social premise. This relation to norms, the playability of them and having them as a first step in negotiations of acceptable social action is not unique to tic-tac-toe. Similar relations to norms were described in the political level as the ''illegalism'' of Israeli politics (Sprinzak, 1993) and Katriel demonstrated that the Dugri discourse was based on similar values (cf. Katriel, 1986).

The inter-cultural application of the tic-tac-toe experiment may be used to demonstrate that some structures may be universal, yet their particulars may differ between cultures. My goal in the remainder of this paper is to discuss this tension between universal structures and cultural particularities with regard to one specific genre, public affair or political radio phone-ins (other genres have different structures even in Israel, cf. Katriel, 2004). By examining the overall structural organizations of radio phone-ins in Israel and the USA, I argue that the phone-in is affected by, and recreates, societal norms. By doing this, I will point to the normative forces, or lack there off, which can be found in the speech codes (Philipsen, 1997) created in similar genres of radio production. Hence, I juxtapose the Conversation Analytic and Ethnomethodological way of analyzing talk (cf. Heritage, 1984) with that of the Ethnography of Communication (cf. Philipsen, 1997) in comparing the Israeli and American Culture. After briefly presenting the tension between universality and particularity in the history of Conversation Analysis (CA henceforth), I present the overall structural organization (OSO) of current affairs phone-ins in the US and that in Israel. The conclusion relates these structures with their societal norms.

2. Conversation Analysis between Universalism and Culturalism

Norms are not ''out there,'' as Garfinkel has suggested (1967). Rather, norms are created, rearticulated, and embedded in every social action participants take. This position seems universal, yet, Goffman, the other fountainhead influencing Conversation Analysis (cf. Levinson, 2012), stressed more than once that his observations of public behavior were by and large descriptions of American norms. This tension, between the universal and the particular, continues in Sacks's work. In various places in his lectures (1992) he stresses the specificity of his discussions to American society and its norms. Explorations of this issue have been taken up in particular contexts in CA and comparative CA. Sidnell (2007), reviewing comparative findings of CA, describes three major mechanisms of CA – personal reference, turn taking, and the repair system – as universal elements having cultural specificity. Still, claims for the universal power of CA were proposed in a recent comparative study: Stivers et al. (2009) argued for the universal power of the turn-taking rule – ''minimal gap minimal overlap.'' In a comparative study, they found that this rule stood with almost minimal departures, smaller than one standard deviation, across 10 languages they studied. Stivers and her colleagues bring evidence demonstrating the power of what can now be called Comparative Conversation Analysis.

In his comprehensive discussion of comparative Conversation Analysis, Sidnell (2007) seems to overlook overall structural organization (OSO henceforth, cf. Schegloff and Sacks, 1973), a concept central to this paper. His oversight is of interest as the comparative elements of OSO were the leading type of comparative CA in the 1990s. Schegloff's (1968, 1979, 1986) discussions of phone openings received much attention within comparative literature. This work, and that of Hopper (1992), was applied to phone interactions in other cultures (cf. in the Netherlands Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1991; in Sweden, Lindström, 1994), illustrating cultural differences in interactional structures of phone conversations. This occurred so much that Schegloff, almost as a reprimand, urged researchers to stop describing cultural differences in phone-interaction openings since that was not a CA goal (Schegloff, 2002). Schegloff's goal, as an ethnomethodological one, was to describe such openings as ways to explain the social order participants create, and he urged researchers to connect the openings and their structures to the interactions they begin to create and not to go on comparing openings for the sake of finding differences between cultures.

There might be another reason for Sidnell's muted discussion of OSO. It is part of a general absence of attention in the field. As Robinson argues regarding OSO from the 1970s ''overall structural organization has since received relatively little