

Answering questions instead of telling stories: Everyday breaching in a family meal

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Received 25 June 2013; received in revised form 17 June 2016; accepted 23 June 2016

Available online 18 July 2016



Abstract

In this article, an ethnomethodological and conversation analytic approach is used to analyze an instance of a child's everyday breaching as a device for avoiding engagement in a story telling of the day's news. An analysis is presented which seeks to elucidate (a) some of the methodical practices which are used to produce and constitute the everyday breaching and (b) the child's parents' analysis of this verbal play as breaching conventional conversational sequential and categorial structures. It is argued that such a fine-grained analysis of seemingly minor breaches can contribute to our understanding of the way that various types of adult/teenager relationships can be constituted via such 'troublesome' interactions.

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Keywords: Ethnomethodologically inspired conversation analysis; Everyday breaching; Family mealtimes; Adult/teenager interaction; Formal structures of language

1. Introduction

How can a child avoid telling his parents what he has been doing that day in school? This paper uses conversation analysis to describe one teenage boys' attempt to do so using an 'everyday breaching' of the formal structures of conversation.

Conversation analysis is concerned with the analysis of members' use of 'formal' (Sacks, 1992a:680) or 'generic' (Schegloff, 2007) structures of conversational interaction such as turn taking, sequence organization, preference organization, repair and overall structural organization amongst others, and in the use of such 'formal' or 'generic' structures in the accomplishment of particular interactional events and episodes.

As Sacks (1992a, vol. 1, p. 11) puts it:

"Of the enormous range of things that people do, all of them are done with something. . . . what we want to find out is, can we first of all construct the objects that get used to make up the range of activities and then see how it is those objects get used. . . . Some of these objects can be used for whole ranges of activities, where for different ones a variety of the properties of those objects will get employed. And we begin to see alternative properties of those objects."

These 'formal' or 'generic' structures of conversational interaction are taken for granted or are an aspect of speakers' taken for granted knowledge which speakers rely on each other to know and to use competently. Such structures may provide speakers with a platform or ethnomethodology for doing a variety of actions; speakers can use conversational

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objects in a variety of ways. Some of these ways may be responded to as being a deliberate ‘misuse’ of them, as breaches of the ‘formal’ or ‘generic’ structures themselves.

It is the aim of this article to explore the domain of ‘everyday breaching’ with respect to some naturally occurring data obtained from a family meal. An instance of ‘everyday breaching’ for the purpose of avoiding telling a story will be discussed in detail and the ethnomethodology of both its accomplishment via the boy’s use of the formal structures of conversation and the parents’ responses to it will be explored.

A fine-grained analysis of such a seemingly minor breach as this reveals its potential for disrupting the family mealtime interaction. Thus, even though what will be presented could be said to comprise a minor (though highly skilful) breach of the formal structures of language for the organization of conversational interaction, such breaching can have major consequences for the situated action and local settings in which they occur. Furthermore, such ‘breaches’ can be a ‘risky practice’ and may not produce the desired result. In this way, analysis may contribute to an understanding of the way in which certain types of adult/teenager relationships are constituted via such ‘troublesome’ interactions.

1.1. Ethnomethodology

The term ethnomethodology, as many readers will know, was invented by Harold Garfinkel to refer to the methods and use of taken for granted knowledge in accomplishing situated social action. He was not referring to ‘professional’ methods, but ‘ordinary’ everyday competences used by ‘ordinary’ members of society. This was a domain that, before Garfinkel, had not been investigated empirically by sociology. In order to demonstrate its existence for investigation, he engaged in, amongst other things, a series of so-called ‘breaching experiments’.

It is not being claimed here that the cases analyzed below are examples of a child engaging in such an experiment. Rather, what is being argued is that in so far as the analyses, *by the recipients*, as instances of violating conversational conventions, and on the basis of such analyses produce reactions noticeably similar to those of the ‘subjects’ of Garfinkel’s experiments, then it would seem to be reasonable to refer to these instances as forms of ‘everyday breaching’. Before discussing data and method, therefore, a brief review of Garfinkel’s work on ‘breaching’ is in order.

1.2. Garfinkel’s breaching experiments

In his various breaching ‘experiments’, it was Garfinkel’s stated aim to bring into view members’ everyday common-sense knowledge of social structures. His objective was to turn the phenomenological reflections of Schutz (1964, 1966, 1967a, 1967b) on the natural attitude into phenomena fit for empirical research. The experiments were designed to demonstrate that the members of society assumed that their co-participants in the activities of daily life would make the same assumptions as they did regarding how the activity was to be carried out, what its constituent features were, etc. Furthermore, what was mutually assumed and taken for granted was not simply a *factual* matter, such that if the interactants did not make the same assumptions they would have difficulties coordinating their actions, but rather it was also a *moral* matter in that it was right and proper and expected that people *should* make the same assumptions.

Garfinkel devised a number of experiments and these are reported in his work (Garfinkel, 1963, 1967). However, the experiment which bears the closest resemblance to the scenes analyzed here is that which involved assumptions about the mutual understandability of talk (Garfinkel, 1967:36–49). The point of this particular experiment was to show that persons’ perspectives were assumed to be reciprocal when it came to the meaning of words and what persons were talking about. Others were to be ‘trusted’ with one’s talk in the sense that they would not make something of it other than what was plainly, and for all practical purposes, intended. In this breaching experiment, then, experimenters were instructed to engage a person in conversation and then have them ‘clarify’ the most ‘obvious’ and ordinary everyday remarks, such as the meaning of a ‘flat tire’, feigning a failure to comprehend the meaning of the most ‘obvious’ of everyday words and remarks. The result of this breaching experiment, like the others, revealed that people become disturbed and sometimes annoyed when their co-interactants do not abide by the background expectancies that people will ‘play by the rules’ and ‘understand the obvious.’

Garfinkel’s stated aim in these experiments had been to ‘cause trouble’ in order to reveal these background assumptions, expectancies and common knowledge that people took for granted and which underpinned everyday social life. The experiments were designed to ‘aid the sluggish imagination’ because it is difficult to bring into view such a panoply of taken for granted assumptions about the world.

Since Garfinkel, despite the potential of this domain of inquiry, with respect to ‘everyday breaching’ it has not been opened up as it might have been. The breaching experiments conducted in the early 1960s are now no longer a popular method for revealing such ‘formal’ or ‘generic’ structures of conversational interaction. Nevertheless they do open up a domain of enquiry which consists of the study of breaching in other contexts, not the experimental.

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