The Sacks lectures

A Review of Harvey Sacks, *Lectures on Conversation,* Volumes One and Two, Ed. Gail Jefferson (Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1992)

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In Harvey Sacks, American sociology has its as-yet-unsung genius. Seventeen years after his tragic death in an automobile accident, these volumes make possible an argument which has, hitherto, been diluted by the unavailability of a major resource: Sacks's lectures. Now, this contentious claim can be advanced, bold-faced, with these publications, finally, in hand. That Sacks's collected oral disquisitions ('lectures' seems somehow too commonplace a term with which to characterise them) should qualify him for such an accolade should become more widely apparent after the public perusal and study of Gail Jefferson's faithful, and elegantly accomplished, rendition of Sacks's astonishing presentations to his classes in sociology over the years 1964 (Fall) to 1972 (Spring). As course 'lectures', I venture to assert that they are probably without precedent in most university sociology courses for their consistency of quality of thought, keenness of insight, originality of documentation and sheer brilliance of intellectual vision. They stand out today as quite extraordinary achievements, and as a living testimony to the deep seriousness and scholarly integrity of the man who delivered them, even though they were undoubtedly looked upon by many of the enrolled students at the time as 'ordinary academic events'. As Schegloff remarks, "the students who sat in the rooms in which the lectures were delivered can hardly have known what they were hearing" (Schegloff, 1992) 'Introduction' to Vol. 1, p. xii). The quality of Jefferson's transcriptions of Sacks's presentations to classes in social science at the University of California, Irvine, is quite remarkable in their rendering of nuances, stylistic idiosyncrasies and other minutiae of the original materials, but not too surprising given their source: one of the leading communicative-action analysts in the world, and a former close colleague of Sacks himself.

At a time when many in U.S. social science are anguishing about their status vis-a-vis the triumphant natural sciences (or collectively lamenting

their failure 'to predict' the end of the Cold War!), Sacks' brilliant work continues to be (relatively) neglected, despite the fact that his methods, as well as his substantive contributions, amount to nothing less than a standing refutation of the canard that sociological work cannot be rigorous, scientific or systematic unless it employs mathematical or statistical constructions of some kind. Once the false restriction upon the scope of his achievement is removed – to whit, the assumption that he was 'merely' the innovator of a relatively specialised sub-field of social science: conversation analysis (as if that alone weren't sufficient reason to consider him seriously!) – the full philosophical, methodological and substantive impact of his work is at last available for objective scholarly assessment.

There will be stylistic impediments to any immediate public appreciation of what Sacks actually managed to accomplish (virtually single-handedly) in those remarkable years of intellectual productivity. There will be a detracting few who, no doubt, will find *some* of these lectures to be affected in tone, even overly 'mannered' in style. Various others will find them to be dense and detailed, and will give up the effort to extract the points that they are making. And yet others (with whom this reviewer has the least sympathy) will find no blanket obedience to the precepts of various orthodox, prescriptive *philosophies* of (social) science in the ways in which Sacks worked with his materials and developed his arguments and findings, and will, perforce, ignore them. So much for the kind of *a prioristic* critiques which are likely to attend the publication of these amazing lectures. The honestly interested reader, who is prepared to suspend judgments about essentially peripheral issues such as style and presentational format, will find in these lectures an *abundance* of insights, arguments and, above all, logical demonstrations pertaining to the *sui generis* properties of human social conduct, whose rigor and originality are quite without precedent in the history of sociology. The international following which Sacks achieved from the earliest days, when he would send dittoed copies of his lectures to any interested scholar anywhere in the world who asked to have the opportunity to read them, was richly deserved. Now that we have an edited and published version of his work available, this following can only mushroom among those who have a genuine interest in learning about *how human action actually works*.

Sacks's innovations in social science are many, but among the most obvious is his insistence upon using as his empirical materials recordings of the things that people do and say in their actual life circumstances. The idea of studying 'naturally occurring' (as distinct from contrived, or idealised, or theorised) human interactional processes *in situ* and *in vivo* may well have been shared by many ethnographers and other students of social phenomena, but it was Sacks who most effectively rendered such a slogan into a research reality by deploying the technology of tape recording (and later of video

recording) and of (increasingly meticulous) transcription procedures.[1] Despite this stringent grounding in an empirical universe of records of actual communicative practices, activities and interactions, nonetheless Sacks was no ordinary 'empiricist'. With uncanny precision, Sacks was able to discern the abstract in the concrete, the general in the particular and the analytically fascinating within the quotidian detail. Eschewing all interest in mere statistical distributions, Sacks's work has the stamp of the so-called 'qualitative methodologist', but even this title fails to capture the unique accomplishment of this gifted observer of, and astute reasoner about, the social world. For Sacks was contributing to nothing less than a radical reorientation to previously sacrosanct and largely classical precepts about the very nature of human sociality and its availability for analysis. From his collaboration with Harold Garfinkel, the founder of 'ethnomethodology', Sacks had come to recognise the power of a mode of explanation of human social behavior which did not mesh with the traditional causal or probabilistic frameworks common throughout the human sciences, including many of their 'qualitative' sectors: namely, *procedural* explanation. In these two volumes, the many fruits of this distinctively logical approach to the study of human conduct in Sacks' expert hands are (at last) collected together and presented to the academic world.

Sacks's close friend and collaborator, Emanuel A. Schegloff, has contributed colleagial and illuminating introductory essays which preface each volume and which together comprise an intellectual history of the emergence and development of Sacks's strikingly disciplined mode of empirical-analytical inquiry. As such, they provide an indispensable guide for those readers who are not familiar with the intellectual traditions which influenced and inspired the corpus of work presented in the lectures themselves, as well as steering him or her through the thickets of possibly unfamiliar intellectual territory. To the reader who approaches these lectures in the belief that they comprise only the precursor thoughts and preliminary arguments which much later matured into a technical field of (socio-)linguistics called 'conversation analysis', the contents of these volumes should both surprise and delight, for here are to be found a fund of elaborate analytical achievements in their own right. Moreover, the fully sociological character of Sacks's work is on display, and the topics explored range over such varied domains as to preclude their being summarily subsumed under any restrictive rubric such as "conversation", even though, of course, much of what Sacks had to say did indeed elucidate many of the devices and structures which inhabit everyday conversational discourse, devices and structures which, for the most part, are simply not available to the unaided intuitions of language-users as a simple function of their being able to speak and understand one another.

Before detailing some of the major issues raised by the lectures, however,

1 would like to digress briefly in order to take up for critical comment a theme which Schegloff introduces into his otherwise exemplary introductory essays. That is the degree to which certain observations made, and 'problem-types' addressed, by Sacks "seem to have a (sociological?) bearing on what came to be called 'cognitive science'". (Schegloff, p. xxxvii). Of course, I agree wholeheartedly with the view that *many* of Sacks's astute observations about thought, memory, comprehension, practical inference, experience, knowledge, motive, feeling, dreams, emotion, identity and other related topics – observations which permeate these lectures, and some of which are developed at considerable length in their own right – are of enormous significance for the emergence of a sociology of cognition broadly conceived.[2] However, these aspects of Sacks's achievement are not so clearly documented or highlighted in Schegloff's commentaries as are some others which appear to cast Sacks's analytical strategy into a more orthodox cognitivist mode. Remarking (appropriately) upon the resonances with some aspects of the Chomskian cognitivist program which appear in Sacks's early work (especially in 1965), Schegloff proceeds to focus upon a form of problem dealt with by Sacks which he describes as "an analysis of the ordering of cognitive operations" (p. xxxvii), and he subsequently comments that the 'problem-types' addressed to "the ordering of cognitive or psycholinguistic or interpretive operations are theoretically central to the responsibilities of a sociological, or more generally interactional, sector of what are now called the cognitive sciences" (p. xxxix).

There can be little doubt that Sacks had not yet emancipated himself fully from a broadly Chomskian form of analytical specification in those very early years, in spite of his also having begun to study the writings of the later Wittgenstein, writings whose arguments are profoundly anti-Cartesian and, therefore, in essence, anti-Chomskian. We can, as Schegloff observes, note the Chomskian resonances in the frequent use by Sacks of the ideas of 'generativity' and of 'grammatical rule' (along with concepts such as 'machinery' and 'cultural apparatus') in some of these very early lectures. Indeed, one can even find Sacks claiming, in a published version of his initial analysis of some basic rules for membership categorisation, that culture "does not, so to speak, merely fill brains in roughly the same way, it fills them so that they are alike in fine detail" (Sacks, 1974: 218). Such a pronouncement may or may not reflect a continuing Chomskian influence (it may, after all, have been intended as a vivid metaphor deployed suggestively). Nonetheless, taken together with some of the lectures being given by Sacks at the time he was presenting these ideas (roughly, late 1965 through early 1966), the impression is fostered of a (tacit?) commitment to conventionally cognitivist modes of reasoning.

Schegloff provides two examples of 'problem-types' which he claims Sacks

formulated and which he (Schegloff) explicitly assimilates to cognitivistic/ psycholinguistic modes of discourse. The first concerns what he speaks of as "the ordering of interpretive procedures" (Schegloff, p. xxxvii), and runs as follows. Sacks seeks to understand how intentional misidentifications are nonetheless smoothly handled by interlocutors. Nowhere in his lecture on this topic, however, does he speak of 'cognitive operations' nor of 'interpretive procedures'. Rather, he argues that, since correspondence-criteria cannot constitute the operably relevant criteria for telling whether or not someone has been referred to by an address term, other sorts of criteria must be relevant. Thus, if one speaker uses an address-term (e.g., "mommy") which does not have a proper referent among co-participant speakers, then, if purely correspondence-criteria for referential adequacy were relevant, one would expect puzzlement. That no such puzzlement ensues is evidence that *other* criteria than merely those of literally correct correspondence are relevantly invokable, e.g., the possible addressee is knowable by virtue of the availability of mis-addresses as modes of insult, and the one who uses such a mis-address ("mommy" when there is no-one's 'mommy' present) can be found to have been engaged in the activity of producing a 'put-down' or an 'insult' (or, as in the actual case inspected by Sacks, a 'return-insult'). Sacks does not articulate his analysis explicitly in terms of 'cognitive operations', but rather in terms of *praxiological* rules and criteria. There is no necessity to impute *explicit* knowledge of such rules to the 'minds' of participants, nor to impute a temporal course of mental (or, worse, 'unconsciously mental') operations to them involving their "*deciding* how the address term is properly to be *interpreted* [according to an order in which these *analyses* are conducted", as Schegloff would have it (Schegloff, p. xxxvii, italics added).[3] Sacks himself formulates his argument in the lecture on this issue entirely in other terms, noting that his proposal concerns: "What can be said to be the constructed procedures for arriving at an activity? What activity is involved in arriving at another activity?", and he adds emphatically that he is "dealing with ... *possibilities*. And I'm trying to lay out the relationship between possibilities." (Sacks, 'Lecture 21', p. 422: italics in original). A discursive idealisation of an actual procedure of interpretation or of analysis putatively *undertaken by interlocutors* is redundant: Sacks's aim is explicitly to reveal a *logic* for a commonplace achievement, viz., the successful identification of an addressee who has been intentionally *mis*identified. It is sufficient if the interlocutors' discourse *conforms to the logic revealed* in Sacks's analysis: it is unnecessary (as well as contestable) to impute any such 'logic' to them as a component of their actual repertoire of propositional knowledge.

Another instance discussed by Schegloff in cognitivist terms concerns the use by members of 'possessive pronouns'. According to Schegloff, Sacks had argued that "a hearer/receiver must first determine that what 'my' is

attached to is a 'possessable' – the sort of thing which in that culture can be possessed . . . . in order to decide that 'my' is being used to claim possession", and he adds: "Once again, an ordering of analyses - of cognitive operations - seems clearly involved" (Schegloff, p. xxxviii). Yet again, however, scrutiny of the lecture in question ('Lecture 16', Spring 1966) reveals not a concern with 'cognitive operations' and their ordering on any occasion of the use of the term 'my', but, rather, an exquisite analysis of the logic of the relationship between objects and 'possible owners'. Sacks distinguishes between two categories. The first, 'possessables', specify things which anyone could, in principle, *own*, if one wanted or sought to. The second, 'possessitives', specify "a class of classes of objects which, when cases of the class are encountered or talked of, they're recognised to be somebody's possession" (Sacks, 'Lecture 16', p. 384). It follows that 'possessitives' are things which, "when found are seen as having been lost", whereas 'possessables' are things which when encountered are not seen as specifically belonging to, or as having belonged to, *anyone*, but which can now belong to you. Problems can arise if one has a possessable that is not a possessitive, since one will have to be more careful in its treatment so as to retain it, whilst if you have a possessitive, one can be much more casual about it. As Sacks elaborates (and this is merely a fragment of his richly detailed discussion):

> You can leave a car in the street, it may be robbed, but you needn't fear that someone will figure by virtue of the fact that it's sitting on the street that it's available for whoever wants it. And with cars, of course, having their locus in the street, there is then the special problem of detecting that they're abandoned. Cars can sit for enormous long times on the street, intending to have been abandoned and not recognised as such. And there are classical stories of people attempting to get rid of an object, finding that it invariably pursued them unless they found an extremely good place to get rid of it, as it was regularly returned. (Sacks, 1992: 385).

Now, it is true that Sacks *does* discuss the distinction he introduces here with reference to the *rules for the use* of the term 'my', arguing that its blanket treatment as a 'possessive pronoun' obscures many of its properties in use (e.g., it fails to distinguish between 'my' as an 'affiliative' and 'my' as a 'relational' pronoun), but there is no attribution of a 'cognitive operation' attendant upon noting that one can only hear a possessive pronoun as indeed being used possessionally if the item which it prefaces is a member of the class of 'possessables' or 'possessitives', - "But that's only to say", Sacks adds immediately, "that if we have that sort of object being referred to, then some possessive pronoun *can be used* possessionally – not which one, *or how which ones are selected*" (Sacks, p. 387, italics added). As usual, Sacks is concerned to elucidate a *logic of use*, not to discern the workings of lan-

guage-users' 'minds', let alone to attribute to those workings the full-fledged praxiological constructs which he uses to exhibit the logic with which their actual usages demonstrably are *in accord*.

Finally, Schegloff considers in this context Sacks's concept of 'tying rules', the precursor to the full-fledged concept of 'sequential' rules and structures which came to play such an important role in his developing thought about the details of communicative and interactional organisation. Schegloff quite properly emphasises the constitutive role of sequential contexts for the comprehension of utterances in discourse, but subsequently characterises the nature of hearers' understandings as involving sequential and/or syntactical "analysis". This overintellectualisation of mundane comprehension reiterates the prior overattributions of (putatively) cognitive 'decisions' and 'interpretations' to practical interactants. For example, Schegloff implies that ordinary uses of the word 'that' require interpretive disambiguation as to *what* use (sense) is being made of it. Utterances such as: "I decided *that* years ago", or '*That*'s a challenge", differ in the ways in which hearers can tell what communicative work is accomplished by 'that' from locutions such as: "I still say though *that* if you take . . ." Clearly, to be able to tell what 'that' refers to in the first two cases presupposes having access to topics/referents in the prior utterance(s) to which the present ones are indeed hearably tied, whilst in the latter instance the word is functioning as a conjunction or complementiser. It is not, however, *conversationalists* themselves who perform such 'analyses', but analysts of the orderly properties of their achievements. Put differently, a *genuine* (as distinct from an analytically *stipulated*) comprehension or disambiguation 'problem' only arises for actual conversationalists if or when an utterance of the first sort is heard *without* its antecedent(s), and Sacks is providing the (socio-)logical basis for that fact. He is not claiming that every time someone produces 'that' as a lexical item in his or her talk, a hearer must, as a precondition for comprehension (*per impossibile*), perform a complex linguistic analysis of the syntactical category to which the word belongs on that occasion, an analysis possibly complicated by the fact that the word 'that' can be alternatively a 'tying' device or a complementiser.

These comments relate to a divergence in the appreciation of the scope and power of Sacks's analytical strategies and the nature of many of his accomplishments, a divergence between a (quite common) 'cognitivist' reading, according to which Sacks was construed as describing actual communicative agents' putative 'cognitive' processes, and an alternative (Wittgensteinian) position which locates Sacks's work squarely within a framework of what could be called 'praxiological' analysis. To his credit, Schegloff also brings out quite strongly several facets of what he terms the 'sociological' Sacks (especially at pp. li - lv in his 'Introduction' to Vol. 1).

Indeed, the cognitivist readings which I have scrutinised and criticised in this review form a relatively minor part of his otherwise penetrating, accurate and lucid introductory essays.

In the first volume of the *Lectures on Conversation* (a massive 805 page opus of some ninety fully transcribed lectures and several associated appendices, excluding the introduction, bibliography and index) we encounter a rich panoply of topics, issues and, above all, striking conceptual and methodological innovations. These wide-ranging studies (for that is what Sacks essentially reports in his lectures: the studies he was doing) are presented chronologically: thematics arise and disappear, only to be (occasionally) picked up further on and interwoven with new approaches, new materials and new ideas, or developed more fully in their own right, because now more clearly focussed and articulated than on the occasion of their initial introduction. Thus, for example, the very first lecture from the Fall of 1964, "Rules of Conversational Sequence", introduces an entire subject-area, widely known to be one of Sacks's most distinctive contributions, which is subsequently refined on its own terms in many subsequent, though not consecutive, lectures (with a prominent component recurring in the first of the final series of transcribed lectures given in the Spring of 1972 under the technical rubrics of "Adjacency Pairs: Scope of Operation" and "Adjacency Pairs: Distribution in Conversation"). Interspersed are treatments of widely varying topics and problems, most of which were occasioned by the scrupulous analytical consideration of some transcribed utterance(s) or exchanges of talk/conduct between people.

Among the major thematics which recur most prominently are those dealing with 'membership categorisation'; its cognate theme of 'category-bound activities'; the nature of practical inference, measurement and description; turn-taking; topic initiation and organisation, and the production of stories. In the second volume, comprising sixty-six transcribed lectures and one 'fragment' (making up some 575 pages of text, excluding the introduction, references and index), the thematics of story production and organisation, sequencing and turn-taking in conversation, identification selection and 'poetics' in everyday life are picked up, developed, and differentially interwoven with sub-topics such as 'greeting', 'interrupting', 'giving compliments', 'telling jokes', 'making puns', 'transmitting (and packaging) information', 'agent-client interaction', 'calling for help', 'communicating a feeling', 'collaborative laughter' and various others. The sheer detail, richness of conceptualisation and material documentation in these presentations defies abbreviated treatment or synopsis. However, in the remainder of this brief review and recommendation of Sacks's work, I would like to focus upon some relatively neglected facets of Sacks's accomplishment.

In what follows, I do not wish in any way to understate Sacks's achieve-

ment as the originator of what has come to be known as 'conversation analysis', nor to underestimate the very considerable accomplishments of this analytical enterprise. In many respects, however, Sacks sometimes allowed himself to embrace what, to my mind, is too *narrow* a characterisation of what he accomplished in his all too brief academic life. (He once told me that he should be thought of, primarily, as a 'technician'!). No-one with any background in, or technical familiarity with, analytical philosophy could fail to discern in Sacks's work, as represented here as well as in his published papers, an abiding concern with issues of *logical demonstration* of each and every point he wished to make about the properties of human practices and interactions. Such severe constraints upon analytical work are relatively rare within Sacks's 'home discipline' of sociology. It is, by now, a hallmark of the very finest work in the analysis of talk-in-interaction (epitomised in the many published contributions of Sacks's colleagues and students) that *each and every abstract or general analytical statement* about the organisational and procedural bases for the phenomena portrayed in the transcribed materials at hand must be argued for extensively (the term of art is 'warranted') by reference to the exhibitable details of the data as well as in respect of the principles of logical argument. Although I mentioned earlier in this essay that Sacks did not employ mathematics in his work, it is nonetheless evident in the kind of work which he did (and especially in the structure of the work that he published during his lifetime) that an acute sense of mathematical precision was a regulative ideal. For example, in his brilliant studies of the logic of the identification of persons ('membership categorisation'), much of which is represented in dispersed form in these volumes, it is clear that he sought not just loose and variable 'conventions' but *theorems* for this domain of human practice. His objective was to depict the 'socially necessary' (to steal from Marx for a moment!) principles governing the ways in which people *could possibly* be categorised. I shall not discuss this work in any detail here, but would refer the interested reader to some useful secondary sources.[4] Two additional examples of this profoundly logical interest come to mind from the work before us: the lectures entitled: "On Measuring" (Lecture 8, Fall 1964 - Spring 1965, Volume 1) and "Everyone Has to Lie" (Lectures 8 and 9, Spring, 1967). There are many other exemplars in these volumes of the logical stringency of Sacks's work, but these are among the most familiar.

Neither is wholly dedicated to the *structural* analysis of conversational discourse, but each trades off what had hitherto been achieved in this domain. Indeed, the *cumulativity* of Sacks's work is another striking (and, again, largely unprecedented) feature which is displayed throughout these volumes.

These 'lectures' deserve to be studied intensively and deeply by anyone seriously interested in the logical analysis of human conduct, notwithstand-

ing disciplinary allegiances. Philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, linguists and psychologists should all find a marvellous source of intellectual stimulation in these volumes. Alternatively 'laid back', intensely focussed, experimental, playful, polished, heuristic and 'finished', these presentations are a veritable fund of insights, spurs to the intellect and resources for further work and reflection. They are *exemplary* accomplishments in their own right, and they set a standard which constitutes a challenge for emulation. They are a monument to a powerful intellect (and a very affable, decent man) who died far too early, but who left us such *treasures* to work with.

Notes

1. In this aspect of his work, of course, his research associate, Gail Jefferson, was to become a major force, and it is largely to her efforts that the field owes what has become a standardised transcription symbology. The conventions of this symbology are routinely reproduced in anthologies of conversation-analytic work.
2. Indeed, I have often relied upon analytical insights developed by Sacks in the pursuit of arguments designed to rescue the analysis of human mentality from contemporary neo-mentalistic (especially computationalist) cognitivism. See, e.g., Coulter (1983), Ch. 7.
3. Schegloff deploys these (italicised) terms without regard for their actual occasionality of ordinary application to speakers-hearers.
4. The best of these is Lena Jayyusi (1984). For an abbreviated version of many of these issues, see the last section of my essay (Coulter, 1991).

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