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ARTICLES

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Doing Feminist Conversation Analysis

This article argues for, and offers empirical demonstration of, the value of conversation analysis (CA) for feminist research. It counters three key criticisms of CA as anti-feminist: the alleged incompatibility of CA's social theory with feminism; the purported difficulty of reconciling analysts' and participants' concerns; and CA's apparent obsession with the minutiae of talk rather than socio-political reality. It demonstrates the potential of CA for advances in lesbian/feminist research through two examples: developing a feminist approach to date rape and sexual refusal; and an ongoing CA study of talk in which people 'come out' as lesbian, gay, bisexual or as having (had) same-sex sexual experiences. These examples are used to illustrate that it is precisely the features of CA criticized as anti-feminist which can be used productively in doing feminist conversation analysis.

Key Words: *coming out, conversation analysis, date rape, ethnomethodology, feminism, refusal, talk-in-interaction, turn-taking*

Feminism is a politics predicated on the belief that women are oppressed; a social movement dedicated to political change. Issues that have preoccupied feminists include violence against women, childhood sexual abuse and recovered memories, acquaintance rape, sexual harassment, the beauty myth, compulsory heterosexuality, women's health and reproductive rights, equal opportunities for women in the workplace and the end of heteropatriarchal domination.

Conversation analysis (CA) is the academic study of talk-in-interaction, as identified, in particular, with the works of its founder, Harvey Sacks, in conjunction with Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson. Issues that have preoccupied conversation analysts include the projectability of turn constructional units, the onset of overlap in turn-taking organization, turn allocation techniques, the syntax of sentences in progress, sequence organization, preference structures and self-correction in the organization of repair in conversation.

It is, then, not immediately apparent, on the basis of the foregoing descriptions of 'feminism' and 'conversation analysis', just what would be involved in 'doing

feminist conversation analysis', and it is perhaps no surprise that some feminist and critical psychologists (for example, Wetherell, 1998; Billig, 1999) have expressed considerable reservations about the value of CA for feminist work – even suggesting that feminism and CA are 'oxymorons' (Speer, 1999). In this article, I write as a lesbian feminist who has used a range of other methodologies (including Q methodology, Kitzinger 1987, 1999; story completion, Kitzinger and Powell, 1995; and discourse analysis, Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1995; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1995), and who sees in CA some exciting possibilities for lesbian and feminist research.

Of course, it is true that CA has not hitherto been notable for its contributions to feminist or lesbian perspectives, but CA hardly stands out in this regard. The core texts on a whole range of other analytic approaches (including, for example, experimental design, psychoanalysis, survey technique, oral history, content analysis, ethnography, grounded theory, psychometric testing, repertory grids, Q methodology) remain largely silent about feminist issues – and yet feminists have found ways of adapting these powerful methods and using them for our own purposes. In the long history of debate about what constitute appropriate feminist methodologies, there is (so far) not one single methodology that feminists have agreed has to be discarded as fundamentally incompatible with feminism (see Reinharz, 1992). The pattern has rather been that particular approaches (for example, experimental, psychoanalytic or postmodern work) have become established without feminist involvement and consequently have been roundly criticized as sexist by feminists who initially dismiss the entire approach ('the master's tools will never demolish the master's house'). Subsequently, other feminists working *within* those approaches have found imaginative and creative ways to address those feminist criticisms, to make gender and sexuality visible and to use the master's tools for feminist purposes – and the approach then becomes firmly established as a recognized and accepted way of 'doing feminism' in the academy. To those feminists who would discard CA as anti-feminist, then, I would urge caution, if for no other reason than simply on the basis of our prior experience of rashly dismissing other approaches as fundamentally anti-feminist, and having later to 'reclaim' them for feminism.

From the earliest development of CA in the 1970s, there has always been some feminist interest in CA, and this interest has grown enormously in recent years since the publication of Sacks's (1995) *Lectures on Conversation* and the wider availability of resources on doing CA (Psathas, 1995; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; ten Have, 1999). It is unfortunate that Billig's recent critique of CA, which is framed in part as a chivalrous defence of feminism against the demonized figure of Schegloff, nowhere cites feminist involvement in CA or engages with feminist claims that CA is of use to us. Not only does Billig overlook classic feminist work drawing on CA, such as West and Zimmerman's exploration of interruptions in cross-sex conversations (Zimmerman and West, 1975; West and Zimmerman, 1977; West, 1979) and Goodwin's (1990) analyses of girls' talk, he also chooses to ignore the conversation analytic work being carried out by femi-

nists based in his own department, and by others who have presented their work at Loughborough's Discourse and Rhetoric Group, of which Billig is a founding member (for example, Frith, 1998; Frith and Kitzinger, 1998; Stokoe, 1998; Kitzinger and Frith, 1999; Speer, 1999, forthcoming). Moreover, in arguing that CA incorporates into its basic premises ideas that are fundamentally antithetical to feminist (and other critical) values, Billig's article assumes a narrow and restrictive model of feminism which is seriously at variance with (and renders invisible) the full range and variety of feminisms across the social sciences. In responding to Billig's critique of CA, Schegloff (1999: 559) has taken him to task for various 'misunderstandings or misreadings' of CA: to that charge I would add a failure to appreciate the range of contemporary feminist theory around gender and sexuality.

This article is not, however, intended as a direct response to Billig's claims, but rather aims to address those of his concerns which strike me as being more generally shared, and which have often been raised (in conversation rather than in print) in critical and feminist academic contexts by students and colleagues apparently alarmed by my developing interest in CA over the past couple of years. These key criticisms are: (1) the extent to which CA's underlying and often unarticulated social theory is compatible with feminism (or other critical perspectives); (2) the difficulty of reconciling CA's emphasis on 'participants' orientations' with the analyst's own preoccupations with gender, class, sexuality and power when these are not apparently attended to by participants themselves; and (3) CA's apparent obsession with the minute details of mundane everyday talk, to the exclusion of broader social and political realities. Following a theoretical discussion of these three (overlapping) 'troubles with CA', I will offer two concrete illustrations drawn from my own work of the value of CA within a lesbian feminist perspective: the first uses CA to develop a feminist approach to date rape and sexual refusal; the second is drawn from an ongoing conversation analytic study of talk in which people 'come out' as lesbian, gay, bisexual or as having (had) same-sex sexual experiences. My theoretical argument and my practical examples converge in the claim that it is, ironically, *precisely those three features of CA that are critiqued as anti-feminist which offer the most exciting potential for feminist-informed conversation analytic work*.

THE TROUBLE WITH CA IS . . .

Conversation analysis is a relatively well-defined field: a core set of key practitioners (for example, Atkinson, Clayman, Drew, Goodwin, Heritage, Holt, Jefferson, Psathas, Sacks, Schegloff) are clearly visible, and their work defines the centre of the field. By contrast, feminist and critical approaches are much more diffuse and heterogeneous, and even within the discipline of psychology alone, there is no single agreed upon feminist (or critical) theory, methodology, epistemology or ontology: feminist work embraces the experimental and the

experiential, the positivist and the postmodern (Wilkinson, 1996, 2000; Fox and Prilleltensky, 1997; Ibáñez and Iñiguez, 1997). This heterogeneity of feminist and critical perspectives means that CA is open to attack on a bewildering array of contradictory points from critics of different persuasions. It is clearly not the case that CA is (or can readily be made) compatible with all variants of feminist research. As I will suggest below, it is not well suited to sex-differences research, to any kind of experimental or correlational paradigm, to work seeking to uncover individual affects or cognitions, or to use in structural-functionalist or essentialist feminisms. All these approaches flourish under the rich variety of what constitutes feminist psychology today – and none is likely to find CA suited to their purposes. But feminist research *also* includes social constructionist, ethno-methodological, postmodern, radical lesbian and queer approaches to sexuality and gender – and for these feminists, as I will show, CA has much more to offer.

Critics of CA sometimes seem to imagine that they can locate it in opposition to some imagined monolithic 'feminism', which has one single politically correct line. In fact, it is striking that criticisms of CA are also very often equally applicable as criticisms of particular kinds of feminisms. For example, both CA and ethnomethodological feminisms are accused of lacking a proper appreciation of social-structural forces that constrain and shape behaviour, and of focusing excessively on the mundane and relatively 'trivial' aspects of our lives at the expense of larger systems of institutionalized power and control; and both CA and postmodern feminism are accused of being dense and impenetrable, and of mystifying ordinary people's everyday experience with jargon-ridden prose. My aim here is not to defend the 'trivial' or the 'jargon-ridden', but rather to contextualize these criticisms of CA within the ongoing feminist debates. We need to replace a simplistic CA/feminism dichotomy with a more sophisticated engagement with *feminist* discussions about the appropriate conceptualizations of social structure and individual agency, the relationship of power to subjective understandings, and the role of the mundane 'micro' events of everyday life in relation to oppression. In what follows, I have tried to lay out some of the groundwork for those discussions to take place.

1. CA's Social Theory

Conversation analysis emerged in the context of, and embodies, many of the ideas of ethnomethodology, the sociological theory developed by Garfinkel and his collaborators in the 1960s (from which terms such as 'member' and 'participant' derive). Garfinkel (1967) rejected the dominant sociological paradigm of his day, as articulated in the work of Talcott Parsons, which explained human action as the result of institutionalized systems of norms, rules and values which are internalized by individuals. For Garfinkel, this approach portrays social actors merely as victims at the mercy of external social forces. For ethnomethodologists, social facts such as power and oppression are *accomplishments* (Garfinkel, 1967); instead of being already existing 'things', they are processes continually

created and sustained (and resisted) through the practices of members in inter-action. Ethnomethodology offered a model of people as agents, and of a social order grounded in contingent, embodied, ongoing interpretative work – an interest in how people *do* social order, rather in how they are animated by it, in how everyday reality is produced by those engaging in it. It is, as Heritage (1984: 2) points out, 'an important prophylactic against the mystifying consequences of "grand theorizing" and "abstracted empiricism"'. (For more information about the relationship between ethnomethodology and CA, see Turner's [1974] *Ethnomethodology*,which includes chapters by both Sacks and Schegloff, and Psathas [1979] for a collection of work inspired both by Garfinkel and by Sacks.) For Harvey Sacks, the founder of CA, talk-in-interaction was simply one common-place site of human interaction which could be studied for what it revealed about the production of social order. Talk as such is not given any *principled* primacy in CA: the key interest of CA is not in talk as *language*, but in talk as *action* – that is, in what people *do* with talk. CA 'describes methods persons use in doing social life' (Sacks, quoted in Psathas, 1995: 53).

It is this underlying ethnomethodological theory that is singled out by Billig (1999: 543) as conveying 'a participatory view of the world', and with which he finds himself (and thinks feminists should find ourselves) in profound disagree-ment. CA's focus on the ordinary world of everyday conversation, and its use of terms such as '*co*-conversationalist', 'participant' and 'member' convey, says Billig (1999: 552), 'an essentially non-critical view of the social world', and support an 'assumption that the conversational situation can be considered as a sociologically neutral place' (1999: 554), 'in which equal rights of speakership are often assumed' (1999: 550). According to Billig, this ethnomethodological stance makes CA incompatible with feminism at the most basic level, in what he calls its 'foundational rhetoric'.

Billig's critique is not, of course, uniquely a critique of CA, but rather of the full range of sociological approaches (ethnomethodology, symbolic interaction-ism, labelling theory, interpretivist approaches, social constructionism and so on) which theorize people (including women) as active participants in the construc-tion of the social world, and which set themselves in opposition to structural functionalist models of the social order. In other words, it is equally a critique of a great deal of specifically *feminist* work. Feminist ethnomethodology is cited in most feminist methods texts (see Gould, 1980: 465; Reinharz, 1992) and the approach has been used to study (for example) the construction of gender (Kessler and McKenna, 1978; see also Crawford, 2000), mental illness (Smith, 1987), sexual harassment (Wise and Stanley, 1987) and prostitution (Davidson, 1996). Like ethnomethodological work more generally, this feminist research uses terms such as 'member' and 'participant', and focuses on women as active co-constructors of meaning rather than simply positing us as the predefined victims of a heteropatriarchal social system.

One of the most sustained arguments in favour of ethnomethodology for feminism is advanced in Stanley and Wise's (1983) classic *Breaking Out:*

Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research. Naming ethnomethodology as a key theoretical influence, Stanley and Wise (1983: 138) celebrate the fact that ethnomethodology's emphasis is on 'exactly that which is of prime importance to feminism – a concern with the everyday and "the personal"'. They are critical of deterministic views of social reality:

> [Reality] doesn't exist in and of itself, 'outside of' or 'beneath' everyday events as a 'social structure' or 'social force', as depicted in traditional structural accounts. Instead we argue that it is *daily constructed* by us in routine and mundane ways, as we go about the ordinary and everyday business of living (Stanley and Wise, 1983: 112).

And while Billig (1999: 554–6) mocks CA's political credibility by creating a nightmare scenario in which the verbal exchanges during a rape are analysed by a conversation analyst who somehow fails to notice that an act of violence is taking place, and analyses the rapist's threats and the victim's pleading as confirming the rules for turn-taking in conversation, Wise and Stanley (1987) apply a (rudimentary) CA to an instance of sexual harassment in conversation. Their aim, they say, is to:

> look at some of the 'rules' that govern everybody's day-to-day interactions in conversation. In particular we look at the initiation of conversation and of topics, 'summons and response' sequences, turn taking in talk and interruptions, and opening up closings to conversations (Wise and Stanley, 1987: 155).

Sadly, the conversation they analyse is fictitious, and I am not aware of any examples of conversation analytic work on actual instances of (what analysts might gloss as) sexual harassment. Such research, however, is exactly what is needed and would, as Wise and Stanley (1987: 157) suggest, show 'how looking at sexual harassment in detail can sharpen up our understanding, by helping us to pinpoint exactly where and in what the intrusion of sexual harassment lies'. Contrary to Billig's implication, there is nothing about CA which makes it inherently unsuitable for the study of sexual harassment or other forms of sexual violence – as the study to be reported in the next section of this article, which deals with date rape, will make abundantly clear.

   In conclusion, therefore, CA does not commit us to an 'uncritical' view of the social world, but it does commit us to a broadly ethnomethodological one in which people are understood not simply as victims of an all-powerful social order but also as agents actively engaged in methical and sanctioned procedures for producing or resisting, colluding with or transgressing, the taken-for-granted social world. Some feminists have certainly criticized ethnomethodology for having too loose and flexible a version of power, for attributing more agency to women than can be reconciled with the operations of heteropatriarchy, and for offering excessively 'individualistic' solutions to social problems (see Wise and Stanley, 1987: 202–8 for a somewhat exasperated response to these criticisms). CA is potentially open to the same criticisms, but it should be noted that they are

criticisms not of CA per se, but of particular kinds of approaches to research, including specifically *feminist* approaches. Rather than counterposing some imaginary unified 'feminism' on one side and CA/ethnomethodology on the other, we need to relate CA's social theory to, and engage with, wider feminist and critical discussions about social structure and human agency.

2. Participant vs Analyst Orientations

Feminism has always been deeply concerned with recovering women's own meanings and understandings about the world. The goal of feminist social science has been envisioned as 'to address women's lives and experiences *in their own terms*, to create theory grounded in the actual experience and language of women' (Du Bois, 1983: 108; emphasis in original). In much feminist research, the author states explicitly that she is trying to avoid the imposition of her own meanings or interpretations – that it is her participants' voices we hear in her work, not her own analytic preoccupations. CA makes remarkably similar claims: it 'seeks to remain faithful to members' perspectives' (Psathas, 1995: 49) and to privilege in its analysis 'the orientations, meanings, interpretations, understandings etc. of the *participants*' (Schegloff, 1997: 166). Here, then, we might expect a happy fit between feminism and CA. And, indeed, CA's concern with 'participants' own orientations to the meaning making practices of everyday life' has been described as a 'main reason' for adopting it in critical psychology (Forrester, 1999: 34).

There are, however, two problems for (some) feminists with the conversation analytic version of 'participants' orientations': first, it is incompatible with the traditional treatment of gender as a sociological variable, and second, it raises difficulties for the analyst who 'hears' in the data oppressions and power abuses not 'oriented' to by the participants. I will deal with these two issues separately.

First, in contradistinction to the feminist version of 'participant orientation', the CA version means that neither gender nor any other sociological variable can be considered in relation to the talk unless the participants themselves can be shown to orient to it. Unless participants themselves make gender relevant (by saying something like 'Ladies last!'), then, from a CA perspective, for the analyst to do so is to engage in what Schegloff (1997: 167) has called an act of 'theoretical imperialism', which imposes the analyst's preoccupation on to the participants' talk. Simply the fact that the speaker *is* a woman is not sufficient to justify analysing her talk *as* a woman, 'because she is, by the same token, a Californian, Jewish, a mediator, a former weaver, my wife, and many others' (Schegloff, 1997: 165). Many CA studies do not even report the gender of speakers: talk issues from the mouths of disembodied subjects called A, B and C.

There is a huge academic (and popular) industry – including work by many feminists – exploring whether and how talk is constructed differently by people of different genders and sexualities and claiming that women speak 'in a different voice' (Gilligan, 1982); that men 'just don't understand' (Tannen, 1990); that we are more 'co-operative speakers' than are men (Maltz and Borker, 1983;

Tannen, 1990); that we use tag questions (Lakoff, 1975) and minimal responses (Fellegy, 1995) differently; that talk between lesbian couples is more symmetrical than that between heterosexual couples (Day and Morse, 1981) or that lesbians talk differently from heterosexual women, and gay men talk differently from straight men, in relation to pitch, grammatical variation and lexical items (Jacobs, 1996). All of this is 'illicit' (Billig, 1999: 545) from a CA perspective because it imposes the analysts' categories ('male', 'female', 'heterosexual', 'lesbian' and so on) on the data, without troubling to show that the participants themselves are orienting to doing gender or sexuality in the talk. Although some researchers have drawn on CA to pursue sex-differences research (for example, West, 1979; Holmes, 1986), to do so is undoubtedly to violate some of the most fundamental ethnomethodological assumptions on which CA is based.

The unsuitability of CA for sex-differences research does not, however, render it unsuitable for feminism – only for certain types of essentialist feminism. Many feminists have been critical of sex-differences research as a feminist approach (Kitzinger, 1994), and have increasingly emphasized the need to get 'beyond binary thinking' (Bing and Bergvall, 1996) and to understand how genders (and sexualities) are socially constructed rather than being pre-existing natural facts. Sex-differences research presumes the already-existing a priori categories of 'men' and 'women', or 'heterosexuals' and 'homosexuals', but to take seriously the idea that gender and sexuality are socially constructed and continually produced and reproduced in social interaction means that instead of claiming that women talk 'like this' and men 'like that' as markers of their pre-existing identities, we need to explore how ways of talking actively *produce* speakers as males or females. Rather than seeing language use as marking a gender or sexual identity which exists prior to the act of speaking, we can understand language use as one way of producing this identity. Instead of your talk depending on who you already are, rather, who you are and who you are taken to be, depends on your repeated performance over time of the talk that *constitutes* that identity. Instead of 'how do women and men talk differently?', we can ask how particular forms of talk contribute to the production of people as 'women' and as 'men' (Cameron, 1996). There is remarkably little conversation analytic work analysing naturalistic data in which gender and sexuality just 'happen' to be present, not as pre-existing properties of people, nor as responses to formal questions about 'masculinity' and 'femininity', but realized, made relevant in interaction through what Elinor Ochs (1992) has referred to as 'indexing gender' (but see Hopper and LeBaron, 1998). This would be a useful approach for feminists to take. The idea that genders and sexualities are constructed through interaction has a long intellectual history in feminism, and finds contemporary resonance in what postmodern and queer theory have referred to as 'performativity' (Sedgwick, 1990; Butler, 1993). From this perspective, then, CA (while not compatible with essentialist feminism) is entirely compatible with (indeed, offers a method for) social constructionist, postmodern and queer theories which treat gender and sexuality as accomplishments rather than as pre-given categories.

Second, as Billig points out, one implication of CA's stricture to focus on 'participant orientations' is the prohibition of particular analytic moves predicated on the analyst's prior categorization of speakers as 'men' and 'women':

> Feminist analysts might be predisposed to 'hear' the operation of unequal gender power in interchanges between men and women. Unless the participants themselves can be heard to 'orientate' to gender issues, then this hearing of gender will be illicit (or unmandated). . . . [A]nalysts must not introduce these concerns if the participants have not done so (Billig, 1999: 545).

Suppose we, as analysts, *do* hear the 'operation of unequal gender power' in a particular conversation, and suppose further that we have no evidence that either conversationalist hears it that way. It could perhaps be an instance of what we would want to label 'sexual harassment', but for both harasser and victim it is treated as 'just life' and not oriented to as anything out of the ordinary (see Kitzinger and Thomas, 1995; Mott and Condor, 1997 for examples). Or it could perhaps be an instance of what we might want to label 'heterosexism', but for the heterosexuals involved, it is just business as usual – they fail to notice their heterosexual privilege in any way (see Kitzinger, 1990). So these are not instances in which a victim protests, or a speaker notices and makes moves to redress or to bolster an act of oppression. Instead, the surface calm of the conversation is entirely untroubled by any apparent awareness that (unequal) power has been exercised. In this situation, what can we say – either as feminists, or as conversation analysts? What warrant (if any) do we have for our claim that an act of oppression has taken place, if the participants do not orient to it as such?

Conversation analysts by and large have not been particularly interested in pursuing this question: CA usually ends with the analysis of the participants' orientations, and as most conversation analysts do not bring their politics into their research, that is all that is seen to be required. Feminists, by contrast, have been quite concerned about the relationship between their (feminist) analysis of their participants' actions and the (generally non-feminist) way in which participants themselves interpret the same behaviours. As I have discussed elsewhere (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1997), the desire to present politicized analyses of non-politicized participants, while still somehow 'validating their realities', has led to unresolved dilemmas in feminist work. Far from involving the imposition of a new and fundamentally anti-feminist requirement, then, the emphasis on participant orientations in CA simply presents feminists with an old problem in a new guise.

From my own perspective, it would be unbearably limiting to use CA if it meant that I could only describe as 'sexist' or 'heterosexist' or 'racist' those forms of talk to which actors orient as such. Indeed, it is *precisely the fact that sexist, heterosexist and racist assumptions are routinely incorporated into every-day conversations* without anyone noticing or responding to them that way which is of interest to me. How is it, for example, that an unquestioned set of mundane heterosexual assumptions regularly surface in talk in which participants do not

notice (or orient to) their own heterosexual privilege, and how does precisely this failure to orient constitute and reconstitute heterosexist reality? These questions can be addressed without violating the precepts of CA – as evidenced by Sacks's analysis of a telephone conversation between two white women, Estelle and Jeanelle, neither of whom orients in any way to the white privilege and class privilege, *yet Sacks draws our attention to precisely these features*. In the data he presents, Estelle recounts to Jeanelle a story about driving past a shop, and seeing two police cars there, which she interprets as doing their legitimate business of trying to prevent a 'coloured lady' from going 'in the main entrance where the silver is'. Here's what Sacks, the founder of CA, has to say about it:

> In her report there's, e.g., no hint of any interest in stopping and helping out, or getting worried about what's going to happen. More importantly, there's no hint that she had any fear that somehow, e.g., that policeman was about to turn to her and ask her what she was doing there. The massive comfort in her innocence, and in that legitimate audience status that she has, is something that we should give real attention to, in at least this way. It's the kind of thing that we know can be readily shaken. There are times and places where some Estelle would not feel at all that comfortable, but, passing such a scene – and you can readily imagine it – she would figure 'oh my God here I am, the first thing that happens is they're going to figure I'm involved'. And that never dawns on our Estelle. And until it dawns on her she can have no sense of an empathy with, e.g., a kid in the ghetto. Her sense of innocence affects the whole way she sees the scene. . . . What are the conditions that would lead somebody like Estelle here to at least have it cross her mind that somebody else might see her and wonder what in the world is Estelle doing there, or that when the cop turns around with his gun he's going to shoot her or tell her to halt. . . . This lady is not designing a right-wing report. All she's doing is reporting what she saw (Sacks, 1995: 185–6).

Precisely by giving careful attention to Estelle's *own* orientation to the events she is recounting, Sacks is able to analyse her account as an instance of mundane ordinary everyday racism-in-action.

The CA injunction to take participants' orientations seriously, then, raises for feminists a familiar set of dilemmas about how to be both responsive to our participants' concerns and, at the same time, to develop a feminist analysis with which they may well be in disagreement. Different feminists have resolved these dilemmas in different ways, and some of these ways are less compatible with CA than are others. Here, as elsewhere, the underlying principles of CA intersect in cross-cutting ways with the various different strands of feminist research, and need to be discussed in that context.

3. The 'Micro–Macro' Distinction

Feminist and critical psychologists often view conversation analysts as narrowly focused on 'just talk' and as ignoring the world of social institutions and brute force. This is also, of course, an accusation that has been levelled against discourse analysts – but CA, even more than DA, is seen as suffering from

'seduction with the "data"' (Forrester, 1999: 34) and represented as nit-picking, obsessively concerned with the minute details of in-breaths and hesitations, and as unable to see beyond the 'micro-' level of the 0.2 second pause, to the 'macro' level of oppression. According to feminist psychologist Margaret Wetherell, 'the problem with conversation analysts is that they rarely raise their eyes from the next turn in the conversation' (Wetherell, 1998: 402). For feminists, 'context' means the social, cultural and historical setting within which talk takes place, the institutional or hierarchical relationship of the people talking, and their location in the social order. For conversation analysts, 'context' is often reducible to the immediately preceding and subsequent turns in the conversation, from which, indeed, they may rarely raise their eyes.

But then, most conversation analysts are not feminists or critical theorists (neither, of course, are most experimentalists, or content analysts or grounded theorists), and we cannot look to current practices and expect to see feminism already in place. Rather, knowing that, of course, as feminists, we will inevitably want to focus on issues of power and oppression, the appropriate question is what, if anything, CA's 'micro' perspective has to offer us in that regard.

There is nothing intrinsic to feminist or critical approaches which mandates a cavalier attitude to the data. Feminism and careful attention to the details of talk are not incompatible – and CA's focus on talk finds resonance in a great deal of feminist interest in talk and its role in the construction of genders and sexualities. Certainly genders and sexualities are accomplished in many ways other than through talk: through the surgeon's knife, the queer-basher's fist, the sexual harasser's leer, the 'glass ceiling' in the workplace and the images on the banners and buttons at the gay pride march – but they are also produced through talk. A feminist CA would use this focus on talk to uncover the practical reasoning through which the taken-for-granted world is accomplished (and resisted) – the resources members have for sustaining a social world in which there are 'women' and 'men', 'heterosexuals' and 'homosexuals', 'normal people' and the rest of us.

The small details of talk are important because conversation analysis has established beyond reasonable doubt that people use the tiny details of talk (micro-pauses, mm hms, restarts, inbreaths and the rest) to conduct and understand the course of their interactions.

> A main thrust of the research here is the finding that far from its being the case that 'social experience [comes] at us too fast' for adequate treatment, speakers and hearers, with respect to the most mundane features of talk and interaction, orient to delicate and rather complex features of the unfolding activity in what Sacks has referred to as 'utterance time' (i.e. the standard pacing of talk) (Turner, 1974: 11).

It is not that conversation analysts suddenly decided they had an absorbing interest in micro-analysing talk and wanted to spend their lives measuring pauses in tenths of a second, or analysing the sequential implicativeness of false starts and hesitations, or the difference between 'uh huh' and 'yes' in back-

channel communication. It is that these apparently tiny and insignificant details *are relevant to the participants* in the conversation, and systematically affect what they do next, and how they do it. If we want to understand what people are saying to one another, and how they come to say it, and what it means to them, then we, as analysts, have to attend to their talk *at the same level of detail that they do*. Unless we do so, we run a serious risk of doing violence to the meaning of the data we are analysing. We can harness CA's careful and sophisticated description of the methods people use to do things in talk, and use them as resources in developing our own feminist analyses.

In Conclusion . . .

In conclusion, then, I have argued that CA is clearly compatible with, and usable for, certain kinds of feminist research. It does not fit well with sex-differences research or with essentialist feminisms in which, for example, the assumption is made that women's talk is always produced by them *as women* and is always structured by and bears the marks of their oppression. It is, however, compatible with ethnomethodology, and with the later developments of social construction- ism, postmodernism and queer theory, which see genders and sexualities as produced and reproduced through ordinary, everyday interactions – including conversation. This makes CA a useful technique for understanding how, in our ordinary, mundane interactions, we produce the social order we inhabit – in other words, how we 'do' power and powerlessness, oppression and resistance. Billig (1999: 550) is simply wrong in his claim that CA presumes 'equal rights of speakership'. As Schegloff points out, it 'does not *presume* an equalitarian society, but merely allows one' – and it also allows for *in*equalities, such that ordinary conversation:

> can thereby become a canvas on which the practices end up having painted a picture of inequality, or exclusion, or oppression, or asymmetry without a sense of oppression . . . Those who take conversation or other talk in interaction to be basically an arena of oppression should undertake to *show* that; the available tools of analysis do not preclude that showing (Schegloff, 1999: 564; emphasis in original).

CA does *not* preclude demonstrations of social inequality or power abuses, but it requires of the analyst a rather different approach to such demonstration than is current in much contemporary feminist psychological research. Harvey Sacks in fact provides such a demonstration in one of his earliest papers, first delivered as a lecture in 1966 and published in 1972. It revolves around a phrase which any- one who has spent much time around children will recognize as an opening gambit: 'you know what, Daddy?' or 'you know something, Mummy?'. Sacks analysed this phrase as a way in which children employ what later came to be called 'sequence organization' *precisely in order to deal with their problem of having unequal rights to talk*. That is, a common response to the question 'you

know what?' is another question (notably 'what?'), and, as Sacks observed, a person who has been asked a question (like 'what?') should properly speak at the next available slot, and reply to that question. So, by asking 'you know what?', a child is manoeuvring a parent into assigning him or her the right (indeed, the obligation) to speak – and on an open topic, since the answer to 'what?' in this context can be whatever the child takes to be an answer, which provides him or her with the opportunity to say whatever he or she wanted to say in the first place, but now not on his or her own say-so, but as a matter of obligation. Sacks used this analysis to observe that

> kids take it that they have restricted rights which consist of a right to begin, to make a first statement and not much more. Thereafter they proceed only if requested to. And if that is their situation as they see it, they surely have evolved a nice solution to it (Sacks, 1972: 231).

There are several important points about this analysis as they bear upon feminist concerns with rights, power and oppression. First, it uses an early formulation of the classic CA discovery of 'sequence organization' (here, reducible to the idea that if you are asked a question, the next sequentially relevant thing is to give an answer), and it uses that foundational CA discovery to talk about the operation of power and privilege in conversation, in the family home. Second, the restricted rights of children are not here an abstract theoretical concept, but are made visible through the concrete practices of social members in interaction. Anyone who doubts that children have restricted rights to talk is now faced with the task of explaining why it is that this particular practice occurs. And it would not be difficult to develop the analysis (although Sacks does not) to show that adults know perfectly well that 'you know what, Mummy?' is a bid to speak which is why, instead of answering the question with 'what?' (first part of an adjacency pair), they say things such as 'not now, Sally'. In other words, it is the social members (parents and children themselves) and not the analyst who demonstrate, through their practices, that children's rights to talk are unequal, and that this particular practice has evolved as a way in which children try to resist that inequality. This kind of analysis does *not* depend on an a priori theory of children's oppression which is imposed by the analyst on the data. Instead, children's inequality is visible in, and produced and reproduced through, the mundane practices of social members. Finally, a conversation analytic approach permits, as a social structural one does not, a proper appreciation of resistance and subversion. As Sacks says of children, 'they sure have evolved a nice solution'. As feminists and queer theorists have repeatedly emphasized of late, women, lesbians, gay men, and bisexual and transgendered folk are not simply victims of an overarching heteropatriarchal world order. We also resist and subvert it – and, of course, we are also sometimes complicit with the very processes by which we are oppressed. CA offers the opportunity to render concepts such as 'resistance' and 'complicity' less opaque than they sometimes seem in some postmodern theorizing, and instead to reveal them as concrete practices visible in talk

(see Kitzinger, 2000 for a conversation analysis of 'resistance' in the talk of breast cancer patients).

CONVERSATION ANALYSIS AND DATE RAPE: JUST SAY NO?

There is a substantial feminist social science literature which finds that young women report difficulty in refusing unwanted sex, and which concludes that many instances of date rape are the result of women not communicating clearly the fact that they do not want sex (for example, Campbell and Barnlund, 1977; Howard, 1985; Warzak and Page, 1990). Indeed, victims of sexual assault often report feeling that they 'failed to make their refusal sufficiently clear', and 45 percent of the young women in one recent study reported that they lacked effective refusal skills (Warzak et al., 1995). My co-researcher, Hannah Frith (on whose doctoral work this analysis is based), ran focus group discussions with young women between the ages of 16 and 18 and overwhelmingly they said the same sort of thing:

> You've sat there and all through it you've been thinking 'I don't want to do this, I should have said no, I should have stopped him before, and I can't stop him now, because we're half way through the swing of it all, and I'm just so stupid. Next time I'm just going to sort it all out . . .' But you never do. . . . You don't want to hurt their feelings . . . . I really try and avoid ever having to be in the situation of having to say to somebody, 'look no I'm sorry' . . . I wouldn't really risk to have a sort of flirty jokey sort of conversation with someone that I don't know very well in case they suddenly just say, 'OK, how about it', and then it would be like 'uuuuuhhhhhh!'

Young women who say things like this are diagnosed, in the social science literature, as suffering from low self-esteem, lack of assertiveness (McConnch, 1990) or as having internalized traditionally feminine gender role expectations such as passivity, submissiveness, nurturance and acquiescence to male needs (Murnen et al., 1989). They have typically been viewed as prime candidates for 'refusal skills' training – a range of procedures common to many date rape prevention, assertiveness training and social skills programmes for young women, which aim to teach them to 'just say no' clearly, directly and unapologetically. Such programmes aim 'to provide women with the skills to avoid victimization by learning to say "no" effectively' (Kidder et al., 1983) and they are backed up by a whole range of literature (both self-help and professional) offering advice on how to be assertive in refusing sex, and thereby safe from date rape.

There are many criticisms that one could make of this advice (and we have made them elsewhere, Frith and Kitzinger, 1997) – for example, the assumption that rape is somehow women's fault for not communicating properly, that rape is the result of miscommunication (rather than a blatant exercise of male power) and that date rape could be ended by teaching women to talk differently. Here, how-

ever, I want to concentrate on a different form of criticism – drawn from CA. (Note that this study – a detailed account of which is published as Kitzinger and Frith, 1999 – uses the CA literature, but does not involve us in actually doing any CA.)

The people who develop these programmes and write this literature have clearly never read any CA. They assume, for a start, that there is some problem with young women who find refusals difficult actions to perform – that they are different from the rest of us (who supposedly have more confidence, higher self-esteem, a better sense of our own worth, and are properly attentive to our own needs). And they advise young women that refusals are best accomplished through plain, unvarnished 'noes'. For example:

> It is crucial that you give a simple 'no' rather than a long-winded statement filled with excuses, justifications, and rationalizations about why you are saying 'no'. It is enough that you do not want to do this, simply because you do not want to do it (Phelps and Austin, 1987: 123–4).

Many books recommend *repeated* 'noes' (the cracked record technique, Phelps and Austin, 1987) and may labour the point that refusals should not normally be accompanied by explanations. Writing for physicans concerned to help teenagers to postpone sexual involvement, one author counsels them to 'emphasise to young teenagers that they have the right to say no' and to 'reinforce the idea that they do not have to give a reason or explanation': they should just 'say "no" and keep repeating it' (Howard, 1985: 87).

When we looked at the CA literature for descriptions of how refusals are actually done, we found it completely at variance with these prescriptions. What the CA literature on 'dispreferreds' shows, based on analysis of naturally occurring conversations in which people either accept or refuse invitations (or offers, or proposals or whatever), is that acceptances and refusals follow very different patterns. Acceptances do, indeed, often involve 'just saying yes', but refusals very rarely involve 'just saying no'. Here are some 'acceptances':[1]

> A: Why don't you come up and <u>see</u> me some[time
> B: [I would like to
> (Atkinson and Drew, 1979: 58).

> A: <u>We</u>:ll, will you help me [ou:t.
> B: [I certainly wi:ll.
> (Davidson, 1984: 116).

By contrast, refusals are much more complicated phenomena.

Refusal 1

> *Mark*: We were wondering if you wanted to come over Saturday, f'r dinner.
>   (0.4)
> *Jane*: Well (.) .hh it'd be great but we promised Carol already.
> (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 86).

Refusal 2

> A: Uh if you'd care to come and visit a little while this morning I'll give you a
>   cup of <u>co</u>ffee.
> B: hehh Well that's awfully sweet of you. I don't think I can make it this
>   morning. .hh uhm I'm running an ad in the paper and-and uh I have to stay
>   near the phone.
>   (Atkinson and Drew, 1979: 58).

CA shows that refusals are routinely designed to incorporate at least some of the following features:

(i) Delays – for example, pauses and hesitations, like the four-tenths of a second pause in Refusal 1 and the filled pause (hehh) in Refusal 2.

(ii) Prefaces or hedges – such as uh, um or well.

(iii) Palliatives – for example, appreciations, apologies, token agreements and so on, which seem designed to alleviate the pain caused by the refusal – compliments such as 'it'd be great' (in Refusal 1) or 'that's awfully sweet of you' in Refusal 2 are typical. Other palliatives include accompanying a refusal with a delayed acceptance ('not today, but tomorrow') or with the offer of an alternative ('I can't come round to your place, but why don't you come to me?')

(iv) Accounts – that is, explanations, justifications or excuses for why the invitation isn't being accepted – such as a prior engagement or commitment in both of the examples above. It is also common for people to present accounts that suggest that it is not that they're *choosing* not to accept the invitation – it is that they *cannot* (they're unable, rather than unwilling) and for refusals to be qualified or mitigated in some way (as in '*I don't think* I can make it this morning').

So CA shows us that if young women find it difficult to give clear, immediate direct 'noes' in sexual situations, that might be because that is not how refusals are normatively done. Refusals are usually delayed, indirect and accompanied by palliatives or accounts, and simply saying no is often experienced as rude or hostile. Our first finding, then, is that refusal skills training programmes seem to be offering advice that does not adequately capture the reality of how refusals are done.

Now, the data we have collected are tape-recorded interactions in which young women *talk about* doing refusals, not in which such refusals were actually being done, and we have analysed these data using *discourse* analysis to explore how these particular accounts are constructed interactionally by young women who are doing various things other than simply faithfully reporting their experiences of sexual negotiation to the focus group moderator. In various publications we have shown how they manage issues of reputation, how they display themselves as sexually knowledgeable and competent actors (but not 'sluts') and how they position themselves as emotionally literate and strong, compared with their male partners (for example, Frith and Kitzinger, 1998; Frith, 1999). From a CA per-

spective, though, it is worth noting that, although young women do not, of course, use terms such as 'dispreferred' or 'palliative', their talk *about* refusals does embody a lay version of conversation analytic discoveries. When asked why they don't 'just say no', they explain that that would feel 'rude' or 'foolish', and they describe the 'best' explanations or excuses as those which assert their *inability* rather than their *unwillingness* to engage in sex (illness, menstruation, a parent's imminent arrival home, not having contraception). They say that it is a good idea to qualify or mitigate refusals in some way ('one way is not to say no as in you never want to, but no as in not now', or 'I'm not ready yet, can we wait a while', or 'I want to keep it for a special time'). And they explicitly state that it is a good idea to offer (what conversation analysts call) palliatives in refusing sex: 'well it's very flattering of you to ask' or 'you're a really nice guy and I do like you, but . . .'). This contrasts sharply with the date rape prevention literature on refusal skills, which emphasizes 'I have a right to say no without explaining my reasons' (Muehlenhard et al., 1989), models statements of *unwillingness* rather than *inability* as paradigmatic assertive behaviour ('I just don't want to', Smith, 1975) and actively advises against offering accounts or palliatives:

> Telling the man that you do not want to have sex by saying things like 'I really don't know if we should do this', 'not now, can't we wait' or 'I really like you but I'm not sure' is not effective. All these statements can be misconstrued as meaning that you need a little more urging to become cooperative (Wiseman, 1994: 65).

So our second finding is that these young women are already able to articulate some of what conversation analysts have discovered about how refusals are normatively done, and they use the knowledge they have about doing refusals to criticize and to resist the advice to 'just say no'.

   Furthermore, CA has important implications for refusal skills training pro-grammes based on the slogan 'just say no' because it demonstrates conclusively that it is not necessary to say 'no' in order to refuse an invitation or request effectively, and to have a refusal heard *as* a refusal. Neither of the two refusals quoted above contains the word 'no'. In fact, one of the most potent indicators of a refusal is a short delay in responding. Here are some of the classic examples from CA in which speakers, hearing the silences that follow their requests or invitations, indicate that they are anticipating refusals:

> C: So I was wondering would you be in your office on Monday (.) by any
>   chance?
>   (2.0)
>   Probably not.
>   (Levinson, 1983: 320).
>
> R: What about coming here on the way
>   (.)
>   Or doesn't that give you enough time?
>   (Levinson, 1983: 335).

C: Well you can <u>both</u> stay.
(0.4)
Got plenty a' room.
(Davidson, 1984: 10).

Palliatives are also often heard as refusals in and of themselves. In one example (Antaki, 1994: 81), someone responds to a lunch invitation by saying:

N: Well, you're real sweet, hon:, uh::m

That is all he says, but it is enough to constitute an implied refusal – the person making the invitation comes in next with 'or do you have something else'. If in everyday conversation a simple palliative is heard as implying refusal, then young women who respond to sexual invitations with palliatives such as 'well I do like you' or 'it's flattering to be asked' should likewise be heard as implying refusal, especially if these responses are preceded by a couple of tenths of a second of silence. Furthermore, in ordinary naturally occurring conversation, weak *agreements* (such as half-hearted 'yeahs' or 'uh huhs') are often heard and reacted to as if they imply *dis*agreement or refusal. For example:

A: .hhhhh Uh will you call 'im tunight for me,=
B: =eYea:h
   (.)
A: <u>Plea</u>::se,
   (Davidson, 1984: 113).

So, CA shows us that refusals do not have to be – in fact, generally are not – emphatic, direct and immediate 'noes'. They are signalled by relatively subtle cues such as pauses, palliatives and even weak agreements. It is not normally necessary to say no to be heard as refusing – pausing, hedging, producing a palliative and even delayed or weak acceptances, are typically understood as refusals. So it seems that young women responding to unwanted sexual pressure are using absolutely normal conversational patterns for refusals. That is, they apparently find it impossible to 'just say no'; they pause, hedge, compliment the man, offer excuses, sometimes even refuse sex with the kinds of 'yes's' which are normatively understood as meaning 'no'. The feminist and date rape prevention literatures present refusals of this kind as inadequate and insufficiently communicative. We offer a different explanation.

If there is an organized and normative way of doing refusal, which provides for culturally understood ways in which 'maybe later' or 'I do like you but . . .' means 'no', then men who claim not to have understood are claiming to be cultural dopes and playing rather disingenuously on how refusals are usually done and understood to be done. They are claiming not to understand perfectly normal conversational interaction and laying claim to an implausible and clearly self-interested ignorance of normative conversational patterns. As feminists, we have allowed men, disingenuously claiming not to understand these normative

conversational conventions, to set the agenda, such that we have accepted the need to educate women to produce refusals that men cannot claim to have 'misunderstood'. The date rapist's self-interested capacity for misunderstanding will always outstrip young women's earnest attempts to explain. On the basis of this analysis we suggest that the insistence of date rape educators on the importance of just saying no is counter-productive in that it requires women to engage in conversationally abnormal actions and allows rapists to persist in their claim that, if a woman hasn't actually said no (in the right tone of voice with the right body language), then she hasn't actually refused to have sex with him.

CONVERSATION ANALYSIS AND COMING OUT: *OR* HOW TO COME OUT WITHOUT ANYONE NOTICING

Lesbian and gay psychology has produced an enormous literature on 'coming out' to others as lesbian, gay, bisexual or as having (had) same-sex sexual experiences. There is substantial *quantitative* research in which coming out to others (or, more accurately, self-report of having come out to others on some kind of questionnaire measures or 'disclosure scales') is correlated with self-esteem, mental health or levels of social support (for example, Schachar and Gilbert, 1983; Franke and Leary, 1991), generating findings such as 'the more widely a woman disclosed her sexual orientation the less anxiety, more positive affectivity, and greater self-esteem she reported' (Jordan and Deluty, 1998: 41–2). In quantitative research such as this, the experience of 'coming out' is subordinated to an investigation of its psychological and social sequelae. *Qualitative* work on coming out relies overwhelmingly on retrospective self-report: lesbians and gay men are asked, in interviews, to describe how they came out, and this is usually taken as a (more or less) adequate reflection of how their coming out was actually done (for example, Edgar, 1994; Cain, 1996). This naturalistic approach to 'coming out' stories treats interviewees as informants transparently revealing truths about themselves and their world – 'telling it how it really was' (for example, Gagné et al., 1997; Shakespeare, 1999). Other work treats retrospective self-report as a form of sexual story telling (for example, Plummer, 1995) and investigates them for their 'narrative iconicity' (Wood, 1997) or 'creation of coherence' (Liang, 1997). What does not exist in the lesbian and gay psychology literature is any study in which 'coming out' – the act of disclosure itself – is the primary data source, that is in which 'coming out' is actually captured as a live event.

By accident, I happen to have (so far) 12 instances of 'coming out' on audiotape. They come from a variety of sources including focus groups and training sessions, but most (including the two presented here) are taken from small group seminar sessions with undergraduate students, run as part of the 'Human Sexualities' module at Loughborough University, recorded, with students' signed permission and informed consent, for ongoing research by several members of

the department on how sexuality is produced through talk.[2] My interest, as a feminist, in this coming out data was initially prompted by what seemed to be a bewildering absence of response to the 'comings out' on the part of the audience (including, in four cases, me). In what I've come to think of as the mundane form of everyday coming out for people in relatively safe environments, nobody expresses disgust, talks about hell fire and damnation, or accuses anyone of being a disgusting pervert – but equally, nobody says 'congratulations!' or 'that's wonderful', or even gives any indication that they've registered the information. And yet I know from other discussions with the students who were coming out in these settings, or who had been the audiences for the comings out of others, that these were intensely important experiences. Coming out was extensively discussed beforehand, experienced as important and significant at the time, and considered newsworthy enough to report to other people afterwards – and yet, at the time the coming out was being done, nobody (me included) reacted to it in this way. There is virtually nothing in the lesbian and gay research literature which addresses the issue of lack of response, nor is there any consideration by feminist or critical psychologists about the political implications of these 'non-responses' to coming out. These, then, are the data extracts to which I am currently applying CA techniques in an attempt to gain a better understanding of how coming out is achieved and reacted to.

In this first example, I am leading a seminar discussion on intersexuality and the students are discussing how they would feel if they learned that someone they were attracted to was intersex, and the implications of that for their sexual identities. In this context, an undergraduate ('Linda') comes out as having found herself attracted to a woman a few years before. Other than a few 'mms' in response to this information, neither I nor any student in the group gives any reaction at all – and I've cropped the transcript at the point where I launch into an account of sexual script theory.

Linda Comes Out

```
01  Kate:    I think it would change y- your concept of (0.2)
02           of (.) w- what it is that attracts you to somebody
03           (0.2) and i- their sex would n-not not be that feature,
04           perhaps¿
05           (1.0)
06  Kate:    Have I explained what I mean? I'm not sure whether I've
07           said what I me(hh)an.
08  CK:      So y- (0.4) inst- (.) I mean, >I think a lot of lesbians
09           and gay people use that argument anyway which is that
10           it's not< (.)
11  Kate:    [mmm]
12  CK:      [ t h e ] sex, it's the person [I  think]
13  Kate:                              [Yeah, I]
14           think my brain w'ld, it'd do it that way.=
15  Linda:   =It does, it does have an effect on you because (0.2)
```

```
16          if you've thought of yourself as heterosexual (1.0)
17          and you (.) >suddenly find yourself attracted to a woman
18          °it happened to me,< (0.2) a few years ago°
19          it's very (0.8) disturbing, [in  a] way it's=
20  CK:                              [mm ]
21  Linda:  =it's (0.2) makes you very anxious (.)
22          because you then don't know how you're supposed to respond=
23  CK:     =mm[mm=
24  Linda:  =    [and (.) if you e- found out that your partner was an
25          intersex you would wonder (.) >how do I respond to this
26          person sexually< I don't know (.) how to approach, how
27          to be romantic how to (.) what this person expects
28          from me, whereas if you (.) think of- you know of
29          yourself as heterosexual, then you know (0.2) the
30          responses you know how to interact.
31          [So it's those kind of]
32  CK:     [There's a sort of set of] guidelines, aren't there,
33  ?:      mmm
34  CK:     for how to (.) how to do sexual interaction
```

In this extract, then, Linda tells us that she was sexually attracted to a woman a few years ago, and it creates barely a ripple on the surface of the conversation about intersex.

In the second example, it is the teaching assistant running the seminar discussion ('Pat') who comes out as having been heterosexual and now being lesbian. The extract is taken from about half an hour into the seminar, and students are supposed to be evaluating different theories of sexuality: as the extract opens, Pat is discussing the criteria upon which they might base this evaluation. Again, there's apparently no response at all – and I've cropped the extract at the point at which the students move off into a discussion about conversion therapies for homosexuality.

Pat Comes Out

```
01 Pat:   So: (0.4) um, (0.4) th- that's another thing to kind of
02         think about t- and to be aware of when you're kind of
03         evaluating different theories of (.) of of sexuality
04         is y'know (.) is it explaining simply who
05         people chose to (.) or who people have sex with (.)
06         or is it explaining (.) .hh you know I mean what people
07         often refer as a kind of a lifestyle, y'know,
08         how they live their lives, who they live with and so on.
09         .hhh um (2.0) I mean living (0.4) living with a woman is
10         quite different from living with a ma:n I think. (0.2)
11         I mean, I've been heterosexual and I'm now lesbian
12         and I certainly experience being in a relationship with
13         a woman as very different from being in a relationship
14         with a man .hhh and (.) it's not just kind of hinged around
15         (0.4) kind of the sex and who you're sleeping with
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```
16        <there's a whole kind of (.) there's a whole big aspect of
17        sexuality and sexual identity that I think theories often
18        (.) miss out on and they reduce it to questions of who
19        you're sleeping with and not >you know< more broadly who you
20        are um (.) oka:y, w- what evidence is there that sexuality
21        can change?
22        (0.2)
```
23 *Dave*: There was that Exodus thing
24 *Pat*:   uh huh
25 *Dave*: um (0.2) it's like a christian organisation I think that
26   focuses on the fact that um homosexuality is a sin (.)
27 *Pat*:   uh huh

Many of Harvey Sacks's *Lectures on Conversation* are devoted to explorations of how people methodically achieve recognizable conversational actions without paying some negative price associated with them: how to avoid giving your name without refusing to give it; how to avoid giving help without refusing it; how to get help without requesting it; how to talk in a therapy session without revealing yourself. Part of what my analysis suggests is that many of us have developed a technique which could be called 'How to come out without anybody noticing'.

CA asks that we understand these 'coming out' utterances not only as a matter of information transfer from the person coming out to their co-conversationalists, but also as actions in interactional sequence. Conveying new information is not the same thing as announcing news: not all new information conveyed is set up by speakers to be treated as news by the person to whom it is told. There is, for example, a substantial CA literature on breaking 'bad news' (for example, of serious diagnoses and deaths), which shows a range of devices used to avoid one person being heard to tell another bad news, while also ensuring that the information is imparted. In ordinary conversation, news telling can be organized so that the recipient, rather than the bearer of the news, ends up pronouncing it (Schegloff, 1988) and clinicians presenting parents with a diagnosis of mental retardation in their child use particular strategies to present the diagnosis as a simple 'confirmation' of something the parent already knows (Maynard, 1992). So, although the comings out I have collected do, as it happens, convey new information to the listeners about the speakers' sexuality, the first thing to observe, from a CA perspective, is that speakers are not doing 'news announcement'. Undoubtedly, there are some comings out which do news announcement, and which we can recognize as such: they begin with classic phrases (pre-announcements) like 'Mum, I've got something to tell you', or 'Guess what? I'm gay.' News announcement normatively makes relevant from the recipient an acknowledgement of news receipt and assessment of the information so conveyed. When 'comings out' are done as news announcement, then, they would make relevant assessments which can be anything from 'Oh no! it'll kill your father' to 'Oh, that's wonderful, I'm so pleased for you'. But Linda, Pat and the other 10 comings out I am analysing are not doing news announcements. Instead, information about the speaker's sexuality is conveyed as an aside, as a list item

or as a passing instance or illustration of some other point altogether. *Not* presenting information about one's sexuality as news has decisive consequences for shaping the course of the talk's development. If it is not announced as news, recipients have to work hard to receive it as such.

There's something else, though, about the construction of this coming out talk which makes audience response to it as news unlikely, and that's the location of the information in the turn-taking organization. Turn-taking organization is one of those classic areas of CA with which feminists and other radicals are often most impatient – but it offers a powerful tool for understanding why it is that these recipients of comings out do not react. Information about the speaker's sexuality is often deeply embedded within turn constructional units in ways that would render as interruptive any acknowledgement or assessment of this information from a co-conversationalist.

In Sacks et al.'s (1974) classic paper on turn-taking, they propose a model for conversation which seeks to explain the practices people use for ensuring – with systematic and orderly exceptions explainable by the theory itself – how it is that people in conversation overwhelmingly speak one at a time. The model proposes the existence of turn constructional units (TCUs), which can be whole sentences, phrases or sometimes just words, but which are recognizable (in context) as potentially constituting a complete turn. Each speaker is initially entitled to just *one* of these: after that, another speaker has the right (sometimes the obligation) to speak next. The model is complex and sophisticated and I have oversimplified it radically, but the key point of relevance here is that the turn-taking organization is not indifferent to the size of the turns parties take: rather, its 'underlying (though supercessable) organization is designed to minimize turn size' (Schegloff, 1982: 73) and consequently we need to understand long turns, with lengthy and/or multiple TCUs, as 'achievements and accomplishments' (Schegloff, 1982: 73) which have overcome the inherent bias of the system.

In the coming out episodes, the speaker, the one who is coming out, uses *long* TCUs, and *many* TCUs – and as CA shows us, that is something which has to be worked at: it does not just happen. Conversation analysts have documented some of the techniques people use when they want to keep speaking for a long time. Long TCUs can be accomplished by using particular sentence structures (such as 'if/then') which are hearably not complete until a second part of the sentence (such as the 'then' part) has been produced. People can project a long TCU simply by taking a big in-breath: studies show that in-breaths put hearers on the alert for a long (possibly multi-unit) turn. Multi-unit turns can be secured at the beginning of a speaker's turn by making a bid to tell a story ('did you hear about the time when . . .); by using a list launcher ('four things . . .'); and by using 'markedly first verbs' (such as 'I thought . . .' or 'I tried . . .', which are regularly used to mark things incorrectly thought, or unsuccessfully tried, and therefore project accounts of what is now known, or an account of failure). Speakers may also employ methodical devices for achieving multi-unit turns during the course of their talk. They may 'rush through' a possible transition point – talking right

through the intersection between one TCU and the next, not pausing to take a breath until a point of maximum grammatical control (that is, where it is obvious that the speaker is not complete). Even more radically, speakers sometimes prevent the end of a TCU (and hence possible speaker transition) from occurring simply by not uttering the last word or syllable of the TCU. (For all this, and more, see Schegloff, 1982.) Although critics have poured scorn on the turn-taking organization research as a tedious political irrelevance which (as in Billig's rape example) could only obscure the operation of power, Schegloff (1999: 563) has said that 'those committed to analyzing forms of inequality and oppression in interaction might do better to harness this account of turn-taking organization as a *resource* for their undertaking than to complain of it as an ideological distraction' (emphasis in original). And that is exactly what we can do here.

If we look back at Linda's coming out, we see that she embeds her coming out in the middle of an 'if/then' structure ('if you've thought of yourself as heterosexual . . .' [line 16]/'[then] it's very disturbing' [line 19] – although the 'then' isn't actually spoken) which projects the first possible transition place to well *after* her coming out. In addition, at line 19, at exactly the point where the TCU is reaching possible completion, and speaker transition becomes relevant, she augments it with another unit which acts as a 'pivot' to get her across the transition place from the end of one TCU to the beginning of the next. The pivot ('in a way', line 19) is both the last part of one TCU and the beginning of the next TCU: 'it's very disturbing in a way'/'In a way it's it's makes you very anxious'. By using the pivot to get her across the possible transition space, Linda again postpones her co-conversationalists' opportunity to offer any acknowledgement or appraisal of the information she has imparted. After using an 'and' (line 24) to indicate 'still not finished', she then launches another TCU which again uses an if/then structure (and a listing device) to maximally extend the turn. By the time CK, who is leading the seminar group, comes in at the next possible transition place – and note that even here Linda keeps talking (lines 31 and 32 are in overlap) – it is far too late to respond to 'it happened to me a few years ago'. In sum, Linda actively uses the turn-taking organization of conversation to extend her turn beyond her coming out moment to decrease the likelihood of anyone offering an assessment of, or any other response to, it. And in fact no one does.

We see a similar example of an extended turn construction in Pat's talk. She begins by making a general point about the difference between living with a woman and living with a man, and her 'coming out' is nicely embedded as a sort of 'take me, for instance', following which she continues her turn, filling the relevant slot in which the recipient would otherwise be expected to respond, with a clearly audible in-breath and an 'and' (line 14) which indicates that she is not yet finished, so warding off challenge, questions or assessment, and subsequently pausing only at places in her talk which are clearly grammatically incomplete (lines 15, 16 and 18). At lines 19–20, she reaches the projectable end of her TCU 'and not more broadly who you are' – and intonationally it is clear that some

ending is required (such as 'spending your life with', for example). But Pat doesn't supply any ending: she simply fails to complete her TCU (thereby avoiding possible speaker transition relevance), signals topic change with an 'oka:y', and asks a question – which makes sequentially relevant an answer to the question so posed, and not any comments, questions or assessment related to her earlier statement that she's 'been heterosexual' and is 'now lesbian'. Like Linda, Pat uses the turn-taking system of conversation to make discussion of her coming out unlikely. And, indeed, nobody does discuss it. As with Linda's coming out, it is not treated as a noticeable, commentable-on piece of information.

So, what political relevance can be derived from this conversation analysis of the turn-taking structure of coming out talk? Linda and Pat (and others in data not presented here) are coming out, but they are using the turn-taking organization to avoid their sexuality becoming topicalized, and they are conveying the information about their sexuality in a 'not news' format (as an instance or example of something else). The design of these comings out is attentive to, and hence can be used to explore, the conditions of our oppression in (at least) two ways.

First, they are attentive to the accusation of 'flaunting it' – to the complaint 'I don't mind gays but why must they be so blatant?'. Their construction as 'not news', as conversational asides, and their embeddedness in long turns, is designed precisely *not* to flaunt, not to draw attention to, not to make an issue of it – to slip it into the conversation so as to make it public, but in a way that is demonstrably relevant to the conversation, displayed as being an instance or piece of evidence in support of some other point. Another reason why coming out might be done in this way is to mark some kind of resistance to the whole idea of coming out, to the notion that it should be necessary; that unless we announce as newsworthy our difference from a presumed heterosexual norm, then we can legitimately be assumed to be heterosexual. As recent theorists have suggested, there is a sense in which coming out colludes with the notion that before we came out, we were hiding, and that in letting other people know our sexuality, we are revealing the past deception of the closet. By making lesbianism an aside, an instance, a deliberately casual exemplar of something else, these young women may be invoking and constructing the notion that that's indeed all it is (or all it should be), that – in fact – there is nothing of note *to* 'flaunt'. Coming out in a way that clearly avoids 'flaunting' sexuality as a newsworthy, commentable-on piece of information can be seen, then, both as collusion with the heterosexual imperative *not* to be public about our sexuality, and equally as a resistance to the whole notion that our sexuality can be assumed to be heterosexual unless we announce to the contrary.

Second, there's a protective element in these comings out: they are both protective of others and self-protective. By embedding information about the speaker's sexuality in the middle of turn construction units, or in following them with multiple TCUs, speakers protect the recipients from having to produce a response. Both the location of the information, and its structure as 'not news' (as an aside, or instance), provides for recipients to hear it and yet not to have to

deal with it there and then. Hearers are insulated by subsequent talk against the potential shock value of the information they are receiving. It is a way in which speakers protect others from being potentially crass recipients of the delicate information conveyed – and, of course, protect themselves from having to deal with such potentially crass responses. In continuing to analyse these data, I hope to develop a better understanding of the politics of coming out in everyday situations.

DOING FEMINIST CA

Feminists have used a variety of different approaches for developing theory and practice in relation both to date rape and to coming out as lesbian. The social science literature on both topics includes a great deal of qualitative work (analysed using thematic analysis, discourse analysis, grounded theory, narrative approaches and so on) as well as feminist surveys, questionnaires, tests and experiments. What unites these disparate studies as 'feminist' – across a range of different epistemological, methodological and ontological assumptions – is their commitment to creating social and political change. In this article, I have demonstrated that CA, too, can be used for feminist purposes.

   As we have seen, 'the trouble with conversation analysis . . .', according to feminist and radical critics, is threefold: its (ethnomethodological) social theory; its emphasis on participant rather than analyst orientations; and its attention on the micro-details of interaction. In applying CA to date rape, and to coming out, I have illustrated how these alleged 'troubles' are in fact strengths which enable the development of a clearly feminist analysis.

   First, the social theory of CA means that my analyses were based on an ethnomethodological concern with members' methods for doing refusals, or doing 'coming out', as that knowledge is displayed *in action* – that is, through what they actually say and do. Whether 'doing refusal' or 'doing coming out', women are conceptualized as active agents, and as participants in the social world, rather than simply as victims of heteropatriarchal structures.

   Second, in line with the CA focus on 'participant orientations', neither analysis is framed up as a sex- (or sexualities-) differences study: by contrast, I assumed that cultural 'members' (male and female) understand refusals in the same way; nor did I seek to make comparisons between (say) bisexual vs lesbian comings out, or undergraduate vs teaching assistant comings out. Instead of subordinating the data analysis to already existing a priori categories of gender, sexuality or other dimensions of social power, the aim was to explore how genders, sexualities and power are accomplished in interaction. The studies show how actions (refusals or comings out) are actively designed in relation to the actions of others – and in the design of those actions, and in others' responses to them, we as analysts can see the everyday (sexist and heterosexist) world under construction. In feminist CA, oppression and resistance are not simply abstract theoretical

concepts but become visible as concrete practices (like 'misunderstanding', or 'not doing news announcement') of social members in interaction. In the 'coming out' data, for example – as in Sacks's Estelle and Jeanelle example – nothing much happens, and it is precisely how it is that nothing much gets to happen, how the conversation is constructed as 'business as usual' which provides the analytic interest.

Finally, these analyses would simply not have been possible without a fine-grained analysis of the data at the level of which participants themselves produce and respond to the talk. The conversation analytic work on 'dispreferreds', sequence organization and turn-taking requires analysts to be sensitive to micro-pauses, in-breaths, intonational changes and other small details of talk, because these are relevant to the participants and are part of the mundane way in which the social order is routinely produced and reproduced.

In conclusion, I hope I have made a case for including CA among our array of analytic approaches. As feminists we need to understand and to counter overt violence, legal discrimination and institutionalized oppression – but the politics of the personal means understanding too the routine everyday talk through which we collude with (or resist) the social order.

NOTES

1. Transcription symbols used in the data extracts are the conventional conversation analytic ones as developed by Gail Jefferson and Emanuel Schegloff (see Atkinson and Heritage, 1984, for a useful summary).
2. With thanks to Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke, Liz Peel and Sue Wilkinson for passing on to me the audiotapes of these coming out episodes, without which this research would not have been possible. I am also grateful to Sue Wilkinson for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

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