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ON SACKS AS LINGUIST

Abstract

Truly original thinkers know no disciplinary boundaries. Sacks is generally thought of as a sociologist, with a primary interest in the possibility of social order. However, in investigating the workings of social organization, Sacks soon discovered that, as an indispensable enabler of that organization, language (as indexical expressions) plays a critical role, and needs to be meticulously observed and unpacked. To this end, he goes to great lengths in almost every one of his lectures to show how the most unexceptional bits of language often turns out to work in previously unnoticed and unimaginable ways. By associating Sacks with the category “linguist”, we do not mean to pigeon-hole a trailblazer who is uncategorizable. Rather, our aim is to show that there is much in Sacks’s highly original work that is still relevant, and indeed valuable, to students of language, even to this day. Within the space of this article, we confine ourselves to two of Sacks’s paradigm-shifting insights on grammar. These include his treatment of collaborative utterances and personal pronouns.

Keywords: Harvey Sacks, linguistics, indexical expressions, collaborative utterances, personal pronouns, grammar-for-conversation

INTRODUCTION

Truly original thinkers know no disciplinary boundaries. Marie Curie's pioneering work that cut across physics and chemistry earned her two Nobel Prizes, one in each subject. Sacks is equally "uncategorizable". He is generally regarded as a sociologist, as his primary interest is in the possibility of social order, or in what Schegloff has aptly termed "the primordial site of sociality" [Schegloff 1992b: 1296]. In investigating the workings of social organization, Sacks soon discovered that, as part and parcel of that organization, talk can be meticulously analysed and unpacked to reveal the orderliness that one finds "at all points" [Sacks 1992 I: 484]. To this end, he goes to great lengths in almost every one of his lectures to show how the most unexceptionable-looking bits of language often turns out to be being put to work by conversational participants in unimaginable ways. Looking back now, the intellectual space that Sacks was traversing and exploring is one that in current parlance might be called the interdisciplinary crossroads between sociology, psychology, and linguistics [Watson 1987].

The generally accepted view, at least among linguists, is that even though there is little doubt about the originality, even brilliance, of Sacks's analysis of talk, he was preoccupied in the first instance with sociological, not linguistic, theory. Sacks did not train as a linguist, and he certainly did not claim to be one. As he says in the General Introduction to his Fall 1967 lectures, "It wasn't from any large interest in language, or from some theoretical formulation of what should be studied" that he decided to "play around with tape recorded conversations" [Sacks 1992 I: 622]. And as Fitzgerald [2019] has shown, in his study of the UCLA "Harvey Sacks papers" archive, "[Sacks] did not stop collecting all and any form of data that gave him access in examining the particular thing he was interested, [these] different forms of data including newsprint, overheard conversations, stories, his own recollections, comic books, classic, and contemporary research reports and of course transcriptions of interactions" [Fitzgerald 2019: 211]. To Sacks, the set of calls to the suicide prevention centre just happened to have been made available to him for open and repeated inspection, and, as "a good enough record of what happened" [Sacks 1984: 26], was as good a point of entry as any for the purpose of studying members' methods for conducting social life.

Be that as it may, if we take a step back and consider Sacks's copious oeuvre, which includes both his lectures (two volumes totalling 1,380 pages) and writings (papers on turn-taking, repair, membership categorization), it is hard not to acknowledge his special interest in language. Indeed, given the amount of time and energy that Sacks had devoted to phone calls and dialogues, to speak of Sacks's

deep engagement with talk as an “interest” would surely be an understatement. After all, until his untimely death in 1975, Sacks had spent hundreds of hours analysing and lecturing on his conversational materials. In almost every lecture he would pick up bits of talk from here and there and start unpacking it to a level of nuance and detail that had never been thought possible. The ingenuity and meticulousness with which he goes about doing this “detective work” should be recognized for what it is, as a real inspiration to the linguists in their incessant search for a scientific theory of language. What’s more, as I aim to show in this paper, on countless occasions Sacks did engage in in-depth discussions of topics dear to the linguist’s heart – grammatical classes, syntactic structures, word meanings and more. Through these passages, we may catch a glimpse of Sacks’s refreshing and enlightening take on the linguist’s toolkit, and his immense foresight into the future directions of that academic enterprise. Sacks may not have gone out of his way looking for language, but language came to him. And once he got started, there was no turning back.

By associating Sacks with the category “linguist”, I do not mean to pigeon-hole a trailblazer who is uncompartmentalizable. I merely wanted to suggest that there is perhaps a “little linguist” in Sacks’s heart, as he engages and struggles with his data. Sacks’s love for “fabulously bland utterance[s]” [Sacks 1992 I: 740] and his imaginative ways of untangling their intricacies resonate well with linguists, who are known for their passion for the quirks of language. I do believe that there is more that the linguist can learn from Sacks than meets the eye.

Within the space of this article, it will only be possible to give a few examples of Sacks’s eye-opening and paradigm-shifting insights on language. And it is to these that we now turn.

COLLABORATIVE UTTERANCES

Let’s begin with a well-known piece of data from one of Sacks’s earlier lectures (Fall 1965, Lecture 3) – Donald Duck’s “three little ducklings” and their “collaborative utterance” [Sacks 1992 I: 144–145]:

- 1 *Joe*: (cough) We were in an automobile discussion,
- 2 *Henry*: discussing the psychological motives for
- 3 *Mel*: drag racing on the streets.

Recall that Joe, Henry, and Mel are three teenagers undergoing group therapy sessions. On the day of this recording, a new member Bob has arrived on the scene for the first time, and the therapist has just completed a round of introductions.

In a characteristically Sacksian fashion, Sacks first showed this datum in one of his Fall 1965 lectures, made some initial comments on it, then came back to it several times in the course of the next three years, refining and adding more details. Based on these comments, we may distil some of Sacks's key observations on these three lines of talk as follows.

First, as should be obvious (to any lay observer, for example), we have a case here of three speakers constructing a sentence together. Jointly building a sentence is presumably a smart way for the three teenagers to address the newcomer as a team. Here, Sacks draws our attention to the known but often forgotten fact that sentences, while typically tied to a single speaker, is only incidentally so. Its true nature, its essence if you like, is not a speaker-based object. Not a mental representation residing in the speaker's head, but a social object, a product designed to serve a specific interactional purpose. Once we realize this, then, in Sacks's (Fall 1967, Lecture 4) words, "...the idea that a sentence is somebody's property would be considerably weakened" [Sacks 1992 I: 653].

Next, we are invited by Sacks to consider, in some detail, *how* the co-construction is achieved. In line 1, Joe delivers an utterance ("We were in an automobile discussion") that has all the appearances of an invitation, in the sense that, being offered as a formulation of "what the group was doing", and given the immediate context (of a newcomer having just been introduced to the group), it is readily recognizable as an invitation (or pre-invitation) for Bob to join the group in its ongoing "automobile discussion" [Heritage, Watson 1979]. In unpacking line 1, Sacks highlights two key features. One, having reached a point of possible completion, Joe's utterance could stand on its own as an invitation on behalf of the group (with or without Henry's subsequent "intervention"). Two, with the use of "we" in a sense that excludes Bob, Joe makes it clear that his remark is addressed to Bob on behalf of the group.

By pointing to the status of Joe's line 1 as a possible standalone utterance, Sacks is drawing our attention to the design of Henry's immediately subsequent contribution ("discussing the psychological motives for") as an extension. A key feature of this extension is its timing. Coming right after Joe's just-completed utterance, Henry's line 2 is timed to begin *before* Joe could (potentially) go on to deliver another unit – something along the lines of "Wanna join us?", for example. By the same token, it is timed to occur *before* Bob could (again potentially) respond to Joe's invitation with something along the lines of "Mind if I join you?", for example.

To describe Henry's method, Sacks introduces a "second speaker rule" [1992 I: 323]. A second speaker rule, according to Sacks, is one where a conversational

participant designs and delivers a spate of talk right on the heels of a prior spate of talk in such a way as to make it recognizable as a “second”, i.e., as an extension or completion of the just-prior spate of talk. Specifically, in terms of its shape and configuration, that second spate of talk must necessarily be “headless”, i.e., comes with a beginning that does not start with a beginning, as Schegloff [1996: 77] memorably puts it in the sense that its existence as (part of) a complete (or fuller) utterance is dependent upon the just prior unit, to which it is now being fitted.

In the case of our three-part utterance, Henry’s contribution does indeed come with a “headless beginning”: a “participial clause” introduced by the word “discussing” which in this specific context (following Joe’s “automobile discussion”) and on this particular occasion (a group therapy session) is readily recognizable as an extension of Joe’s prior utterance, and a “modification” [Sacks 1992 I: 176] of “automobiles” as a topic of discussion. This practice is made possible by the availability of participial forms of verbs as a means, in English, of constructing a headless unit. With it, Henry is able to add a layer of meaning pertaining to counselling and therapy (“psychological motivations”) to Joe’s more generic formulation of “an automobile discussion”.

Following a similar procedure, in line 3, Mel self-selects to assist Henry in completing his half-done job (“discussing the psychological motives for”), by adding a final component, “drag racing on the streets”. It should be clear, given Sacks’s observations above, that, like Henry, Mel is also exercising the second speaker rule, with a spate of talk that is designed to be fitted to Henry’s just prior, incomplete, utterance. There is, however, a crucial difference between Henry’s application of the rule (line 2) and Mel’s (line 3), namely, that while line 2 is offered as an *extension* of line 1, line 3 is formulated as a *completion* of line 2.

In unravelling the workings of the second speaker rule, Sacks points perceptively to the prospect of a grammar conceptualized as a “technology” [Sacks 1992 I: 146] for building social actions:

... that particular choice of a participle is to be accounted for by reference to some task of social organization, solved by reference to syntactical features. And not by any, quote, purely linguistic considerations. Or even stylistic considerations. The participle, then, becomes an object in the technology of social structures... And we get some work that it can do which one isn’t going to find much in whatever radical grammar you’re going to look at [Sacks 1992 I: 146].

The grammar that Sacks was looking for (Fall 1964, Lecture 4), the ideal grammar if you like, is one that underpins the occurrence of “closely ordered, routinely observable, social activities,” a set of methods or procedures that provides for the possibility of action and interaction [Sacks 1992 I: 31]. The question for

the linguist is: what would such a grammar look like? What units and structures can it provide for the building of social actions and the pursuit of interaction?

Sacks's early insights on the grammar of turn construction and subsequent work by Schegloff and others to incorporate linguistic work into CA have sparked off volumes of research by linguists and conversation analysts in the decades that followed, working with materials from a diverse range of communities and languages. It will not be possible to give even a summary, let alone a review, of this work within the space of this article¹. For our present purposes, we may focus on just one issue which I believe is of critical importance to Sacks's project, but upon which more work still needs to be done. This is the issue of the status of the linguist's grammatical rules and units as members' conversational objects for use in turn-taking. Whichever grammatical framework one subscribes to and whatever theoretical constructs populate the grammar, the challenge is to show that these linguistic resources are oriented to by co-participants in their local management of turn construction, turn transition, turn extension, turn competition and completion. Without members' orientation as a reality check, the linguists' units and rules will run the risk of remaining formal constructs that may make sense within their particular theoretical contraptions, but have little relevance for the study of naturally occurring talk [Button, Lynch, Sharrock 2022].

What would such a grammar look like? There is no shortage of frameworks that one can draw upon in the linguist's vast inventory of theories. As the late James McCawley [1982] famously once said, in his characteristically tongue-in-cheek fashion, referring to the proliferation of theoretical modelling in syntax, one can have a choice of "thirty million theories of grammar"! Out of the many potential candidates, from "clause complexes" and "groups" [Halliday 1985], "predications" and "terms" [Dik 1989], to "c-structures" and "f-structures" [Bresnan, Asudeh, Toivonen, Wechsler 2015], two stand out as the most well recognized and promising, namely, the sentence and the clause.

Ford and Thompson [1996], in their study of linguistic resources for the management of turn-taking, identify the clause as the centrepiece in the syntactic component of a linguistic model which features syntax, intonation, and pragmatics in a tripartite configuration. In this system, a Complex Turn Transition Relevance Place (CTRP) is identified as a point where the syntactic, intonational, and pragmatic completions of an ongoing utterance converge.

¹ Some key publications include Lerner [2004], Ochs, Schegloff, Thompson [1996], Selting [2015], Ford, Fox, Thompson [1996].

In a similar vein, Couper-Kuhlen and Selting [2017] defend the relevance of “sentence” and “clause” as the linguistic correlates of CA’s Turn Construction Unit (TCU):

...the category of sentence or clause can be warranted by showing that speakers and recipients orient to it by timing their follow-up TCU and actions accordingly, by waiting for or even pursuing its completion, and/or by interpreting its break-off or abandonment as a source of inferences [Couper-Kuhlen, Selting 2017: 25].

To meet the needs for turn construction and turn-taking, a candidate unit (or unit-type) must come with a shape that is recognizable and a possible ending that is projectable – as Schegloff puts it, “Speakers construct utterances in turns at talk out of describable structured units, with recognizable possible completions” [Schegloff 1982: 74]. For a unit-type to satisfy these conditions, there must be good evidence that, first, its possible completion is oriented to by co-participants, and second, that its shape is also oriented to by them, in the sense that a particular spate of talk must be recognizable to co-participants *as an instance of that particular unit-type in question*.

Based on the above considerations, to what extent does the sentence or the clause qualify as a unit-type? With regard to the first criterion, sentences and clauses may appear to be reasonable candidates as they both have recognizable possible completion points. However, it should be clear that everyday conversations are full of turns that look nothing like canonical sentences or clauses; for example, in English, common expressions like “Yes!”, “Morning!”, “So?”, or “Across the street” all come with natural end points, but they are not readily analyzable as sentences or clauses.

As for the second criterion, what evidence do we have that particular turn constructional units in a turn not only have projectable completion points, but are also recognizable as instances of a sentence or a clause by virtue of their overall shape? Specifically, given the commonly accepted definitions of “sentence” and “clause” – subject plus predicate in the case of the former, and verb plus attending grammatical arguments in the case of the latter – what evidence do we have that these structural configurations are oriented to by co-participants in conversational interaction? The answer to this question is, not much. There may well be the occasional turn that is identifiable in this way, but in the vast majority of cases, a TCU would not be recognizable as “subject+predicate” or “verb+arguments”. To take a random example from Sacks, a turn like “Why do you want to commit suicide?” [Sacks 1992 I: 33] can be heard as an instance of the “Why do you want to do X?” question-type, which is used to seek a justification for an undesirable

course of action; it will not be analysed or understood by the addressee by virtue of its being an instance of a sentence or a clause.

The fact is, “sentences” and “clauses” are very broad categories that cover vast spans of linguistic territory. One should think of them as “super unit-types” sitting at the highest level of abstraction within the massive inventory called “grammar”. It is one thing for a stretch of talk to be *ultimately* describable as “a sentence” or “a clause”, but quite another just how that same stretch talk is actually oriented to and understood by co-participants in a moment of interaction. Our engagement with naturally occurring data suggests that this work is done by reference to much more fine-grained unit-types that come with readily recognizable structures and meanings.

A fuller discussion of these and related issues will need to be the subject of another paper. For now, suffice it to say that much more work remains to be done by the linguist to move away from abstract theoretical modelling towards capturing in finer detail multitudinous grammatical templates that will enable co-participants to do the analytical work necessary to identify unit shapes and possible completion points. One would do well to take Sacks’s idea of a “radical grammar” [Sacks 1992 I: 146] to heart and work towards such a solution to the problem of unit-types; cf. Schegloff’s [1996] call for a “grammar for conversation”.

PERSONAL PRONOUNS

Pronouns is one of the most written about, if not *the* most written about, topic in contemporary linguistics. A quick search of the *Linguistics and language behavior abstracts database* (LLBA) returned over 2700 publications with a title containing the words “pronoun”, “pronominal”, “anaphor” or “reference”. “Subject” is another popular topic (over 2000 titles), but other contenders do not come even close, e.g., “transformation” (569) and “binding” (600). Sacks had also been very fond of pronouns. This is not at all surprising given his passion, which he shared with Garfinkel, for “indexical expressions” [Garfinkel, Sacks 1970]. Before we dive into Sacks’s analysis and insights, let’s set the scene by reviewing several lines of research on pronouns within linguistics. Broadly speaking, we can identify four main themes in this literature.

The first theme is pronouns as self-contained linguistic systems in the structuralist sense of sets of items in opposition [Saussure 1959]. The selection of a pronoun on an occasion of use will be determined by the nature of the referent (typically conceptualized in terms of person, number and gender). Within such an ecosystem, pronoun selection is understood as an exclusive act of selection, i.e.

the selection of one item precludes the selection of any other item in the system, as only one of them will correspond correctly to the referent [Lyons 1977]. As an extension of this line of research, linguistic typologists have compared pronominal systems across languages and carefully documented variations in these systems such as inclusive vs. exclusive “we” [Bhat 2004].

The second major theme is syntactic studies of pronouns, largely under the heading of anaphora. Here, the pivotal reference is Chomsky’s [1981] work *Lectures on government and binding* (GB), where a distinction is made between PRO (“big PRO”) and pro (“small pro”), with the former being a phonologically empty item in a non-finite clause, and the latter a full pronoun in a finite clause. Huang’s study of Chinese [Huang 1989] and Jalabneh’s analysis of Arabic [Jalabneh 2022] are just two out of several dozens of examples of this line of work. Note here that the anaphora that GB theoreticians talk about are typically syntactic relations within a sentence, not across sentences.

A third strand of work comes under the rubric of pragmatics and discourse. Here, the interest lies in what personal pronouns can tell us about social relationships or the cognitive status of referents. A long line of research going back to Brown and Gilman’s seminal paper “The pronouns of power and solidarity” explores the linguistic manifestations of power relationships through the use of different pronominal forms, such as “vous” and “tu” in French [Brown, Gilman 1968]. In a similar vein, pronouns have been said to reveal the “cognitive status of ... referent[s]” [Gardelle, Sorkin 2015: 8] in terms of attention or accessibility, or as “a window to the relationship between selves and the outside world” [Mühlhäusler, Harré 1990: 207].

The final theme is generally known under the heading of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) [Fairclough 1989, 1995]. Here, the emphasis is on how discourse as social practice perpetuates or disrupts ideological and power structures, and how CDA can help uncover underlying power dynamics and bring about social change. Fairclough’s early work has sparked a burgeoning field that revolves around the politics of pronouns, two well-known phenomena being the generic “he” (as a replacement of it) and the gender-agnostic, indeterminate “they” [Wales 1996].

Considering these different perspectives, we may observe that while each has contributed to a partial sketch of the forms and functions of pronouns by prioritizing either “system-internal” considerations surrounding reference and anaphora or “system-external” issues of ideology or cultural politics, none came close to asking fundamental questions about the use of pronouns. Why is their

presence so pervasive in conversations? And why are pronouns needed in the first place – what is their *raison d’être* in the language?

It is precisely questions like these that Sacks was asking, as he stepped into the terrain of pronouns. Rather than focusing on system, reference, or ideology, Sacks attacks the phenomenon at its core, and through a series of incisive observations, paints a picture of pronouns that answers both of the above questions at once. And the key to his discovery is the notion of “tying”.

By “tying”, Sacks refers to a technique through which parts of a conversation are “tied together” [Sacks 1992 I: 150]. Tying is thus work that goes into the *making* of “a conversation”. Unlike approaches in social semiotics and discourse analysis [e.g., Halliday, Hasan 1976], where notions like “textual/discourse cohesion” are explained in terms of anaphora or co-reference, Sacks sees tying as a design feature of conversational turns. Crucially, the use of a pronoun in the construction of a turn allows the speaker to make recognizable their current (ongoing) utterance as “a second”, and through that, to re-constitute the just-prior turn as “a first” (in ways reminiscent of the making of collaborative utterances discussed in the above section). Through such an operation, the two turns are now tied together as a “nondisorderable” pair [Sacks 1992 I: 372].

While essentially a “local” operation (that works between two adjacent turns), the tying technique can be extended to cover any number of subsequent turns, and in this way, through “an absolutely fabulous machinery” [Sacks 1992 I: 720], co-participants maintain a sense of “talking to each other” [Sacks 1992: 159] and building “a conversation” together. In Sacks’s words:

The use of [tying], then, is not to be seen as simply a way of, for example, avoiding redundancy or making variety or whatever else, but it provides an order of work - and is produced by an order of work - which is at least to some extent different than the work involved in using a name, etc. [Sacks 1992: 163].

Once we see that, and how, pronouns, as tying operations, serve a fundamental function, it becomes clear why their presence is so pervasive in conversation: they are an indispensable means of bundling turns together and through that, provide for the very possibility of conversation in the first place. Commenting on the pervasiveness of tying, with reference to a particular data segment, Sacks notes:

...there are no untied utterances in the segment. And by that I mean, no utterance for which there is not at least a single tie [Sacks 1992: 157].

In addition to these insights into the workings of pronouns as a class of objects, Sacks also devoted considerable time in his lectures to the explication of individual pronouns, including the diverse uses of “you” and “we”. In one

of his early lectures, Sacks drew his students' attention to an instance of "you" being used in a turn of talk by a woman calling the Suicide Prevention Centre. In response to the counsellor's question, "why do you want to commit suicide?", the caller says, "You want to find out if anybody really does care" [Fall 1964, Lecture 5]. Sacks's brief comment on this was:

...instead of saying "I want to find out if anybody really does care," she says "You want to find out...". And those usages, where a person says "you" or "one" as a way of stating something that they propose thereby to be a generally correct remark, and how they are defended, and what kind of attacks they can be subjected to, are something we can watch. And I'll deal with these matters later on [Sacks 1992 I: 32].

A year later, in Fall 1965, Sacks did come back to it and gave a full lecture on "you" [Lecture 6]. In Spring 1966, another lecture was devoted on "we" (and category-bound activities) [Lecture 8]. Thereupon, Sacks would periodically return to this topic to further explore and delve more deeply into it. A rough count shows that since Fall 1965, Sacks came back to the subject of pronouns no less than fifty times – if we include in that count not only personal pronouns, but also possessive pronouns ("her dad", "that Bonneville of mine"), demonstrative pronouns ("this", "that"), and indefinite pronouns ("everyone", "anyone"). As our focus in this paper is the full implications of Sacks's insights for linguistics, we will limit our comments to personal and possessive pronouns, and leave the other ones for consideration on another occasion.

Sacks's interest in pronouns was driven, as just mentioned, by his fascination with their indexicality, and more generally, the indexicality of talk itself. As Sacks explains, in his paradigm-shifting paper, co-authored with Garfinkel, on the formal structures of practical actions:

...the properties of indexical expressions are ordered properties, and that they are ordered properties is an ongoing, practical accomplishment of every actual occasion of commonplace speech and conduct [Garfinkel, Sacks 1970: 162].

In practice, this entails unpacking the use of particular pronouns on specific occasions, which requires in-depth and fine-grained analysis of context. That's why when personal pronouns are examined for their fittedness to the particularities of the occasions of which they form a part, questions will necessarily be asked not only about their correspondence to people and things, i.e., reference, but also the finer nuances of form, meaning, and action that breathe life into their selection and use. Let me illustrate this further with two specific examples from Sacks: the defensive "you" and the mitigating "we".

Picking up from Sacks's example about "the suicidal woman" who said, "You want to find out if anybody really does care," recall that Sacks made just a brief comment on it in Lecture 5 of Fall 1964. When he returned to this data in Fall 1965 [Lecture 6], he launched into a more elaborate analysis by making further, more fine-grained, observations. First, Sacks started by stating a perfectly obvious fact about "you", namely, that "you" in English can be used to make either a singular or a plural reference. In the conversation in question, "you" could refer to the addressee (singular) or a collective, e.g., people (plural). From this simple fact Sacks went on to extract a valuable insight about the use of "you": in the course of the addressee's understanding of the utterance, the reference of "you" could have undergone a process of "expansion" in the sense that at the beginning of the utterance, there's the possibility that "you" is being used by the caller to address or refer to the counsellor. However, as one moves deeper into the turn-in-progress, it becomes clear that the pronoun is *not* used to make a singular reference. Instead, as the turn unfolds it becomes increasingly clear that "you" is being used with the "everybody" reading, i.e. a plural reference. Sacks highlights this process by calling the evolvment an "expansion", i.e. expanding the scope of "you" from a singular reference to a collectivity. In Sacks's words, the transformation "from singular to plural «you» permits an indefinitely large expansion" [Sacks 1992 I: 350], one that, on this particular occasion, can be heard as inclusive of the speaker herself.

Once the generic reading of "you" (i.e., "everyone") is firmly established, then the utterance as a whole will take on a sense that allows it to serve a specific interactional purpose, namely, it can be used by the caller as a way of building an element of defence into her response to the counsellor's question which comes with a bite – by challenging the caller to furnish the grounds for contemplating suicide. This is how the defensive "you" works, according to Sacks:

...if you're asked some sort of question which you know in the first instance is one which has the sort of answers that you must defend when you've given them, and you'd like to have an answer that has a built-in defense for it, then one of the defenses would be to show that there's nothing at all problematic about your answer [Sacks 1992 I: 350].

In other words, as a feature of turn design, "you" allows the speaker to formulate a general statement, in anticipation of a possible challenge by the counsellor in the next turn (had the answer been formulated as a personal, "I"-statement). It is in this sense that the choice of pronouns is, first and foremost for co-participants, done in consideration of local *interactional* contingencies.

As a final example, consider Sacks's analysis of the mitigating "we." Here, a woman (C) is calling to tell her psychiatrist (S) about her husband who did not take her threats of suicide seriously. To her, this shows that "he doesn't care" [Sacks 1992 I: 352—353]:

C: Wouldn't you think that if a person found someone that tried to commit suicide they would realize that it was serious?

S: Sometimes people do, and sometimes they don't. Sometimes they need someone to tell them straight out. We can be very blind to the things around us.

In examining the psychiatrist's turn, Sacks draws our attention to the use of "we", as a term selected out of a set of possible alternatives, including, for example, "you". The psychiatrist's statement about "us" being "blind to things" is formulated as a truth, about people in general, human weakness if you will, and is used here to mitigate the husband's insensitivity (and hence to ease the wife's anxiety). At the same time, Sacks reminds us that the speaker could equally have used "you" to make a general statement, e.g., "You can be very blind to the things around you", to achieve the same effect. With "you", however, he would run the risk of the statement being understood by the caller in a way that does not include him. It is in this sense that Sacks characterizes the psychiatrist's use of "we" and "us" here as "gratuitous":

[By] virtue of the sequence in which "we" is heard, the inclusion of the speaker is partially gratuitous; is heard as doing something he "needn't have done." Where, if you use "you," it in the first instance includes the recipient, providing for, in the above case, her hearing "me," which may be sufficient reference for the remark tied to it, and so not providing for the further step which would include the speaker [Sacks 1992 I: 352].

By using "we" and including himself in the general statement, the psychiatrist is constructing a stronger justification for the husband's (non-serious) reaction to the wife's distress:

If someone who needn't include themselves in some class in which the recipient is a member – or someone else that the recipient is talking of is a member – wants to say in a stronger way than "you" (which can be misheard as only the recipient) that "everyone is that way", they can say "we" [Sacks 1992 I: 351].

Following Sacks's train of thought, we may also notice how, in formulating the general statement, the psychiatrist actually starts with "people" ("Sometimes people do"), then moves on to "they" ("Sometimes they need someone to tell them straight out"), and finally "we" – all in the course of one turn. Such observations and discoveries about the workings of personal pronouns would not have been possible without the kind of data (naturally occurring) and deep-dive analysis that we learned from Sacks through his lectures.

Sacks's insights on the defensive "you" and mitigating "we" will hopefully serve as a good illustration of his method or style of analysis. In unpacking a turn of talk, Sacks attends, simultaneously, to the details of the forms of words, the meaning of the construction(s) that emerge in the course of the turn, and the actions that get implemented in the sequential context of the ongoing conversation. The building of the analysis is guided always by co-participants' orientation and practical reasoning, which ensures that his account of the moment-to-moment interaction "makes sense", flows naturally, and is compelling. Crucially, his analysis reveals to us something deeply true and significant about the production and reception of spates of talk, which traditional modes of linguistic and pragmatic analysis (using notions like "anaphora", "reference", "social deixis" or "pronoun politics") have failed to capture.

Incidentally, our understanding of Sacks's thinking about pronouns as indexical expressions (in the Ethnomethodological sense) is also inspired by Rod Watson's early paper on "the analysis of pro-terms" [Watson 1987]. In this paper, Watson gives a much more thorough account of "you", "we", and other "pro-terms" using a Sacksian approach. Due to space limitations, we will not be able to discuss his rich findings here, but I will come back to his insightful observations about interdisciplinarity towards the end of this paper.

Comparing and contrasting Sacks's treatment of the indexicality of pronouns with the work done in linguistics and pragmatics raises intriguing questions about some long-held assumptions of the linguists. For the purposes of this paper, I will confine myself to the notion of reference. As is well known, personal pronouns have since antiquity been associated with reference. They are used to refer either deictically to roles in the speech situation (viz. "first", "second", "third" person), or non-deictically to antecedents in the discourse. Either way, their primary function, according to traditional linguistic analysis, is making reference. However, for the analyst who, following Sacks, is attuned to the rich array of circumstances and considerations that animate the use of pronouns in the context of a broad diversity of social actions, reference can only take us so far.

In Sacks's way of thinking, the "choice" of a pronoun, far from being simply a matching operation relative to the attributes of a referent, is guided by the action that is being implemented in the turn-at-talk of which the pronoun forms a part, e.g. proffering mitigating circumstances in face of a complaint or speaking organizationally to a client. A fuller discussion of this and related insights can be found in Watson [1987]. Watson also pointed out that there are situations where a pronoun is used when even the identity of the referent is not known to the co-participants, which would render the notion of referencing of limited utility.

An example of this is when a counsellor, looking for an organization that may be able to help, says to the caller, “I’ll just see if I can find the number where they’ll be able to help you.” This use of “they” here is aptly characterized by Watson as a “prospectively vague organizational use of «they»” [Watson 1987: 273].

For Sacks, who the referent of “you” is may not always be the most relevant question to ask. In general, the work that a pronoun does within a turn-at-talk is recognizable only as an integral part of the action the turn is constructed to perform [Goodwin 2018]. Recognizing that action may not always require identifying a referent (through a pronoun) as a pre-condition. Thus, in a turn like “You never know”, referring is probably not a relevant operation, given the tight integration between “you” and the rest of the construction. The light-hearted and hopeful attitude that the speaker is displaying is recognizable not through referent identification together with some separate, attending operations but through the overall shape of the utterance and its fittedness to the occasion. As Heritage states, in explication of Garfinkel and Sacks’s concept of indexicality:

...the inherent “looseness” of fit between a state of affairs and any natural language account used to formulate it both permits and motivates the circumstantial elaboration of any natural language account. Through these indexical and reflexive circumstantial elaborations, social actors determine every aspect of an account’s sense, adequacy and motivation [Heritage 1984: 177].

CONCLUDING REMARKS

There’s so much the linguist can learn from Sacks that one may feel at a loss as to where to begin. One way, as I hope to have shown in this paper, is to carefully study Sacks’s unpacking of particular turns-at-talk in particular conversational sequences on particular occasions of use. Only by fully engaging Sacks in his explication of the haecceity (or “just-thisness”) [see Garfinkel 1996: 10—11] of an utterance can we come to appreciate his understanding of indexicality and his way of working with data.

With their love for “dull remarks” [Sacks 1992 I: 437] and “bland utterances” [Sacks 1992 I: 740], the linguist should be in a privileged position to learn from Sacks. The reality, however, is rather different. It has been fifty years since Sacks’s untimely death, but linguists’ uptake of his vision has been slow and drawn-out. It is true that many have adopted some semblance of CA in their work – collecting naturally occurring data, doing Jeffersonian transcriptions, dabbling in well-known CA concepts (e.g., turn-taking, sequencing, repair), and citing CA publications; nevertheless, few have ventured significant distances from their

home turf into Sacks's new territory. Many still shy away from questioning assumptions underlying apparently sacrosanct notions like "sentence", "clause", "person", "reference." I hope to suggest that, for us to truly follow in Sacks's footsteps and appreciate their far-reaching consequences, harder soul-searching is in order.

When Sacks talks of "radical grammars", he is not talking about tinkering with old tools. He is talking about wholesale re-examination of fundamentals. Using collaborative utterances and personal pronouns as examples, I hope to have shown that merely tweaking and re-purposing traditional linguistic instruments won't do. Merging intonational, syntactic, and pragmatic information won't help us find "complex TRPs". If grammar is the organization of language and language is the indexical expression that participates in the production of social order, then grammar cannot afford to bask in its former glories as an academic, i.e., highly idealized, exercise. Not only do we need to work with naturally occurring data, even more so we will need new tools that can help us grapple with talk in the context of interaction, its natural habitat. We will need to teleport ourselves into Sacks's world where "language," far from being a reified object, is re-integrated into the warp of social interaction. Here, Bilmes's bold proposal to migrate from ethnosemantics to "occasioned semantics" is a real inspiration [Bilmes 2020].

It is clear from his lectures and writings that the research programme that Sacks was building was one that would allow the investigator to reveal ways that co-participants construct order and meaning, in the details of particular bits of talk-in-interaction. In his own words, "[A science of social life] should be able to handle the details of something that actually happens" [Sacks 1992 II: 26]. I would add, from the view of linguistics, that a science of language should be able to handle the details of utterances that actually occurred.

In re-examining our discipline's foundations, we would do well to heed Watson's cautionary note against formalism:

We can speculate that [Sacks] might have found an irony in the arrogation of so much contemporary CA by linguistics; CA has apparently cast off one disciplinary kind of FA [Formal Analysis] only to take on another! [Watson 2009: 213]

Indeed, it was Sacks's great achievement to have started an intellectual movement that has the potential not only of transforming sociology, but also of taking linguistics in a new direction. For the linguist, the waters are uncharted, the journey will be hazardous, but if we embrace Sacks's vision and practise his trade, coming out on the other side promises to be hugely rewarding.

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Kang Kwong Luke

SACKS JAKO LINGWISTA

Streszczenie

Prawdziwie oryginalni myśliciele nie znają granic dyscyplin naukowych. Sacks jest powszechnie uważany za socjologa zainteresowanego głównie pytaniem o to, jak możliwy jest porządek społeczny. Jednakże, badając to, jak działa organizacji społecznej Sacks szybko odkrył, że język (jako wyrażenia okazjonalne) gra decydującą rolę jako nieodzowny czynnik umożliwiający organizację społeczną i powinien być dokładnie obserwowany i analizowany. W tym celu Sacks niemal w każdym ze swoich wykładów dokłada wielkich starań, by pokazać, jak najbardziej zwyczajne skrawki języka często okazują się oddziaływać na sposoby, których uprzednio nie zauważano ani się ich nie domyślano. Poprzez łączenie Sacksa z kategorią „lingwista” nie zamierzamy zaszufładować prekursora, którego nie da się wpisać w jakąkolwiek kategorię. Naszym celem jest natomiast wykazanie, że w wielce oryginalnym dziele Sacksa nadal odnaleźć można liczne ważne i prawdziwie cenne elementy. W ramach tego artykułu ograniczamy się do dwóch spośród przełomowych idei Sacksa na temat gramatyki. Chodzi tu o wspólnie wytwarzane wypowiedzi oraz o zaimki osobowe.

Słowa kluczowe: Harvey Sacks, lingwistyka, wyrażenia okazjonalne, wspólnie wytwarzane wypowiedzi, zaimki osobowe, gramatyka konwersacji