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**MY GRATITUDE TOWARDS A MOST POWERFUL  
ANALYTICAL LEGACY.  
SOME REMARKS ON THE IMPORTANCE  
OF THE RESEARCH WORK OF HARVEY SACKS  
FOR PROCESS-ANALYTICAL SOCIOLOGY**

**Abstract**

Harvey Sacks's studies opened up a new "observational habit" for looking at social processes and interactive work as expressed by speech activities. It stressed formal features of social processes that would be normally taken for granted by mainstream sociology and therefore not reflected at all. These are the phenomena: (a) sequential order of social activities of relating to others, (b) sequential order of speech interaction, (c) temporality and history of social processes of interaction, (d) categorization devices and category bound activities, (e) the formal-order apparatus of social process phenomena and mechanisms, (f) the impetus and obligation, i.e. the "force", stemming from the exertion of the formal order apparatus.

In conversation analysis Sacks was engrossed within the extremely creative exploration processes of a first layer of analysis regarding the formal order phenomena (of ongoing conversation). However, in the examples given during his lectures he would also hint at the possibility of a second layer of analysis: being intrigued by culture as "an apparatus for generating *recognizable*

actions” [Sacks 1992: 226]. And this might be a concept for reminding process-oriented social scientists – and not just linguists – of the perennial epistemological importance of Sacks’s explorations in his conversation analysis and in his earlier work.

**Keywords:** Harvey Sacks, conversation analysis, formal orderliness of social phenomena, two-layer analysis, process-analytical sociology

The impact of the research activities of Harvey Sacks on socio-linguistically based process-oriented sociology of the seventies and eighties of the last century cannot be overstated. His studies opened up a totally new “observational habit” for looking at social processes and interactive work as expressed by speech activities. What his research work entailed was much more than just a new lucid method for the analysis of mundane speech communication.

Harvey Sacks’s Ph.D. dissertation *The search for help. No one to turn to* [Sacks 1966] revealed the inexorability of the *sequential order of turns of social-relating activities* within contexts in which there was a risk of someone taking their own life. In this study Sacks underlined the non-interchangeability of interactive relating activities of suicidal persons to *significant others*, on the one hand, and to counsellors who staffed telephone crisis helplines, on the other. The tragic situation for the suicidal person (as well as for the counsellor, too, although it would not be as life threatening for her- or himself as it would be for the suicidal caller) was that at the very end of exhaustive biographical identity work, the suicidal person was not able to find an understanding and helpful significant other anymore.<sup>1</sup> The counsellor of the telephone crisis helpline, whom the caller phoned instead, was not able to change her or his personal identity and social categorization into such a significant other for the caller, whom the suicidal person would have had or should have had in their former life and who could convince the suicidal person of the importance of a further maintenance of her or his life. The same quality of the inexorability of social relating, which Harvey Sacks would lucidly demonstrate in his Ph.D. dissertation, was also revealed in his lectures on conversation analysis – but then dealing mostly with more mundane, less life-limiting issues.

Harvey Sacks’s focus on the *sequential order of speech interaction* in his later research period of conversation analysis was always connected with a deeper sensitivity for the *temporality, i.e. the sequence and the “history” of*

<sup>1</sup> On the notion of biographical identity work see [Schütze 2008].

*ongoing conversation*, which the interaction partners would hint at and take into account for each other. The fellow interactants would often deal with the history of the ongoing conversation and would also hint at its future possibilities. The famous early article on opening up of closings of conversations is a powerful demonstration of these types of phenomena. Harvey Sacks started to explore and structurally describe the formal features of temporality in ongoing conversation of fellow interactants. A similar sense of *temporality and history* is revealed in Sacks's early articles on joking narratives and on the categorization devices used for depicting features of actors and activities of interaction.

Similarly important is Harvey Sacks's permanent observation and analytical focus of the *interactivity* of all types of speech activities. Even social researchers who always work with transcriptions of speech communication tend to underestimate the sequential "positioning" in speech interaction (for example as realized in the orderly sequence of turns of talking in ongoing conversation). Harvey Sacks was deeply intrigued by scrutinizing the formal markers of interactive work in ongoing interaction, which the interaction partners would present to each other and reciprocally take into account. The famous article on the simplest systematics of turn-taking in conversation basically demonstrated *interactivity* in its assumed and widely practiced orderliness. But as already elucidated in his Ph.D. dissertation, interactivity is a power (or weakness, too) on much more levels of social reality than just the organization of conversational talk.

In all of the research works of Harvey Sacks, the *formal orderliness of social phenomena* is carved out as essentially different from the conventional concepts of order, which would normally orient the research of social scientists. Basically, the formally expressed speech and activity orders in conversation and social relating are not just mechanisms of *normative* social order. They belong to a much deeper and more essential level of the constitution of social processes.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the elementary formal orders in conversation and social relating in the sense of Harvey Sacks are not produced by arrangements and organizations of political and/or economic power or by heteronomous system conditions (as, for example, on intensive-care wards in hospitals the incrementally growing lack of personnel or the impact of body-intruding machinery – although such powerful conditions can distort the basic conversational and relating orders on

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, they could be connected with normative-moral assessments by afflicted "victims", in case a dramatic distortion of the basic formal orderliness of interaction, conversation and social relating would occur – as, for example, talk-in-interaction under constraint superimposed by institutional power, such as some courtroom interactions or "treatments" by secret police [Schütze 1978].

the ward). Harvey Sacks hinted at *a quality of formal ordering mechanisms of social interaction and social relating, whose exertion and accomplishment is basically beyond any personal interpretation and normative assessment of the co-interactants and the researchers*. The formal order of social interaction and social relating that Harvey Sacks was dealing with is some sort of automatic or natural force. However, the impetus and obligation, its “force”, stemming from the exertion of those formal ordering mechanisms could become conscientiously addressed – and interpreted, if it might be distorted by external conditions as in communications under constraint, or if artificially “enstaged” and utilized in strategic interaction. To a certain degree, for social scientists the quality of this automatic formal order and its exertive efficacy seem to feel somewhat similar to the power of “natural orders” in the natural sciences. Especially this exertive quality of the formal orders of communicative interaction by conversation is what was very intriguing for young process-analytical researchers in Germany. Harvey Sacks revealed layers and mechanisms of social orderliness that could not be discovered and grasped by mainstream sociologists on the base of their quantitative methodology that utilizes predefined and simplified features and subjective attitudes collected in statistically great numbers for probabilistic comparisons and assessments. Such a methodology would not be able to explore basic universal features and mechanisms of orderliness and disorderly disruption of social interaction and social relating.

The exactness of insights into the formal structures of order and disruption in social interaction and social relating, which the research work of Harvey Sacks revealed, also allowed first steps to a *strict analysis of single cases of social processes, which are carried through and/or experienced by individual members of the existential world of everyday life or by collective entities*. Mainstream sociology always claimed that truthful statements of social phenomena could only be accomplished on the empirical base of great statistical numbers. Harvey Sacks opened the door for the exact analysis of social and biographical processes of *single cases* (including, indeed, biographical cases, since the tragicalness of “no one to turn to” as in Sacks’s Ph.D. dissertation would refer to painful phases in the life courses of single members of society). Of course, within the social sciences there is also a rich, though often overlooked historical tradition of in-depth studies of single socio-historical (individual and collective) cases. In traditional in-depth single case studies, the credibility of truthful statements derives from their confirmation across multiple formulations, typically embedded within a coherent and convincing historical narrative of the case as it unfolds.

However, there could always emerge the possibility of telling another story on the history of that single case. And, hence, most of the lively traditional in-depth studies would always be in danger of being refuted, however rich and convincing their presentation would look. Harvey Sacks demonstrated that this can be different with single case studies by means of structural description of social processes of single cases, which would harness the formal activity and process markers in communicative interaction. And this also applies to autobiographical rendering of people who recall and tell their life history in off-the-cuff narratives as well [Schütze 2008].

The structural description of the formal features of ongoing speech interaction, as Harvey Sacks did it, is prone to become intersubjectively controllable: it focusses on the sequences of evolvement of the course of interaction, on its temporality, on its mutual referring of co-interactants to each other and on the indexicality of the evolving situation (including biographical identity development and/or historical change of collective entities). The essential exactness can be accomplished by systematically observing how the formal features of interactional and sequential speech production reveal unfolding social processes, which are expressed by the ongoing speech production.<sup>3</sup> By practicing the research work on single cases in the style of Harvey Sacks, process-oriented social research was enabled to state exactly “what is the case with the processes of the single case under study” with much more confidence and conviction than it had been possible before. This is especially important regarding the scientific impact of sociological single case analysis on the analytical work of practitioners in different professions, who can gain a new epistemic habitus of methodological sincerity by being trained in single case analysis on the pivotal empirical base of looking at formal features of evolving social processes in the vein of Harvey Sacks.

In his Ph.D. dissertation Harvey Sacks followed up a *two-layer analysis*. (a) On a first level, he would deal with the pivotal formal aspect of the sequential interactional and category-device-utilizing order of social processes: namely, turning to different types of others in search for counsel and help. Since no significant other would be left to turn to, the suicidal person would turn to anonymous others – counsellors totally unknown to her or him. In formal terms and in a first instance, such phone calls would be efforts to interact and get counsel *in last attempt positions* in order to be rescued, or to receive legitimation for one’s suicide.

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<sup>3</sup> I myself have named such a first-instance focus on formal features and the concomitant question, how they express socio-cultural processes, as “pragmatic refraction” [Schütze 2008, especially Part One, 171–172 and 187–188; cf. Schütze 2016: 88 and 100].

One formal (organizational) aspect is the temporality of a *last chance* or *too late position* in interaction and relating. An additional tragedy of some of these phone calls occurs when the counsellor, i.e. the other of last resort for the caller, is unable to persuade the caller to change their plan. So, in formal (sociological) terms, the generalizable significances of Sacks's Ph.D. dissertation are that for those people who are in personal crisis there is a ***lack of opportunity or the impossibility to be categorized and to categorize*** another person as a significant other. (b) On a second level, Harvey Sacks would deal with the ***"socio-cultural content"*** of the actions and processes of suffering of suicidal persons. Guided by the formal features of temporality and of sequential order and by the impossibility of a trustworthy mutual social categorization, he would explore how difficult – and quite often how hopeless – it is for the counsellor at the suicide prevention center to divert the suicidal caller from their plan to kill themselves. This insight implies that the counsellor, through questioning probes, learns more about the caller's situation and about the caller's plan to take their lives, in other words, about the ***socio-biographical processes of trajectories of suffering and, finally, of developing and following up an action plan to kill oneself***. The suicidal person is searching for significant others, who would help to develop and help to organize her or his biographical work regarding the question whether to live or to die. Indeed, the central socio-cultural content feature that makes the telephone call difficult is the reluctance or impossibility of the suicidal caller to consider the counsellor as someone who is advising in the caller's best interests. This means that the counsellor is disregarded as someone who could be entrusted with central aspects and questions of the caller's life course. In these circumstances, the counsellor's entreaties or persuasions to the caller not to go through with their plans to end their life may be ignored.

So, in general terms, we can see the operation of a two-level approach to social processes in Sacks's [1966] dissertation. On a first level of his research, Sacks detected a basic and very simple – and at the same time "seen but unnoticed" – formal temporal sequence of interactive (and biographical) action: first, the suicidal person searches for someone to turn to for help among the caller's significant others, which is also constitutive of the caller's narrative report. Following that, the search for counselling support outside the caller's social network of significant others starts to take place. But the second level – sociologically and for the caller/counsellor – is no less important. These formal markers, discussed above as the temporal sequence (or features) of searching for help, reveal the socio-cultural content features of social order and disorder of a very special and tragic type of social processes, in this case suicidal social (and at the same time biographical) processes. ***Harvey Sacks realized how insightful the focus***

*on formal features of speech interaction and speech presenting would be for detecting basic content features and mechanisms of social and biographical processes and their distortions.*

His totally new insights into the epistemic power of those formal markers of social processes as constituted and presented in dense speech communications, which were performed during phone conversations within the socio-technical context of telephonic crisis helplines, induced Harvey Sacks to take a step further: he started his new research explorations with both of the parallel *generalized* approaches to conversation analysis that he had developed, i.e. membership categorization and turn-taking. This was undertaken in order to focus on the formal markers of speech communication in general – especially on the formal markers of speech interactions that members of the existential world of everyday life would harness in all types of mundane interactions. Here Harvey Sacks detected very naturally occurring formal mechanisms of interaction that are so basic and so simple that we as members of this existential world normally would not feel induced to search for and gain predicative and reflected knowledge of them – as, for example, regarding the mundane order of the simplest systematics of turn-taking in verbal interaction. Harvey Sacks was expecting that there would be lots of those very mundane production mechanisms in speech communication. His research work in conversation analysis made it possible to reach very basic universal mechanisms for the constitution of social order and disorder in interaction, social relating and social categorization through a radically open empirical exploration guided by formal markers of everyday speech, which at the same time guide and constrain the interactants in their basic activities without taking away their personal ideas and personal freedom for participation.

In terms of a *work study* about the developing research work of Harvey Sacks, it is plausible that his manifold explorations of mundane conversation deeply engrossed him and involved his whole work energy into finding out many features and mechanisms of conversational interaction. I wonder if, had Sacks lived longer, he might have expected that after this exhaustive exploration work in conversation analysis, he would return to the question, what these mechanisms and other formal mechanisms – those of storytelling, those of autobiographical narration, and those of institutional speech interaction – would reveal about processes of socio-cultural content. In Harvey Sacks's lectures we can find many allusions towards the *way formal mechanisms would reveal socio-cultural content processes* (including those of "historical" single cases). The sentence in one of his lectures "A culture is an apparatus for generating *recognizable* actions" [Sacks 1992: 226] is one hint to this assumption of mine about further developments

of his research work, which he could not follow up due to his tragically early death. I believe that there was the possibility that later he would have returned to the two-layer approach (as was practised in his Ph.D. dissertation). However, he would have done this in a technically highly sophisticated mode of analytical work taking into regard the many constitutive layers of speech interaction.

Harvey Sacks came to Bielefeld twice during the seventies, and he presented some of his lectures to young qualitative researchers in empirical sociolinguistics and process-analytical sociology. We were extremely impressed by his lively and in-depth style of presentation, which was delivered extemporaneously, and which at the same time was very much concentrated on the transcriptions to be seen through the overhead projector. *He was focussed only on the empirical phenomena to be seen within the transcription pieces, and he would abstain from any type of docile referral to famous texts of the social-science tradition. Through this style and content of presentation we learnt how much empirical speech data would matter, and their potential for revealing formal and socio-cultural content.* His very personal, very youthful and at the same time very modest presentation style would exert an almost magical radiation of his scholarly personality on us. This was the style of researcher and university teacher we later wanted to become. Harvey Sacks directed our scientific interest to all type of formal structures of speech interaction and communication – in my case to the observable, recognizable and detectable forms of action schemes put forward in speech communication and to the activities and mechanisms of narration of personal experiences, especially those of autobiographical extempore rendering.

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**MOJA WDZIĘCZNOŚĆ WOBEC NAJMOCNIEJSZEJ TRADYCJI ANALITYCZNEJ.  
KILKA UWAG NA TEMAT WAGI PRACY BADAWCZEJ HARVEYA SACKSA  
DLA SOCJOLOGII PROCESUALNEJ**

Streszczenie

Badania Harveya Sacksa wprowadziły nowy „nawyk obserwacyjny” patrzenia na procesy społeczne i pracę interakcyjną (ang. *interaction work*) jako wyrażoną poprzez aktywność językową. Nawyk ten kładł nacisk na formalne cechy procesów społecznych, które zazwyczaj uznawane były przez socjologię głównego nurtu za oczywiste i dlatego nie stanowiły przedmiotu jej namysłu. Chodzi o takie zjawiska jak: (a) sekwencyjny porządek powiązanych ze sobą aktywności społecznych, (b) sekwencyjny porządek rozmowy jako interakcji, (c) czasowość i historia społecznych procesów interakcji, (d) urządzenia kategoryzacyjne (ang. *categorization devices*) i czynności związane z kategorią (ang. *category bound activities*), (e) formalnie uporządkowany aparat procesualnych zjawisk i mechanizmów społecznych, (f) impet i zobowiązanie, czyli „moc” wywierana poprzez stosowanie formalnie uporządkowanego aparatu.

Uprawiając analizę konwersacyjną Sacks pochłonięty był niezwykle twórczą eksploracją pierwszej warstwy analizy, która dotyczyła formalnego porządku zjawisk zachodzących w dziejącej się krok po kroku rozmowie. Jednakże w ramach przykładów prezentowanych podczas wykładów Sacks napomynał o możliwości prowadzenia drugiej warstwy analizy. W tej kwestii intrygowała go kultura jako „aparat generowania *rozpoznawalnych* działań” [Sacks 1992: 226]. Koncepcja ta mogłaby przypominać procesualnie zorientowanych badaczy społecznych, a nie tylko lingwistów, o nieprzemijającej doniosłości eksploracji Sacksa w jego analizie konwersacyjnej i jego wczesnych pracach.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Harvey Sacks, analiza konwersacyjna, formalne uporządkowanie zjawisk społecznych, analiza dwuwarstwowa, socjologia procesualna