



Introduction

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Introduction

LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL INTERACTION¹

During the last two decades, sociologists and social psychologists have directed increasing attention to language and its use in social contexts. In fact, from a variety of subdisciplines including cognitive sociology, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, the ethnography of speaking and interpretive sociolinguistics, social scientists have produced a large corpus of work that addresses, in new ways, core problems in sociology and social psychology. To date, however, much of this work has appeared in relatively obscure specialty journals and edited volumes. This special issue of *Social Psychology Quarterly* was commissioned with several purposes: (1) to introduce the data, analytic apparatuses and theoretical perspectives of scholars in the area of language and society to other readers of the journal; and (2) to demonstrate ways in which these data, apparatuses and perspectives may inform the research of these other readers.

These purposes are consistent with a recommendation that an ASA Committee on Publications review board proposed for *SPQ* in 1984; namely, to encourage submission of theoretical manuscripts and those representing nontraditional methodological and substantive approaches within social psychology. The committee was concerned about a common perception of the journal as being narrow and biased toward publishing experimental social psychology. Review boards for other ASA journals have documented similar perceptions and produced comparable recommendations. From a variety of standpoints, the feeling exists that what Donald Levine (*The Flight from Ambiguity*, University of Chicago Press, 1985) discusses as the univocality in social science—i.e., the attempt to be as precise and technical as possible when representing the facts of social life—has become the univocality of social science. That is, the concepts and techniques most often exhibited in our main journals tend to be of a singular type. Insofar as social reality is a complex and multidimensional mosaic, then sociology needs

diverse voices, approaches, topics and methods to comprehend and analyze more fully the patterning of the mosaic. Furthermore, this diversity deserves expression in the profession's major outlets, lest we suffer the fragmentation or differentiation without integration to which Randall Collins referred when asking, "Is 1980's Sociology in the Doldrums?" (*American Journal of Sociology*, 1986). While *SPQ* has already taken large strides in publishing a breadth of social psychological research, the studies in this special issue may in fact appear startlingly different from those which appear in many sociological journals. I hope these articles will increase scholarly awareness of the considerable and to some degree submerged energy generated by language-oriented sociologists and social psychologists.

The papers in this special issue represent a variety of approaches to the study of language and interaction. Thus, they do not necessarily agree on how talk should be studied and are, I believe, both stimulating and provocative. Even if there are differences, they share a background similar to the "linguistic turn" in philosophy, when scholars put aside epistemological questions such as how to discover the manifestation of meaning and truth in language. Instead, philosophers began exploring language as a mode of life, a way of being, or, to paraphrase John Austin, a realm in which people "do things with words." Sociologists interested in linguistic practice propose that speech is neither an appendage to, nor an epiphenomenon of, human conduct. Equally, it is not simply a repository of meaning that can be tapped as a resource for the investigation of sociology's substantive problems. Language and interaction are themselves the substance, they are the site where people produce elementary forms of social organization that are irreducible to terms other than those of intrinsic composition.

But there is more afoot here than just introducing linguistic sociology to a larger audience. Several papers address conventional topics in new ways. Goodwin tackles a classical problem of psychology, the word or name "search," which Roger Brown described as the "tip of the tongue phenomenon," and shows it to have profound implications for social interaction. Spencer furthers a traditional symbolic interactionist concern by demonstrating how role-identities may be negotiated in conversation. The topic of rationality in decision-making

¹ I would like to thank Peter Burke, the current editor of *SPQ*, for making this issue possible, and for lending a hand with numerous tasks along the way. My gratitude also goes to reviewers for papers that were submitted. Operating under a somewhat constricted timetable, they provided excellent and often very detailed reviews in short order.

is addressed by Anderson, Hughes and Sharrock, who examine actors collaboratively discovering and delineating the dimensions of an interorganizational problem in business negotiations. Another pervasive social activity—the interview—receives scrutiny in Button's analysis of how participants construct such recognizable characteristics as a respondent "not answering a question." Other papers illuminate less conventional topics, including the opening segments of emergency telephone calls, which, according to Whalen and Zimmerman, exhibit and reproduce "institutional" features of the interaction. Ambiguity as both a resource and a problem in everyday talk is examined by Grimshaw, who shows ways in which both interactants and social analysts attempt to clarify pieces of talk. Two papers explore general social psychological issues in the context of medical discourse. Tannen and Wallat argue that doctors and patients (or their representatives) may apply conflicting "schemas" of knowledge to bodily signs and symptoms, and that these schemas may require alterations in the "framing" of interaction. Cicourel raises a question of how talk in one medical encounter may be related to interaction in other encounters, and proposes that singular episodes are always part of complex, "interpenetrating" contexts. All of these papers have deep preoccupations with matters of abiding disciplin-

ary concern: social organization, social structure, social relationships and social selves.

In the lead article for this special issue, Schegloff addresses the theoretical importance of, and demonstrates analytic devices for, analyzing single actions and episodes of talk. It turned out that most of the papers accepted for publication in this issue, while discussing other substantive problems, also focus on a single fragment, or, at most, several pieces of talk from one conversation. Consequently, these articles take for granted some of the points that Schegloff raises. And even those which treat larger collections of conversational episodes join the other papers in taking seriously what Schegloff proposes as a social scientific responsibility for answering to and not dispensing with the details of social life. The particularities of conduct are of interest to linguistically-oriented sociologists not because of an instinct for immersion in the residues of behavior, but because of the attempt to develop a science that can encompass, in terms of its indigenous social organization, the totality of human activity as it is actually lived.

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