Discourse & Society

Conversation Analysis and the Claims of Naivety

MICHAEL BILLIG

The online version of this article can be found at:

Published by:

$SAGE

http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for *Discourse & Society* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://das.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://das.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://das.sagepub.com/content/10/4/572.refs.html

Schegloff, E.A. (1996b) 'Confirming Allusions: Toward an Empirical Account of Action', *American Journal of Sociology* 104: 161–216.

Schegloff, E.A. (1997) 'Whose Text? Whose Context?', *Discourse & Society* 8: 165–87.

Schegloff, E.A. (1998) 'Reply to Wetherell', *Discourse & Society* 9: 457–60.

Schegloff, E.A. (1999) 'Discourse, Pragmatics, Conversation, Analysis', *Discourse Studies* 1(4), November.

Stevens, Wallace (1982) *The Collected Poems*. New York: Vintage Books.

Wetherell, M. (1998) 'Positioning and Interpretive Repertoires: Conversation Analysis and Post-Structuralism in Dialogue', *Discourse & Society* 9: 387–412.

Conversation Analysis and the claims of naivety

MICHAEL BILLIG

LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY

Space inevitably restricts my reply to Emanuel Schegloff. I will try to concentrate on some of the major issues that divide us, for I think that his characterization of these differences contains omissions and misunderstandings. I cannot deal with all the issues raised by Schegloff, but I will attempt to clarify what is, and is not, the basis of my position.

First, a couple of preliminary remarks can be made. Schegloff objects to my describing his original article (Schegloff, 1997) as an 'attack' on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). I gladly withdraw the word 'attack'. Deborah Tannen (1998) suggests that academics too readily use the military metaphors of 'attack' and 'defence' to the detriment of reasonable debate. I would not wish, therefore, to 'defend' my use of 'attack'. In the same spirit, I hope to show that my article was not intended as an 'attack' on Conversation Analysis (CA) as such – although I can understand how it might be interpreted as one. Another preliminary point can be made. Schegloff objects that, although I claim to analyse his article, I readily cite the works of other conversation analysts, for whom he can bear no responsibility. He is correct. I did not (and still do not) wish to personalize the issue by concentrating only on his work. When Schegloff (1997) outlined the strengths of CA, he was not, of course, just referring to his own work: he was referring to a whole corpus of inquiry. However, I should have made clearer that I was using his article to illustrate wider trends in CA, and to have stressed that his own work may not represent the clearest examples of some of these trends. If there is ambiguity, I apologize. Inevitably some ambiguity will continue, for I still do not wish to deal only with Schegloff's own contributions to CA, however eminent and distinguished they are.

Schegloff begins his reply by commenting on the sort of critiques which he categorizes under the heading 'The trouble with CA is . . .' A number of ideologically driven critiques will, no doubt, have suggested that the details of CA should be replaced by wider, structural analyses. That is no part of my argument. In fact, I have criticized cultural studies for ignoring the detailed study of language prac-

tice (Billig, 1998). My piece had a specific rhetorical context and purpose. It was a response to Schegloff's (1997) characterization of CA, which he used to make rhetorically weighted contrasts with CDA. These contrasts prompted my response, as I am sure they prompted Wetherell (1998). After all, neither of us has ever previously felt impelled to write a 'trouble with CA' piece – and both of us, after our own fashions, have used CA in our own work.

My critique was directed against Schegloff's (1997) claim that CA is based on a naive epistemology and methodology. He suggests that CA approaches social reality directly, examining it in the participants' own terms. He contrasts this with CDA, which, he claims, imposes its own categories on participants. Schegloff suggests that CDA, because it is driven by prior theorizing, can only find out what it already knew. Schegloff repeats this last claim in the final paragraph of his reply to me. I want to emphasize that my arguments were directed against these claims, not to disputing the value of fine-grain analysis, which CA practices. Regarding the claim that CA studies participants in their own terms, I wanted to suggest that matters are not (and cannot be) that simple. CA constructs and uses analytic terms that are not the participants' own. The use of such terms and the meanings they convey are by no means straightforward. I suggested that their usage contradicts the claims to epistemological naivety.

I feel that Schegloff tends to disconnect my critique of CA's terminology from the specific argument about epistemology. He suggests my descriptions of CA have a polemical import. According to him, I convey an impression of 'impropriety and misleadingness', draping a 'vague illegality' over CA's terminology. He exemplifies this by citing my discussion of his use of the term 'vernacular'. My point was not that there is something misleading or illegal in the use of 'vernacular'. I was suggesting that CA, in its own concepts, moves beyond the participants' own terms. I cited Schegloff criticizing analyses which themselves are stuck in the 'vernacular'. Let me stress: I find nothing illegal or inappropriate in using technical terms which are not part of the ordinary vernacular; nor for that matter do I find anything wrong in attempting to stick to the vernacular in analysing discourse. My point is that the naive epistemology has problems accounting for this move from the vernacular (or from the participants' own terms) to the specialized language of CA. If this central direction of my argument is ignored, then it is understandable how one might be left with the impression that the criticism is diffuse, or to use Schegloff's phrase, that there is a 'blizzard of innuendo'.

I wanted to suggest that in practice CA is not so methodologically or epistemologically naive as Schegloff suggests. Analysts bring presuppositions to the analysis. My point is not that they should seek to eliminate all presuppositions. I think the epistemological and methodological naivety that Schegloff recommends is neither desirable nor in an absolute sense realisable. For this reason I raised the issue of how speakers might be named in CA transcripts. My point was to show that there can be no 'neutral' naming practice. Each practice embodies assumptions about the social world. Schegloff points out that identifying speakers in

terms of institutional affiliations may have some advantages, but it runs the risk of casting a 'category shadow' over the analysis. Similarly, I would suggest that informal categories and alphabetic codes, too, cast 'shadows'. There is no point of sociological neutrality.

In his reply, Schegloff points out the difficulty of identifying speakers on the basis of the talk's content: that would be to presuppose the analysis, before the analysis has been conducted. Indeed, that was, in part, intended to be my point. But not all prior judgements can be avoided. Judgements about the type of talk being studied (i.e. institutional, doctor/patient, domestic, etc.) – and, thus, about the suitability of naming practice – will be made, at least provisionally, prior to the details of the analysis. In short, the analyst, in order to conduct the analysis, must bring presuppositions about the nature of the interaction.

My point was that the terms used in CA – its foundational rhetoric – carry theoretical baggage. The terms, including those used to identify the speakers and also to categorize them as 'participants' or 'co-participants', reflect analysts' understanding about the nature of the interaction being studied. Analysts shift their foundational rhetoric (and practices of naming) depending on whether institutional or domestic talk is being analysed. An implicit sociological under-standing, thus, is the precondition for the analysis. I criticize the notion that infor-mal conversation, as compared with institutional talk, can itself be treated as a sociological point-zero, as some conversation analysts, who consider conversa-tion as a 'bedrock', tend to imply. Again, I should emphasize: there is nothing ille-gal or improper in using presuppositions as such. In my view, presuppositions are necessary for analysis.

It is in this context that I introduced the hypothetical example of the rape. The point was not that violent episodes cannot be studied in terms of the details of spoken interaction. As Schegloff states, recounting his experience of studying an episode of wife-battering, the detailed examination of interaction can show how violence was embedded in more 'ordinary talk'. I would not wish to dispute that at all. My point was more specific. It was that some of the theoretical terminology regularly used in CA for analysing non-institutional interaction would be inap-propriate for the case of rape. This would imply that such terms (including those which I called the 'participatory rhetoric') make assumptions about the nature of social interaction: if they did not, they would not be inappropriate in the case of distressing situations.

I suggested that the form of CA, which Watson (1997) calls 'traditional' CA, is particularly unsuited for a critical analysis of situations such as rape, racial abuse, etc. It would also be unsuited without modification for investigating gender imbalances. This form of analysis, again to quote adherents of CA, involves a par-ticular pattern of 'attending and disattending', which specifically 'disattends' to content. Schegloff in his reply correctly points out that not all CA disattends to content. In my view, a serious study of gender and child supervision would not be based on a single example (such as the extract presented by Schegloff, 1997), but would demand a corpus of materials, to be studied in terms of content. Such

investigations provide a bridge between CA and CDA. When material is collected on the basis of content – such as gathering a corpus of material on wife-beating, rape or child supervision – then, as Schegloff noted with respect to practices of naming, the analyst must bring in presuppositions about the nature of the phenomenon before the analysis is conducted in detail.

If there are different forms of CA, with different patterns of 'attending and disattending', then one must ask how analysts are to choose between them. In passing, I should mention that the very notion of 'attending/disattending' itself reflects the claims for epistemological naivety. It suggests that the analyst merely attends to social reality which is given in a non-problematic way: it ignores the extent to which the analysis depends on the construction of rhetorical practices. The choice is not merely between patterns of attending/disattending, but also between rhetorical practices, including naming practices and the participatory rhetoric. It is not sufficient to claim that the data 'mandates' certain practices and not others. The analyst brings tasks to the data. CDA aims to make explicit such tasks, in order to enable a theoretically based choice between available rhetorics and attending/disattendings (for instance, there would be theoretical grounds for avoiding the participatory rhetoric when analysing certain topics).

In my view, such considerations vitiate the distinction between CA and CDA that Schegloff makes. It is not the case that CA looks at social reality directly, while CDA is condemned only to find what the analyst expects to find. CA has various patterns of attending and disattending, as well as different rhetorical practices. However, a commitment to epistemological naivety downplays such issues. Similarly, epistemological naivety, especially when accompanied by the conviction that CA operates in the participants' own terms, might discourage analysts from reflexively examining their own theoretical terms and the choices that are made in the conduct of analysis. It might be thought that the technical terms and the foundational rhetoric merely describe what actually exists. However, as Schegloff in his criticism of my rhetoric argues, ' "mere description" is not viable in ordinary discourse'. Schegloff suggests that because there is an 'indefinitely expandable set of noticings', no one particular noticing can be warranted by its mere 'correctness'. The same conditions are present in the technical discourse of social analysis. Any piece of social interaction might be the object of indefinitely expandable academic 'noticings'. One particular set of attendings and disattendings cannot be warranted merely on the grounds that it is correct. In this sense, 'mere description' is not viable: it too carries theoretical baggage and assumptions about the nature of social reality.

Although Schegloff warns against ungrounded analyses, his contrasts between CA and CDA are themselves ungrounded in relation to CDA. He offers no analyses of CDA to support his contrasts, nor to warrant his descriptions of CDA's practices (which, of course, are not 'mere descriptions'). The criterion which he uses to distinguish between CDA and CA – the possession of theoretical presuppositions, which dominate detrimentally the analysis – is more appropriate for

distinguishing good from bad analyses, whether they be conducted under the label of CA or CDA. After all, conversation analysts might apply particular patterns of attending and disattending to certain data sets, with the result that they only notice analytically what they are expecting to notice: what they disattend to will remain ignored. There is a case for saying that the traditional form of CA was looking for the basis of social ordering in codes of speech which are shared by participants. If this pattern of attending/disattending is applied to episodes in which power is violently exercised, it might be possible to find such shared codes. If that is all the analyst attends to, then the inequalities of power will be disattended to.

I would prefer the distinction between CA and CDA to be drawn differently, although a firm distinction would be misleading because CDA, like CA, encourages the close examination of spoken interaction; indeed, CDA often uses the methods and findings of CA. However, there are differences between CDA and 'traditional' CA. The specific tasks of CDA are frequently part of a wider analysis of social inequality. Moreover, CDA wishes to theorize the presuppositions that must be brought to the micro-analysis of interaction. CDA does not claim epistemological naivety in the fulfilment of its methodological tasks, but explicitly wishes to incorporate insights from social theory and other social sciences, including macro social science, into the analysis of particulars. This can be clearly seen, for example, in Wetherell's (1998) response to Schegloff. CA, by contrast, using variants of epistemological and methodological naivety as guiding principles, often excludes these wider inquiries, ignoring the insights that can be gained from other disciplines (its exclusionary character can be seen in the limited range of references that typically are cited in CA empirical studies). In consequence, I would turn Schegloff's final conclusion around. Those who think they have little to learn from studying the broad pattern and history of social relations, should choose the path of traditional CA. Those who feel that they do not know these things and who wish to understand how the wider pattern might be reproduced in particular moments of social interaction, should turn to CDA.

REFERENCES

Billig, M. (1998) 'From Codes to Utterances: Cultural Studies, Discourse and Psychology', in M. Ferguson and P. Golding (eds) *Cultural Studies in Question*. London: Sage.
Schegloff, E.A. (1997) 'Whose Text? Whose Context?' *Discourse & Society* 8: 165–87.
Tannen, D. (1998) *The Argument Culture*. London: Virago.
Watson, D. (1997) 'Some General Reflections on "Categorization" and "Sequence" in the Analysis of Conversation', in S. Hester and P. Eglin (eds) *Culture in Action*. Washington, DC: University Press of America.
Wetherell, M. (1998) 'Positioning and Interpretative Repertoires: Conversation Analysis and Post-Structuralism in Dialogue', *Discourse & Society* 9: 387–412.