Review of Charles Antaki and Sue Widdicombe (eds.), Identities in Talk

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This is a collection of studies of identity in the framework of Conversation Analysis. Many of the essays make explicit use of Harvey Sacks's descriptions of the "membership categorization devices" by which people construct attributions of identity in the course of interaction, as a way of accomplishing particular, situated goals. Many mount explicit arguments against psychological accounts of personal identity and social categorization according to which people bring pre-existing identities into interactions. With one or two exceptions, the contributions are well argued, clearly written, and free of the jargon that sometimes makes work in Conversation Analysis inaccessible to outsiders. Readers of Language in Society should find the collection thought-provoking.

In the first chapter, Antaki & Widdicombe lay out the general theme: "Membership of a category is ascribed (and rejected), avowed (and disavowed), displayed (and ignored) in local places and at certain times, and it does these things as part of the interactional work that constitutes people's lives. In other words, the functionalist to this book take it not that people passively or latently have this or that identity which then causes feelings and actions, but that they work up and to this or that identity, for themselves and others, there and then, either as an end in itself or towards some other end" (p. 2). They discuss five principles that characterize the "ethnomethodological analytic attitude." First, to "have an identity" means to be placed, via one or more interactional moves, into a category with associated criterial features. One of the teenagers described by Widdicombe in her own later chapter shows how negotiations about identity can involve such moves. When an interviewer makes a bid to categorize her by asking, "Would you say that you were punk?", the teen rejects the bid by claiming not to fit one of the criteria: "You have to have a certain way of thinking you know you to be a punk and ... I certainly haven't got it ..." (58). Second, moves that cast people into identity categories are indexical and occasioned. In other words, the meaning of a cat-

egorization can differ from moment to moment, depending on the situation and purposes at hand. For example, in their chapter about a radio interview with members of the National Rifle Association, Andy McKinlay and Anne Dunnett show how the NRA members cast themselves as "average" in several different senses. Sometimes their claim that they are "average" is a claim that they, like other members of the public, have a variety of opinions about guns. At other times, "average" means "not criminal" and serves to differentiate justified uses of guns from unjustified uses.

The third principle is that the casting of oneself or someone else into a category is a strategic bid to make the category relevant to the "interactional business" in progress. A good example is provided in Dennis Day's chapter about multiethnic interactions in Swedish workplaces. When a worker mispronounces a Swedish word, others respond in a way that "ethnicizes" him as a foreigner, teasing him about what the word, as mispronounced, could mean, and making up a series of humorous parallel neologisms. He responds by asking whether one of these phony words "is in Finnish or what," making relevant the fact that not all the people teasing him are Swedish, either. This serves his particular, momentary self-defensive purpose in the interaction at hand. The fourth principle is that what it means to be "an x" or "a y" is what this identity accomplishes in the interaction at hand. Robin Wooffitt and Colin Clark show, for example, that the key to being seen as having telekinetic powers, for the spirit medium they studied, was to manage to be identified by others as a "knowing recipient"—someone who already knew what people were telling her.

The final principle is that the evidence of the first four principles can be seen in the ways people make use of the "structures of conversation." Speakers share expectations about what will happen at a certain point in conversation, and what it can be taken to mean. For example, Don H. Zimmerman explores the structure of calls to emergency response centers. Once connected with the center, callers can make use of a format that includes a self-identification ("this is security at this bus depot") and/or a "proprietary" move ("As we got a guy down here that's uh . . . over intoxicated"). In his chapter on how teachers solicit school psychologists' help with difficult students, Stephen Hester shows that teachers can use "category contrast" structures, setting the child in question against "most children" without ever having to use evaluative terms such as "deviant." In a particularly striking chapter on how senility is interactively constructed, Isabella Paololetti shows how an interviewer talking to a younger person followed up on apparently incoherent statements, asking "What do you mean?" in order to reduce the incoherence, whereas with an elderly person, the interviewer allowed apparent incoherence to stand unchallenged, simply moving on to the next question. Thus, the interviewer's initial categorization of the source of the incoherence (temporary conversational difficulty in the case of the younger person, senility in the case of the older person) led her to structure the succeeding talk in a way that inevitably confirmed her expectations. Other chapters show how conversa-

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nional structure is mobilized in categorizing people in a marriage counseling session (Derek Edwards), in divorce mediation (David Greathouse & Robert Dingwall), and in repartee between a mother and her daughter (Antaki). The last chapter of the book is an epilogue by Widdicombe.

Work like that represented in this collection is relevant and valuable for linguists and anthropologists who analyze discourse. It reminds us of the constantly rhetorical nature of talk, the ways in which what we are arises from and is constantly adapted to the interactional things we do. It reminds us that what we have sometimes thought of as immutable social “facts” about people (even such things as their age) are constantly negotiable and resistible, and sometimes completely irrelevant. It also reminds us of the importance of listening to and looking at the talk and text we study with the conviction that some of the best evidence of what people are doing is in the details of what they say and how they say it.

But the contributors to Identities in Talk go further than this. Rather than maintaining, with many other discourse analysts, that what people say is a useful source of evidence about what people mean and what actions they are involved in, these authors take it as axiomatic that talk is the sole source of evidence about meaning and social action, both for participants and for analysts. Antaki is particularly explicit about this. The meaning and force of the identity categorization moves in conversation, as he claims, completely recoverable from what is “hearable” in the conversation; it is unnecessary to adduce any “extra-textual” knowledge. Antaki’s central example is a segment of conversation in which a mother says to her daughter, “You look like Fagin.” He argues that an analyst can figure out what the mother is accomplishing by this move solely by looking at what precedes and follows it, without needing to know who “Fagin” is, and that one need not attribute any literary knowledge to the participants in the conversation; either: “Even though the tease seems to invoke the cultural nugget of a fictional character-name (‘Fagin’), the untangling work it does is hearable and intelligible without resort to any sort of ‘cultural’ or ‘psychological’ analysis, where the former means something like the interpretation of a code and the latter means the evaluation of inner states” (p. 71). Antaki’s analysis is a useful reminder that it is possible to make sense of literary and other references in conversation without being able to identify the referent. For that matter, it is possible to make sense of words one does not know, odd syntax, foreign accents, and many other kinds of newness.

However, “extra-textual knowledge” is at the core of this process, at least in the form of the expectations about conversational structure to which Conversation Analysts themselves refer; and Antaki’s analytical work, like that of all the contributors to the volume, crucially depends on “cultural analysis,” if only because an utterance’s being “hearable and intelligible” as doing anything at all requires understanding English or some other language. Although many linguists and anthropologists would wholeheartedly agree that language is not “code,” neither would we want to say that people figure out the meanings of words and structures completely de novo in each utterance they hear. Grammar and culture

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do not exist prior to discourse, determining what people can say and what it will be taken to mean, but people clearly make generalizations about structure and meaning on the basis of what they hear, and then refer to these generalizations in interpreting new things. The same is true of identity. Conversation Analysts are correct in pointing out that people do not enter interactions with preestablished identities that invariably become relevant therein. But to insist exclusively on the emergent aspects of identity is to ignore the ideological processes (which are at the root of racism and sexism, for example) through which certain identities do tend to become relatively fixed in meaning, and to be treated as relevant, no matter what. I recommend Identities in Talk as a very clear exposition of the Conversation Analytical approach to identity, even though I think that this approach provides only a partial description of the forms and functions of social categorization in human life.


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The Multiliteracies (ML) Project is a response by eleven prominent literacy researchers, known collectively as the New London Group (NLG), to changes associated with the end of the Cold War and the information economy. ML was conceived in 1994 at a meeting in New London, New Hampshire, US, and saw light with the publication of NLG 1996 in the Harvard Educational Review. With the appearance of the volume under review, we can now say that it is walking and has a promising future.

The volume consists of 16 essays — there are no reports of research — divided among five thematic sections, each with a brief introduction by the editors. The Harvard Educational Review article is reprinted as Chap. 1 and forms the entire first section. Although readers familiar with it may chose to skip this introduction, it is a needed starting point for those unfamiliar with ML, because it summarizes the entire project. For both groups, a reread after examining other articles may prove profitable, as it did for me.

Section 2 consists of five articles providing rationales for ML. The first two focus on changing political, social, technological, and economic realities. Jim Gee (Chap. 2) — almost in spite of himself — appears fascinated by what he has elsewhere called the New Work Order. The emphasis is on the possibilities accruing from the increasing distribution of decision-making that characterizes post-industrial workplaces and societies generally. Carmen Luke (Chap. 3) discusses

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