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Omni-relevance and Interactional Context

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Abstract

During the course of this article the concept of omni-relevance is explored in relation to talk-in-interaction. Through the use of the reconsidered model of membership categorization analysis (Housley and Fitzgerald, 2002) issues relating to context and understanding within the local production of interactional order are discussed. The paper argues that the use of omni-relevant devices and associated 'recognition work' provide a means of empirically documenting how 'extra-textual understanding' and 'background expectancies' are made retrospectively apparent within the contours of membership work and alignment in story telling practices. To this extent we argue that an understanding of omni-relevance and membership categorization practices is central to debates concerning category, sequence and context within empirical studies of talk-in-interaction.

Within the Sacksian approaches of both Conversation Analysis and Membership Category Analysis the problem of extra textual participant relevance has tended to prove illusive, often remaining analytically contestable as to its contextual or interactional relevance *in situ*. This has tended to make problematic the possibility of exploring extra textual features as operating or influencing the background understandings and contextual orientations of participants within the flow of interaction. However, in this paper we draw upon Sacks' (1995) notion of an omnirelevant device to explore a sequence of interaction where the participants are seen to invoke a membership device which, it is suggested, informs both the turn by turn flow of the interaction and the context of the interaction. According to Sacks' (1995, Vol 1 p313-4) a device is 'omni' relevant to '…a setting via the fact that there are some activities…that have no special slot in [in the interaction], i.e., do not follow any given last occurrence, but when they are appropriate they have priority'. This is not to preclude other devices being relevant, including other omnirelevant devices, but that:

> Things may be going along, the device isn't being used; at some point something happens which makes it appropriate, and its used. And when it is used, it's the controlling device, i.e., there is no way of excluding its operation when relevant.
> (1995, Vol 1 p314)

To suggest that a device is 'omni-relevant' then is to say that the device operates at an organisational level (of the interactional event) and at times an immediate level (the sequential and categorical flow of the interaction). Our discussion builds upon recent work that draws on Sack's notion of omnirelevance (Fitzgerald and Housley 2002, McHoul and Rapley 2002, McHoul, Rapley and Antaki 2008) through the analysis of a story-telling event where at various times within the flow of interaction the participants invoke assumed-knowledge-in-common.

Within the following analysis it is suggested that at various points in the interaction an omnirelevant device is oriented to which invokes co-membership through assumed-knowledge-in-common about various characters in the story being told. The assumed-knowledge-in-common, drawn upon from within the interaction, invokes what we term a 'resource' device that is observable at various points within the conversation as a 'resource' available *in situ* and which serves to shape the interactional task of telling the story. The term 'resource' device is used to refer to a membership device that is built around some form of assumed mutual knowledge. Clearly category membership is routinely predicated with

category tied knowledge; a mundane method identified and described in a number of empirical studies that include Drew's (1978) analysis of the Scarman tribunal, Lynch and Bogen's (1996) analysis of the Oliver North trial and Sharrock's (1974) seminal discussion of 'owning' knowledge. In this discussion we suggest that a further aspect of the use of a resource device is that there is an assumed reciprocity between co-members that may be used for aligning understanding. This 'resource-in-common' may be drawn upon by other co-members and through which invokes co-category membership of a device predicated with such knowledge. Membership of this type of device is organised around the particular knowledge predicated to co-membership invoked *in situ*.

Moreover, through our analysis we explore the way a resource device invoked by members in the data can be understood as 'omnirelevant' in the sense that it operates as a resource to be invoked by participants as and when needed to aid the task of telling the story. Thus, what we suggest is that the invocation of the omnirelevant device is seen as imbuing a level of context for the interactional event and its sequential unfolding through co-membership of the omnirelevant device reflexively permeating the interaction as a resource that informs and shapes the local action of narration. This use and sense of context is referred to by Sacks in his discussion of a story telling event:

> One of the things that [the story teller] is doing throughout the story is, in various ways, dealing with relevancies that she knows of that turn out to be important for the last thing or the next thing said. So what we have is a sense of context being employed by the teller, which involves fitting to the story, in carefully located places, information that will permit the appreciation of what was transpiring…(Sacks 1995 Vol 2 p274)

Here, then, assumed relevances are seen as informing the interactional sequencing through an orientation to recipient design. Recipient design involves an attention to the *in situ* organisation of who we relevantly are, what we are relevantly doing and what we assume to relevantly know of each other for, and in doing, *this* task. In this way 'contextual' relevance may be observable through the invocation of local, *in situ,* 'participatory relevances' within the interaction.

In the discussion that follows it is argued that a level of oriented-to context is observable and analytically recoverable from the data despite no direct referent to co-membership being made. Rather, we argue that participants appeal to a level of knowledge-in-common and that

this, in turn, invokes co-membership of a 'resource' device. We argue that this device, whilst not directly referred to, is nonetheless observable through the cracks, joints and seams of the data through which the recognition work of members and situated forms of knowledgeability in relation to persons is interactionally accomplished (Housley, 2000). By exploring where the *resource device* is invoked within the unfolding story we argue that there is a cumulative build of analytic evidence to suggest the resource device is operating at a level of omni-relevance. Indeed, we observe that the device is not only used to inform the on going story but is also oriented to as some kind of common-stock-of-knowledge which is observably invoked attended to, repaired and re-aligned separately from the story. Whilst space precludes detailed analytic attention to the full extract, in the examples below we draw attention to two features of interest, the invocation of assumed knowledge in common and an extended side sequence attending to the resource device.

1. *Invoking a Resource Device*.
Extract 1.
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[30]   J:      =well look at D::av's Da:d (.) I don't know how much truth is in
[31]           that bout er=
[32]   S:      =with that fat slag Toni=
[33]   R:      =who's that?=
[34]   J:      =you know-phhhhhh-yu know Jean Roberts-Phil Roberts'Mum
[35]           [her granddaughter] –
[36]   S:      [  an  she  led   ] im on as well [ like]
[37]   J:                                        [well yu] don't know like yu
[38]           don't actua:lly know like do y::a Sh:irl? (.) There might-I--I think
[39]           there's a lot more to it but I don't know
[40]           [ so I'm not gonna judge either ov um]
[41]   S:         [      I used to knock              ] around with er [for years]
[42]   R:                                                             [  I::s  ] that
[43]           Julie Roberts' daughter?
[44]   J:      yer
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In the preface to his story J provides one character using a person reference 'Dav's Dad'- a form that assumes recognition by the recipients. S offers a completion of J's turn with reference to a second character 'Toni', which demonstrates her recognition of the reference to 'Dav's Dad' and the shared knowledge that this reference invokes. However, R indicates that 'Toni' is not a recognitional reference for her and asks 'who's that?' This display of non-recognition is responded to by J with ''=you know-phhhhhh-yu know Jean Roberts-Phil Roberts mum [her granddaughter]'. In this response, J refers to people that R is assumed to know, and in offering this identification displays an assumption that R shares some

knowledge of the persons referenced through which 'Toni' can be found amongst. At lines 42-43, R demonstrates the (at least partial) success of this identification with a clarification request - "is that Julie Roberts daughter", again a clarification reliant on shared knowledge. What is of interest here is how person reference invokes assumed knowledge in common. This use of assumed knowledge in common *in situ* and its relationship to context is noted by Pomerantz in her discussion of Buttny (1998).

> Interactants enact their personal relationships in their current interactions. Yet what they do, say, and feel in the present may be connected to conversations (and more generally experiences) in the past...One way participants use "context" involves invoking something from the past to explain something occurring in the present. (Pommerantz 1998 p130).

Thus the identification work invokes a shared 'resource' for locating Toni, and this shared resource is made both sequentially and categorically relevant through collaborative turns that are built around and rely upon what R is assumed to know in relation to Toni.

2. *Resource Repair.*

The second example involves a side sequence initiated after revealing some mistaken mutual knowledge.

Extract 2.
[67]   J.   in Risley when I got to Risley he was there (.) I went round n
[68]   seen im I always thought is name was John=
[69]   R: =his name is John [isn't it?]
[70]   S: [it's John=]
[71]   J: =no it's George (.) Is names George like
[72]   R: [[I thought is name was John (hahahahaha)
[73]   S: [[I always thought John was is name (hahahahaha)
[74]   J: I always called im John yer-it's only is nick-name it's not is real
[75]   name (.) n-I've known im since I was a little kid as well
[76]   S: yer I've known im a good while
[77]   J: err=
[78]   R: =I've only known im as long as I've ad bins to empty=
[79]   J: =well J::av-D::av errr D:av-John (.2) his older son (.) the one

At line 68 J offers that he saw Dav's Dad in the remand prison they were both at and that he 'always' thought his name was John. This opens up a side sequence where;

1. R and then S report their belief about John's name, followed by J then revealing his real name is George.

2. R and S then self initiate, with remarkable symmetry, relating their state of knowing. With S also providing a temporal marker 'always'

3. J then recycles the term 'always' as he unpacks his temporal account – 'since I was a little Kid'.

4. S and then R respond in turn recalling their temporal knowledge of John/George.

Whilst the use of temporal reference in this sequence and throughout the data is an interesting phenomena, what is of particular interest here is that the side sequence, where topic talk is suspended, is made relevant through J revealing his mistake in the detail of the common knowledge of the person between the two other co-members. The symmetry of the sequential units is remarkable within each of the three sequences where the initial action invokes a 'round' where each person responds by invoking their co-membership. It is within these side sequences that the detail of the common knowledge is revealed as mistaken, reported as shared mistaken, and elaborated upon. What is also of interest here is the way the reference to Dav's Dad as introduced as a character in the story is not replaced with 'George or John' once this is discussed. That is, although the name of Dav's Dad is now brought into the discussion, this information does not then replace the use of 'Dav's Dad' when the story is resumed. This detail does not inform the story, it does not influence the telling of the story (though it may have influence and be part of a wider orientation in relaying the story – rather than in the sequential telling of the story), but rather it interrupts the story as a side sequence and aligns the knowledge in common.

Summary discussion.

To suggest the participants invoke an omni-relevant resource device in interaction builds on Sacks' observations by exploring their contextual relevance within the flow of sequence and category work. This requires a level of unique adequacy of participant generated context, a context in which the participant orientations are invoked and observable within and between various tasks. That is, our analysis identifies a number of instances throughout the interaction where the resource device is seemingly oriented to by the participants. It is through this level of observation that we build a cumulative sense of the layers of participant orientations that operate over the course of interaction and permeate the turn by turn sequence and categorial organization of the interactional context.

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