Introduction

Membership Categorisation Analysis. Technologies of social action

1. Introduction

The origin of this special issue was a panel organised at the International Institute of Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis (IIEMCA) on Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA), held at Kolding in Denmark in 2015. The panel, in memory of Stephen Hester who died in 2014, brought together a number of researchers to discuss the current state of the field and present new directions in research in MCA. Building on the pioneering work of Harvey Sacks and the later work of Hester and others the special issue highlights the contemporary development of MCA as a rigorous empirical approach to the study of situated identity within the flow of social interaction. The papers, placed at the intersection between pragmatics and sociology in examining multiple sequentially organised layers of category work, examine the organisation of social knowledge and knowledge entitlement, of moral ordering and the deployment of social norms, but also new and emergent areas of interest around spatial and embodied social action within the frame of technology and technologies of interaction.

The interface between technology and talk has always been understood as a multi-faceted relation. Technology in the guise of portable tape recorders was pivotal in the development of conversation analysis and the study of talk while the increasingly ubiquitous recording devices and the explosion in communicative practices and media in the digital age has generated new domains for the study of talk-in-interaction and new ways for recording and approaching these practices as 'data'. At the same time, although not an uncontroversial analogy, talk and interaction can be understood to exhibit technological characteristics; a ubiquitous methodological apparatus through which social life is both organised and accomplished. The ethnomethodological paradigm, including CA and MCA, as a 'primitive natural science' (Sacks, 1995; Lynch and Bogen, 1994), embraced both naturalism and technical descriptions in order to render visible the highly organised and granular features of this shared 'technological' apparatus.

2. MCA and pragmatics

Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) has developed and expanded as a rigorous approach, particularly as applied to the study of social organisation and social identity through its focus on social-knowledge-in-action (Housley and Fitzgerald, 2015). Based on the original work of Sacks (1974, 1995), MCA has become recognised as a rigorous empirical form of qualitative analysis that has proven remarkably adept and analytically valuable in recovering and examining the social cultural resources people use in their everyday interactions and cultural encounters. While based in Sacks' original categorisation work in the 1960s it was the publication of Hester and Eglin's (1997) collection *Culture in Action* 20 years ago that heralded the renewed interest and re-examination of membership categorisation practices and a growing cumulative body of analysis and methodological development which now underpins contemporary MCA research (Housley and Fitzgerald, 2002; Fitzgerald and Housley, 2015). This engagement and development of Sacks' ideas has also seen MCA expand beyond the original sociological focus to become a recognised interdisciplinary approach for studying the locally organised practices of social knowledge-in-action in linguistics, psychology, communication, media studies, and anthropology.

Sacks' Categorisation Analysis and Membership Categorisation Analysis has a rich tradition within pragmatics and has been present in the *Journal of Pragmatics* since the early beginning with the paper Rod Watson looking at Black American Speech published in 1977. Since then there has been a steadily increasing presence of the approach applied as a single method of analysis, alongside CA or as a component of a methodological approach. Topics covered include being a 'foreigner' (Fukuda, 2017), political talk radio (Dori-Hacohen, 2012), social research interviews (Myers and Lampropoulou, 2012), family meal times (Butler and Fitzgerald, 2010), face (Samra-Fredericks, 2010; Ruhi, 2010), and business calls (Hougaard, 2008) to name a few. Moreover the *Journal of Pragmatics* has been pivotal to the increased engagement of MCA and pragmatics through the publication of a key paper by Schegloff (2007) in which he critically discusses Sacks' category work alongside MCA. In this paper Schegloff offers some critical comments on the development of MCA and its relation to both Sacks and the potential for what he terms analytic promiscuity, where the analyst imposes their own understanding onto the data rather than demonstrating members orientations. While the critique may serve as a caution for many approaches when badly executed, including Conversation Analysis, for MCA this spurred a critical examination of the core methodological engagement between data and analysis which is now threaded through the approach (Carlin, 2009; Stokoe, 2012; Fitzgerald, 2012; Fitzgerald and Rintel, 2013), underpinning the papers in this special issue and directly addressed in the first paper by Francis and Hester.

3. Technologies of social action

In line with Ethnomethodology, Sacks' work and MCA has always encompassed a broadly multi-modal and ethnographic disposition towards data, drawing on a range of available data including texts such as newspaper headlines and stories, adverts, children's drawings as well as overheard and recorded spoken interaction and video. In recent years high quality video recordings have become widely available which has allowed this form of data to become an increasingly important mode of data, and brought about a subsequent widening of the analytic scope for the exploration of the ethnomethods of interaction and category work through physical and embodied action. The theoretical focus of such research draws its operative focus from Sacks' viewer's maxim (Sacks, 1995; Hester and Francis, 2004; Paoletti, 1998) to explore how and in what ways visible action and embodiment are reflexively bound up with social orderliness. Adding to this is the proliferation of easily accessible social media data and other forms of online interactional work that further opens up the possibilities for examining multiple layers of members category work. Questions regarding the primacy or hierarchy of these layers in relation to each other is beyond the scope of this introduction, however, we suggest the answer to that question lies in the careful analysis and study of the situated and local organisation of these matters as member's phenomena.

While the concern with embodied action provides further analytic insight into categorical implicature, information structures, and, of course, performativity, MCA is also turning towards issues of technology and communication. Here the use of technology as, and as part of, interaction has begun to explore a range of categorical issues, from platform-specific categories and technologising of interaction itself, through to ways in which the constraints and affordances of media have revealed more general categorical features of interaction that had been difficult to see in face-to-face encounters (Rintel, 2015).

As these new forms of data and new phenomena become common this also raises new sets of issues around current methodologies and forms of analysis. Given the proliferation of multi-channel data capture, social media and computer mediated interaction it is also critical to consider how fit for purpose the current suite of methodological approaches might be. For example, is it possible simply to apply methodological techniques from an approach to the new forms of data or should current methods be reexamined and tested in order to see if they are fit for purpose albeit within the situated parameters of the local production of social order? This on going reflexive process resonates with both the early work of Ethnomethodology, Conversation Analysis and Pragmatics where the innovative approach to data using naturally occurring interaction was facilitated by the ability to tape record action and conversation and so play it back repeatedly in order that others are able to examine the data and the analytic claims made from the data. It is a testament to CA's insistence of the primacy of naturally occurring data, and through this the rigour of analysis more generally, that the approach has developed and achieved the major position in the field it now holds. However if we are able to take a step back a bit to where this began, Sacks lectures provide an insight into both his use of technology and his central concern for the data.

> So I started playing around with tape recorded conversations, for the single virtue that I could replay them; that I could type them out somewhat, and study them extendedly, who knew how long it might take. And that was a good enough record of what happened, to some extent. Other things, to be sure, happened. But at least that happened. It wasn't from any large interest in language, or from some theoretical formulation of what should be studied, but simply by virtue that; I could get my hands on it, and look at what I had studied, and make of it what they could, if they wanted to be able to disagree with me.

> (Sacks, 1995, vol. 1, 622)

In this well-known passage Sacks draws attention to how he came about studying conversation through the ability of the tape recorder to capture data for repeated examination. This of course heralds the early beginning of Conversation Analysis but it also draws attention to the way that, for Sacks, the recordings were a means to an end and that his central concern was to capture a 'good enough' record of the data that he could repeatedly go back to and re-examine. While much has been made of his use of tape recordings, his archives held at UCLA, as well as his lectures, contain many different forms of collected and analysed data including tapes and transcripts, large amounts of newspaper clippings, adverts, children's stories, pictures and even radio phone-in transcripts. If we accept his description of his analytic motivation, to see how he could capture data for analysis, together with the different types of data he collected, then we can see that he was interested in working with whatever data he had available in ways that enabled systematic, repeatable and inspectable analyses. What we can take away from this is that through his interest in different forms of data it is possible to consider that had other forms of data including video and social media data been widely available, then this would also have been collected for examination and also subject to repeated methodological innovation in trying different ways to unpack the data for analysis in the ways that it could.

In highlighting Sacks' interest in multiple forms of data with his analytic goal of unpacking how these made sense or what sense could be made of them we draw attention to a number of intersecting themes that thread through the data and analysis in the papers contained in this special issue and raise critical questions around current methodologies applied to new forms of data and phenomena. In raising these questions through an MCA analysis the papers push at the current edges of this approach and through this test and examine the fit for *this* specific study of action and where necessary to configure new analytic considerations in order to remain analytically focused on the study of practical methods of interaction which is at the heart of the interdisciplinary study of situated social (inter) action.

4. Conceptual threads and papers

As said, the papers in this special issue bring together researchers in the field of MCA who are concerned with methodological developments and substantive investigations. The papers are arranged around two main interlinking themes that relate to categorisation work as technologies of social action acting as a core thread underpinned with a methodological orientation that explores the current frontiers of MCA analysis. Having discussed the methodological emphasis above we now introduce the papers through a reflection upon the way data in this collection, and across MCA and other disciplines, is becoming visibly technologised. By this we mean that the nature of data collection useable in MCA is itself being accomplished by participants within a social-technical frame and both the data and the socio-technical frame of the participants is being treated as an accountable resource by researchers.

To reiterate, Sacks' decision to use tape-recorded speech and detailed transcripts stemmed from the need to provide a new kind of empirical ground truth for productions of sociological action in situ in which abstracted large data sets or glossed interview quotes could be replaced with re-playable or at least re-readable documents of talk-as-it-happened. Both early tape-recorded and early filmed interactions largely treated the recording situation and mechanism, and occasional participant mentions of recording or glances to camera, as not relevant for the argument being made. One exception is studies that focused on the telephone as a technology of institutions or intimacy, which explored how the affordances of landline telephones were treated by participants as resources for interactions (role categories such as caller and call recipient, fishing, calling just to keep in touch, etc.). But much research was, and continues to be, accomplished using telephone data that made little or no reference to the technology at all.

After initial work to establish the genre of naturally-occurring data, as it were, to a certain extent discussions of both participant and researcher accountability of data subsided within studies that involved a concern with sequential and categorical matters.

Stephen Hester's educational psychology referral meetings data as used in Francis and Hester's ''*Stephen Hester on the Problem of Culturalism*'', is an example of a 'settled' period of research in which participant reaction to the fact of tape-recording is not reported and the researchers treat tape-recorded transcripts as sufficient unto themselves for the argument. And indeed they are sufficient because it is extremely likely that the activities captured would have occurred regardless of the data collection process and in largely the same manner. Even if we imagine some activities being somehow 'held back' by participants to avoid being captured, the referral meetings were accomplished as meaningful social interactions for all involved. As Francis and Hester point out, for Stephen Hester the data produced analytically viable distinctions of interaction around deviance categories. And, stepping back, Francis and Hester's description of Stephen Hester's approach does not rely on the accountability of the data. Rather they show that Hester's exploration of the two different models of deviance turns precisely on the demonstrable relevance of categories within the transcripts.

Essentially the same approach is taken by both Stokoe, Sikveland, and Huma for issues in sales calls and Evans and Fitzgerald for basketball coaching. Stokoe, Sikveland, and Huma in ''*Entering the customer's domestic domain: Categorial systematics and the identification of 'parties to a sale'*'' do in fact mention some aspects of technologisation

that underpin their exploration of categories in sales scripts: that the sales calls are generated in part from agents' access to computerised "actionable consumer profiles", and that access to the calls was predicated on the widespread practice of recording institutional calls for "training/quality/evaluation purposes" – the latter being a condition to which callers and participants nominally actively consented at the start of calls. The project of callers seeking out customers' names is subject to the material constraints of voice-only telephone calls, coming into play especially around how gender is used to establish categorised titles. However, while the telephone source is reflected in the analytic particulars, Stokoe et al.'s conclusion would likely be the same in any medium: that seeking titles and making assumptions based on them introduces more problems for salespeople than it may solve. Stokoe et al. do note that establishing things such as titles (to the extent that they matter) to parties to a sale might be better solved externally to any direct sales interaction, for example by "employing data from other companies and settings", which introduces the potential for how an institutional caller could draw on a larger media and information ecology as a categorical resource.

Likewise, Evans and Fitzgerald in "*The categorial and sequential work of 'embodied mapping' in basketball coaching*" work with video capture as a simple record of a view on social activities. It is important to note as a practical feature of modern video-based analysis, though, that there is significantly more authorial work in presenting descriptions of embodied actions to accompany transcripts in such a way as to render the practices of interest 'visible' to readers. While the increasing ability to insert actual video excerpts in digital renderings of articles improves the transfer of the argument from writers to readers, it also brings with it new challenges in the trade-off in both the ability to present a case and the nature and size of collections of practices from which such cases are drawn. The upside, of course, is that embodied actions are made available for analysis, and, as above for Francis and Hester, so long as the embodied activities thus captured are relevant to the participants who are, at the same time, ignoring the video capture, then all is well.

Reynolds represents a bridge between traditional and newer approaches to gathering and exploring naturally occurring interaction. While Evans and Fitzgerald's basketball coaching sessions might not normally be recorded, many sports and fitness activities are now recorded as a matter of course in a range of ways. As Reynolds' article "*Description of membership and enacting membership: Seeing-a-lift, being a team*" discusses, many individual athletes are now deliberately video recording training sessions and posting some version of these to *Facebook* and *Instagram*. The reasons for posting are ostensibly for personal improvement – posting for a non-present coach to scrutinise to posting to see progress – and also to generate social media content and receive responses from others about that content as a means of building a 'following and interest'.

Reynolds draws on one of these instances to initiate his discussion on "seeing a lift". He notes that while recording one's own activities in gyms is common, the posted version is likely one of many, showing perhaps the best or idealised version of an activity or, as in his instance, a newsworthy event potentially outside or parallel to the fitness activity. In this case the blatant staring of an unintentionally captured onlooker helps Reynolds make an introductory contrast between sanctioned versus unsanctioned looking, and while this distinction itself is not the purpose of his article, it makes the point that the core work here involves recognisably suspending one's own activity and attending to a lift in progress as a team member for specific social purposes. The bulk of Reynolds' data then comes from video recordings captured in much the same way as that of Evans and Fitzgerald and not published to Facebook or Instagram – or at least not in the same format as the initial video. Reynolds does not directly further interrogate the differences between the social media posting and its relationship to his other recordings in this case, but then ability to source data from social media is clearly likely to have an effect on both the availability of data and the analytic work needed to understand it.

This is at least partially the issue in Smith's "*Membership categorisation, category-relevant space, and perception-in-action: The case of disputes between cyclists and drivers.*" Smith draws his data from 20 disputes between cyclists and drivers uploaded to a public website. Smith is highly aware of the difference between this data and traditionally collected data, and makes several important points about this difference. This data should not be treated as a simple proxy for a participant's view, as what is seen in the camera's field of view is not linked to what participants literally see or attend to and, further, each "video has been selected, edited and uploaded by the amateur filmmaker for their purposes and in line with an expected audience". There is an intentionality to what can be seen, and thus the categories and predicates that can be analysed as deployed by researchers. Smith notes that the likely issues of self-selection that might crop up in relation to such data are more relevant to questions of frequency or distribution than to the more MCA orientation of "how members accomplish a given phenomenon." In Smith's data the camera as a central part of the socio-technical assemblage is one of many resources used to make and contest category claims. While appeals to video recording is not the primary point of Smith's analysis, it is an inescapable part of the 'documentary method' that the participants themselves are using in their disputes, and thus must be included in the analysis.

Of course, such visible technologisation of data does not warrant attention only to technological questions. While many issues of technology and society could be explored (lay collections of data, multi-modal responses to video posts, etc.) and many such issues would be interesting to MCA, the key link between traditional data collections and data aggregations remains, as Francis and Hester argue, that analytic rigour depends on attention to the 'membership' aspect of MCA as a locally occasioned and ordered matter.

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Richard Fitzgerald*
University of Macau, Macau

William Housley
Cardiff University, United Kingdom

Sean Rintel
Microsoft Research, Cambridge, United Kingdom

*Corresponding author
E-mail address: RFitzgerald@umac.mo (R. Fitzgerald).