Approaching the Future

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There are many interesting and worthwhile directions for research in an area characterized with such a general and deceptively simple label as *language and social interaction*. Rather than enumerate a broad, multifaceted research agenda, I focus on a few general issues of concern.

A sense of the breadth and variety of research directions should emerge from the collective perspectives in this volume. I take up the following issues:

1. Language and social interaction cannot be properly studied by treating language as if it were a transparent medium.
2. Discourse is a multimodal activity system and this creates certain methodological and theoretical complexities for studying it.
3. Research on language and social interaction (the field of study as well as this journal) has the potential to contribute to a wide range of current language research.
4. Technology is deepening the possibilities for studying language and social interaction and is bringing greater complexities to it.

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1. LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL INTERACTION CANNOT BE STUDIED BY TREATING LANGUAGE AS IF IT WERE A TRANSPARENT MEDIUM

Words are no longer spiky bits of hard matter, which refer only to themselves. They become, more and more, a transparent medium in which I live and which lives in me—a medium through which I can once again get to myself and to the world. (Hoffman, 1989, p. 243)

In Lost in Translation, Eva Hoffman (1989) wrote with wonderful insight into the subjective experience of reconstructing herself and her world after her family emigrated from Poland and reconstituted themselves in another language and culture. She described her metamorphosis in mind, body, and soul from a native speaker of Polish (who also knew Yiddish) into an accomplished, multilingual English speaker in North America.

The aforementioned quote captures a truth about language and social interaction that is noteworthy for this Research on Language and Social Interaction (ROLSI) special issue. Hoffman (1989) noted that to be at home in the world of talk, a language user cannot not be struggling with the medium that engages her or him with the world. Speaking (or signing) is the medium through which we “do” being in the world. Experiencing language as a transparent medium, that is, using English gracefully and automatically without much conscious thought and effort, was one of Hoffman’s spectacular linguistic accomplishments, as it is for most learners of a native language and, perhaps, many other successful learners of a second or nonprimary language.

However, the perspective of the analyst of language and social interaction is, or should be, quite different from that of the language user. The medium of language—those “spiky bits of hard matter”—which we take for granted, must become the object of our study because language is constitutive of social interaction. Human engagement emerges through and is organized by the process of speaking. In order to describe how language relates to, or is consequential for, social interaction, language itself cannot be treated as if it were a transparent medium: taken for granted and looked through in order to “get to” the study of social interaction—as if social life were a linguistic. When we study “language and social interaction,” we are seeking to understand what we mean by both of the complex, to-be-analyzed notions, “language” and “social interaction,” as well as providing insight into the ways they interconnect.

2. DISCOURSE IS A MULTIMODAL ACTIVITY SYSTEM

What are the necessary units and boundaries of discourse? Talk-interaction is a complex system. Gesture, gaze, and other body movements related to talk have traditionally been excluded from the study of adult spoken language, certainly in the field of linguistics. Likewise, language has been excluded from much of the research on “nonverbal communication” in the field of communication studies. The assumption seems to have been that language (“the pairing of meaning with speech or signs,” “verbal communication”) and movement-related-to-talk (“nonverbal communication”) are independent domains and can profitably be studied as if they were disjoint, despite the fact that they are usually produced in a highly coordinated fashion.

This assumption is coming under scrutiny, and current research is starting to bring the two research streams together to be studied as an integrated whole in order to provide more insightful descriptions. Such research is challenging some established ways of thinking about human communication and showing us that this deceptively simple term hides a lot of unanalyzed complexity.

Analyses of discourse that take gesture and gaze into consideration underscore the multimodal nature of the activity system that is involved in the production and understanding of discourse. It makes visible the importance of time and space for the production of talk-in-interaction, which is an emergent, moment-to-moment, sociolinguistic process. We are learning about the precise degree of coordination and interactivity between speakers during the coconstruction of meaning and exchange of information (e.g., Goodwin, 1986; Heath, 1992; Jarmon, 1996; Sheldon, 1998; Streeck, 1993). In addition, showing the interconnectivity between talk and movement-related-to-talk raises questions about a speaker’s knowledge states, and about the underlying, cognitive organization of language (e.g., McNeill, 1992, 1998).

Furthermore, the incorporation of gesture into the study of discourse challenges the traditional view of language competence as primarily an individual achievement and raises basic questions about what constitutes intersubjectivity or social cognition. Research on talk-in-interaction is showing that the work being done by speaker and hearer to produce and understand discourse is far more complex than cognitive theories of speech
production and comprehension have imagined it to be. For one thing, the distinction between speaker and hearer is not as clear-cut as it is usually assumed. For example, hearers are not passive listeners but often coconstruct talk. Speakers are engaged in ongoing assessments of the listener's knowledge state, and listeners often provide indicators of the extent of shared knowledge (see Clark, 1996).

3. RESEARCH ON LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL INTERACTION HAS THE POTENTIAL TO CONTRIBUTE TO A WIDE RANGE OF CURRENT LANGUAGE RESEARCH

Talk-in-interaction is the matrix for language use. Language is used in a social context and largely for social purposes. This is true across languages and across a variety of situations. Research on language and social interaction should have broad implications and basic connections to many areas of inquiry because language behavior is intrinsically interactive. For example, we can expect insights from research on language interaction to have a bearing on how we define and describe the human capacity for language, how we describe the process and goals of child and adult language learning, and how we determine effective language teaching methods or ways to remediate language disabilities.

It would make great sense for links to be made with related areas of inquiry, incorporating methodology, insights, or concepts from research on talk-in-interaction. One natural link would be to the stream of work on linguistic and processing universals, which has developed over the last few decades. A cross-language cross-cultural perspective on language and social interaction research is an inevitable one to take, with questions of universals, near-universalas, and cross-language cross-cultural differences needing to be pursued.

The potential for research on language and social interaction to transform prevailing modes of disciplinary thought has already been recognized, for example, in Schegloff, Ochs, and Thompson (1996):

Real-time data have inspired a radical shift in the kind of question being asked. These data are now prompting functional linguists to ask in what ways an understanding of the profoundly interactional nature of spoken language can be brought to bear on our understanding of what we take grammar to be. (p. 11)

4. TECHNOLOGY IS DEEPENING THE POSSIBILITIES FOR STUDYING LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL INTERACTION AND IS BRINGING GREATER COMPLEXITIES TO IT

a. Digital Technology Represents the Data of Talk-in-Interaction More Faithfully

The tools we use affect what we are able to study and therefore how we define what we are studying. Technology has always been needed to capture the fleeting, hidden, and layered information in complex linguistic and social events (e.g., tape recorders and transcribers, VCRs, oscilloscopes, spectrographs, computers and software, etc.). Digital technology makes language and interaction even more amenable to study. Software, like Adobe Premier, allows for greater precision, scope, and novelty in the microanalysis of videotaped talk-in-interaction, through features such as slow motion and video frame capture and storage.

However, it is nearly impossible for the individual researcher to keep up with the development of suitable hardware and software, to know what is available, what fits particular research needs and budgets, and to master the everchanging technology. We would all benefit from some kind of central clearing house that addresses technological and other needs of researchers in language and social interaction. The CHILDES database, software, and e-mail list is a good model of a dedicated approach to communal research needs, which might be developed along the lines needed for talk-in-interaction research.

b. Journal Innovations Are Needed to Provide Accurate Representations of Data and Facilitate More Complex Analyses of Language and Social Interaction

When we present tapes at conferences or workshops the audience is able to see and hear the data on which the research is based. This is necessary to properly understand and evaluate the research, and to engage as a scientific community in productive critique and analysis.

Print journals have been the final vehicles to convey research to the scientific community and to archive it. However, the limitations of print
can no longer define the subject matter of and approaches to research on language and social interaction. Print alone is counterproductive because it is a reductive and cumbersome medium for representing talk-in-interaction. Transforming complex, audiovisual, multispeaker behavior that is highly coordinated in time and space underrepresents the rich information present in the original event. We have long known about the limitations of transcripts for presenting language data (Ochs, 1979). Fortunately, it is no longer necessary to rely on transcripts alone because creative use of digital technology gives us some alternatives we have long needed.

Software for analysis of videotape is capitalizing on digital media's ability to represent the multilayered and multimodal nature of language and social interaction, "where visual information is important, or where a textual representation of the event by itself is inadequate for mental reconstruction" (MediaTagger, 1998, p. 1). Software already exists that incorporates visual and audio information and links it to a transcribed and annotated record of the original discourse event. It is reasonable for journals like ROLSI, which publish discourse research, to be in sync with the capabilities of these analytic tools, and to think about adding electronic options to their print format. Publishing a CD-ROM as an adjunct to papers published in print format might be worth a try. Alternatively, data and analysis could be archived by authors on their Web site. A central virtual research archive that would enable readers to access the direct audio-visual data of conversational interaction would serve us very well.

CONCLUSION

The term language and social interaction encompasses broad and complex areas, which have long been studied independently, by different scholarly traditions, as if there were a clear and legitimate boundary between them. We are in the fortunate position of having good technological tools to study this area now. We need to continue to develop insightful descriptions, but also to develop interesting and falsifiable theories.

It is crucial to make links to related areas of research in which either the interactive nature of talk or the linguistic nature of interaction is currently ignored or believed to be marginal. Future research on how language and social interaction interrelate and are consequential for each other has the potential to challenge and clarify our ways of thinking about a broad range of basic human capacities and behaviors.

NOTES

1 Run by Brian MacWhinney at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA.

2 Making data available in digital format brings its own problems: It compromises privacy and there is currently no good way to limit who can download it or how it might be used once downloaded. It would also require rethinking how potential participants are asked for informed consent at the beginning of the study, what they are being asked to give their consent to (e.g., whether they will allow the data to be shown at conference presentations, to be circulated on a CD-ROM, to be stored at a Web site, etc.). Susan Ervin-Tripp has developed a consent form format that is relevant here. Participants check off a series of items on a list, giving them the option of participating in the study yet allowing them to withhold permission for certain uses of the research data that involve them, if they choose to.

3 Nota bene: Leslie Jarmon published her doctoral dissertation as a CD-ROM.

REFERENCES


Research on Language and Social Interaction, 32(1&2), 163–171
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Ethnomethodology, Conversation Analysis, Microanalysis, and the Ethnography of Speaking (EM-CA-MA-ES): Resonances and Basic Issues

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The assumptions, background, and conceptual roots of our studies merit special attention. The conventional view regards the seeking of conceptual clarity and explicitness as a characteristic of scientific inquiry and other rational enterprises, desirable in itself and as beneficial to consensus building, to the proper application of logic to candidate propositions, and as an inoculation against the revenge of unnoticed assumptions. Optimism about the possibility of achieving clarity or about its benefits is not the only motive for pursuing it. The investigation projected here is prompted more by the anticipation that the search itself may yield the discovery of new phenomena, reclassifications, new classifications, new dimensions of taxonomies, the need for new concepts, the need for new conceptual boundaries, the resources for new concepts, and other comparable matters. Important theoretical gains have been made in Psychology, Sociology, and Philosophy by inspecting, clarifying, interrogating, and making explicit the unspecified dimensions and unclarified assumptions underlying conceptual schemes.

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