

# Comparative Studies in Conversation Analysis

Jack Sidnell

Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario,  
M5S 3G3 Canada; email: jack.sidnell@utoronto.ca

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## Key Words

social interaction, cross-linguistic comparison, cross-cultural  
comparison, repair, turn-taking, person-reference

## Abstract

Conversation analysis initially drew its empirical materials from recordings of English conversation. However, over the past 20 years conversation analysts have begun to examine talk-in-interaction in an increasingly broad range of languages and communities. These studies allow for a new comparative perspective, which attends to the consequences of linguistic and social differences for the organization of social interaction. A framework for such a comparative analysis focusing on a series of generic interactional issues or “problems” (e.g., how turns are to be distributed among participants) and the way they are solved through the mobilization of local resources (grammar, social categories, etc.) is sketched. Comparative studies in conversation analysis encourage us to think of interaction in terms of generic organizations of interaction, which are inflected or torqued by the local circumstances within which they operate (Schegloff 2006).

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**CA:** conversation analysis

**Generic:** an organization not specific to any particular language, or social group. Differs from the common linguistic anthropological usage relating to “genre”

**Repair:** an organized set of practices through which troubles of speaking, hearing, and understanding may be addressed and potentially resolved

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## TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

Examples are presented using the transcription conventions originally developed by Gail Jefferson. For present purposes, the most important symbols are the period (“.”), which indicates falling and final intonation, the question mark (“?”) indicating rising intonation, and brackets (“[” and “]”) marking the onset and resolution of overlapping talk between two speakers. Equal signs, which come in pairs, one at the end of a line and another at the start of the next line or one shortly thereafter, are used to indicate that the second line followed the first with no discernable silence between them, i.e., it was “latched” to it. Numbers in parentheses [e.g., (0.5)] indicate silence, represented in tenths of a second. Finally, colons are used to indicate prolongation or stretching of the sound preceding them. The more colons, the longer the stretching. For an explanation of other symbols see Sacks et al. (1974).

## INTRODUCTION

Conversation analysis (CA) is an approach to the study of social interaction, which emerged in the 1960s from the collaboration of Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson. Early work in CA drew on the sociologies of Goffman and Garfinkel (both Sacks and Schegloff studied with Goffman at Berkeley, and Sacks worked closely with Garfinkel on a number of early projects) but quickly took on a distinctive set of methods and analytic questions adapted specifically to its chosen subject matter: the organization of talk-in-interaction (see Heritage 1984; Levinson 1983; Schegloff 1995a,b; Silverman 1998). Adopting a rigorously empirical set of methods, early work in this field focused on topics such as the organization of turn-taking (Sacks et al. 1974) and the sequencing of actions in conversation (Schegloff 1968). In a series of pioneering studies, Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson showed that such phenomena were best understood as socially organized practices rather

than as manifestations of individual psychology or abstract cognitive processes.

Although CA developed among sociologists working primarily on English materials (American and, later, British), its methods should be applicable to data from any language, any culture, and any social group (Lindstrom 1994; Moerman 1977, 1988; Schegloff 1987a, 2002, 2006; Sidnell 2007b; Zimmerman 1999). Moreover, the findings of CA studies suggest that the phenomena described are quite general, indeed, possibly universal or species-specific (Sidnell 2001). However, it is clear that conversation involves the mobilization of the local resources of particular languages (i.e., grammar, intonation, vocabulary), social formations (categories of persons, for instance), and that conversational practices may be constrained or shaped by culture-specific phenomena such as taboos, which prevent the use of certain words or names, impose restrictions on gaze, etc. The stage is thus set for a comparative exercise through which it should be possible to determine the way in which various generic organizations (turn-taking, repair, person reference, etc.) become adapted, inflected, or torqued within the particular local circumstances in which they are deployed.

## THE OBJECT OF STUDY

The object of CA studies has been variously formulated. Goodwin & Heritage (1990, p. 283; see also Heritage & Atkinson 1984, p. 1), for instance, suggest that CA seeks to describe “the underlying social organization—conceived as an institutionalized substratum of interactional rules, procedures and conventions—through which orderly and intelligible social interaction is made possible.” Such competencies, interactional rules, procedures, and conventions can be thought of as a set of context-free structures, which underlie the production and interpretation of “context-sensitive” conduct in interaction. The term context-free may raise a few eyebrows among anthropologists, and it is therefore important

to explain exactly what is (and what is not) meant by the use of this phrase. Sacks et al. (1974) suggest that several strands of evidence suggest that the organization of turn-taking for conversation is “context-free.” They note, for instance, that conversation can accommodate a wide range of situations from passing remarks at the bus stop to extended spates of talk into the wee hours of the morning. Furthermore, conversation is a vehicle for interaction between parties with just about any potential identity—family members, coworkers, strangers, employers and employees, etc. They conclude then that conversation must have “an appropriate sort of general abstractness” combined with a “local particularization potential.” Sacks et al. (1974) go on to remark in a footnote that

[w]hat we mean to note is that major aspects of the organization of turn-taking are insensitive to such parameters of context, and are, in that sense, “context-free”; but it remains the case that examination of any particular materials will display the context-free resources of the turn-taking system to be employed, disposed in ways fitted to particulars of context. (p. 699)

So the basic argument of Sacks et al. (1974) is that the underlying organization of turn-taking for conversation is essentially generic and applicable to any particular context in which participants may find themselves. However, it is inevitable that any actual deployment of the practices of turn-taking will be sensitive to the particulars of the context within which they are used. Schegloff (2006) puts the matter as follows:

When the most powerful macrostructures of society fail and crumble (as, e.g., after the demise of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe), the social structure that is left is interaction, in a largely unaffected state. People talk in turns, which compose orderly sequences through which courses of action are developed; they deal with transient problems of speaking, hearing or understanding the talk and reset the interaction on its

course; they organize themselves so as to allow stories to be told; they fill out occasions of interaction from approaches and greetings through to closure, and part in an orderly way . . . the organization of interaction needs to be—and is—robust enough, flexible enough, and sufficiently self-maintaining to sustain social order at family dinners and in coal mining pits, around the surgical operating table and on skid row, in New York City and Montenegro and Rossel Island, and so forth, in every nook and cranny where human life is to be found. (pp. 70–71)

A focus on context-free structures allows the conversation analyst to investigate specific interactional problems and the practices involved in their solution—for instance, the problem of how turns-at-talk are to be distributed among multiple participants and the solution that the turn-taking organization provides (Schegloff 2006). Although any given empirical instance—that is, any particular fragment of recorded conversation—will necessarily involve the concurrent operation of many different organizations (the turn-taking organization, sequence organization, the organization of repair, etc.) it is nevertheless possible to isolate in each one the particular phenomenon being investigated (e.g., “oh”-prefacing, other-initiation of repair via a questioning repeat, etc.). Although each instance of a given phenomenon is the unique outcome of a unique set of interactional circumstances, recurrent organizations are at work across instances, and it is these recurrent organizations of practice that constitute the focus of CA study and provide a possible target for systematic comparison across different linguistic and cultural settings.

## PERSON REFERENCE AND SOCIOCULTURAL SETTING

In a short paper from 1979, Sacks & Schegloff (1979; see also Sacks 1995, p. 444) noted that in making initial reference to a person a speaker selects between two options, each

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**Recognitional reference:** designed to allow a recipient to determine the specific person, place, or thing to which the speaker is referring

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of which sets a different task for the recipient. On the one hand, a speaker may design the identification such that it proposes the recipient should be able to use it to find someone they know. Such recognitional reference forms provide “for the recipient to figure out who that they know the speaker is referring to by use of this reference form” (Schegloff 1996, p. 459). Two common recognitional forms in English conversation are (personal) names and recognitional descriptors such as “the guy that always comes in here.”

Alternatively, the speaker may design the identification in a way that does not suggest the recipient should or could recognize the person being talked about with it. Such non-recognitional forms comprise a varied and heterogeneous set and include expressions such as “a guy,” “someone,” “this person” . . . as well as nonrecognitional descriptors such as “a guy at work” and category terms such as “my professor,” “this student,” “the postman,” etc.

Sacks & Schegloff (1979) proposed that references to persons are organized in relation to two sometimes conflicting and sometimes convergent preferences. The first preference is for recognitionals over nonrecognitionals. The second is for single, minimal forms over complex ones. The concurrent operation of both preferences results in the massive use of personal names because a name satisfies both preferences. Where the preferences are in conflict, the second is relaxed step by step so as to allow for recognition via more elaborate and less minimal forms. Sacks & Schegloff provide the following example as evidence of their claims (Transcript 1).

Here Ann attempts to achieve recognitional reference over three tries. At line 02, on her first attempt, she finds she does not have the name available to her and a word search ensues (Goodwin 1983b, Goodwin & Goodwin 1986). After Ann produces a first form “thee uhm (0.7) mtch! Fo:rds,” her recipient, Bev, does not do anything to show that this has allowed her to figure out who is being talked about, and Ann continues by providing a second form “Missiz Holmes Ford?” This second attempt is produced with markedly rising intonation—it is as Sacks & Schegloff (1979, p. 18) describe it, “try-marked.” Moreover, Ann leaves a space after this in which Bev might have displayed recognition of the person being talked about. When such a display is again not produced, Ann produces a second form, “the cellist,” and this receives from Bev a claim to have now recognized the person referred to.

On the basis of Sacks & Schegloff’s discussion, Levinson (2005, p. 448) characterizes the preferences as follows:

Preference 1: Use a recognitional form if possible.

Preference 2: Use a single or minimal form if possible.

When 1 and 2 are in conflict: Apply 1 and relax 2 successively until recognition is achieved.

The society of Rossel island is very different from that of the participants in example 1. Rossel is the last island off the eastern tip of Papua New Guinea. Levinson (2005, p. 434) writes, “The island lies just outside the boundaries of the Kula ring, due both to geographical isolation and to the fact that the language

(Transcript 1) SBL 2/2/4 (Sacks & Schegloff 1979, p. 19)

01	Ann:	. . . well I was the only one other than
02		.hhh than thee uhm (0.7) mtch! Fo:rds.
03		Uh Missiz Holmes Ford? (0.8) You know the-
04		[the the cellist?
05	Bev:	[Oh yes. She’s- she’s (a)/(the) cellist.
06	Ann:	Ye: s.
07	Bev:	ye[s
08	Ann:	[Well she and her husband were there, . . .

and culture are not akin to those of the surrounding Massim peoples—the 4000 inhabitants speak a ‘Papuan’ language, actually an ancient isolate, called Yéli Dnye.” Rossel islanders observe an elaborate set of taboos on the use of names. Because such name taboos prevent Rossels from availing themselves of this primary resource for the making of minimal, recognitional reference to persons in English, this is a likely place to find significant differences in the organization of interaction. Levinson provides the following example (Transcript 2) in which a problem arises when N attempts to make reference to his “daughter-in-law, an affine he should not name.”

(Transcript 2) Levinson (2005, p. 442)

- |    |    |   |
|----|----|---|
| 01 | N: | <i>wu dmââdi a kêdê Thursday ngê anê lóó</i><br>“That girl told me she would go across on Thursday”   |
| 02 | P: | <i>n:uu ngê?</i><br>“Who did?”  |
| 03 | N: | <i>o(yi dmââdî) o</i><br>“That girl!”   |
| 04 | P: | <i>Mby:aa tp:oo módó ngê =</i><br>“The daughter of Mby:aa did?”   |
| 05 | M: | <i>= Kpâputa u kpâm?</i><br>“Kpâputa’s wife?”   |
| 06 | P: | <i>Kpâputa u kpâm?</i><br>“Kpâputa’s wife?”   |
| 07 | M: | [<br><i>ee! ee! ki tpókni mwi lee dmyino, Stephen a kwo, mwi lee dmyino ó!</i><br>“Hey kids go over there, Stephen is here, go right over there!” |
| 08 | N: | [ <b>EBF</b> ] <b>Head-point East</b>   |
| 09 | P: | <i>Kpâputa u kuenwe apii?</i><br>“Kpâputa’s widow, right?”  |
| 10 | N: | [ <b>EBFmm</b> ]<br><i>(°ki dmââdî°)</i><br>(That girl) “you got it”  |

N first attempts to accomplish recognitional reference using a form Levinson glosses as “that girl”—the deictic *wu* glossed as “that” indicating “invisible, only indirectly ascertainable.” The reference is vague and P initiates repair with “who did?” This, however, elicits only a repeat (at line 03) and no further informational upgrade that might provide for recognition (the deictic form here—the only difference between the references in lines

01 and 03—is merely a distinct “anaphoric” type—i.e., “that as previously mentioned”). This refusal to upgrade apparently tips P and M off to the fact that the initial reference was intentionally vague (and not simply mis-designed), and they, suspecting the interference of a name taboo, begin guessing at who it might be that N means by “that girl.” P and M’s candidate reference forms eventually obtain an eyebrow flash (EBF), which according to Levinson signals either “yes” or “go on,” and this indication is followed by a head-point to the east. Finally, a reformulation of the candidate at line 9 (from “Kpâputa’s wife” to “Kpâputa’s widow”) elicits an eyebrow flash

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**EBF:** eyebrow flash

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and “mm” confirmation. Levinson (2005, p. 444) summarizes saying,

Reference is achieved by first using a general description, “that girl,” then letting his interlocutors generate descriptive guesses, to which he can assent in a minimal form (*sotto voce*, raised eyebrows). He provides one additional clue, namely the head-point to the home-base of the girl in line 8. Notice that

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**Minimization:**  
preference for using  
the most minimal  
expression adequate  
to present purposes  
(see Schegloff 1996)

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his interlocutors have quickly realized the nature of the problem, namely that N wants to mention someone he can't name, for in their guesses (lines 4, 5, 6, 9) they avoid offering the name of the girl, choosing naming instead a relative of hers, and specifying her relation to that relative.

Examples 1 and 2 thus exhibit some clear differences in the interactional organization of person reference in these two settings (Rossel, American), but as Levinson points out, underlying the differences are some important and striking similarities. Levinson argues that in Rossel, person reference is organized by the same two preferences as in American English. However, in Rossel there is an additional preference to the effect of "Don't use a recognitional form when referring to an in-law."

Preference 1: (a) Use a recognitional form if possible

(b) If not possible by preference 3, go for recognition otherwise (e.g., pointing)

Preference 2: Use a single or minimal form if possible

Preference 3: Don't use a recognitional form when referring to a taboo relative

(a) When 1 and 2 are in conflict, Apply 1a, and relax 2 successively until recognition is achieved (as in English)

(b) When 1 and 3 are in conflict, Apply 1b and relax 2 successively until recognition is achieved (e.g., by gesture of indefinite reference).

Thus what initially seems drastically different emerges as quite similar on closer inspection. Furthermore, this case provides something of a model for thinking about comparison in this and other domains of interactional organization. Person reference in both American and Rossel society is organized around the twin preferences for minimization and recognition. In the Rossel

case, however, a number of taboos prevent the use of names to accomplish recognitional reference. At the same time, conventionalized EBFs, a system of absolute spatial reckoning and associated practices of pointing provide resources for making recognitional reference without using a name. A generic organization of references to persons can thus be seen to be inflected or torqued by the local circumstances within which it operates.

In a recent review of person reference in interaction, Stivers et al. (2007) discuss evidence from a wide range of languages (including Lao, Yéli Dnye, Kilivila, Bequian Creole, Yucatec Maya, Tzotzil, Tzeltal, and Korean). Although they find that the generalizations derived from the study of English (Sacks & Schegloff 1979) hold for these communities too, they also point to some variation. For instance, the kind of expression used for making "default reference to persons" can vary. Although names serve this function in many societies, in other societies default reference is made by the use of a possessed kin term (e.g., your cousin; see also Oh 2002). The authors also note variation in the degree to which a preference for association is implicated in the organization of person reference. In Tzeltal, for instance, the preference for association is prioritized over that for minimization such that if recognition cannot be achieved with a single form that associates the referent to speaker or hearer, then the speaker will combine forms to do this (so selecting "your sister Xun" over "Xun" even if the latter would secure recognition).

## TURN-TAKING, GRAMMAR, RECIPIENCY

In their 1974 paper, Sacks et al. showed that turn-taking in English was intimately tied to certain grammatical properties of the language. Specifically, turns in English are composed out of a set of grammatical formats (lexical items, phrases, clauses) that share a



feature of projectability (see also de Ruiter et al. 2006, Ford et al. 1996). Consider the following example (Sacks et al. 1974, p. 721):

(Transcript 3) [T. Labov: Battersea: B: 1]  
01 Tourist: Has the park cha:nged much,  
02 Parky: Oh:: ye:s,  
03 (1.0)  
04 Old man: Th'Funfair changed it'n [ahful lot [didn'tit.  
05 Parky: [Th- [That-  
06 That changed it,

At line 05 of this example Parky begins to speak and finds himself in overlap with Old man. Where does Parky begin to speak? Not after “The,” not after “Fu” or “Fun,” not after “funfair.” Rather, the beginning of Parky’s turn is designed to coincide with the end of “it” so after the “The funfair changed it.” Parky has then targeted the first point of possible completion in Old Man’s turn as a place to begin speaking. Notice that Parky starts up here and again at the next two points of possible completion (after “lot” and “it”) not by virtue of any silence (by the time he starts there is no hearable silence) but by virtue of the possible completion of the turn which he has anticipated. The coordination of speakership—i.e., turn-taking—with minimal gap and overlap thus seems to involve, in a basic way, the participant’s ability to project the possible course of the current turn and thus to anticipate when it will reach a point of possible completion. In their 1974 paper, Sacks et al. write,

There are various unit-types with which a speaker may set out to construct a turn. Unit-types for English include sentential, clausal, phrasal, and lexical constructions. Instances of the unit-types so usable allow a projection of the unit-type under way, and what, roughly, it will take for an instance of that unit-type to be completed. Unit-types lacking the feature of projectability may not be usable in the same way. (p. 702)

In this way they link the notion of turn constructional units—the building blocks out

of which turns-at-talk are composed—to a feature of “projectability.” In a paper originally delivered in 1973, Schegloff (1987b)

expands on the notion of projectability, writing

One important feature of turn construction . . . and the units that turn construction employs (e.g., lexical, phrasal, clausal, sentential constructions) is that they project, from their beginnings, aspects of their planned shape and type . . . . There are other sorts of projection that are, or can be involved from the very beginning of a turn. For example, question projection . . . . Or: beginnings can project “quotation formats.” . . . Or: a beginning like “I don’t think” can project, in certain sequential environments, “disagreement” as a turn type for its turn . . . . Again: turn beginnings are important because they are an important place for turn projection, and, given the importance of turn projection for turn taking, they are important structural places in conversation. (p. 71)

Recent work on Japanese (beginning with Fox et al. 1996) suggests that the grammatical properties that make such “early syntactic projections” possible may not be shared by all languages. Fox et al. (1996) and Hayashi (2003) argue that various “syntactic practices” of Japanese result in a “limited projectability.” These syntactic practices include: (a) a flexible word order particularly at the beginning of the turn, (b) the use of post-rather than prepositions, (c) a prevalence of unexpressed constituents (including subject and object), (d) the use of final particles capable of retroactively transforming the constituents to

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**Projectability:**  
allows participants to anticipate the probable course, extent, and nature of the talk in progress

**Point of possible completion:**  
discrete point within the emerging course of a turn-at-talk at which participants can find that it is possibly complete

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***Aizuchi***: Japanese term for recipient interjections displaying attention and understanding

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which they attach. The authors (1996) argue that

the kind of clausal TCU structure these facts commonly lead to typically, . . . , starts with some kind of discourse marker (e.g., *ano*, *nanka*), followed by adverbials, or nouns indicating setting of some kind, followed by the verb, and possibly followed by so-called final particles. So what occurs early in the TCU is often only loosely associated structurally with what is to follow. Conversational utterances in Japanese thus seem not to show tight syntactic organization. (p. 208)

Whereas in English “the subject begins a tightly knit clause structure and hence syntactically is the “beginning” of the clause,” in Japanese “there is no constituent element that serves as the beginning of a tightly knit syntactic unit—in fact, there is no such tightly knit unit.” These syntactic practices then indicate that turn-taking is “managed in a different way in Japanese than it is in English” (Fox et al. 1996, p. 209). The authors summarize (1996):

English recipients are able to use the beginning of a TCU to project a possible course for that utterance, while Japanese recipients “wait and see” how the utterance develops. It is thus possible that English recipients are able to predict with such accuracy how the utterance-under construction will come to an end that they are able to plan their own utterance to start up exactly at the moment the current utterance comes to a possible completion point, with no pause between the end of the current turn and the start-up of their own turn. In Japanese, on the other hand, since recipients are not able to make such detailed predictions about the course of the current utterance, they wait until they hear the last few syllables of the turn (which often contain such “ending signals” as final particles, or special completion-relevant verb forms) before starting their own utterance. (p. 209)

The general interactional consequences of these various syntactic practices then include the adoption of a “wait and see”-type approach to turn-taking (and specifically self-selection), limited mid-turn projectability of turns-in-progress, and an “incremental” or “bit-by-bit” approach to turn construction (Tanaka 2000; Hayashi 1999, 2003). The consequences are manifested in an absence of clause-level recycling in self-repair (see below and Fox et al. 1996), various kinds of delay in coparticipant completions including a preference for terminal item completions (Hayashi 2003; compare Lerner & Takagi 1999), an orientation to the end of the predicate component as transition relevant, and a vulnerability of postpredicate components to overlap (Tanaka 2000, pp. 7–8).

Japanese grammar may then help to account for the practices of *aizuchi* (Miller 1983, LoCastro 1987). As Schegloff et al. (1996) remark,

The interpolations which in English conversation ordinarily come at the boundaries of larger chunks of extended turns understood to be not yet complete (Schegloff 1982) are produced—and solicited—for smaller chunks of utterance in Japanese, in part to offset otherwise potentially problematic indeterminacies built into Japanese grammar, indeterminacies which are problematic precisely because of the exigencies of recipient parsing *in real time*. (p. 32)

As Schegloff (2000a, p. 1) notes, “the orderly distribution of opportunities to participate in social interaction is one of the most fundamental preconditions for viable social organization.” In other words, for human groups, turn-taking is a generic problem of interaction. Like any other such problem, this one must be solved through the mobilization of available local resources. With respect to turn-taking, one particularly important resource appears to be grammar (or “syntactic practices”). In both English and Japanese the turn-taking problem gets solved



but differently in each case owing to the availability of different grammatical resources (see also Mori 1999).

Other researchers have claimed that differences in the organization of turn-taking reflect basic differences in the degree to which participants in conversation attend to one another. In a well-known paper titled "Contrapuntal Conversations in an Antiguan Village" anthropologist Reisman (1974) described conversations in Antigua and other Caribbean communities as "contrapuntal" and even "anarchic." Indeed, Reisman (1974, pp. 113–15) suggested that, in this setting, "there is no regular requirement for two or more voices not to be going at the same time. The start of a new voice is not in itself a signal for the voice speaking either to stop or to insinuate a process which will decide who is to have the floor. [...] [T]here is no sense of interruption, or need to fit carefully into an ongoing pattern of conversation, or need to stop if somebody else speaks." Such a description stands in stark contrast to that put forth by Sacks et al. (1974) in their account of turn-taking in American English conversations. In a response to Reisman's arguments, Sidnell (2001) drew on data from a small Guyanese community to argue that the organization of turn-taking in that Caribbean English Creole (Guyanese) was identical in all relevant respects to that described for American English conversation. For instance, Sidnell (2001) shows that participants in these conversations orient to points of possible completion as discrete places within the emerging course of talk at which transfer to a next speaker or retention of the floor by current speaker is relevant. The evidence for such an orientation is manifold and includes various kinds of overlap and joint-utterance production, as well as prefaces designed to secure a multi-unit turn-at-talk. Sidnell goes on to argue that the orderliness of conversational turn-taking is grounded in a species-specific adaptation to the contingencies of human social intercourse and is thus likely not open to a great deal of crosscultural and crosslinguistic vari-

ation. Although it is of course still possible that Antiguan conversations exhibit some kind of "contrapuntal" or "anarchic" organization, Reisman does not provide any evidence of this in the form of transcriptions of actual, recorded talk. This absence combined with evidence from other Caribbean communities casts considerable doubt on his claims (see Sidnell 2007d).

This should not be taken as suggesting that there are no differences in the ways participants attend to one another (Sorjonen 1996, 2001; see also Creider 1984). In recent work comparing Tzeltal and Rossel data, Brown & Levinson (2005) have shown striking differences in practices of response. Tenejapan Tzeltal speakers, they suggest, avoid mutual gaze and generally do not produce visual responses. Instead they routinely respond by repeating the clausal core of what the other has said. In contrast, response on Rossel is gaze-based and includes, as seen in an earlier example, conventionalized EBF and blinks as well as gaze points and such. The overall result of these differences is strikingly different interactional styles. The Rossel style is quick and based on mutual gaze. This imposes constraints on the number of parties, and interaction is often between dyads or triads. Tenejapan interactional style is, in comparison, cautious and based on accruing small increments of common ground producing a slow and steady path toward affiliation and interactional alignment (Brown 1998).

## PRACTICES OF SELF- AND OTHER-INITIATED REPAIR

Repair refers to an organized set of practices through which participants in conversation are able to address and potentially resolve problems of speaking, hearing, or understanding. Episodes of repair are composed of parts (Schegloff 1997, 2000b; Schegloff et al. 1977). A repair initiation marks a "possible disjunction with the immediately preceding talk," whereas a repair outcome

results either in a “solution or abandonment of the problem” (Schegloff 2000b, p. 207). That problem, the particular segment of talk to which the repair is addressed, is called the trouble source or the repairable.

Fox et al. (1996) noted three differences between self-repair in English and Japanese and link these to the different “syntactic practices” of the two languages. First, similar to Egbert’s (1996) finding for German, Fox et al. (1996) report that certain kinds of morphological repair are possible in Japanese but not in English. They illustrate with the following example (Fox et al. 1996:202):

(Transcript 4) K: *ja nanji goro ni kurida [sbi-\*]soo?*  
 Then what.time about OBL go.out  
 “Then about what time (shall we) go out?”

The authors observe (p. 202) that in this example the “speaker K replaces only the inflectional ending of the verb with another . . . . The first form that K produces in this example (*kurida-sbi*) has the adverbial ending *-sbi* . . . . However K cuts off the verb and replaces *-sbi* with the ‘cohortative’ ending *-soo*. In other words, K has replaced one bound morpheme with another.” In English, repair does not operate on inflectional endings. This difference can likely be accounted for in terms of verbal morphology of the two languages. The Japanese verb endings *-sbi* and *-soo* are full syllables consisting of a consonant and a vowel. In contrast, English verb endings (with the exception of *-ing* and *-s* in certain contexts) are, typically, pronounced as a single consonant sound. They are thus unpronounceable independently of the word to which they are attached. This prevents their production as independent units in self-repair as in the following invented example (from Fox et al. 1996, p. 202; compare Boas 1911, p. 24).

(Transcript 5) She looked- s at the table.

Moreover, as the authors point out, in Japanese, an agglutinating language, each morpheme has roughly a single grammati-

cal meaning. In contrast, English is characterized by relatively greater fusion in inflectional morphology (Comrie 1981). So verbal *-s* carries the meaning of present and third person, and singular. Bound verbal morphemes are semantically complex in English but not in Japanese. Finally, English verbal morphemes (or at least verbal *-s*) may also indicate agreement with the subject of the clause and thus link back to something earlier in the utterance, whereas Japanese verbal markers do not. Fox et al. (1996, p. 203) conclude that “these . . . differences between English and Japanese verb endings suggest to us that at a variety of

levels verb endings in English are more tightly ‘bonded’ to the verb than are verb endings in Japanese and hence less available for individual replacement than are verb endings in Japanese.”

Another difference noted by these authors involves practices for delaying the production “of next noun” due in self-repair. The following example illustrates one common practice in English:

(Transcript 6) M: on the back of his pickup truck  
 with a, (0.4) with a jack.

Here the speaker begins a prepositional phrase, initiates repair, and then recycles the preposition and article (“with a”) before then producing the rest of the phrase. Recycling the preposition (and article) thus “constitutes a procedure for delaying the production of the next item due. This procedure could, for example, be part of a word search, a request for recipient gaze, management of overlapping talk, and/or production of a dispreferred” (Fox et al. 1996, p. 204). Because Japanese has postpositions rather than prepositions (and no articles) this procedure for delay is not available. Fox et al. show that Japanese speakers often use a quite different procedure to effect the same result: employing a demonstrative

pronoun (translated as “that”) as a “place holder while the speaker looks for a lexically specific noun” (p. 204).

Other-initiated repair has also been examined in a number of different communities. These studies describe a robust substratum of common practices as well as some differences linked to variations in language structure and sociocultural context (Kim 1999, Wu 2006). Ochs (1984) was led to suggest that although other-initiated repair/clarification is a “universal activity,” the manner in which it is accomplished “varies cross-culturally.” The literature suggests at least three dimensions of possible variation with respect to other-initiated repair: the preference for self-correction, social constraints on who may initiate repair, and the typology of other-initiation forms.

The English conversational data analyzed by Schegloff et al. (1977) displays a clear preference for self- over other-correction/repair. Moerman (1977) found evidence for the same preference in Thai conversational materials. Evidence from studies by Goodwin (1983a) and Mendoza-Denton (1999), however, suggests that the preference for self-correction may be “gradient” and take “stronger or weaker forms in different speech communities” (Mendoza-Denton 1999, p. 282).

Some research suggests that the way repair is related to various social categories varies considerably. Language teachers for instance routinely correct nonnative-speaker students in the course of instructional activities (Kasper 1985, Koshik 2005). In other contexts, such corrections would likely be taken as a serious offense given a strong preference for self-correction. Indeed, repair and correction appear to be almost always tightly connected with notions of politeness and decorum. In this respect, it is not surprising to find that many languages have variant repair initiators that differ in terms of a politeness value (e.g., English “pardon me” or “excuse me” as compared with “huh?” or “what?”), with the polite version typically attributing responsibility for the trouble to the recipient rather than to the

speaker of the trouble source (Schegloff 2005, Robinson 2006).

Certain categories of persons may have restricted rights with respect to repair/correction initiation. In a study of interaction between Samoan children and their caregivers, Ochs (1984) argues that higher-ranking persons in this highly stratified society are not expected to take the perspective of lower-ranking persons. One consequence of this expectation is that higher-ranking persons tend not to guess at what lower-ranking persons are saying/doing and accordingly are more likely to employ what she calls a “minimal grasp” rather than an “expressed guess” strategy in initiating repair or clarification of their subordinates’ utterances (see also Besnier 1989).

Schegloff et al. (1977) described a typology of forms used to initiate repair. The major forms have a natural ordering, based on their relative strength or power to locate a repairable (Schegloff et al. 1977, p. 369). At one end of the scale, open-class initiators such as “what?” and “huh?” indicate only that a recipient has detected some trouble in the previous turn; they do not locate any particular repairable item within that turn. At the other end of the scale, an understanding check (such as “y’mean Mr. Lemay?”) precisely identifies the repairable item while offering a candidate understanding.

Schegloff et al. (1977, p. 369) note that “there are, of course, additional construction types for other-initiation,” and here we see a good deal of variation across both languages and contexts. Egbert (1996) for instance has argued that German *bitte?* (“pardon?”) not only initiates repair but also helps to reestablish mutual gaze between speaker and recipient in interaction between copresent persons. Egbert’s analysis suggests a specialization of *bitte* within the group of open-class repair initiators. Evidence does not indicate such a device in English (see Drew 1997 for an analysis of “open class” repair initiators in English).

Despite being led to conclude that “the detailed, systemic, and massive parallels

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**YNI:** yes-no  
interrogative

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between” Thai and American English corpora “support the claim that the domain described by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson is conversation—without respect to language, nation, class, or culture in which it occurs,” Moerman (1977) notes a number of differences between repair in the Thai and American English materials. One such difference concerns the way in which the grammatical resources of the languages in question are mobilized in understanding checks. In English this typically involves appending “y’mean” to a possible understanding of the trouble source turn. In contrast, in Thai understanding checks of this kind typically employ “one of a set of particles which... indicate increasing degrees of confidence/certainty or strength of assertion” (1977, p. 876).

In a study of repaired person reference in conversations from the Caribbean Island of Bequia, Sidnell (2007c) argues that in this community the set of other-initiation formats are specifically adapted to address recurrent interactional problems. The population of the island is ~6000 people, and although Bequians operate on the assumption that Bequians should be able to recognize other Bequians, knowledge of names (especially in the descending generation) is patchy. Moreover, it is not uncommon for a single individual to have several different names in use among different subsections of the population. These factors result in a recurrent interactional problem—a speaker uses a name unfamiliar to the recipient for a person the recipient should be able to recognize by some other route (e.g., Sheila’s nephew). Bequians have a repair initiation format specifically adapted to dealing with just this situation—“who is named so.” Another detail of other-initiated repair in Bequian Creole (and other English-based varieties) reflects the grammar of yes-no interrogatives (YNIs) (Sidnell 2007a). In most varieties of English one standard way of forming YNIs is to invert the ordering of subject and auxiliary verb in simple declarative constructions. So “you’re going for a nap” becomes “are you going for

a nap?” etc. Such inverted syntax can be preserved in partial repeats, which initiate repair so that, for instance, repair is initiated with forms such as “Am I GOing?” or “Am I going for a what?” In the creoles of the Caribbean there is no auxiliary-subject inversion in YNIs; indeed, there is no category of auxiliary verb for such inversion to operate on. However, prefacing the repair-initiator by “if” conveys that the recipient heard the turn containing the trouble source to be a question. The following example illustrates the practice:

(Transcript 7) BQV\_OIR#187\_Q2 qt 51:50

- 01 Benson: *yu bin hii fu kanival (.) Pat?*  
were you here for Carnival Pat?  
02 Pat: → *if mi bin wa?*  
if I was what?  
03 Benson: *Bekwe kanival?*  
Bequia Carnival?  
04 Pat: *yeab:*  
yeah

When Benson asks Pat in line 01 if she was in Bequia for Carnival, Pat responds by initiating repair with “if mi bin wa?,” an if-prefaced partial repeat. This form isolates “here for Carnival” as the trouble source to be repaired. It also shows Pat to have heard the turn addressed to her as a YNI. At line 03, the reference is repaired, and at line 04 the question answered. So the function of if-prefacing is apparently to show that the one initiating repair heard that the turn containing the trouble source was produced as a YNI. This is the basic interactional environment for if-prefacing, and the practice is likely related in a basic way to the grammar of interrogatives in this variety (see Sidnell 2007a).

## CONCLUSION: GENERIC ORGANIZATION, LOCAL INFLECTION

Early work in CA was based on the analysis of recordings of English conversation. A possible concern with respect to these studies is their potentially limited applicability (e.g., to a particular variety of English). The studies

reviewed here should serve to significantly relieve any such anxiety. Examination of languages as different as Japanese and Tzeltal reveals a robust base of apparently generic interactional organization. Such generic aspects of the organization of interaction reflect the specifically human “form of life,” which Wittgenstein sought to describe in his later philosophy (see Wittgenstein 1953). This is not to say that things are everywhere the same. Interaction involves the mobilization of local resources resulting in a local inflection of essentially generic organizations of practice. These local resources are complex and highly structured semiotic systems—of grammar, social categorization, onomastics, etc.—with their own clearly distinctive properties. In addition, the generic organization of interaction is inflected by a range of local factors—for instance, it appears that demographic factors such as scale and population distribution can impact the organization of person reference (Sidnell 2007a,c).

The studies reviewed here also vindicate an earlier focus on English. The classic studies of turn-taking, repair, and person reference in English have, it turns out, provided a remarkably robust base for comparative work. This success may be attributable in part to the methods of CA. CA methods are par-

ticularly portable because they are participants’ methods, and participation in conversation poses similar tasks and problems everywhere quite independently of the particular languages used or the particular sociocultural setting in which the interaction takes place (see Levinson 2006, Schegloff 2006).

It is perhaps worth noting a parallel here between Boas’s well-known arguments in the *Introduction to the Handbook of American Indian Languages* and current comparative work in CA. Boas suggested that grammatical differences were consequential not so much for what they allowed speakers to say but rather for what they required or obligated a speaker to say. Different (and differently configured) grammatical categories essentially forced speakers to attend to different aspects of reality. Comparative studies in CA illustrate, in a related way, the consequences of different sociocultural arrangements and grammatical structures for the organization of human interaction. To the extent that we are now also beginning to see the intimate connection between interaction and cognition (see Levinson 2006, Wootton 1997), further convergence between CA and Boas’s initial formulation of linguistic anthropology is a likely prospect for the future.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any biases that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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