LANGUAGE, INTERACTION, AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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Language, Interaction, and Social Problems*

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This paper addresses the question of why the study of language and interaction matters to the sociology of social problems. The proposed answer is that such study tends to understanding what Goffman called the "interaction order." Language studies, that is, have a first-order concern with how talk and interaction work; as a byproduct, they offer a different standpoint for a social organizational understanding of such traditionally-identified social problems as subcultures, conflict, power, troubles, and institutional processing. The appeal here is not for investigating micro-analytic dimensions of abstracly-defined social problems, but for approaching the interaction order as a substantive domain in its own right.

The sociology of social problems, traditionally concerned with the sociology of poverty, crime, delinquency, mental illness, hoboism, and other devalued and deviant social experiences and behavior, derives from and has its roots in the uniquely American origins of sociology, which emanate from post-Civil War processes of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration (Hinkle, 1980; Hinkle and Hinkle, 1954). Although influenced by European sociologists such as Spencer and Comte, it was deeply connected with the Progressive movement as a social and political response to such processes (Weinberg, 1972). Early perspectives on social problems, including "social pathology" and "social disorganization," consequently shared a particular and privileged standpoint (Davis, 1938; Mills, 1942; Matza, 1969) comprised of rural, Protestant, and upper middle class American values. Individual and group behavior at variance with these values was "pathological" or "disorganized." Through the years, that particular bias may have been dropped, but it bequeathed a preoccupation with definitional issues to the sociology of social problems. To avoid the sins of their fathers, sociologists either take great pains to devise objective categorizations of social problems (Manis, 1974) or else study the constructive activities of those who declare something to be a problem (Kitzuse and Specter, 1973, 1975; Specter and Kitzuse, 1977: Chapter 5). Even recent statements about "ontological gerrymandering" (Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985), which argue that social constructionist explanations (Schneider, 1985) display inconsistent and vacillating tendencies toward the objectivity of social problems (Hazelrigg, 1986), can be most fully understood as wrestling with a century-old legacy.

The persistence of the debate between objectivist and constructionist approaches to social problems raises the issue of whether the sociology of social problems can transcend or step outside the terms of this debate. This paper suggests that such a possibility exists and is in fact imminent in an upsurge of linguistically-based studies of social interaction that has transpired over the past 25 years. These studies go under the names of cognitive sociology, constitutive ethnography, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, the ethnography of speaking, ethnomethodology, and interpretive sociolinguistics (see the summary in Grilshaw, 1981:222-26). An "immense consciousness of language," as Hacking (1975) calls it in the context of philosophy, has also developed in a variety of social scientific subdisciplines, and this signals a unique stance for the sociological understanding of social problems. The aim here is neither to critique prior perspectives, nor to review literature, however. Rather, I wish to

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answer the question of why language and interaction matter to the sociology of social problems. In simplest terms, the answer will be that language-oriented sociology is fundamentally directed to analyzing the organization of the interaction order, and that, as such, it is an enterprise for itself that yet has benefits for a wide variety of other substantive areas including the sociology of social problems and deviance.

I will show how sociolinguistic, conversation analytic, and other language-based approaches have already made forays into traditional social problems areas, shedding sociological light on subcultures, conflict, power and domination, the negotiation of troubles, institutional processes, and the media. They have done so by being less concerned with social problems or deviance per se, and more concerned with the organization of talk, language, and interaction. Thus, while the discussion that follows is centered on topics of longstanding concern in the sociology of social problems, most of the language-oriented studies I review did not begin with the goal of addressing or redressing such problems. If there is a unifying thread, it is that these studies aim to understand how people use language to handle problems of most immediate interest. That is, people demonstrate their orientations, through structures of direct talk and interaction, to difficulties and issues that emerge most intimately and urgently for them. Therefore, language studies, rooted in an analysis of these difficulties and issues, are about "social" problems in a most radical fashion. What follows, then, addresses the sociology of social problems in two senses. In discussing language studies, it is about direct interactional problems in showing how language studies have implications for understanding subcultures, conflict, power, trouble, institutions, and the media, it is about social problems more abstractly and traditionally conceived.

Language as an Indicator of Social Diversity

A criticism of early American sociology, particularly "social pathology," was its model of a uniform and homogenous society that, while non-existent, was nonetheless a standard for judging contemporary society in terms of illness and disease (Davis, 1975:32). Even when the social disorganization perspective succeeded social pathology and separated academic sociology from its close relationship to welfare activity, the "agrarian myth" (Gitter, 1959) or the idea that the urban landscape was a deteriorated version of a formerly rural landscape with traditional values and cooperative communities still informed sociological thinking. Dependence on, crime, divorce, desertion, suicide, and all kinds of vice, it was argued, were endemic to cities because of the social deterioration. But, paradoxically, social disorganization theorists also appreciated that stable traditions and regulations did emerge within subgroups, such as hoboes, delinquents, and others who made up the urban landscape. Shams, ghettoes, prisons, hobo jungles, and immigrant colonies had codes, traditions, and definable ways of life (Matza, 1969:31). And, belonging to certain ecological areas of the city, these traditions were discussed in almost Durkheimian terms, as if they were external and constraining social facts.

It is not surprising, therefore, that language practices of the diverse groups first came to

1. Hereafter, the terms "language" or "language use" should be understood as a shorthand way of referring to "language and interaction." The phrase, "language and interaction," is meant to capture the dynamic, conversational, "talk-in-interaction" (Sacks, 1969) aspects of actual speech.
2. The framing of this question follows from Hacking's (1975) and Dallmayr's (1954) studies of language-based inquiries in philosophy and political science respectively.
3. Best and Luckenbill (1982) critique sociological studies of deviance for being preoccupied either with social psychology or with structural analysis of analysis and neglecting an intermediate level of social organization. Their suggestive essay develops a social organizational perspective on "deviance" (social transactions) and "deviants" (associations). My social organizational emphasis is on neither deviance nor deviants per se but on language and interaction involving "anybodies."
they know this question does not mean, "Where do you usually make a flop?" They translate it into something else. "Do I have a room, a house, or an apartment with an address like most people?" They almost always answer, "I don't have a home," and, on the basis of this answer, tramps are transformed into "homeless men." In all the months of interviewing tramps, I never heard one say "I'm a homeless man" or even "I have no home." I did hear them say, "I made a good flop last night" or "I used to jungle up down by the waterfront."

Thus, studying the argot of a subculture provides access to insiders' rather than outsiders' orientations, values, and behavior patterns and means confronting that organization that resides in linguistic practice. Studies of such diverse groups as pickpockets (Maurer, 1964), confidence men (Maurer, 1974), dance musicians (Becker, 1963), drug addicts (Agar, 1973; Finestone, 1957; Inghart, 1985), and juvenile "hotrodders" (Sacks, 1979), as well as tramps and hoboes, suggest that the use of argot has a number of effects. It reinforces solidarity, helps determine who is a man and what the status of various members are, aids in resisting incursions (inquisitiveness, attempts at social control) of outsiders, and designates the techniques and other intricate dimensions of thieving, conning, playing music, drugging, hotrodding, tramping, or other projects that occupy participants and constitute the subculture. In short, the argot, like the codes and rules it instantiates, stands in reflexive relation to the subculture, simultaneously describing and producing members social worlds (Wieder, 1974:166).

Language and Conflict

From recognition of the diversity of groups and subcultures, it is a small step to also see that this diversity represents the possibility of conflict between them. In American sociology, generally, Dahrendorf (1958) may have been the first to emphasize the theoretical significance of this, but in the sociology of social problems, a "specialized application" (Vold, 1958:218) of conflict sociology occurred early on in the work of Sutherland (1924:21, 1929), Sellin (1938), Fuller (1942), and others, who suggested that criminal behavior could result when one group succeeded in codifying its moral principles, while members of another group continued to behave according to its own divergent standards.

... there are many situations in which criminality is the normal, natural response of normal, natural human beings struggling in understandably normal and natural situations for the maintenance of the way of life to which they stand committed (Vold, 1958:201).

Thus, we have now-classic studies of sexual psychopath laws (Sutherland, 1950), prohibition (Gusfield, 1963), marijuana legislation (Becker, 1963; Dickson, 1968; Gallaher and Walker, 1977, 1978), vagrancy (Chambliss, 1964), theft (Hall, 1952), juvenile delinquency (Platt, 1969), and others, which argue that classifying behaviors as deviant and ultimately illegal benefits psychiatrists, progressives, landowners, merchants, or upper economic classes and elites of various stripes.

But if sociologists regard conflict between groups, whether class, status, occupational, political, religious, or otherwise, as a significant phenomenon, their treatment of it in the everyday experience of members is sparse. With some exceptions (e.g., Thrasher, 1927) in the social problems area, studies of group conflict and how it results in the promulgation of particular laws has abstracted and reified complex social processes (Manning, 1975). If, however, we look to language-oriented research, the principle that Vold so well articulated with respect to criminal behavior appears prominent in many institutional arenas. That is, such research shows that officials may impute deviance to groups who simply maintain their ordinary patterns of talk and action.

Consider the subtle manifestation of conflict between racial groups in school settings. Previously, the term "cultural deprivation" (see the review and critique in Ogbu, 1978:42-44; cf. Mehan, 1984) was used as an explanation for what appeared to be deficient speaking skills among black children in school. It was not uncommon to consider black English or an "undereveloped version of standard English" (Bereiter et al., 1966:112-13). Research in natural settings (Labov, 1972a:64), such as Goodwin's (1980, 1982a, 1982b, 1983, forthcoming) elegant studies of disputing among urban black youth, demonstrate children's enormous linguistic, social, and cultural competencies. Disputes are the arena in which blacks, as well as middle class white children (Adler and Adler, 1984; Corsaro, 1987; Edler, 1985; Maynard, 1985), "display and generate character," and "realize" a local social organization (Goodwin, 1982b:91).

Libby (1972a:64) himself argues that Black English Vernacular (BEV) is an internally cohesive and distinct linguistic subsystem within the larger grammar of Standard English (SE). Documenting sociolinguistic skills and competencies leads to an appreciation of the conflict that can result when members of different groups meet in institutional settings. Thus, to follow the example of black/white relations, it is within the schools that the notion of cultural deprivation gained provenance and seemed to mask conflict between the dominant usage of SE and BEV. The pattern is for some black children to learn BEV at home, and then confront schools and school systems in which SE is the official language. The result may be that school officials place black children disproportionately in classes for the mentally retarded and learning disabled, assign them to lower instructional groups, and retain them in grades more often than other children (Labov, 1982). Such practices were questioned in a law suit brought before federal court in Ann Arbor, Michigan in the late 1970s. The basis for the suit was Title 20 of the U.S. Code, section 1703(f):

No state shall deny equal educational opportunity to an individual on account of his or her race, color, sex or national origin by... (f) the failure by an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome linguistic barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs. (Quoted in Labov, 1982:169)

The plaintiffs, who were parents, argued that their children spoke a vernacular with different grammar that constituted a linguistic barrier to equal participation. Expert witnesses included Labov and other sociolinguists. Ruling in favor of the plaintiffs, the court required the school and the district to identify children speaking BEV, to develop ways for teachers to learn the characteristics and history of BEV, and to use this knowledge in providing reading and writing instruction.

As a linguistic and interactional matter, the conflict of cultures occurs not just for children in schools, but among adults in job interviews (Akinosu and Ajijotutu, 1982; Erickson, 1975; Erickson and Schultz 1982), in committee negotiations (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, 1982b), courtroom hearings and trials (O'Barr, 1982; Gumperz, 1982c), in doctors' offices (Tannen and Wallat, 1987), and in other institutional arenas. In social science, the tradition of interpretive sociolinguistics pioneered by Gumperz (1982a, 1982b) and colleagues provides the most systematic investigations of such conflict. Their research concentrates on "contextualization" cues, or prosodic features of talk such as tone, accent, tempo, pitch, rhythm, hesitation, through which speakers signal interpretive frames (Gumperz, 1982a; Tannen and Wallat, 1987) that may be prominent in specific language groups. With these frames, people further segment messages, distinguish key points, and assign weight to various matters that parties discuss or to actions in which they engage. Such research has implications for sociological understanding of the unprecedented cultural and ethnic diversity of contemporary society (Yinger, 1985). Although tendencies toward assimilation can be documented (Massey, 1981; Hirschman, 1983), the great melting pot that early America sociologists foresaw has not oc-
curred (Alba and Chamlin, 1983; Blauuer, 1972; Hirschman, 1983). As Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982a:2) suggest, families from at least some ethnic groups are no longer as likely to live in separate enclaves or communities, and members are dependent on or involved in public services, agencies, and events which bring them together with others from different cultures. Sociolinguists are laying bare the interactive consequences, and most especially misunderstanding and conflict, in which the perpetuation of diversity is implicated, and do so by building knowledge about the organization of speaking and interacting skills that persons learn in their local milieu (Mehan, 1984).

Language, Identity, and Power

Diversity in society, besides raising the possibility of conflict between groups, can also promote other social problems, such as those of status, power, and patterns of domination and subordination (Gumperz, 1982a:6-7). As interactional phenomena, such patterns involve social identities, including sex, age, ethnicity, class, and others (Gumperz, 1982b:7). In an uncomplicated view, it is partly by virtue of a social identity that one is accorded status and either wields or accedes to power, but studies of talk and interaction demonstrate that things may not work so straightforwardly. For one thing, even if people can be abstractly categorized in various ways, that does not make their identities automatically relevant for direct interaction. Only periodically during conversation do parties enact their “master” identities (West and Zimmerman, 1985:116-17). For another, it is erroneous to assume that because of their social identities, parties become involved in patterns of domination and subordination. Instead, at the interactional level, displays of power include the asymmetric use of conversational resources (Holohan and Boden, 1985) and these are the very tools by which parties achieve the visibility or social reality of their identities. Both of these issues point to understanding the interaction order as a prelude to investigating the complex relations of identity and power.

These issues can be illustrated by considering male-female interaction. Regarding the enactment of identity, studies of linguistic differences between male and female have proliferated in the last 15 years (see the bibliography in Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley, 1983a). Early investigators of females are more expressive in intonation, that they use more adjectives and intensifiers, including “so,” “such,” “quite,” “very,” and “more,” that they make more precise determinations of color (Key, 1972), that they employ more fillers, such as “uhm” and “you know,” and that women more often use affective address terms like “dear,” “honey,” and “sweetie” (see the review in West and Zimmerman, 1985:106). As it turns out, when researchers examine these items as simple markers or indicators of female speech, only two show any consistent patterning. Compared to men, women produce speech in phonetically more correct forms (e.g., Labov, 1972b:243; see the review in Thorne and Henley, 1975:17), and vary their pitch and intonation more than men (e.g., McConnell-Ginet, 1978; see the review in West and Zimmerman, 1985:107).

Studying indicators without regard to their speech environment is misleading, however (Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley, 1983b:13; Phillips, 1980). For example, in a well-known early statement, Lakoff (1972) suggests that women use more “tag questions” of a certain type than men. Tag questions are phrases such as “don’t you,” “right,” and “isn’t it” that speakers append to their conversational utterances to elicit conformation of something they already know, to check information of which they are unsure, to elicit small talk, and to ask for confirmation of an opinion. It is only the latter that Lakoff (1973) proposed as being more frequent for women than men, which is to say that the tag question as a “marker” of women’s speech is context-bound and performs a specific discourse function. Nevertheless, as West and Zimmerman (1985:110) point out, research that reports no differences between men and women has either examined tag questions in a non-conversational environment or failed to distinguish their functional uses. That is, investigators have removed the contextual considerations that were part of Lakoff’s (1973, 1975) original formulations. The guiding assumption of such research seems to be that sex categorization is an abstract determinant of speech; it is as if male and female categories are social structural distinctions that somehow cause those with the appropriate biological endowments to talk one way or the other.

An approach that takes into account the interaction order would regard differences between male and female forms of talk as not susceptible to straightforward counting, would pay closer attention to the details of topic and other aspects of conversational organization (Thorne et al., 1983b), and would then see how conversational procedures may serve to display social identity. That is, identity can be an accomplishment of social interaction rather than its cause. For instance, Fishman (1978) argues that one party to conversation may procedurally claim rights to develop talk, while the other supports that claim through various displays of monitoring and appreciation, the two interweave thereby “doing” maleness and femaleness, respectively (Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1976; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Insofar as participants are oriented to those categories as relevant to their understanding of the interaction, this latter point is crucial because participants can use such speech devices without attributing the usage to their male and female identities. They can simply adopt “discourse identities” as topical speaker and listener, irrespective of any “master identities” (sex, age, ethnicity; cf. West and Zimmerman, 1985:116-17; Maynard and Zimmerman, 1984). In short, it is important to analyze the independently organized structure of topical and other features of talk (Button and Casey, 1984, 1985; Maynard, 1986; Maynard and Zimmerman, 1984) before assuming that these practices or any other “markers” derive from externally based social identities (Schegloff, 1987). It remains as another task to map the relation of these practices to such identities.

Overall, then, studies of status and power lack a theory of the interaction order as an independent social domain with its own integrity and organization (cf. Goffman, 1983; Schegloff, 1987; Rawls, 1987). Just as one cannot bridge social structure and interaction by asserting correlations, we cannot assume that externally based patterns of domination and subordination automatically reproduce themselves as embedded, pervasive, and omnipresent features of people’s direct interrelations. We need an understanding of how interaction works, and based on this understanding, it then may be possible to examine distributions of phenomena in terms of structural or other identities. Thus, the work of West and Zimmerman (West, 1979, 1982; West and Zimmerman, 1977, 1983; Zimmerman and West, 1975) that documents an asymmetry of interruptions between males and females (males interrupt females more than the reverse) has a profound dependence on the model of conversational turn-taking developed by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974), which specifies the mechanisms of proper turn transfer and thus provides a theoretical perspective on participants’ speech rights and also suggests how to distinguish interruption from other kinds of overlapping speech. Further research may show, as Kollok, Blumstein, and Schwartz (1983) argue, that differences in interruptions may be due to power rather than sexual status (see also Schegloff, 1987 and O’Barr, 1982). It remains, however, that we are just beginning to understand how language and interaction operate as a site for the exercise of control, dominance, resistance, and other activities ordinarily associated with struggle at the level of social structure (cf. Boden and Zimmerman, forthcoming; Holohan and Boden, 1985; West, 1984; Zimmerman and West, 1975).

Language, Troubles, and Problems

The sociology of social problems has been concerned with how collectivities bring about
visible through the ways that participants manage their interchanges on a moment-by-moment basis. Some troubles and problems do acquire labels, but many do not, and the study of language describes an organization of interaction that handles both situations.

5. Troubles and problems may emerge as fodder for people processing institutions. Investigating commonsense reasoning that is embedded in institutional discourse permits access to wider organizational experiences and cognitions that are social structural in origin. But studies of conversational sequencing demonstrate a linkage between discourse in institutional settings and talk in ordinary life that again attests to the integrity of the interaction order and thus compels attention to everyday talk for the full organizational explication of institutional interaction.

6. Because perceptions of social problems are filtered through the news, an institution of unique importance is the media. Rhetorical analysis of messages regarding social problems shows that they attempt to persuade people of the existence of particular problems, especially those that are disruptive of a Progressive sense of social order. Interactional analysis sheds light on the effectiveness of rhetorical formats in terms of generating audience responses and how these formats may then determine media coverage and depictions of social problems. In addition, the increased use of spoken interaction (as in interviews) to present the news means it is possible to analyze the organization of talk for ways in which it affects the structure and content of public information regarding social problems.

Although social problems touched upon here go under the names of homelessness, racism, sexism, domination, labeling, professional power, and the like, at every turn advancing our understanding of these phenomena can benefit from the analysis of ordinary interaction. This paper, however, is not an appeal for a theory of social problems that incorporates sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, cognitive sociology, ethnmethodology, or any other interactional inquiry, where one starts with a concern for an official social problem and looks for its interactional manifestations using one of these as a method for inquiry. It advocates further studies of language and interaction, for these are the stuff and substance of social life, and their investigation leads to a theory of the interaction order as an organized domain in its own right. To the extent that we have learned about such interactional phenomena as diversity, conflict, domination, troubles and problems, the institutional processing of deviance, and mediated versions of social problems, it is because we have propositions about systems of vernacular talk, turn-taking, troubles-telling, commonsense knowledge, conversational sequencing, rhetoric, and so on. Thus, the general answer to why language and interaction matter to the sociology of social problems is that their study permits the development of propositions about social organization. Although not about social problems traditionally conceived, those propositions have implications for the sociology of social problems, as they do for other substantive areas in sociology.

References


labels such as homosexuality (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977), alcoholism (Schneider, 1978), hyperactivity (Conrad, 1975), battered women (Loseke and Cahill, 1984), and others. Such studies successfully specify and trace a "politics" of deviance (Schur, 1980) in the realm of institutional activities. In the interactional arena, however, sociologists of social problems largely point to conflict, strain, and struggle without adequately analyzing their organized dimensions (Emerson and Messinger, 1977). Once again, research on actual speech supplies an understanding of how parties routinely and procedurally produce and experience forms of "trouble" that may emerge as problems and deviance.

Consider labeling theory, whose flaws are well critiqued and only need brief mention here. By arguing that definitional processes can bring on the stabilization of deviant behavior, the theory attempts to deal with the nature of face-to-face confrontations where deviance and problems emerge, but the implication is that, until it is labeled, behavior is largely chaotic and random. That is, classic formulations make provocative statements about the "dramatization of evil" (Tannenbaum, 1938) and "public reactions" (Becker, 1963) to an individual: "audiences" (Schur, 1971; 12) provide "rewards," "punishments," and other "cues" (Scheff, 1963) that presumably influence the person's behavior. The perspective is agnostic about the origins of this behavior or "primary deviance," and merely stresses that it may become "secondary" and prolonged if others react by attaching stigmatizing categories (Lemert, 1951).

If any propositions beg for an analysis of speech in the context of interaction, these do (see Pollner, 1974, 1987; cf. Boden, forthcoming), but such analyses are not traditional within the field. On the one hand, we have large-scale examinations of the effect of labels on various measurable outcomes, such as arrest, prison sentences, mental hospitalizations, and so on, which necessarily leave actual interaction untouched, and therefore gloss, misrepresent, or overlook significant phenomena (Holstein, 1987; Maynard, 1982). On the other hand, by posing a variety of issues for exploration at the interactional level, Emerson and Messinger (1977) suggest an alternative to aggregate-level studies. These issues include how some difficulties and troubles are ignored while others arrive at a stage where "troublemakers" may suggest a label, how attempts at remedy can act to "consolidate" a trouble, and how discourse and procedural interventions ("symmetrical" vs. "asymmetrical") can affect whether a "trouble" emerges publicly as "conflict" between parties or as the "deviance" of one of them (Emerson and Messinger, 1977). Several studies thus develop intriguing insights into how people manage trouble before it becomes labeled. Methodologically, however, the sociology of troubles depends on subjects' recollected interpretations (e.g., Cohn and Gallagher, 1984; Lichn, 1983; Schneider, 1984), or on observation of rapid-fire events (e.g., Emerson and Pollner, 1978). Consequently, where investigations based on aggregate data are inevitably ignorant of real-time process, research that approaches this process directly is still somewhat distanced from talk and action as they actually and originally occur.

Nonetheless, recent microanalytic studies do demonstrate the socially organized interactional manifestations of talk about "troubles" and "problems." For instance, Jefferson and Lee (1981) describe "troubles telling" as an activity that can be accomplished relatively successfully or that can be "contaminated" and foreshortened. A way that troubles telling can be abbreviated is for the "recipient" of such talk to offer advice prematurely or before the "teller" has had the opportunity to produce a full account of the trouble. In this context, the teller may reject or otherwise be resistant to the advice in part because accepting advice means relinquishing the "discourse identity" of being speaker. The troubles-recipient, by becoming an advice-giver, assumes speakership as the troubles teller shifts to hearing the proffered suggestions of remedy. Thereby, a transition is made from a "troubles telling" to a "service encounter," from "discussing "trouble" to formulating a "problem" and its remedies. Members distinguish between talk that focuses on the "troubled person" and his or her experiences and talk that deals with the "problem" and its "properties," and correlates, between emotional reciprocity and instrumental exchange (Jefferson and Lee, 1981: 411-21).

The shift between a troubles telling and a service encounter, between one person having a "trouble" and then having a "problem" and, correspondingly, another person being sympathetic and then offering help, is a delicate matter that requires exquisite attention to the organization of talk and relevant discourse identities for its successful accomplishment. Of course, sometimes the shift is accomplished through a change from two-party interaction to multi-party settings in which the kind of interventions and taking sides that Emerson and Messinger (1977) analyze become possible. And it may also mean going from one social environment to another, which itself requires a change from using "relational" (family or friendship) categories to "professional" ones in organizing the search for help (Sacks, 1972). Even when professional help is sought, it is too simplistic to regard the labeling process as a straightforward application of a textbook definition to some pre-defined symptoms (Emerson and Messinger, 1977: 123). Instead, in those institutional settings designed to "service" human clients, interactional jockeying over whether a problem exists, and, if so, what its nature is, regularly precedes the successful use of a label (Scheff, 1968). For example, in a study of how clinicians deliver diagnoses to patients of developmentally disabled (retarded, autistic, or learning deficient) children, Maynard (forthcoming b) examines a "perspective-display" sequence whereby clinicians, before delivering a diagnosis, ask the parents for their view of the child:

[1]

Dr: What do you see as his difficulty?
Mrs. A: Mainly his um the fact that he doesn't understand everything and also the fact his speech is very hard to understand what he's saying
[2]

Dr: Now tell me what you feel is the problem
Mrs. B: He's not learning

To say that these queries contain problem proposals means that referring to "his difficulty" or "the problem" is a claim that has to be honored by the other party. In both of these examples, those claims are granted, which allows the clinician to move quickly to delivery of the diagnosis. However, such claims can be resisted; that is, a parent can reject the problem proposal:

Dr: So at this point there is a certain amount of confusion in your mind as to what the problem really is, and we haven't really had a chance to hear from you at all what you feel the situation—

Mr. G: Well I don't think there's anything wrong with him.

Resistance is not a one-way street. Parents may report or propose to a pediatrician or other professional that there is something wrong with their child, only to have the suggestion ignored or discounted with imputations that the child is going through a phase or will outgrow a worrisome condition.5

Thus, applying a label such as "mental retardation" to some child depends at least partly on achieved intersubjective agreement that there is a "problem." Stated differently, that a person has a problem can become a taken-for-granted or presumed feature of interaction between client and parent so that they can then negotiate specific diagnoses or labels. Such a presumed feature is no automatic, cognitive "seeing and saying" process that participants

5. See also Emerson and Pollner's (1978: 82-87) discussion of how psychiatric emergency teams can minimize or discount callers' proposals and claims about problems. They may refer to such claims as "overreactions," attempted "manipulations" of the team, or manifestations of the caller's own "craziness."
(1987) applies Toulmin's (1958) logical analysis of argumentation to show a generalized pattern in the way groups make claims about social problems. First, they provide the grounds for the claims by defining a problem, using "atrocity tales" to grab an audience's attention, and estimating the problem's prevalence, its growth, and its potential threat to a wide population. Second, claims-makers employ warrants, or devices to convert grounds into conclusions about the necessity of action. With respect to the missing child problem, for example, it is not enough to establish that a large proportion of children become missing persons every year. Promoters remind audiences of the sentimental value of children, the innocence and blamelessness of the victims, the evils they will experience, and other "lines of reasoning" that make self-evident why something must be done. Finally, claims-makers draw conclusions which suggest that citizens and officials must become more aware, engage in prevention, exert social control, and, in other words, counteract the problem. Best (1986:117) concludes:  

Sociologists of social problems and social movements cannot afford to ignore the rhetoric used in making claims. Rhetoric reflects both the nature of the interaction between particular claims-makers and their audience, and the larger cultural context within which claims-making occurs. In turn, rhetorical choices affect the success or failure of specific claims. The message—as well as the medium of claims-making—merits further study.

The interaction between claims-makers and audiences is mediated by news-producing institutions, and the urge is to specify how interested parties in conjunction with newspapers and television can structure and perform their messages in such a way as to appeal to large numbers of people. Research from a conversation analytic perspective on political speeches elucidates such performances. In general, public speakers have devices to hold the attention of audience members, and to solicit valued collective responses such as applause. Alkison (1984) shows that messages whose central points are delivered as "three part lists" (Jefferson, in press) and "contrastive pairs" are particularly effective (see also Heritage and Greatch, 1986), for they enable audience members to coordinate their approval by clapping in unison. The importance of this is not simply to show the structure of speech that results in a particular audience response. Heritage, Clayman, and Zimmerman (1988) suggest, successful communication inside an auditorium is "also strongly implicated in subsequent prime time news media exposure," for television news broadcasts tend to use just those segments of political speeches that are rhetorically formatted (Heritage and Greatch, forthcoming). Hence, to the degree that public understanding of such problems as poverty, crime, racism, sexism, war, depends on the media, we should also understand that media portrayals are in turn shaped by political context, which involves tightly organized relationships between speech makers and their audiences.

A second way in which language-oriented research relates to the study of media and social problems has to do with the increased use of interactive formats for the presentation of news. Broadcasters may show reporters talking to political leaders informally, or discussions among family members related to a hostage, or anchor persons asking questions of a correspondent. This means that scholars can analyze the structure and content of mediated news in relation to these audiovisually available interactions (Heritage et al., 1988; Molotch and Lester, 1974:105). Thus, examining how participants open, elaborate, and close the news interview furthers our appreciation of how talk and interaction, rather than reflecting the objectivity of pre-existing events (including the occurrence of social problems) give these events their actual character.

As Clayman (forthcoming:36) notes, it is not unique to regard the news as a social construction (Molotch and Lester, 1974; Tuchman, 1972), but it is novel to focus ways that routines within news interviews, rather than exogenous forces such as political ideologies and the institutional organization of newsgathering, constitute the form and content of messages (see also Schudson, 1982). Both Clayman (1987) and Greatch (1988) document a predominant turn-taking organization in which interviewers refrain from stating opinions, and ask questions of interviewees who, in answering, are allowed long turns in which to express their views. The consequence of the interview turn-taking system is that interviewers, through their questioning, can set the "agenda" (Greatch, 1988; Clayman, forthcoming). Nevertheless, interviewees have devices for shifting these agendas, avoiding topics posed by the interviewer, and producing talk that represents their own interests (Greatch, 1986). Finally, interviewers may counter such devices, although this depends on which kind an interviewee uses. Both parties pay attention to the fact that their talk occurs for an "overhearing" audience (Heritage, 1985). This brings about considerable and organized jockeying between view of interviewee, which news about social and other problems will reflect.

Conclusion

Both a particular and a general answer to the question of why language and interaction matter to the sociology of social problems exist. The particular answer is that the sociology of social problems, because of its heritage, is often preoccupied with definitional issues, whether from an "objectivist" or "constructionist" perspective. Language and interaction offer a different starting point or stance from which to understand social problems because instead of offering "official" (theoretically-derived, or policy-implicated) "big" issues for study, they pose for analysis what members, in their orderly ways of talking and acting with one another, demonstrate to be problems for themselves. Thus:

1. Studying vernacular ways of speaking and argot allows a researcher to appreciate the diversity of groups in society and how group members conceptually carve their worlds, reinforce social boundaries, and resist outside attempts at social control. Such appreciation is possible because the investigator drops those questions that an outsider might ask and learns to see the vernacular as representing solutions to difficulties that are indigenous to the experiences and lives of people in the group.

2. Diversity also means the potential for conflict. In schools and other agencies that promote a public form of discourse, officials may mask such conflict by treating members of one or another subgroup as cognitively, culturally, or socially deficient. Being able to see deficit or deprivation in terms of conflict depends upon first documenting the organized system of language in terms of which members of a particular subgroup operate. Practitioners of divergent vernaculars and language systems, although skilled in their own arena, may find official discourse to be like a foreign language.

3. Employing vernaculars and other distinctive speech modes or devices may involve enacting social identities. At the same time, participants may use such devices for displays of dominance and subordination. However, an understanding of such phenomena depends on specification of the status-free ordinations of interaction. That is, even if domination and subordination are features of a society's social structure, they do not easily penetrate the "interactional membrane" (Goffman, 1961:65) in which the organization of language use is involved. Thus, where relations of power in everyday life are of concern, adequate sociological understanding requires previous analysis of turn-taking and other independently organized aspects of interaction.

4. By the same token, if "labeling" and "societal reactions" set careers of deviance in motion, such motion depends upon ordered activities of telling troubles and proposing problems. These activities and their organization are best approached not by hypothesizing relationships between exogenous variables and the incarceration or hospitalization of subjects, nor by reconstructing how such activities could have occurred in such a way as to eventuate in a particular label or societal reaction, but from the standpoint of how they actually do occur as real-time linguistic and interactive processes. Starting with the details of talk and interaction permits an appreciation of how troubles and problems only become contingently
Language and Institutional Settings

When "troubles" become "problems," the society's medical, legal, welfare, or other institutions may be brought to bear. Students of language and interaction have generated a wealth of research on discourse in institutional settings (e.g., Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Cicourel, 1968; Erickson and Shultz, 1982; Maynard, 1984; Meehan, 1986; Mehan, Hertweck, and Mehlis, 1986; Peyrot, 1983; Polliner, 1987; West, 1984; Whalen and Zimmerman, 1987). For general sociologists, language in institutions may be of more interest than everyday conversation because, in some views, these settings embody the rituals of processing deviance and thus seem to control, perpetuate, channel, or reproduce social problems. A common attitude is that ordinary talk contains noncritical features of communication and is therefore "trivial," whereas institutional discourse is by definition consequential because it reflects the transmutation of macrosociological relations and constraints into interactional patterns (van Dijk, 1985; Waitzkin, 1979).

Once again, matters are not so straightforward. Among language-oriented researchers, two major strategies for the investigation of institutional discourse exist. One strategy incorporates an emphasis on the transmutation, and urges a study of the institutional context of discourse through ethnographic investigations, which include observations of organizational environments and interviews with participants (Cicourel, 1981, 1987). In medical offices, for instance, doctors and patients use different conceptions of disease to make sense of symptoms, behavioral cues, and speech acts. These conceptions, although they affect the immediate interaction, are not directly available in it. Instead, the investigator may see simple manifestations in the way doctors ask "leading" questions, employ a specialized vocabulary, and write truncated medical histories (Cicourel, 1981:70-71). In fact, doctors' attempts to see diseases according to official categories can cause them to ignore what Mischel (1962) calls the "voice of the life world." Unless researchers perform ethnographic investigations, they will not penetrate the medical conceptions and theories that lie behind such practices. Correlatively, patients' own belief systems will guide how they talk and respond to physicians. In one study, Cicourel (1982) shows how a patient's experiences with medical bureaucracies are embedded in her challenges to a gynecologist who has diagnosed the patient with cancer and recommended a treatment regimen of radiation therapy and surgery. Although the patient comply's with the doctor's recommendations, because of past experiences she clearly does not fully trust what she had been told about the diagnosis and treatment plan. Patterns of talk seem to attest to her mistrust, but explication of the mistrust and the experiences that cause it become available only through interviews that allow the patient's views to be fully expressed. And despite her beliefs, experience, and distrust, organizational and interactional pressures constrain her to go along with the doctor's plan.

Interviewing participants to reveal their patterns of commonsense reasoning is an analytic device that can show the relation of organizational and other "distal" contexts to local or "proximal" wants or language use in doctors' offices and other such settings (Mehan, forthcoming). Starting with actual discourse, one also conducts interviews with participants to garner their reflections on the talk and, through other ethnographic methods, further investigates the institutional surround to fully understand what occurs in that discourse. In an apt turn of phrase, the sociologist Hymes (1974) has called such an approach "the ethnography of speaking." Intuitively appealing as the first strategy may be, conversation analysts take a different approach to institutional language. They raise a concern that using terms such as "doctor's office," "courtroom," "police department," and so on, to characterize settings and warrant contextual investigations is a vernacular practice that can obscure much of what occurs within those settings. As Schegloff (1987:219) argues, "... the fact that a conversation takes place in a hospital does not ipso facto make technically relevant a characterization of the setting, for a conversation there, as 'in a hospital' (or 'in the hospital')." Consider, for example, that a "doctor" and "patient" may begin their conversation by discussing the weather. That such talk occurs and the manner in which participants produce it have to do with the generic problem of how to open conversations and not with the specific location of the interview, nor with the fact that participants may be otherwise identifiable as "doctor" and "patient" and therefore holders of particular professional or commonsense conceptions regarding medical or other conditions. As another example, consider this fragment of conversation in a doctor's office (Schegloff, 1980:145; transcript is simplified):

Dr: Very good. Very good. Let me see your ankle.

Dr: VERY GOOD. Why don't you say somethin'. ← 1

Pt: I have this second toe that was broken. But I went to the p'diatrician becuz I couldn't find a doctor on the weekend. And he said it wasn't broken. It was. So it wasn't taken care of properly. And when I'm on my feet, I get a sensation in it.

Pt: What is something that can be done? ← 2

Dr: How long ago did you break it

Pt: Mm two years.

Dr: You could put a metatarsal pad underneath it...
Thus, a choice for students of interaction in institutional settings is one of whether, in the first instance, to attend to the vernacular characterizations of the setting and its participants or to sequential and other forms of actual talk. The first choice entails examining medical or legal discourse for ways in which ethnographic knowledge of wider social environments will be manifest in that discourse. To capture participants’ experiences in any one interactional episode, it is necessary to observe and interview participants in a variety of places. The second choice involves more reliance on *in situ* accomplishment of the episode’s scenic features, on explication of generic structures of ordinary talk, and on demonstrations of just when and how participants orient their conduct to, and thereby activate, the institutional context (Seligoff, 1987:219; cf. Sharrock and Watson, forthcoming; Wilson, forthcoming).

For the sociologist of social problems, then, the ethnographic strategy provides access to ways in which “organizational pressures and constraints” (Cicourel, 1982:72) influence options, decisions, courses of action, and the like (see also Mehan, forthcoming; Mehan, Hertweck, and Mathis, 1986; Miller, 1983; Spencer, 1983). Alternatively, the conversation analytic approach examines language use in institutional settings as a domain whose major parameters derive not from outside, “contextual” influences, but rather from its indigenously produced properties. Where investigations occur in arenas that handle social problems and deviance, that means more fully exploring continuities as well as differences with discourse in everyday life and seeing how ordinary conversational devices are altered and deployed for specialized purposes (Frankel, 1983:45; Heritage, 1984:238-40; Maynard, 1986; Whalen and Zimmerman, 1987). To the extent that institutional discourse depends on such devices, there is a significant theoretical imperative for sociologists of legal, medical, welfare, and other settings to pay attention to studies of everyday talk. It is therefore premature and inappropriate to regard ordinary conversation, in comparison to institutional discourse, as somehow sociologically trivial, non-critical, or inferior, for it is mundane talk and its range of speaking practices from which institutional discourse procedures are fashioned.

**Language and the Media**

Medical, legal, welfare, and other “people processing” bureaus are not the only major institutions bearing on social problems. Another one is the news media, which often filters public and even social scientific perceptions of social problems (Molotch and Lester, 1974). Consequently, efforts to understand the history and organization of radio, television, and newspaper industries (e.g., on newspapers, see Drever, 1982; Schudson, 1978, 1982) and the structure of the “news” presented via various media and their data-gathering routines (e.g., Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Hallin and Mancini, 1984; Tuchman, 1978) are important contributions to the sociology of social problems (Schneider, 1985:221-23). Consider, for instance, Fishman’s (1977) study of a “crime wave” against elderly people that purportedly hit New York City in the mid-seventies. Going beyond preceding critiques of official statistics that showed how rates of deviance reflect practitioners’ commonsense reasoning, folk theories, organizational contingencies, and political concerns (Kitouse and Cicourel, 1963; Cicourel, 1968), Fishman (1977) demonstrates that this particular wave was entirely the product of the media’s interrelationships with other institutions and the embedded practices through which editors and reporters obtain, thematize, and promote crime news.

And other studies demonstrate that understanding media can bring the sociology of social problems full circle from its origins. If sociology in America began with the Progressive ideal or “agrarian myth,” by which it judged the contemporary scene and found it to be rampant with pathology and disintegration, the media may now use a similar perspective in reporting on the nation and even the world-at-large. In his study of national news, Gans (1979:53-59) argues that the media emphasize stories about natural, moral, and social “disorder” and its restoration. This gives evidence to the value placed on “order” and suggests that we might want to know, especially with respect to reports about social disorder, “what and whose order is being valued” (Gans, 1979:57). The answer, it appears, lies in the media’s use of an operational definition of social order as political stability and overall social cohesion as measured by the standards of upper middle class, business and professional, white, middle-aged males (Gans, 1979:58-61). “In reality,” says Gans (1979:68), the news is not so much conservative or liberal as it is reformist; indeed, the enduring values are very much like the values of the Progressive movement of the early twentieth century. The resemblance is often uncanny, as in the common advocacy of honest, meritocratic, and anti-bureaucratic government, and in the shared antipathy to political machines and demagogues, particularly of populist bent.

Additional ideas that journalism and the Progressives share include notions of responsible capitalism, dislike of bigness, celebration of pastoral society, emphasis on individualism, and dislike of collectivism and socialism.6 Journalists, then, consider themselves as “watchdogs” (Gans, 1979:293) and may thus, like social disorganization theorists of an earlier generation, be concerned to warn the rest of society of current or impending problems that affect them, to promote social control, and to uphold a vision of what a national society can be.

Language-oriented studies of the media fit into this picture in at least two ways. First, one of the more intriguing ways that media help perpetuate the agrarian myth is by unwittingly passing on “urban legends” (Barker, 1976; Bird, 1976; Brunvand, 1981:5), those stories about vanishing hitchhikers, “Kentucky-fried” rats, death cars, microwave babies, and so on (see also Brunvand, 1984, 1986). Urban legends depict anxieties concerning changing values and conditions in contemporary society as compared with conceptions of a traditional lifestyle (Brunvand, 1981:189) and capture fears regarding strangers, foreigners, large cities, large corporations, technology, increased mobility, threats to children, and so on (Fine, 1980; Best and Horiuchi, 1985).

The analysis of media treatment of urban legends fits within a larger framework for the rhetorical analysis of public versions of social problems, which involves explicating how “claims-makers” attempts to inform audiences are also efforts at persuasion. From the inception of American sociology, and particularly with respect to the “oral historians” of the “Chicago school,” scholars aimed their discussions not just at other social scientists but also at the public. In making available first-person accounts of deviance, social disorganization theorists such as Clifford Shaw were combating newspapers’ stereotyped views of, and punitive orientations toward, these deviants. The “message” in such oral histories as The Jackroller (Shaw, 1930) was that delinquents were not alien beings, but rather essentially good persons who had become bad by existing in a disorganized and therefore criminalogenic environment. If reformers wanted to change these individuals, they had to alter the environment and not just the person (Bennett, 1981:258-59).

Rhetorical analysis of a perspective such as social disorganization shows precisely how any social problems “theory,” far from being a neutral exposition of some “putative” (Kitosue and Spector, 1978) conditions, is itself embedded in courses of action that are linguistic, interactive, and political (Hallin and Mancini, 1984; Schudson, 1982). Because the media represent powerful resources for persuasion, groups seek out newspapers, radio, and television to promote their definitions and versions of problems (Molotch and Lester, 1974:104), and this means a wide field exists for sociologists who are interested in the organization of rhetoric in relation to publicly defined social ills (Gubrium and Lynott, 1985; Gusfield, 1981). Thus, Best

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6. Gans (1979:203-13) suggests that, for several reasons, the connection of the Progressive movement to contemporary media values is not coincidental. Early on, journalists were active in the Progressive movement, and even today they come from backgrounds similar to the Progressives. Being upper middle-class and identifying themselves as politically independent and liberal, furthermore, even if the movement died, Progressive values have not, and are embedded in the work conditions of the professional journalist. See also Schudson (1982:110).