



A tutorial on membership categorization

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Abstract

After setting Sacks' work on membership categorization in its historical and analytical context, and suggesting some ways of reading the original texts, I sketch the major components of membership categorization devices (MCDs) – collections of categories and rules of application, and then the categories themselves and their features. These discussions lead to some consequences for research practice – both for social science generally and for conversation-analytic practice in particular, and to an initial treatment of some problems that arise in advancing this line of conversation-analytic research.

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1. A tutorial

In labeling this essay a “tutorial,” I mean to make clear from the outset that the substance of what is to be covered here is not new, and is not mine. The topic is work on *membership categorization* first explored by my friend and colleague Harvey Sacks some 40 years ago in 1963–1964, work which found its way into print in 1972 in two edited volumes (Sacks, 1972a,b), and in 1992 with the publication of his ‘Lectures on Conversation’ (Sacks, 1992).

Virtually all readers of this essay have come to Conversation Analysis well after its first stirring in the mid-1960s, and well after Sacks' work on Membership Categorization Devices (or MCDs) was introduced – indeed, I daresay, after it had for the most part faded from central attention. This work was encountered, in other words, as a historical legacy. Those who have tried to familiarize themselves with it, or make it part of their working competence, have often found the central texts difficult, even inaccessible. Those who have tried before would do well to try again; those who have not, should try now. I believe that this tutorial will be most accessible and productive for those who have recently been in touch with Sacks' texts. In my view, they have

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often been subject to misunderstanding, and the misunderstandings have led work based on them astray. Readers might do well to have copies of the two main papers at hand throughout the reading.

The text that follows presents *my* understanding of the key elements of Sacks' work on membership categorization, sketches its greatest strengths and weaknesses, clarifies some elements which have been puzzles, and others which have been vulnerable to misunderstanding, and suggests what seem to me its most critical growth points and needs.

2. Context

Let me start by providing some analytical and historical context.

Analytically, one way of locating this topic – membership categorization devices – is to understand it by reference to the set of practices for referring to persons, which is itself part of two larger domains, one of which could be characterized as *doing description*, the other of which could be characterized as *word selection*, – how speakers come to use the words they do, and how that informs the hearing that the talk gets from recipients. Sacks himself sets the 'Baby Cried' paper in the larger context of doing and recognizing possible descriptions at the very outset of the paper (1972b:326, 330–331). In the core of the paper, however, what figures most centrally is the narrower – and only partially intersecting – domain of selecting terms for referring to persons and for understanding those terms. Elsewhere (Schegloff, 1996), I discuss an organization of practices for referring to persons that starts with practices for referring to speaker and recipient, then practices for what can be termed *locally subsequent* reference to other persons, then *locally initial* reference forms, with their preference for recognitional references if possible (Sacks and Schegloff, 1979), and finally locally initial reference forms that are *non-recognitional*. The use of category terms for persons is the most substantial and important practice of non-recognitional reference, and the Membership Categorization Devices which Sacks introduced are the basic resource for their description. Arguably, their importance transcends the corner of the person-reference practices to which this location consigns them, as would strike most persons who read the relevant Lectures or 'The Baby Cried' paper (Sacks, 1972b) or 'The Search for Help' paper (Sacks, 1972a).

Historically, Sacks began doing this work during the 1963–1964 academic year, while he was a Research Fellow (together with Harold Garfinkel and the occasional participation of Erving Goffman) at the Suicide Prevention Center in Los Angeles. It formed the basis of his Ph.D. Dissertation, and is available through the two papers I've mentioned, and the lectures he gave in his courses in the early years of his teaching career. The last substantial treatment of this topic in the Lectures was in Spring, 1967, when the course was largely given over to identification and categorization. And thereafter, there is little mention of the matter, except for a bit in several lectures in Winter, 1969, one of which is a reprise of an earlier lecture on partitioning constancy (see section 4.1, below), the other of which has something new – categorical reformulation as the population of present persons changes. There are occasional other scattered bits, but Sacks' serious and sustained engagement with this topic lapses after early 1967, and the main thrust of it was done several years earlier than that.

So the MCDs are an *early* product, when a variety of materials were being inspected, not just conversational materials. The 'Baby Cried' paper, for example, takes as its point of departure and recurrent return a story Sacks found in a book called 'Children Tell Stories.' Told by a very young child in response to a researcher's solicitation, this one starts, "The baby cried; the mommy picked it up." The form of the data has consequences for how Sacks' treatment of it begins, and

that treatment in turn, I suspect, has engendered some consequential misunderstandings, to be taken up below, after the relevant analytic resources have been explicated.

As the focus of CA work came increasingly to be on conversational materials, carefully transcribed, the work on categorization devices receded. The bit on reformulation in a lecture in Winter, 1969 is based on such conversational data. But the data extract is taken from a recounting of an experience; and, that noted, we can note as well that much of the earlier work draws on such recountings (like “The baby cried . . .”) – in various forms and media. So one key site for work on categorization has been story telling, and that may not be coincidental but worth pursuing. For example, a great deal of the subsequent work by others that draws on MCDs is addressed to interview data, that is, data in which recounting is done, but which does not focus on the interview itself as a site of talk-in-interaction. Still, the relevance of membership categorization has seemed to many to extend past these boundaries to the very constitution and organization of perception, of understanding, of the character of stipulated reality, to the organization of experience. The question is whether it is possible to find a way to re-engage or adapt the early analytic work to the sort of data which the current state of the art requires – a constraint which Sacks himself insisted on. The answer to that question is by no means clear.

3. Reading the papers

Before trying to sketch in brief compass the key features of the MCDs, let me comment briefly on aspects of the published papers where this work is most systematically presented. Both were published in 1972, but they came to publication by different routes. The first appeared under the title ‘An initial investigation of the usability of conversational data for doing sociology’, in *Studies in Social Interaction*, edited by David Sudnow, though the title under which Sacks developed it, and by which I will refer to it, was ‘The Search for Help: No one to turn to’. It was developed from the outset as a *written* paper, and went through quite a few drafts before reaching the form in which it was published. It was, in that sense, designed from the outset to be carefully and precisely drafted and read, and not for oral delivery.

The other core paper appeared under the title ‘On the analyzability of stories by children’ in ‘Directions in Sociolinguistics’, edited by John Gumperz and Dell Hymes, though it is more commonly known by the data fragment to which it is mostly addressed, “The baby cried, the mommy picked it up”, or ‘The Baby Cried’ paper, for short. Its first appearance was in course lectures at UCLA in the Fall of 1965, and subsequently in Fall and Spring of 1966. In the published version of Sacks’ *Lectures on Conversation*, Gail Jefferson presents the unedited text of the Spring, 1966 version of these lectures, followed by Sacks’ edited version (which was further changed in the published version). I refer to *The Search for Help* as the ‘first’ paper because Sacks starts the ‘The Baby Cried’ paper by saying that it “may be seen as re-introducing and extending the results” of the other.

First, then, on *The Baby Cried*, I promised several paragraphs ago to return to comment on its commencement. After several introductory paragraphs, the paper begins as follows:

“When I hear “The baby cried. The mommy picked it up,” one thing I hear is that the ‘mommy’ who picks the ‘baby’ up is the mommy of the baby . . . Now it is not only that I hear that the mommy is the mommy of that baby, but I feel rather confident that many of the natives among you hear that also . . .”

And it goes on in this vein, occupying the first several paragraphs of the paper.

These first paragraphs of the first section are not to be understood as *analysis*, let alone as conversation analysis. Starting with literary data, Sacks here lacked the resources of co-participants' understanding as displayed in ensuing turns as a target and resource for his analysis. So he, in effect, stipulates the understandings whose basis much of the paper aims to reconstruct. His understanding that “the mommy is the mommy of the baby,” and his invocation of the class's assent to that proposal (this was, of course, a class lecture to begin with), these are such stipulations. Note well: these are not technical analyses. These are offered as articulated embodiments of ‘anyman’s’ vernacular or common-sense understandings – understandings whose basis or grounding is the goal of inquiry, not its premises. These opening paragraphs present, in a manner of speaking, the data, or part of the data, – to be *analyzed* in what follows – a move made necessary by starting with non-conversational data. Please forgive me for emphasizing this point, especially since Sacks appears to have made it amply clear when he remarks a moment later about these observations that

“... they are *not* proposed as sociological findings, but rather do they pose some of the problems which social science shall have to resolve ...”

a challenge which, of course, he takes on in what follows. But some readers and writers have been inclined to take observations like these (“the mommy is the mommy of the baby”) as themselves bits of Sacks' analysis, rather than bits for Sacks' analysis, and this can steer analysis into dangerous, shallow waters indeed, as we will see in a little while, when we have developed the resources for it.

Second, a word about ‘The Search for Help,’ and a hint on a way to read it. Anyone who has tried to read it will testify to the formidable character of the task. This is in large measure because of the effort at formal statement that is immanent in this undertaking. Part of that effort is lodged not in the particular language, and not in the hierarchical numbering system of the paragraphs, but in the order of presentation. The hint on how to read it to maximize understanding is this: read it first, as best you can, from start to finish. Then read it backwards – not word by word of course, but section by section. Then read it forward again. Here is why this may help.

The paper is presented backwards relative to its dawning. The work itself started with a particular kind of utterance that Sacks found in calls to the Suicide Prevention Center. That was: the suicidal person at some point said to the counselor who had answered the phone, “I have no one to turn to.” One key analytic commitment in CA from the very beginning has been *not* to dismiss what persons said or how they said it as ‘just a manner of speaking,’ any more than one would dismiss the direction in which bees fly as incidental; these are the very details of their natural behavior which set our task. Sacks registered that the ‘no one to turn to’ complaint sounded like there had been a *search* for someone to turn to, and it had come up dry; it had located no one. What were the terms of such a search, taking the notion ‘search’ seriously, even if abstractly? How could it end up with ‘no one’ as a result? Even more curiously, this report of ‘no one to turn to’ was articulated precisely in a conversation in which the speaker had in fact turned to somebody – the very somebody to whom the report of ‘no one to turn to’ was being delivered. This was not to be understood as just sloppy thinking and careless talk by unsophisticated non-academics.

So the problem was how to understand ‘no one to turn to’ as a seriously, methodically arrived at report of the result of a process or a set of practices. The solution was this: when you are in trouble, there are people you have rights (and *obligations*) to turn to, and people you *do not*. Sacks called these two classes of people Rp and Ri – short for Relationship proper and improper, respectively. And these two classes, and the natural categories contributing to them (like family

and its sub-categories, friends, strangers, etc.) supplied the basic terms of the search for help. There is much to say about this which cannot be taken up here, but the key point in understanding ‘no one to turn to’ was the case in which the person with the strongest claim to be turned to would, by virtue of the trouble to be reported, be removed – or would remove themselves – from the category that made them turn-able to in the first place. In particular, take the case of an adulterer, with a romance gone bad. The spouse is the most eligible and entitled person to turn to with trouble, but *this* trouble – were it disclosed to the spouse, could be grounds for the spouse to remove themselves from the category. Hence the bind: no one to turn to, if the person to turn to would become *not* such a person, if turned to.

And how come this gets said to someone who *has* been turned to? The person turned to at the Suicide Center often was told by callers that they (the callers) felt strange telling their troubles to ‘a stranger.’ Of *course* they did; by reference to the R (or Relationship) categories, ‘stranger’ was one to whom it is *improper* to tell trouble. But, Sacks proposed, there is another collection of categories, grounded not in relationships but in knowledge – *professional* knowledge, so he called it K. And there are K_p and K_i – categories of persons proper and improper to turn to by reference to knowledge. And someone who is by reference to R *improper* could be, by reference to K, a *proper* person to turn to. And so these callers *did* turn to them, often still being caught between the two different ways of orienting to – indeed, seeing/hearing – the person they were talking to – ‘a stranger,’ improper by reference to R, ‘a professional,’ *proper* by reference to K. So that is how the problem got shaped up, and how it got solved in the end.

But to get to this result in a tight, orderly, formal way, and to use its elucidation to get at the most basic practices involved, Sacks needed to begin with an account not just of such a category as R_p or R_i, or K_p and K_i, but with an account of how *categories of member* generically figured in the common sense worlds at issue. Why? Because this was just one dilemma in a world of dilemmas – whether harrowing or not, and in a world of utterly unproblematic routine settings, with their seeings and hearings of persons one knew, encountered, talked about, heard about, – that made up the fabric in detail of ordinary and extraordinary talk in, and about, life. And that’s where ‘The Search for Help’ begins. It begins (1972a:31) with this sentence: “Among the basic resources we need in order to describe the materials we have collected are some collections of membership categories;” that is, it starts with the most general of assertions. And its final section, 9.0, begins the end of the paper with this: “How is it that suicidal persons, or those they turn to for help by reference to R, come to treat as proper calling for a professional’s help?” And the paper ends a page and a half later (32 pages after its start) with an answer to that quite specific question.

It should now be clear why I recommend reading the paper forwards to get the drift of its formal argument; then reading it backward, to see how its empirical problem has led to a series of increasingly general, formal, and encompassing issues in persons’ efforts to grasp the world in which they must act, and finally, putting the two together in another reading, from front to back. Not that this reading will be easy; there is much that is difficult in the paper – difficult but rewarding, and very important (and not just about the matters I have touched on in this précis). And with several prior readings already accomplished, you have a better chance of knowing where you are.

4. Membership categorization device (MCD)

All that said, let me turn to a sketch of what Sacks was proposing, as I understand it. The goal, you may recall, is building what Sacks called in ‘The Baby Cried’ an *apparatus*; we can recognize here what we now call ‘resources’ and practices for their deployment. Whatever we

call it, we are looking for an account for the sorts of hearings and understandings such usages get, and for the practices that get them produced in a fashion that achieves these understandings. The membership categorization device is such an *apparatus* – such a set of resources and practices.

So what *is* a Membership Categorization Device or MCD, how does it figure in the workings of the society and interaction in particular, and how does it figure in the conduct of inquiry?

A Membership Categorization Device is composed of two parts – first, one or more collection(s) of categories, and, second, some rules of application. We will take these up in turn: first the collections of categories and the categories, which they organize, then the rules of application. This account of the MCDs will be followed by a discussion of their import for research – first for social science research writ large, and then for the forms of research associated with conversation analysis and related lines of inquiry. Finally, our attention will turn to some questions and problems often raised by those trying to do actual analysis in a fashion consistent with the analytic resources as they were described by Sacks and as we have aimed to get them sorted out here. First, then, collections of categories.

4.1. Collections of categories

The categories at issue here are ones like men, women, Protestants, minors (or miners), professors, goalies, adults, cellists, conservatives, vegetarians, merchants, murderers, 20-year olds, cat-people, technicians, stamp collectors, Danes, ‘looky-loos’ (people who slow down on the highway to stare at an accident), lefties (both politically and handedly), surfers, Alzheimers, etc.

The categories of person (or *member* [of the society] in Sacks’ parlance) which figure in interaction and in social life more generally are not a simple, single aggregate of categories, but are organized into *collections* of categories. A collection is a set of categories that ‘go together’ – for example, [male/female]; [Buddhist/Catholic/Jew/Muslim/Protestant ...], [freshmen/sophomores/juniors/seniors/graduate students ...]; [American/Canadian/Dane/French ...], etc.

And note: this is an empirical matter; the examples I just offered – and the way in which I offered them – are correct for American culture and, I suspect, many cultures represented in the readership of this essay, whereas [male/female/technician] would be incorrect; ‘technician’ is not a member of that collection. Some of the categories I mentioned go together with others I did not mention (e.g., Hindu); some of them go together with alternative sets of other categories (e.g., ‘professor’ goes with student, administrator, staff, etc., as ‘campus’ categories on the one hand, and with plumber, doctor, secretary, undertaker as occupational categories on the other. (In ‘The Baby Cried’ paper, ‘baby’ belongs to several such alternative collections.)

An MCD of a certain sort may have alternative collections of categories. For example, for age, one can use the cardinal numbers (1-year old, 2-year old, 40-year old, etc.), or categories like infant, baby, child, adolescent, etc., or still others, like young(er), middle-aged, older, etc. These clearly can have different properties; for example, some of these category collections are ‘objective,’ in the sense that their referents are invariant with respect to speaker and recipient (even if their *significance* may not be), but for the last of them (young(er), middle-aged, older), you need to know who’s talking, and in particular, you may need to categorize the categorizer on just that MCD to know what s/he may be saying/doing. They figure differently in use.

Some collections are what Sacks termed ‘Pn-adequate’ and some are not. Pn-adequacy means that the categories in that collection can categorize any member of any uncharacterized, unrestricted, undefined population. So Sex or Age are Pn-adequate – any human will be

categorizable by some category in those collections; whereas goalie/striker, etc. is not, nor is freshman/sophomore ... graduate student, etc.; they apply only to already delimited and characterized populations, like football team or college student. It would be silly to apply those MCDs, for example, to an infant.

It is a fact of major importance that there are at least two Pn-adequate devices in every language/culture we know. In fact there are more, but two or more is what matters. It matters because it means that anyone who can be categorized by some category from *one* device – say, female – can be categorized by a *different* category from a *different* device – say ‘45-year old’ from the MCD ‘age’. The consequence is this: *being* one is no warrant for using that category – either for persons in interaction, or for researchers. I will return to this theme.

Another feature of some collections in some MCDs is this: the categories in some category collections in some MCDs may be combineable to compose instances of a larger unit – constituting what Sacks termed ‘team-type’ MCDs. This is the case with [goalie/striker/forward ...] composing a soccer team; and it is so with the MCD ‘family’, i.e., [husband/wife/father/mother/daughter ...]. The categories in such collections in such MCDs may have, as a feature, numerical restrictions such as ‘no more than one goalie at a time,’ or ‘no more than one husband/wife at a time’. If the numerical restriction is met, categorizing several persons with categories from such an MCD is likely to be heard as treating them as co-incumbents of the same team; that is, referring to ‘the father, the mother, the son and the daughter’ will be heard as referring to the members of the same family, not the father from one family and the son from another.

Assertions about team-type organization or numerical restrictions are empirical in the sense used several paragraphs back for the ordering of categories into collections of categories. For example, the numerical restriction ‘one husband/wife at a time’ can be empirically correct or not; it is incorrect for settings which are polyandrous/polygamous, respectively.

The foregoing characterizations are features of MCDs and pertain to MCDs across contexts and occasions; but MCDs may have properties specific to a particular occasion. For example, one of Sacks’ lectures features what he termed *partitioning constancy*. *Partitioning constancy* registers the observation that on a given occasion, with its particular composition of participants, some two MCDs could turn out to partition those participants identically; that is, the same individuals end up differentially being members of the same categories under the application of alternative category collections. On the other hand, some two MCDs may have on that occasion partitioning *inconstancy*, each partitioning the local population *differently* than the other does, yielding *alternative* co-class memberships. Which MCDs (if any) have as a feature partitioning constancy or inconstancy varies from occasion to occasion, depending on the composition of the population in the occasion.

To take an early example from Sacks (1992:I:590–594): having been apprised of his (Sacks’) presence behind a one-way mirror, the persons gathered in the room under observation under the auspices of ‘a group therapy session’, and categorizable by reference to it as ‘patients’ vis-a-vis his being an ‘observer,’ several of these ‘patients’ lean toward the microphone and say “Turn on the microphone;” “Testing;” “We’re about to start.” They thereby appear to invoke an alternative categorization device – [performer/audience] – with partitioning constancy relative to [patient/observer]; that is to say, all the persons who are patients by reference to the one MCD are performers under the other; but the two MCDs refract the scene in a rather different way. We might further note the bearing of partitioning *inconstancy* here: by reference to the therapy-relevant MCD, the ‘patients’ and the ‘therapist’ are differentially categorized, i.e., they are members of *different* categories, but by reference to [performer/audience] they are now co-categorized as *performers*, and differentiated from the presence behind the one-way mirror who

is now cast as audience, again providing a possible alternative set of relevancies for conduct, for interpretation, for participation, etc.

Both partitioning constancy and inconstancy can serve as vehicles for replacing the relevance of one set of category terms by another, and can thereby serve as *cover* or *camouflage* identities, activating alternative bodies of common sense knowledge, inference, perception, etc., as relevant to conduct and understanding in the situation, and *of* the situation. The mention of the different ways in which different MCDs may refract a scene, and the different understandings of conduct they may provide for, leads us to some observations about the *categories* that are in these collections and how they appear to work.

4.2. *The categories*

Why actually should one *care* all that much about these terms and their deployment? What is the big deal about which “category label” (as Moerman, 1988 referred to them) is applied to someone? The answer is that what is involved here is rather more than labels. The categories themselves play a profoundly more consequential role than that. Three facets of these membership categories that figure in their consequentiality may be mentioned here:

(a) inference-richness: The membership categories we are talking about are what Sacks termed ‘inference-rich’. They are the store house and the filing system for the common-sense knowledge that ordinary people – that means ALL people in their capacity as ordinary people – have about what people are like, how they behave, etc. This knowledge is stored and accessed by reference to categories of member/person. Here is how this works:

Any attributed member of a category (that is, anyone taken to be a member of the category) is a presumptive representative of the category. That is, what is ‘known’ about the category is presumed to be so about them. I say ‘known’ rather than ‘believed,’ and refer to ‘(common-sense) knowledge’ rather than ‘stereotype’ or ‘prejudice’ because, for members, this has the working status of ‘knowledge,’ whatever its scientific status or moral/political character may be. There may be an effort to block the operation of this feature of presumptive relevance, to neutralize the applicability of the presumptive knowledge by *modifiers*, as in this exchange taken by Sacks from a call to a Suicide Prevention Center:

A: How old are you Mr. Bergstein?

B: I’m 48, I look much younger. I look about 35, and I’m quite ambitious and quite idealistic and very inventive and conscientious and responsible.

So here Mr. Bergstein immediately addresses what he figures will be presumed about him by virtue of his being a 48-year-old; these are the modifiers just mentioned – the ‘but’s’. But there are overrides to such modifiers – such apparent tautologies as ‘boys will be boys’, ‘women are women’, etc., which re-invoke the category-based knowledge over the attempted exemption.

(b) protected against induction: The common-sense knowledge organized by reference to membership categories is protected against induction. If an ostensible member of a category appears to contravene what is ‘known’ about members of the category, then people do not revise that *knowledge*, but see the person as ‘an exception’, ‘different,’ or even a defective member of the category.

But since the person in question is also a member of the culture and employs its common-sense knowledge, the person may find her- or himself to be inadequate, or to be (as they say) “a phony” (Sacks, 1992:I:328ff., 578ff.). Subscribing as they do to the knowledge about the category, and ‘knowing’ that it is not the case for them, the upshot is that there is something wrong with *them*, not with *it*. And they may try to change in that regard (and thereby reinforce the common-sense knowledge), or they may despair. On the other hand, persons doing some activity which is out of keeping with the category they are ‘obviously’ a member of – for example, a child or a slave, may be seen and said to be *imitating* that behavior, rather than doing it (Sacks, 1992:I:470ff.; see also I:40ff.). And the modifiers, if not overridden, are also a resource in protecting category-based common-sense knowledge against induction or subversion.

(c) category-bound activities: Among the items that compose category-based common-sense knowledge are kinds of activities or actions or forms of conduct taken by the common-sense or vernacular culture to be specially characteristic of a category’s members – what Sacks termed (in the ‘Baby Cried’ paper) *category-bound activities*. His example in that paper was ‘crying’ as tied to the category ‘baby’ in the MCD ‘stages of life’. He noted that by reporting ‘crying,’ the category ‘baby’ as a stage of life could be seen to have been activated. So, if one can, one will ordinarily see or report that ‘the *baby* cried,’ not that ‘the *male* cried’ or that ‘the *Methodist* cried’ or that ‘the *Libra* cried’, even when each of those category memberships is correct. So one can allude to the category membership of a person by mentioning that person’s doing of an action that is category bound, and the *doing* of a category-bound action can introduce into a scene or an occasion the relevance of the category to which that action is bound, and, with that category, the MCD which is its locus, and thereby its other categories as potential ways of grasping others in that scene.

Here is an instance from Sacks’ Suicide Center materials: in it a man has reported himself to have been a “hair stylist” and to have “done fashions,” and takes a later question about “sexual problems” to have been generated by the inference that he is gay. Here are the two exchanges:

A: Is there anything you can stay interested in?

B: No, not really.

A: What interests did you have before?

B: I was a hair stylist at one time, I did some fashions now and then, things like that.

Then a few minutes later:

A: Have you been having some sexual problems?

B: All my life.

A: Uh huh. Yeah.

B: Naturally. You probably suspect, as far as the hair stylist and, uh, either one way or the other, they’re straight or homosexual, something like that.

The connection between category and action/activity is not restricted to someone’s *formulating* or *describing* an action in a certain way, as in these examples; doing some action, doing an utterance analyzable by recipient as doing some action, can activate the relevant invocation of a category. We will return in a bit to category-bound activities and how they figure in the conduct of participants and in the conduct of inquiry about participants.

So the categories that compose the *collections* of categories that are one major component of MCDs are *not* mere taxonomic labels. On this account, they are big-time players in how common-sense culture operates, and, with it, a broad swath of talk-in-interaction and other conduct as well, whether in interaction or not.

We need to return to the issue, then, of how some MCD gets activated, gets made relevant, and thereby its categories and the common-sense knowledge that can come with them, and we will. But first we need to say some things about the other main component of MCDs – rules of application.

4.3. Rules of application

Economy rule: One rule of application Sacks called the *economy rule*. It holds that a single category term from any MCD can in principle do adequate reference. More *can* be used; as for example in a reference to a ‘45-year-old Russian ballerina’; but, in principle, one term can do adequate reference. And it is that observation that provides the entry point for hermeneutic interpretation: if one reference *can* be enough, why wasn’t it? (See the related discussion in Sacks’ Lectures, II:447). (In case it seems entirely unremarkable that a single reference term suffices, consider the case of referring to a place on a map: that requires two coordinates – two identifying terms – to do adequate reference: horizontal and vertical, or latitude and longitude, depending on the scope of the map.)

Consistency rule: Another rule or practice Sacks termed a *consistency rule*. It holds that, if several persons are being categorized (that is, referred to by category terms), and if the first to be categorized is referred to by some category from some MCD’s collection, then that category or other categories from the same collection can be used to categorize *subsequent* persons.

In plainer language: When some category from some collection of categories in an MCD has been used to refer to (or identify or apperceive) some person on some occasion, then other persons in the setting may be referred to or identified or apperceived or grasped by reference to the same or other categories from the same collection. Now this is an optional *practice*, not a mandatory one, but it does serve to inject into the scene or the activity the relevance of those other categories. Having introduced me to one person at our first meeting as ‘a sociologist,’ others are readily oriented to *disciplinary* categories, and the relevance of doing so is given by the prior bit of identifying. For some next person to be identified or to self-identify as ‘Canadian’ is then registerable as a ‘departure’ from the relevancies already introduced, and can prompt a search for what has occasioned that categorization (‘why that now’). And that can operate not only when the initial category has been introduced by mentioning a category term, but also when it has been introduced by way of a category-bound activity.

Sacks proposed as corollaries to these rules what he called hearer’s and viewer’s maxims. These took the form of instructions to an apperceiver: if you are presented with a performed action that is tied to some category from some collection, and its performer can be seen as a member of that category, then understand or grasp her/him that way.

In fact, however, what Sacks referred to as *hearer’s* maxims were instructions for hearing a *category term* used by another, and they concerned which of alternative possible hearings to accord that term. He writes (Sacks, 1972b:337): “If a category-bound activity is asserted to have been done by a member of some category . . . Then hear it that way”. That is, both the activity and the categorized person have been *mentioned by another* – have already *been formulated*, and the maxim instructs us on how to understand those *mentions* or *formulations*, and how they have been used.

His *viewer's* maxim, on the other hand, initially appears to be an instruction for perceiving *not* an already-articulated characterization of an action or a category term for a person, but the *bit of behavior itself*. So in developing the *viewer's maxims*, he begins by writing:

“Let me for the moment leave aside our two sentences [“The baby cried. The mommy picked it up.”], and consider some observations on how it is that I see, and take it you see, describable occurrences. Suppose you are standing somewhere, and you see a person you don't know. The person cries. Now, if I can, I will see that what has happened is that a baby cried. And I take it that you will, if you can, see that too.” (Sacks, 1972b:338)

And he goes on. He is working on how a person comes to grasp a scene, specifically with respect to the characterization of the actors or participants in it. And he proposes as a *viewer's* maxim:

“If a member sees a category-bound activity being done, then, if one can see it being done by a member of a category to which the activity is bound, then: See it that way. The *viewer's* maxim is another relevance rule in that it proposes that for a *viewer* of a category-bound activity the category to which the activity is bound has a special relevance for formulating an identification of its doer.”

As I noted, Sacks is working on how a person comes to grasp and formulate a scene, *specifically with respect to the characterization of the actors or participants in it*. He treats the description of the *activity* as non-problematic so as to focus on the categorization of the *actors* as problematic; the activity is treated as transparently characterizable (for example, as ‘crying’), and, *as such*, furthermore having the feature of being category-bound.

But the characterization of actions or activities is *also* a locus of order, and an apt candidate for analysis. And, indeed, its analysis is presupposed here in getting a solution to the characterization of the participants. In the discussion of category-bound activities, the identity of the activity is given as transparent, and is used as leverage for getting at the relevant characterization of the actor.¹

This very likely had to do with the materials being focused on in doing this work; specifically, either literary ones (like ‘the baby cried’) which were constituted by references to a formulation of actions, or conversational ones in which *telling* and *describing* was being done (in storytelling, for example), in which characterizations and names of accomplished, already analyzed and formulated actions again serve as the point of departure.

But in real time, the analysis and characterization of the activity is *also* contingent: is it ‘crying,’ or ‘eyes watering,’ as may, for example, become problematic to someone with right-hemisphere brain damage, whose capacity to recognize emotion is impaired. Focusing on the

¹ One sense of the ‘problematicity’ of the formulation of an utterance’s action is captured in a snatch of conversation I overheard during a break at an academic conference. Sitting and having coffee, I overheard the following exchange between a father and 9–10-year old daughter (I have used the *viewer's* maxim here) as they walked by:

He: Please don't start complaining.

She: I was a:sking.

Of course, I did not hear what came before, and I do not have the exchange recorded to allow repeated examination; but what I got from the bit I heard was that she had made some request whose timing or manner of presentation got it heard by him as a complaint, and got him to complain about it via a request, in response to which she denied that her prior turn was a complaint, insisting that it was ‘only’ a request. Of course, the formulation of what action an utterance was doing is ‘problematic’ – in the sense of requiring ‘doing’ and ‘solving’ – even when it is *not* contested, as is most commonly the case.

problem of characterizing the *action*, one might then be tempted to stipulate to the identity of the *actor* to get a solution to the characterization of the activity, but that would be an equally simplified solution.

For example, in data Chuck Goodwin collected on an oceanographic research vessel, someone appears on deck with a complicated piece of equipment and says, “Where next?” In the discussion of how to characterize the action this turn was doing – ‘request for instructions’ or ‘offer of further help’ – the issue was recurrently made to turn on who the speaker and addressee, respectively *were*, in hierarchical structure terms. If we could stipulate to the identity of the parties, we could get a solution to the characterization of the action.²

This theme was not unknown to Sacks. One place where it can be seen in operation, though it is not made explicit, is in his discussion of the *omni-relevance* of the categorization device therapist/patient in the Group Therapy Session material (Sacks, 1992:I:314–315). This discussion was touched off by noticing that there is something said by ‘Dan’ that is recognizable to those who have been coming to the therapy sessions for a while as a hint or cue that time is about up, and it is time for the session to end. It is only if *Dan* says it that it carries this import. *Closing* is a feature and phase in the overall structural organization of therapy sessions; in every session there will be a time for launching the closing, but when that is not pre-specified. It is *his* saying it that makes relevant – or, rather, trades on the omni-relevance of – his being ‘the therapist’. And the move by some of the long-standing patients (as we can now relevantly refer to them) to clue in the newcomer patient, Jim, to what has happened, reveals both the accessibility to them of what Dan has done with this utterance and its invocation of his relevant status as Therapist, and their realization that this would not yet be accessible to a newcomer attending the sessions for the first time. So here the grasping of the speaker as ‘therapist’ and of the utterance as *opening the closing* composes just that reflexive co-determination that I have meant to be talking about.

The point of this entire discussion has not been hermeneutic elaboration of Sacks’ texts. Rather it has been to link the work of some 40 years ago to our contemporary tasks. In asking how do parties make evident the categories and MCDs to which they are oriented in accomplishing the *moment* in the interactional episode in which they are engaged, and in making the warrant for researchers’ characterizations be grounded in such evidencing, we require that analysis deal not only with *already formulated* descriptions of persons and activities (like ‘the baby cried’) but with the occasion of the talk or other conduct itself – not just how to link the characterization

² The discussion of the oceanographic data is taken from a data session at the second CLIC (Center for Language, Interaction and Culture) Conference on Interaction And Grammar at UCLA, in 1993.

I am reminded here of Sacks, observation in his lecture on “Seeing an ‘imitation’”:

“One of the things that would of course mean is, if one had a transcript or a film and one saw some possible activity going on in it, then, as an outsider, one couldn’t assert what was being done unless he was apprised of the fact that the person doing it was one who could be doing it. Otherwise it would be seen as an imitation.” (Sacks, 1992:I:481)

This was said before there was a realistic opportunity for a conversation analyst to see a film, and was quite hypothetical and, it turns out, right on the whole but wrong in its details. For example, in the instance on the research vessel it was not the case that ‘one couldn’t assert what was being done’, only that one couldn’t decisively choose among alternative possibilities, but the alternative possibilities *were* findable. And one of the alternatives was *not* ‘imitation.’

Those interested in analysis along these lines might be interested in a paper of mine on “interruption” (Schegloff, 2002). There I entertain the possibility of a reflexive co-selection of action and person descriptions, at least in some contexts, in which the identification and formulation of the action/activity and of the participants are mutually informing, and propose that this is the case for the grasping of *some talk* as ‘interruption,’ on the one hand, and the invocation of certain hierarchically structured categorization devices – like adult/child, professional/client, or man/woman – for formulating *the participants*, on the other.

‘crying’ to the category ‘baby,’ but how the conduct itself comes to be formulated as ‘crying.’ Then we can make a link – or explore the link – between what someone has said or done and a categorization of the speaker by the recipient or another participant – or an academic analyst of the talk as data. And then we have a characterization of a practice of talking that arguably makes some categorization device *possibly* relevant in the scene *whether it is actually articulated or not*, and that is what people have wanted in order to avoid relying on speakers saying, ‘speaking as a woman . . .’ (as if that was enough to ground an analysis that they *were* speaking as a woman!). What that might look like with actual data will need to be reserved to other occasions, but it is for such occasions that we are trying to consolidate our understanding of the tools made available in Sacks’ early work and sort out what remains robust and productive in the light of what has been learned since that work was done.

5. Some consequences for research practice

The consistency rule and corollaries we have just been discussing are *relevance* rules. Readers and practitioners of CA will have encountered relevance rules before – for example, in the context of next-speaker selection in turn-taking organization, in the context of conditional relevance of next turns in adjacency pairs and sequence organization, in the context of repair (its preferences are relevance rules),³ and elsewhere, so their importance should be no surprise. But we need to be clear about the basis for, and the import of, relevance rules with respect to categorization. The crux of the matter can be traced to the previously mentioned existence of more than one Pn-adequate device.

Recall: Pn-adequate categorization devices are ones whose categories are adequate for any population (that is, any set) of persons at all, without prior specification. The fact that there are at least two – age and sex – in every culture we know of has as a consequence that it can not be adequate grounds for categorizing someone with some category from some MCD that they are, in fact, a member of that category. Because if that category is from either the Age or Sex MCD, they are equally a member of some category in the *other*. And if the category that has been used is from *neither* the Age nor the Sex MCD, they are equally actually members of two other categories from two other MCDs. So actual membership in a category is not a sufficient basis or grounds for using it to categorize someone. (In fact, it turns out that actual membership is not only not sufficient, it is not necessary!) So there must be *other* grounds – grounds of relevance – both for interactional co-participants and for researchers. And given that there is no unique solution to how to categorize – no *omni-relevant* categorization device across settings,⁴ there is a *selection* issue for any single person categorizing others as to which MCD’s categories to use, and there is a *convergence* problem when more than one will be engaged in the categorizing.

By that I mean that there is an issue about the relationship between the categories selected by the several participants (both if both you and I are categorizing a third person, *and* if you are categorizing me and I am categorizing myself, that is, acting by virtue of one of the categories of which I am a member). Is that person a woman or a professional? Is that person swimming toward the drowning boss a lifeguard or an employee? Is the guy who got into a fight at the races last

³ For example, recipients hold off initiating repair to allow speakers to do so first, and speakers can hear the developing gap following possible completion of their turn as possibly so occasioned and look for possible trouble in their just-completed turn to fix.

⁴ Note that the ‘omni-relevance’ of the therapist/patient device discussed earlier is setting-specific for the therapy sessions (cf. Sacks, 1992:1:313, 315). That there is no cross-setting *omni-relevant* categorization device that has been *shown* to be *omni-relevant* is a position taken up in Sacks, 1972a; as far as I know, it has not been successfully challenged.

night an automobile racer or an actor? If there are choices to be made by each participant, there is also an issue of convergent orientations by the *several* participants. And given what we have said about the import of the categories as loci of common-sense knowledge, these orientations and convergences – or lack of them – can be profoundly consequential for how someone is understood, how they are treated, how the scenes in which they figure are grasped and whether or how another intervenes in them, and so on. It is because multiple MCDs are available with their multiplicity of categories that relevance is the issue, and *how* categories and their MCDs become relevantly oriented to becomes a key topic for inquiry. Before I turn to that, however, let me sketch briefly the import of this issue for social science research.

5.1. *Import for social science*

A great deal of social science research is organized by reference to how various kinds of people behave – in the marketplace, in the polling booth, and on and on. All such research rests on categorizations of the people being studied. But if those being categorized can be categorized by a vast variety of categories from a vast set of categorization devices, what warrant is there for any *particular* categorization employed in a piece of social science research or writing?

This problem is not often posed within the mainstream work paradigms in the social and human sciences, whose practices therefore remain profoundly equivocal. Where the issue is confronted, the most common account is that what warrants a particular categorization is its analytic efficacy; that is, when used, it yields analytically cogent and compelling results, theoretically interpretable, and underwritten by evidence, whether statistical, documentary, experimental, ethnographic, etc. This can be dubbed the positivistic stance, using the word loosely.

In CA work – with its commitment to getting at the practices by which the world we see and hear gets produced – this is insufficient. We need as well some evidence that the participants' production of the world was itself informed by these particular categorization devices. And so if we want to characterize the parties to some interaction with some category terms, we need in principle to show that the parties were oriented to that categorization device in producing and understanding – moment-by-moment – the conduct that composed its progressive realization. In doing so, we will need to be alert to the ways in which the parties make accessible to one *another* these orientations, because that is the most serious and compelling evidence of their indigenously-to-the-interaction status. If we can show that, we neutralize the equivocality that otherwise subverts category-based inquiry.

5.2. *Import for CA and related lines of inquiry*

There is a second matter related to this theme that is worthy of discussion in the present context, one which bears on the treatment of category-bound activities not in literature of mainline social research, but in some of the literature in our own area – at least as I read it. Category-bound activities are one central locus of relevance rules. Several pages ago there was a discussion about how *mentioning* such an activity as crying, or *doing* one, can serve to make relevant a category it is tied to, and the categorization device to which that category belongs. But Sacks was very careful in introducing this resource.

Recall Sacks' remark after articulating his initial observations about hearing that “the mommy was the mommy of the baby” (3. above):

“they are *not* proposed as sociological findings, but rather do they pose some of the problems which social science shall have to resolve . . .”

The same goes for assertions about category-bound activities. The assertion that some activity is tied to some category is not an assertion about that activity and category; it is an assertion about common-sense knowledge – an assertion that common-sense knowledge asserts such a connection. So with respect to the connection of ‘crying’ to ‘baby’, although this is ‘obvious’ to our common sense knowledge, Sacks undertook to ‘show’ it, – to ‘test’ it, and thereby to learn from it and make explicit something *other than* the matter for which he was introducing it. In fact, if one looks back to Sacks’ work where this is introduced, he explicitly remarks on the construction and use of a procedure for warranting the membership of some activity in the class “category-bound activities” and the bound-ness of the activity in question to a particular membership category:

“Let me notice then, as is obvious to you, that ‘cry’ is bound to ‘baby’, i.e. to the category ‘baby’ which is a member of the collection from the ‘stage of life’ device. *Again, the fact that members know that this is so only serves, for the social scientist, to pose some problem. What we want is to construct some means by reference to which a class, which proposedly contains at least the activity-category ‘cry’ and presumably others, may have the inclusion of its candidate-members assessed.*” (Sacks, 1972b:335, emphasis supplied)

Sacks then goes on to propose a procedure about which he claims that it

“ . . . will provide, for any given candidate activity, a means for warrantably deciding that it is a member of the class of category-bound activities.” (Sacks, 1972b:336)

That is, the starting observation about this – that ‘cry’ is bound to ‘baby’ – is not enough for its incorporation into inquiry; it must be inspected, tested, and “warrantably decided.” And that is what Sacks in fact does, and then he writes:

“Having constructed a procedure which can warrant the candidacy of some activity as a member of the class ‘category-bound activities,’ and which warrants the membership of ‘cry’ and provides for its being bound to ‘baby,’ i.e. that category ‘baby’ which is a member of the ‘stage of life’ collection, we move on to see . . .” (Sacks, 1972b:337)

Note well: It was necessary to *warrant* all these things which were introduced as: “Let me notice, then, as is obvious to you, that ‘cry’ is bound to ‘baby,’ i.e., to the category ‘baby’ which is a member of the collection from the ‘stage of life’ device. Again, the fact that members know that this is so only serves, for the social scientist, to pose some problem.”

The ‘obviousness’ of it is not the investigator’s resource, but the investigator’s problem. And this, the subsequent literature – especially in so-called membership categorization analysis – has too often failed to notice, has failed to take seriously, has failed to be constrained by. It can thereby become a vehicle for promiscuously introducing into the analysis what the writing needs for the argument-in-progress. To avoid this, there must be analysis to show the claim is grounded in the conduct of the parties, not in the beliefs of the writer.

The foregoing considerations have a bearing as well on issues of professional and scholarly identity, which have gone unremarked for too long. Over the last several decades, there have been recurrent efforts to foster a line of work claimed to be grounded in Sacks’ treatment of membership categorization devices that has been discussed here, and this is said to represent an independent field or sub-field, called *membership categorization analysis* (see, for example,

Eglin and Hester, 2003; Hester and Eglin, 1997; Hester and Francis, 2000; Lepper, 2000; Silverman, 1998; Watson, 1997). Some of this work appears committed to extending a close linkage between CA and ethnomethodology, across considerable changes in both of these areas of work over the last 35 years.

With all due respect to my colleagues who are parties to this effort, and with sympathy for their deep and continuing appreciation of Sacks' achievement, I beg to differ. I do not believe one can establish a new field simply by announcing it, or by announcing that one intends to confer such a status on an already existing line of work, especially if that does not involve consequential new initiatives in the underlying thrust of the work.

I share the interest in renewing the relevance and energies of the work Sacks launched in this area, and have been working at preserving and extending it. But it seems to me that such efforts should not ignore Sacks' own well-thought-out standards of rigor in pursuing such work, and should not ignore the rest of the field of which it is presumptively a part and what has been learned in it – I mean, conversation analysis. Extending the work on categorization will require familiarity with, and competence in, the whole *range* of analytic tools developed over the last 35 years or so – will require advancing membership categorization analysis in a way that represents state of the art. We need to ask whether this line of work can be re-established with renewed vigor and power on an appropriate, up-to-date basis. The key issues, it seems to me, are two:

- (1) how do the ordinary workings of talk and other conduct in interaction serve to get categorization devices made relevant or activated for the parties? and
- (2) how can analysts show parties' orientation to the categories they want to claim are in play, without the parties saying things like, 'as a woman, I ...' (in fact, saying that does not make it so, and should be tracked for what its speaker is doing with it, and what other category is more compellingly in play).

With the aim of facilitating progress along these lines, I would like in the remainder of this essay to touch on several matters that often come up when I discuss categorization in my courses, the discussion of which may help move work in this area from interpretation to data analysis.

6. Some problems engaged

Perhaps the most urgent issue pressed is this one, because it directly affects the effort to use work on MCDs in actual analysis. Is any attribute or description to be treated as a category in a categorization device of the sort Sacks meant to be describing? Answers to questions of this sort, it seems to me, are to be sought not in Sacks' texts, nor in efforts to extrapolate from them or to *theorize* solutions. The issue is, after all, not whether *we* can or should make a category out of it, but whether *they* – the parties to the conversation – do so, and, if they do, what that sounds or looks like. And this, of course, should be sought in data, in an effort to get at what the parties to the talk are doing by talking the way they are. For example, look at Extract (1):

(1) TG, 2:10-33

- | | | |
|---|------|--|
| 1 | Ava: | I'm so:: <u>ti:yid</u> .I j's played <u>ba:ske</u> 'ball t'day since the |
| 2 | -> | firs' time since I wz a <u>freshm'n</u> in <u>hi:ghsch</u> [ool.] |
| 3 | Bee: | [Ba::]sk(h)et= |
| 4 | | b(h)a(h)ll? (h)[(°)Whe(h)re.] |
| 5 | Ava: | [<u>Yeah</u> fuh like an hour enna <u>ha:</u> [lf.] |

- 6 Bee: [hh] Where
 7 Bee: didju play ba:sk[etbaw.]
 8 Ava: [(The) gy]:m.
 9 Bee: In the gy:m? [(hh)
 10 Ava: [Yea:h. Like grou(h)p therapy.
 11 (.)
 12 Ava:-> Yuh know [half the grou]p that we had la:s' term wz=
 13 Bee: [O h :. : .] 'hh
 14 Ava: =there- <'n we [jus' playing arou:nd.
 15 Bee: ['hh
 16 Bee: Uh-fo[oling around.
 17 Ava: ['hhh
 18 Ava:-> Eh-yeah so, some a' the guys who were bedder y'know wen'
 19 -> off by themselves so it wz two girls against this one guy
 20 ->> en he's ta:ll. Y'know? ['hh
 21 Bee: [Mm hm?
 22 Ava: En, I had- I wz- I couldn't stop laughin it wz the funniest
 23 thing b't y'know you get all sweaty up'r en evrything we
 24 didn' thing we were gonna play, 'hh en oh I'm knocked out.

Here, the references at lines 2 (“freshman in high school”), 12 (“Half the group ...”), 18 (“... the guys ...”), and 19 (“girls”) surely seem to be category terms of the sort Sacks was dealing with. But how about “tall” at line 20 – “he’s tall, y’know”? Does that count as categorizing him? Now look at Extract (2):

(2) TG, 6:01-42

- 1 Bee:-> nYeeah, hh This feller I have-(nn)/(iv-)“felluh”; this
 2 -> ma:n. (0.2) t! 'hhh He ha::(s)- uff-eh-who-who I have fer
 3 Linguistics [is real]ly too much, 'hh[h=]
 4 Ava: [Mm hm?] [Mm [hm,]
 5 Bee: [=I didn' notice it
 6 -> b't there's a woman in my class who's a nurse 'n. 'hh she
 7 ->> said to me she s'd didju notice he has a ha:ndicap en I
 8 said wha:t. Youknow I said I don't see anything wrong
 9 wi[th im, she says his ha:nds.=
 10 Ava: [Mm:.
 11 Bee: =' hhh So the nex' cla:ss hh! 'hh fer en hour en f'fteen
 12 minutes I sat there en I watched his ha:n(h)ds hh
 13 hh['hhh=
 14 Ava: [Why wha[t's the ma[tter] owith (his h'nds)/(him.)
 15 Bee: [=She [meh-]
 16 Bee: 'hhh t! 'hhh He keh- He doesn' haff uh-full use uff hiss
 17 hh-fin::gers or something en he, tch! he ho:lds the chalk
 18 funny=en, 'hh=
 19 Ava: =Oh[:]
 20 Bee: [hhHe-] eh-his fingihs don't be:nd=en, ['hhh-
 21 Ava: [Oh[:]]

- 22 Bee: [Yihknow] she
 23 really eh-so she said you know, theh-ih- she's had
 24 ->>> experience. 'hh with handicap' people she said but 'hh
 25 ih-yihknow ih-theh- in the fie:ld.
 26 (0.2)
 27 Ava: (Mm:.)
 28 Bee: thet they're i:n[:]=
 29 Ava: [(Uh [huh]
 30 Bee: [=Yihknow theyd- they do b- (0.2)
 31 t! 'hhhh they try even harduh then uhr-yihknow a regular
 32 instructor.
 33 Ava: Righ[t].
 34 Bee ['hhhh to uh ins(tr)- yihknow do the class'n
 35 evr[ything.] An:d,
 36 Ava: [Uh huh.]
 37 Bee: She said they're usually harder markers 'n I said wo::wuhh
 38 huhh! 'hhh I said theh go, I said there's- there's three
 39 courses a'ready thet uh(hh)hh[hff
 40 Ava: [°Yeh
 41 Bee: I'm no(h)t gunnuh do well i(h)n,

The first half dozen lines here are full of category terms – “feller,” “man,” “woman,” “nurse;” but how about the characterization attributed to the “nurse” (at the double-headed arrow at line 7) that “he” (the “feller/man who she has fer Linguistics”) “has a handicap.” Is that a categorization? Or is it ‘just’ a description, an attribute? Look next at the three-headed arrow turn at line 24; here we see “handicapped” *made into – and used as* – a category term in a manner quite distinct from the usage or practice at line 7 – “handicap’ people.” Its members are referred to with plural terms; common-sense knowledge gets deployed about members of the category – people like that try even harder, they are harder markers, and so forth. So here is an entering wedge, perhaps, for exploring the attribute/category issue in an empirically grounded manner, and not as a matter for conceptual stipulation or logical analysis.

If the attribute/category juxtaposition posed an issue, surely the juxtaposition of name and category does not; they are *alternatives*, are they not? Names are exemplary instances of recognitional references – singling out who that the recipient knows the speaker is referring to; whereas categories – as we saw in the preceding extract – are commonly non-recognitional references. But look at extract (3), taken from the Goodwin ‘Automobile Discussion’ data that has been much written about.

(3) Auto Discussion, 8:10-26

- 1 Mike: So:mebuddy rapped uh:
 2 Curt: °((clears throat))
 3 Mike: DeWald'nna mouth.
 4 Curt: Well, h[e deserved it.]
 5 Mike: [But yihknow eh-] uh-he made iz first mistake number
 6 -> one by messin with Keegan because a'pits'r fulla Keegans en
 7 -> when there is[n't a Keegan there ere's a'Fra[: n k s ,]
 8 Curt: -> [°Mmhm, [<There's a] Fra:nks,

9 Mike: [()]=
 10 Curt: [(I kno[w.)
 11 Mike: [=Because they're relatedjih kno:[w?
 12 Curt: [((clears throat))

Here “DeWald” (at line 3) and “Keegan” (at line 6) surely are recognitional references to persons who have featured in the storytelling, which has been in progress, but how about “Keegans” in “the pits are full of Keegans” at line 6, or “a Keegan” at line 7 or “a Franks” at lines 7 and 8? Here are names – family names – used as category terms.

And, finally in this series of points, look at Extract (4). Here is a sense of the possibilities made available when we have the opportunity to examine instances of things Sacks described, but examine them in detailed contexts of actual use where they can be grounded in detailed practices.

(4) Virginia, 5:01-23

1 Mom: `hhh ^Well that's something else. (0.3) ^I don't think that
 2 you should be going to the parties that Beth go:s to. She is
 3 -> eighteen years old. An' you are four:tee:n, da[rli:n'.
 4 Vir: -> [I KNOW::, BUT
 5 ->> A:LL THE REST OF MY: PEOPLE MY AGE ARE GWAFFS. I promise. they
 6 are si:[ck.
 7 Mom:->> [They're what?
 8 (.)
 9 Vir: ->> GWAFFS.
 10 ???: ()
 11 Pr?: ->> What's a gwaff.
 12 (3.1)
 13 Vir: ->> Gwaff is jus' someb'dy who's really (1.1) I just- ehh! `hh
 14 ->> s- immature.>You don't wanna hang around people like tha:t.<
 15 (1.9)
 16 Mom:->> Well, don'tchyou think thet thuh: eighteen year o:lds, an' thuh
 17 ->> twenny year olds think you're a gwaff?
 18 (0.8)
 19 Mom:->>> Whatever a gwaff might be,
 20 Pru: [ehh huh!
 21 Vir: [eWell not if I date 'em, I mean my go:osh!
 22 Pru: ehh!
 23 (2.2)

At line 3, “18 years old” and “fourteen” appear to be attributes, but they surely convey the sense here of being deployed as categories; so our earlier observations about “he’s tall” and “has a handicap” now invite review. Some attributes do resonate category-relevance, but for now this remains an inchoate intuition.

But look: in her turn at lines 4–5 Virginia shows herself to have heard the categorical resonance as well. From “you are fourteen” she goes to “people my age,” and there we are with the category. And it’s not just Virginia; by lines 16–17 Mom is also referring to “18-year olds” and “20-year olds.” So maybe there is something to pursue here: *some* attributes are – or are deployed on some occasions as – category-relevant, and others are not; and discriminating these

is something that parties do and display having done, and that means we may be able to describe that doing, and thereby those usages and practices.

But there is more. About the category “people my age” Virginia asserts another: they are “Gwaffs.” Now this has all the marks of what Sacks took up in his lecture on ‘hotrodder’ as a revolutionary category (Sacks, 1992:I:169ff., 396ff.). It is a category invented by teenagers to describe teenagers. They administer it and its criteria, and these categories often govern the desiderata of social relationships (as per line 14, “>You don’t wanna hang around people like tha:t.<”). Mom knows she does not know what this is, and even when Virginia tries to translate it into adult terms – someone who is “immature” (at line 14) – Mom shows she *knows* she still doesn’t understand (line 19’s “whatever a gwaff may be”), and shows that indeed she does not, by reasoning with the category (at lines 16–17, “Don’tch you think thet thuh: eighteen year o:lds, an’ thuh twenny year olds think you’re a gwaff?”) and doing so incompetently (Virginia’s response at line 21, “Well not if I date ’em, I mean my go:osh!”).

The upshot of this line of inquiry is this: parties to talk-in-interaction can and do discriminate between attributes and categories, so analysts should not simply treat the former as virtually doing the latter. One thing participants can do is make such a conversion, and it is in point to examine what they are getting accomplished by doing so, and what is getting done by deploying some feature as an attribute without treating it as a category.

7. Conclusion

Sacks gave us much of what we know about categorization and person description, but it took his very special cast of mind to pry them out of his data. In the end one had to *believe* him; we more often than not could not see for ourselves. Here we can start to do that. And that is now the coin of the realm.

In ‘The Baby Cried,’ Sacks contrasted common-sense description with an alternative. In what he was calling ‘common-sense description,’ recipients do not need to juxtapose a possible description with that which it purports to describe in order to *recognize* it as a possible description, and in order to undertake next actions predicated on its adequacy. The contrast is with another kind of possible description – what might be thought of as the description of disciplined inquiry, and another kind of uptake of it, which requires *just such juxtaposition* to warrant the adequacy of the description, and to turn it into adequate grounds for further inference and action. And that is what CA aims to do: it requires such juxtaposition. The resumption of work on membership categorization devices, and membership categorization analysis, will require such data, and the pursuit and grounding of claims in such data, and the use of the resources that have been developed over the last 30 years in doing so.

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