

**"Hotrodder: A Revolutionary Category"- A Genealogy of a Sacks'  
Conversation(al) Analytic Method**

Dušan I. Bjelić, University of Southern Maine

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Learning how "kids in trouble" use tools and skills to modify cars and build their own autonomous subculture must have appealed to Harvey Sacks, not only as interesting data for explaining the 'social structure' of youth cultures, but also as a site of methodological resemblance. Hotrodders build elaborate sets of categories as a way of carving out a piece of autonomy within the disapproving world of adults. Sacks too built "an apparatus" for his own sets of self-administered categories as the domain of his future autonomous research (Schegloff 1992 V. I, xxi), and what Lynch and Bogen subsequently call the "primitive science" of "naïve adequacy" and "naïve competency" (1994, 69). And in doing so, Sacks' analysis administers his own

set of categories disloyal to official reality, such as the categories "revolutionary," "disloyal" "two-set class" etc. This paper examines a suggestive equivalence of accounts between the hotrodders and Sacks' inquiries, pairing his apparatus of explicable categories with the category-bound and tool-based activities that grew out of hotrodders' modified cars. Not only can the category "hotrodder" not be disassociated from Sacks' category of the "conversational analyst"; the latter cannot be disassociated from the "hotrodder's" self-administrative disloyalty to official reality. Sacks claims that when these self-administered categories "have been engaged in setting up independent corporations which everybody is eventually forced to recognize on their own terms," one ought to read here "corporation" in two simultaneous ways: one formed by the analyzed category of hotrodders, and the other as formed by the category "the conversational analyst." In other words, what Sacks learned from hotrodders is that to have a method you have to have your own analytical "corporation." To this end, Sacks had to erect his own tent in the wild and assemble a squad of loyal eyes and ears. At least this is how I read Sacks' lecture "'Hotrodder: A Revolutionary Category."

Addressing Sacks' lecture, Schegloff glosses over its deed of analytical disloyalty to the official realities of sociology, offering it rather as a distinct case of an official "sociology

of cognition." He writes that "there seems to be here a whole area of inquiry which might be termed a sociology of cognition or a cognitive sociology quite distinct from other usages of this term" (cf. especially Cicorel, 1974)" (Schegloff, 1992 V. 1, xxxvii). Being "distinct" and being "disloyal" are not one and the same; this distinction is rather fundamental for Sacks' analysis of the category "revolutionary." Although not explicit, but evident in the course of his analysis, Sacks meanders between the different categories of "revolutionary," "official" and "disloyal," underpinning the category of "social control." Sacks modifies the "hotrodders'" disloyalty into a device with which he marks his method's disloyalty to the official category of "revolutionary." On the most general level, Sacks' "primitive science" was disloyal to the Cartesian revolution, to its grid of epistemic modeling of the ordinary world. What binds the category "teenager" to social control is the way it is known as a concept of what a youth *ought to do* rather than what a youth *does*. Sacks is quite aware of the epistemic "revolutionary" histories, going back to Galileo and Descartes' heroic opening of reason to a priori knowledge and of reason's heroic emancipation from the slavery of natural sensibilities. In so far as the epistemic revolution had foreclosed an archaic world of natural sensibility out of rational truth, i.e., an archaic sensibility with which everybody's life as a child begins, and

to which Sacks re-turns, it has inadvertently created the space for "primitive science," but now as a counterrevolution to the Cartesian or epistemic revolution.

Sacks called the epistemic effect on natural perception "feigning ignorance," something on the order of a socially trained production of errors. Commenting on his students' failure to rely on natural sensibility in observing peoples' exchanges of glances, Sacks blamed official education for this blinding effect: "It's part of the way in which what's called your education here gets in the way of your doing what you in fact know how to do. And you begin to call *things* 'concepts' and *acts* 'inferences', when nothing of the sort is involved. And that nothing of the sort is involved is perfectly clear in that if it were the case that you didn't know what was going on (...) then the question of what you would see would be a far more obscure matter ..." (1992 V. I, 83). The problem was not with the students' lack of observational competency but rather with the epistemic 'revolutionary' method of conceptual modeling interfering with the naïve descriptions. "You see 'a girl,' 'a Negro,' 'a such-and-such.' That is, the class permits you to see what it is that's there. It permits you to see" (86). In contrast to his students, the uneducated hotrodders did not suffer from "feigning ignorance." With their set of classes hotrodders saw their world as *it was made to be seen*.

The hotrodders' clash with adult realities attests to Sacks' fundamental concern about the epistemic revolution's suppression of the archaic knowledges of youth subcultures. He evidences the element of epistemic violence *vis-à-vis* the youth he observed, stating that "fundamental attacks are being launched against a culture which is stable by reference to everybody seeing the world for what it is" (1979, 14). Only from within such "a culture which is stable by reference to everybody seeing the world for what it is" could a child have produced a naïve yet dangerous sociological description of the world as it is: "The Emperor has no clothes!" And here we arrive at the radical consequence of Sacks' lecture: "Sociology, as we know it, has no society!" If adults invented the category "society", as they did "teenager," "neurotics," "Negro" etc., then the science of "society" is an oppressive apparatus in the hands of adults, it operates as a *normative* regulator rather than as naturally occurring order.

It should be clear by now that Sacks disassociates his usage of the category "revolutionary" from its official usage. To this end, Sacks takes to task two official revolutionaries, Marx and Freud. Freud's method was revolutionary because of the epistemology of the blind eyes *vis-à-vis* the world as it is seen; Freud found the blind eyes psychologically and morally revolutionary in his readings of the myth of Oedipus. The myth

informed Freud's revolutionary etiology, which claims that the child's repressed fantasy about "parricide" is the cause of sexual neuroses. Sacks subverts Freud's apparatus by way of inverting the binary of father and son: "And the parricide theme, if anything, is a rationalization for the institution of infanticide, in a play written for adults by adults" (1979, 9-10), "... it seems to me at least it's perfectly obvious that they're just about the exact opposite to what's proposed" (9). Central to the myth's moral catharsis is Oedipus's self-punishment; his guilt for killing his father did not instruct him to, for instance, cut off the hand with which he had killed his father but rather to blind himself; Oedipus thus punished his naïve adequacy and naïve competency of seeing the world as it is; he in fact committed a self-inflicted 'infanticide.'

Sacks dwells on this moral paradox because of the misplaced guilt in relation to the two-set categories: "... the ones who set out to kill the infant Oedipus know what they're doing--i.e., they're adults killing a child-Oedipus, [but] when he kills his father, [he] doesn't know what he's doing--i.e., he knows he's an adult killing an adult, he doesn't know he's son killing his father" (10). Oedipus unknowingly found himself in a prohibitive two-set class-exchange and acted according to what he saw. For all practical purposes he saw "the world for what it is" rather than for what this world was in the transcendental reality of a

prophecy. He was guilty for not seeing the world 'as it is not.' The adults in the story, on the other hand, knew which two-set class they were dealing with. They saw the infant as an infant. *They* should have owned the guilt, but they did not. Shouldn't moral judgment, Sacks ponders, be congruent with the two-set class at hand? By blinding himself, Oedipus accepted the curse of the prophecy and became his own transcendental authority; he became father to himself. The two-set class hostility now became his psychological terror inflicted by a transcendental truth not seen by naïve observation. In the eye of adults, Oedipus was the first psychological revolutionary precisely because he saw world as it *ought to be* rather than as it was. In other words, he became a member of the category "adult" by doing what fathers are expected to do, to go blind in the face of the world as it is. For this change in membership, Oedipus ascended into myth only to re-appear many centuries later as the "blind man" scientist in Descartes' *Optics*, the one who 'sees' light better than a man with eyes (2001, 67).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sons don't dream about killing fathers, but rather, Sacks argued, fathers dream about killing kids for daring to see "the world for what it is." As a caveat, I cannot but hear an echo of an autobiographical reference in Sacks' lament and recall Goffman's "killing" of Sacks' papers under review. Carving out his own niche under the canopy of Goffman and Garfinkel, Sacks, as the first and most threatening among all Garfinkel's "bastards" and the one who claims that everything is given on the surface, began to work on building devices generative of self-administering categories and looking for those to whom he could turn to. In any event, it would not be a stretch to read the Oedipal dilemma in a moment marking the beginning of "conversation analysis." Schegloff registers this moment precisely at the time of Sacks' lecture series of 1963-4 at UCLA when the "hotrodder" lectures were delivered and on the occasion of Sacks' concern over the future of his professional career due to his somewhat turbulent relationship with Garfinkel. "A transient difficulty with Garfinkel," as Schegloff recalls of a surprise visit by Sacks, which could be characterized as a moment of finding one to turn to, "had led him to realize that, if not on the present

Unlike Freud, Marx had no use of the category "youth." Sacks references Marx in his lecture because the "hotrodders'" phenomenon disputes Marx's claim about the ideological concealment of culture's dependence on material labor. Sacks posits, "just the way that Marx would say that the dependence of our culture on the labor is not recognized; i.e., it's not only not recognized by those on the top, it's not recognized by those on the bottom, either" (1979, 10). Adding, "[a]nd the kinds of revolutions that then try to take place are attempts to reconstruct how it is that things are seen, where the attempts in part is for some category to get to enforce a view of themselves, a view which will be held by others; a view which the category administers and not the others" (1979, 10-11). So, it is not necessarily the case that the kids "know not what they do," but rather the adults 'know not what their kids do.' This is why the kids can pass as "teenagers" and still drive as hotrodders, because the adults' set of categories can't account for the kids' subversive activities as they account for their own.

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occasion then at some future time, he might have to fend for himself in the academic marketplace and had better have some written work to show" (1992, xvii). For Schegloff this occasion was important to remember not only because it marked the beginning of Sacks' conversion of his lectures into his first published papers, but more importantly because, as Schegloff put it, the occasion might "be treated as the beginning of what would come to be called 'conversation analysis'" (xvii).

But more importantly Sacks seems to suggest that Marx's theory-laden two-set class appropriates an inventory of the kids' subculture only to turn it against naïve perception. In his Fall-Spring lectures 1964-1965 titled "The MIR Membership Categorization Device," Sacks expands on Marx's appropriation of the two-set class device; "Under such a view, you can see all sorts of different things being fitted to the notion of haves and don't haves. Marx can be seen to have used this two-set class ... it begins to look as though formulating in terms of two-class sets is a method of doing things" (1992 V. I, 48). Marx's two-set class relations arise from a naïve observation that rests on a device that is as old as are kids' games; kids' games are built on pairs, such as kid-toy, kid-kid, kids-kids, chase-flee, hide-seek, sets or pairs in language like a playful topic introduction, "You know what? What". "This two-set class" is an 'inventory' of the archaic world of play rather than of labor, which is out there ready to hand available to accommodate Marx's theory-laden two-set class of "haves" and "have-nots." For Sacks unlike for Marx, the two-set class is not a transient structure on the path to communal ownership of the means of production, but rather an omnipresent instructional device that was always there for naïve perception.

Central to Marx's and Sacks' category of 'revolutionary' is the question of ownership, "official," ownership as a

definitional category and "disloyal" or native, ownership as an archaic access to a natural order of things. In Lynch and Bogen's account of Sacks' "primitive science," one can discern the extent to which the latter type of ownership permeates Sacks' structures of accountability.

Sacks was particularly interested in the structures of accountability that 'anybody' is entitled to use; i.e., the competencies for doing and understanding the most commonplace and mundane acts like greetings, proverbs, stories and jokes. 'Anybody' can see at a glance (or hear immediately) what such activities involve, since they are produced as ordinary organizational objects. In Sacks' terms, such ordinary objects are assembled through verbal and gestural components which 'anybody' is competent to *analyze* (1994, 71).

The method thus formulated subtly but heretically reconfigures Marx's communist principle of ownership based on the definitional principle, 'to each according to their needs'--as something pertaining to a distant future and as such is a historic narrative--to Sacks' omnipresent conditions of natural distribution, "once it is out it is anybody's," or a communism of immanence.

Lynch and Bogen's paper on Sacks' "primitive science" took an accurate measure of Sacks' project. "Primitive" in Lynch and Bogen's use refers to its all-around accessibility and not to a category of colonial anthropology. Modeled on biology's simple method of a recyclable wheel of accounts ("observation-report-replication"), his method should be available to anyone with non-specialized community. But whereas Lynch and Bogen place an

emphasis on the "non-specialized," I place it on "community." While "observation-report-replication" is the structural shell of Sacks' primitive science, I argue, it can only run on an internal pronominal use of "We-I-You". Here is how it works:

I could say [X is the case] but I wouldn't be able to show why that's so, or how it's so. If that's the case, I don't establish my point. I could say [Y] and we could [find A but not B]. That again wouldn't do what we propose to do. We want to do both: [A and B]. You want a method that generates this. (1992 V. I. 127)

Sacks' pronominal use "We-I-you," seems to suggest that to make a point, much as not to be able to make a point, you have to turn to someone, to the pronoun "you" who will be able to see what the pronoun "I" saw; if both interlocutors don't see the same, then there is no "we" and the point is not valid. "Seeing the same" is not an agreement in opinions, but in the primitive logic of the two-set class of conversation constitutive of the pronoun "we": "If you can claim that it could be another thing, first one wants to show how it's another possibility," you need to have your own "corporation" made of eyes and ears *à la* hotrodders. There is a communal commitment to the recognition of a failed project, "you" not seeing what "I" saw "wouldn't do what we proposed to do." So, there is a "we" assumption working through the argument both as a resource and as the point of "seeing the same"--the ancient trick used by the Greek street philosophers.

Here are some items drawn from the inventory in Sacks' lectures of the "I-you-we" wheel: "You want a method that generates this ..."; "That is what I think we can see with this ..."; "That's what I think you can see with this ..."; "Now you see that what she's picking up here is ..."; "Now what you can see is this ..."; "And what we find is this ..."; "Remember we said ..."; "now we originally introduced the notion of an omni-present device ..."; "We have now, the notion of an omni-relevant device ..."; "If someone who needn't include themselves in some class ... wants to say in a stronger way than 'you' (which can be misread as only the recipient) that 'everyone is that way,' they can say 'we'".

Analysis based on the pronominal use of "we-I-you" is in fact a *conversational* method for studying rules *in* conversation, hence Conversation(al) Analysis. Only within a primordial solitary predicament of looking for "someone to turn to," Sacks to Schegloff, that a point *of* and *in* analysis can or cannot be possible. When Sacks says, "Now it is not only that *I* hear the mommy is the mommy of that baby, but I feel rather confident that at least many of the natives among you hear that also," he discloses in the simplicity of the principle of hearing as if a "we"-deduction, this "inference-making machine" forged by the primordial "Us." Sacks utilized Wittgenstein's philosophical claim that we already agree in the *language* we use (PI: §241),

as both a topic of "primitive science" and a social platform for the co-living in analysis. So, the naïve wheel of seeing-hearing-reproducing is predicated on membership to a subculture of "primitive science." Considering Sacks' lectures on hotrodders, his "primitive science" is in a fact a way of building subversive sets of categories to resist 'official reality,' a genealogical detail worth remembering on the day of Sack's anniversary.

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