

SPECIAL ISSUE: DISCOURSE STUDIES

The epistemics of Epistemics: An introduction

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This special issue is concerned with epistemics in Conversation Analysis (CA). It was developed from an invited panel at the 2015 meeting of the International Institute of Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis [IEMCA], held in Kolding, Denmark. A generous invitation to organize a panel was extended to Douglas Macbeth, without specifying a topic. The topic became “Epistemics,” an emerging program that already had become highly visible in the Conversation Analysis literature. The co-authors of the four articles in this special issue, joined by Wendy Sherman–Heckler, had already been meeting regularly by Skype connection for more than a year. (In addition to her contributions to those conversations and to the 2015 panel, Wendy was a major facilitator for those meetings.) Our conversations began at earlier IEMCA meetings, and were sustained by a genuine curiosity and puzzlement about epistemics in CA, an exciting development that also seemed problematic. The exchanges over Skype were interspersed by extensive reading in and around the CA literature on epistemics, and the panel and this special issue are an outgrowth of those readings and discussions.

As Teun van Dijk (2013) points out in his introduction to an earlier special issue of this journal on epistemics, the conveyance and distribution of knowledge in discourse has been a lively topic for quite a long time in linguistics, cognitive science, and discourse analysis. However, instead of covering the broader array of studies of epistemic phenomena, in this special issue we focus on a relatively recent development that has been heralded as a genuinely innovative, perhaps transformative, development in CA and interactional linguistics. For convenience, we are calling this development the Epistemic Program (EP). What is novel and distinctive about the EP is that it synthesizes various linguistic and conversation analytic phenomena into a comprehensive model that

purports to describe the ubiquitous and continuous operations of an “epistemic engine” that *drives* sequential order in conversational interaction (Heritage, 2012a,b). Although the EP is but one part or phase of the long-standing interest in epistemic phenomena in discourse studies, it has attracted an extraordinary amount of attention in the decade since John Heritage and Geoffrey Raymond (2005) launched their analytic program.

As Heritage has proposed – a claim that has been echoed, underlined, and amplified by others (Drew, 2012; Sidnell, 2012, 2015; Clift, 2012) – this program involves a significant departure from prior work in conversation analysis. The proposed “epistemic order” is not simply another interactional domain to be added to those of turn taking, repair, and recipient design; instead, it is a basic *system* of information exchange that provides a constant and underlying motive force for the sequential organization of talk-in-interaction. And yet, despite the ambitions and forcefulness of these proposals, the EP thus far has received very little critical attention. Giving it the attention it is due is the aim of this special issue.

A key proposal in the EP is that each party to a conversation continually monitors the “epistemic status” of the other (or others). The idea is that, when “designing” a turn at talk, a speaker reflexively takes into account what the recipient knows, or has presumptive “rights” to know, about the relevant information—or informational domains— at hand. The recipient, in turn, both monitors the epistemic “stance” expressed in and through the design of the initial utterance, and takes into account the speaker’s epistemic status and “rights” to know and talk authoritatively about family, personal experiences, areas of expertise, etc. (the inexhaustible *et cetera* clause is a key item in this list). Accordingly, reciprocal monitoring by each participant of the other’s

knowledge, information, epistemic authority, epistemic rights, and experiential access drives sequences forward from turn to turn. And it does so by addressing the central puzzle for the EP of how *action* is formed and recognized in conversation. A signal claim for the EP is that, for participants in and professional analysts of conversation, relative epistemic status is crucial for determining what has just been said and done, and thus how a recipient should respond to a sequentially prior action. A related claim is that a recipient's understanding of the just-prior utterance as, e.g. a request for information, usually is consistent with the morphosyntactic form of that utterance, but that on some occasions epistemics overrides surface grammar. Accordingly, and depending upon the relative epistemic status of speaker and recipient, a "first" utterance that takes the grammatical form of a question may actually function as an assertion to be confirmed, an authoritative assessment with which the recipient should affiliate, or an "inapposite" question that deserves to be marked as such. A further aspect of the model is the stipulation that parties to conversation continually seek to redress momentary imbalances in knowledge or information before moving on to other matters. These and many other aspects of the EP are taken up at length in the articles and comments in this special issue. A crucial feature of epistemic conversation analysis is that it treats exchanges of information not as *occasionally* relevant actions in conversation, but instead as *constantly* relevant, and as making up the underlying driver of sequential order in conversation.

The articles in this special issue critically examine the conceptual apparatus and empirical evidence presented in published exemplars of the Epistemic Program. We argue that the conceptual apparatus is overbuilt and overgeneralized. Although we attempt to give clear and fair characterizations of the work we criticize, we do not expect,

nor would we want, readers to take our word for it when we summarize EP claims and arguments. Instead, we have pursued three strategies to enable readers to critically interrogate our criticisms, as well as the arguments and examples we present and discuss. First, our articles present summaries of key generalizations — especially those that are made repeatedly — in EP publications. We provide quotations and page references to enable readers quickly to find the relevant sources and passages in order to decide for themselves if we have fairly characterized them. Second, we invited others to comment on our articles. We solicited reviews of the individual papers (please see acknowledgments), and received two substantial commentaries on the collection as a whole that are published in this issue, one by Jacob Steensig and Trine Heinemann, and the other by Graham Button and Wes Sharrock. Third, the articles in this issue present and discuss numerous transcripts and commentaries that have appeared (often recurrently) within and across key EP publications. In many cases, we present such transcripts and commentaries in full, as they appear in particular EP publications, before presenting our own reanalysis. This is a central exercise in the tradition of our shared literature. In some instances, we were able to get hold of the longer transcripts from which the published fragments were drawn, and in a few cases we obtained digital copies of the original recordings. We have thus made use of what Harvey Sacks suggested, nearly a half-century ago, was a decisive advantage of tape-recorded and transcribed conversations as materials for sociological analysis: “... others could look at what I had studied and make of it what they could, if, for example, they wanted to be able to disagree with me” (Sacks, 1984a: 26; edited extract from a lecture in Fall 1967).

Many of the recordings from which the fragments we discuss are extracted were recorded and transcribed decades ago, and in the years since then they have been featured in numerous CA publications and informal data sessions. As Heritage and Atkinson (1984: 4) note, the fact that such materials are “cumulatively reusable in a variety of investigations and can be reexamined in the light of new observations or findings,” is one of the key advantages of CA’s empirical approach. In this light, it is fair to note that the EP publications we address *themselves* present re-analyses of transcripts. We are only adding another link to a chain of empirical re-analysis that is part of the promise of CA.

There are some differences, however, between our analytical procedure and those of the EP publications we examine. First, we examine the presentations of transcript for their alignment with the commentaries they receive in EP publications. Second, we do not allude to large collections of (arguably) similar fragments in order to establish what the parties are doing in the exemplary fragments we assess. Although we neither ignore nor criticize the value of collections in the CA literature—their powers were powerfully demonstrated in the Sacks et al. (1974) “turn-taking” paper—our primary focus is on treatments of singular sequences in the EP publications we examine. **Third**, whenever possible, we situate the particular fragments that we analyze within the longer transcripts and tapes from which they were extracted. The resultant understandings routinely differ, sometimes markedly, from the way the fragments are framed and “animated” in EP publications on behalf of abstract generalizations about epistemic stance and status, territories of knowledge, and epistemic gradients and “tickers”.

Although the contributions to this special issue are critical of the EP, they should be viewed as affirmations of what is most distinctive, and perhaps endangered, in CA’s

approach to social action and interaction. What they affirm is the radical point of departure for CA that its founder, Harvey Sacks, articulated many years ago:

I want to propose that a domain of research exists that is not part of any other established science. That domain is one that those who are pursuing it have come to call ethnomethodology/conversation analysis. That domain seeks to describe methods persons use in doing social life. It is our claim that, although the range of activities this domain describes may be as yet unknown, the mode of description, the way it is cast, is intrinsically stable. (Sacks, 1984a: 22)

This was, and remains, a radical proposal. It articulates two distinguishing features of ethnomethodology/conversation analysis: first, it recognizes the existence of coherent “methods” that are used, not only by social scientists but also, and primarily, by participants in the myriad activities that social scientists study. And, second, it proposes that such ordinary “methods” articulate *intrinsically stable* activities. This proposal is radical in the way it refuses to privilege specialized social science theories and methods over and against the intrinsic coherence of “ordinary” or “common sense” reasoning and practice. Affirmations and elaborations of this proposal have been made numerous times by Emanuel Schegloff in the decades since Sacks’ untimely death in 1975. For example, in one such elaboration, Schegloff emphasizes that the evident and demonstrable orientations of participants in ordinary activities provide an observable basis for “... disciplining [professional] work to the indigenous preoccupations of the everyday world being grasped, and serving as a buffer against the potential for academic and theoretical imperialism which imposes intellectuals’ preoccupations on a world without respect to their indigenous resonance” (Schegloff, 1997:165). This proposal is radical in its

divestiture of academic authority, and also in its suggestion that the source of “discipline” for professional analysis is to be found not in the methodologies of the social science disciplines, but in the methodic communicative practices performed on the streets and at dinner tables, and wherever else organized social activities take place.

Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson led CA on the path to a descriptive science that analyzed recordings of actual activities of endless and unremarkable variety, and developed technical findings from analyses of such data. As Schegloff (1992: xxxii) points out, this path diverged from Harold Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology (see, for example, Garfinkel et al., 1988; Lynch, 2000; Lynch and Bogen, 1994). Nevertheless, the divergence from ethnomethodology was never complete. Like EM, CA continues to disavow what Schegloff called “academic and theoretical imperialism” in favor of describing the endogenous intelligibility of practices performed at ordinary sites of social **life and action**.

Arguable divergences from ethnomethodology’s program are not germane to the articles in this special issue. Instead, the aim in these articles is to *affirm* the premises of CA, as best articulated and exemplified by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson’s writings and the corpus of CA studies. This alignment with CA is not simply a rhetorical posture. Rather, the contributions to this special issue aim to *defend* CA from a reversion to the established social science programs from which Sacks and Schegloff took their leave. The epistemic program itself has been characterized (for example, by Drew, 2012) as a “radical” departure from CA’s established program, and indeed it is. But, as elaborated in the articles in this issue, the EP’s radical turn is a turn *away* from CA’s distinctive treatment of talk-in-interaction in favor of a more conventional information-transmission

version of speech communication, social action, and action formation as the play of prevailing formal structures.

Conclusion

The papers in this issue arose from a mutual interest among the authors in epistemic *phenomena*. Each of the authors has long-standing interests in “epistemics”, as Lynch (1993) dubbed topics of epistemology construed as locally organized practices. Such practices include routines for presenting evidence, conducting observations and measurements, extracting testimony from witnesses, instructing novices, performing and orchestrating classroom and clinical demonstrations, and many other substantive matters in the organization of everyday life. Such practices evidently do involve epistemic considerations, but in an occasioned way, tied to the locally organized activities they serve.

The Epistemic Program certainly has caught on in CA and interactional linguistics, and some commentators accord monumental significance to it. Drew, for example confesses (perhaps with a deniable hint of irony), “I don’t think any of us [in CA] suspected that participants’ monitoring and expression of epistemic status, and imbalances in relative status, are as constant, omnipresent, and omnirelevant as is proposed” He adds that “if Heritage is correct, and even if he is only partially correct, epistemics are not an occasional or peripheral matter, but rather lie at the heart of what drives interaction” (Drew, 2012: 64). The key word here is “if”.

Thus far, there has been very little critical exploration of that “if” (but see Sormani, 2013; te Molder, 2016). The absence is especially puzzling, given **how** EP publications present their claims in a bold and forthright way, documenting those claims

with an abundance of transcript, **and allusions to still larger collections of transcript** that enables readers to critically examine them for themselves. This special issue is an attempt to give that fugitive “if” the sustained attention it deserves.

The special issue includes four articles (two of which make up a two-part article) and two commentaries. The first article that follows this introduction, “Epistemic status and the recognizability of social actions,” by Oskar Lindwall, Gustav Lymer, and Jonas Ivarsson, critically examines the way the EP formulates and addresses “first” actions in conversation sequences. The next article, by Michael Lynch and Jean Wong, “Reverting to a hidden interactional order: Epistemics, informationism, and conversation analysis,” examines how, in the name of conversation analysis, the EP deploys interpretive schemes drawn from functional linguistics, information studies, and cognitive science. ~~The first part of the two-part article~~ on “The story of ‘Oh’, Part 1” by Douglas Macbeth, Jean Wong, and Michael Lynch develops a genealogy of the early EP literature by tracing two interrelated practices of constructive analysis. The first entails **how ‘Oh’ indexes hidden epistemic structures**. **The second, part 2**, addresses how the EP animates transcripts that are routinely used in EP publications to demonstrate the workings of the epistemic order.

We do not suppose that these articles provide the last word on the subject of “epistemics.” And as mentioned earlier, two commentaries are included in this issue. Steensig and Heinemann use CA as an established and rigorous method for studying communicative actions. Their commentary disavows any need to speak of an “Epistemic Program,” and suggests instead that epistemics is a coherent and substantive domain of language use that offers promise for further scientific inquiry. Button and Sharrock have made numerous contributions to ethnomethodology and CA over several decades, and

their commentary discusses epistemics in connection with the original efforts by Garfinkel and Sacks to study social actions *in situ*, without resorting to constructive analysis – the use of indicators, models, and conceptual schemes that stand proxy for ordinary actions.

Notwithstanding their different attachments to ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, each of the two comments orients to a shared conceptual history, and to the extraordinary proposal that CA might recover a remarkably robust and even an elegant grammar of social actions from the most remarkably unlikely places, places like ‘Nyems’ (Jefferson, 1978), or the accountabilities of ‘doing being ordinary’ (Sacks, 1984b), or the extraordinary rewards of finding the ‘routine as an achievement’ (Schegloff, 1986). Button and Sharrock’s comment speaks directly of these conceptual foundations, and Steensig and Heinemann’s comment speaks for what can be learned and recovered from a return to actual materials and an analysis of their sequential productions. At this point, it falls to our readers to take the measure of the “potential dangers and pitfalls” (Steensig and Heinemann, 2016: 18) of the epistemic CA that we discuss in this special issue.

There are debates and disputes to take up with *both* commentaries, and with our contributions, but we have chosen not to engage them at this time. We hope that this issue will provoke further discussion to be included in later issues of *Discourse Studies*, and we would hope to contribute to those discussions as they develop.

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