

Introduction: A collection of notes and papers on “epistemics” in Conversation Analysis

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Epistemics is a name that has been used in linguistics, philosophy, and cognitive science for decades. Like the word *epistemology*, it refers to an academic approach to knowledge, but instead of presenting a philosophical “theory” of knowledge, epistemics with its ‘ics’ suffix suggests a more technical approach; specifically, in the case discussed here, an approach to knowledge-in-talk-in-interaction alternative to branches of linguistics, such as semantics and pragmatics. Knowledge is of long-standing interest in ethnomethodology, with its original links to the sociology of knowledge, and its more recent efforts to respecify *topics* of epistemology with investigations of ordinary practices (Garfinkel, 1991; Button, 1991). Jeff Coulter (1989: Ch. 1) used “epistemic sociology” as a descriptive term that encompassed developments in ethnomethodology and social studies of scientific knowledge, and in a review of developments in those fields I suggested that ethnomethodology turned epistemological concepts (observation, representation, replication, facts, etc.) into investigable “epistopics” (Lynch, 1993), in and through an ethnographic variant of what historian of science Peter Dear dubbed “epistemography” (Dear, 2001). One upshot of such research is that, far from offering a coherent theory or model of knowledge, it dissolves the nominal coherence of that topic into innumerable contexts of practical reasoning-in-action.

Knowledge also has been thematic in Conversation Analysis (CA), though always in connection with interactional routines for conveying news, telling stories, interrogating witnesses, conducting interviews, querying students, and reaching agreement in particular contexts (e.g., Pomerantz, 1984). So, for example, the well-known CA theme of “recipient design” (Sacks et al., 1974) involves sequential organizations of talk that take into account what a recipient possibly knows and cares about, as well as many other matters concerning identity, location, timing, and relative familiarity. Conversation analysts have described “pre-announcement sequences,” in which speakers check out what recipients may have ‘heard’ already concerning an incipient ‘news’ announcement (Terasaki, 2004). They also have described what one or another party presumes as an “entitlement” to tell by virtue of their personal experiences and categorical incumbencies (Sacks, 1992; Lynch and Bogen, 1996: 280). Such practices concern “knowledge” in a highly differentiated way, as parties take into account (and progressively explore and avoid) their recipients’ topical sensitivities, opinions, and affiliations (Jefferson et al., 1987).

Ethnomethodology takes a “radical” approach to knowledge that is difficult to pin down in terms of familiar categories of radical politics and radical epistemology. Part of the difficulty with tagging ethnomethodology with a realist, empiricist, (social) constructivist, (cultural) relativist, historicist, (neo-)Marxist, feminist, or ‘postmodernist’ epistemology has to do with its orientation to *investigations* of contextual epistemic practices; an orientation that continually resists or defers academic demands for an overall theory of knowledge (and, for that matter, a theory of practice). An analogy with Wittgenstein’s (1958) “language games” can perhaps be helpful for understanding what might be “radical” about the treatment of knowledge in

ethnomethodology and CA: what counts as knowledge, how knowledge is relevant, and whether or not knowledge (in some sense) is even relevant at all, depends on the language-game underway. This does not mean that knowledge is arbitrary or that ethnomethodology is nihilistic; nor does it mean that the relevance of knowledge, and what counts as knowledge, is sequestered within singular moments without any connection to practical routines, recurrent settings, and native forms of life. The work of description is never done, as there is no room in the world to assume the imagined platform of a transcendental observer whose comprehensive knowledge collects the arrays of particular practices and subsumes them under a grand theoretical or methodological scheme.

Garfinkel's (1967: Ch. 3) well-known treatment of Karl Mannheim's "documentary method of interpretation" perhaps can provide a sense of what is "radical" about the treatment of knowledge (as well as method) in ethnomethodology. Mannheim (1952) outlines a hermeneutic method for an interpretive sociology; a method through which an investigator seeks to find and show adequate documentation for general claims that are made. Without faulting Mannheim's account of this method, Garfinkel assumes a radically different, arguably incommensurable, perspective on it. First, he takes the method far afield from the scholar's encounter with documentary material, and addresses it as a commonplace practice for navigating through daily life situations and lively courses of social interaction. Second, he refrains from any endorsement of the adequacy and efficacy of the method. Third, his demonstrations ('experiments') expose the extreme flexibility with which members assimilate documentary evidence within ongoing narratives. Though not cast as an explicit criticism of Mannheim, and presented with the proviso that the documentary method is *unavoidable* for

professional sociologists (presumably including ethnomethodologists), as well as for the unwitting participants in his demonstrations, Garfinkel's treatment of the documentary method certainly does not recommend it as a special investigative tool.

Garfinkel (1967) presents similar transformations of other established social science and interpretative methods, such as *coding* recorded materials to render them as data for an effort to map organizational processes. Again and again, he demonstrates that the organized use of ad hoc practices in professional and ordinary situations of inquiry makes up a *phenomenon* for ethnomethodology; a practical phenomenon that constitutes (as well as obscures) the lived-work of *doing* socially organized activities. The question is, where does Epistemics in CA stand in relation to this original, and still radical, agenda; an agenda that was, and arguably still is, evident in CA's distinctive treatment of conversational organization as a methodic vernacular production?

Epistemics in Conversation Analysis (CA) is presented in a growing body of publications, and is often traced back to two articles on assessment sequences by John Heritage and Geoffrey Raymond (Heritage and Raymond, 2005; Raymond and Heritage, 2006). More recently, it was featured in two articles by Heritage (2012a, b) and three commentaries on those articles (Drew, 2012; Sidnell, 2012; and Clift, 2012), followed by a response (Heritage, 2012c) in a special section of an issue of the journal *Research on Language in Social Interaction (ROLSI)*. The commentaries were largely celebratory of Epistemics as a new and possibly "radical" contribution to CA.

To others of us, the relationship of Epistemics to CA (and also ethnomethodology) seemed puzzling at best, and contradictory at worst. Several years ago, Doug Macbeth, Oskar

Lindwall, Jonas Ivarsson, Gustav Lymer, Jean Wong, and Wendy Sherman-Heckler began a series of informal discussions in which they tried to work out what puzzled us about epistemics in CA. I joined an ongoing conversation on the subject during a professional meeting in 2013, and afterwards we continued the discussion with regular conference calls and occasional meetings at conferences. Jean Wong joined in several months after I did, and others occasionally joined in. This continuing discussion also has delved into broader developments in and around CA.

As our discussion developed, we located and read a large number of publications in CA and related fields. Much of our reading was focused on publications by Heritage and Raymond, starting with the articles that explicitly introduced Epistemics as a systematic phenomenon for CA research (Heritage and Raymond, 2005; Raymond and Heritage, 2006), but as they made clear in those publications, their approach drew upon Heritage's earlier work on the linguistic expression "oh" as a "change of state token" (Heritage, 1984), and on "oh-prefaced" responses to inquiries and assessments (Heritage, 1998, 2002). Because of the way he promoted Epistemics in CA, and was credited by others (including his collaborator Raymond, 2018) as the leading proponent of it, we focused on the subset of Heritage's voluminous body of writings that dealt with the topic and on the conceptual themes and analytical strategies he used when addressing it. We read work by others as well, but it was impossible not to put Heritage's conceptual and analytical moves front and center. To cast the distinctive character of those moves into relief, we found it helpful to read and re-read many of Emanuel Schegloff's publications in which he discusses and demonstrates what, in his view and ours, was and remains distinctive of CA as a research program.

Schegloff's writings are most salient in reference to approaches by Heritage (2012a) and Levinson (2013) on "action formation" in conversation. Heritage (2012a: 2) proposes that "epistemics" fills a gap that Schegloff's (1984) critique of Speech-Act Theory opens up, which is how First Pair-Parts (FPPs) in adjacency pair sequences that take the grammatical form of questions function to initiate actions other than questioning (e.g., request or invitation sequences). Schegloff uses transcribed examples to support his argument that sentence grammar provides insufficient evidence of the sequential contingencies that furnish an utterance with its interactional specificity. Heritage, in our view, maintains a more traditional linguistic orientation to the function of information-transfer initiated by interrogatives (requests for information) or declaratives (assertions of information). As conversation analysts and discourse analysts had noted for decades (e.g., Labov, 1972: 121), in some circumstances an utterance that takes the syntactic form of a question can function as a declarative, while an utterance that takes a declarative form can function as an interrogative. The solution Heritage offers involves what he calls "epistemic status": the participants' presumptions about one another's differential access to relevant information, knowledge, and expertise, as well as social entitlements to speak authoritatively about personal experience rather than hearsay, and about topics the speaker presumptively 'owns': their own friends, pets, children, and grandchildren (Raymond and Heritage, 2006). For Heritage and Raymond, the grammatical form (epistemic 'stance') of an FPP usually is consistent with the epistemic status attributed to the speaker, but when they are incongruent epistemic status *trumps* epistemic stance.

One of the main problems we found with Heritage's purported solution is that it relies on a conception of language-in-interaction that Schegloff (2010) has criticized in remarks

directed to an approach by Stivers and Rossano (2010) for being speaker-centric (or individual utterance-centric). We also invoked what Schegloff has consistently argued over the years about the problem or relevance in the analysis of social action, when we examined Heritage's efforts to solve that problem by assigning relative "epistemic status" to speakers and recipients in particular instances. In our view, the 'solution' relies upon generalities about the omnirelevance of epistemic rights, epistemic access, and asymmetries of information, which are then documented in an ad hoc way in characterizations of particular fragments of transcribed interaction. Moreover, we increasingly suspected that many of the fragments excerpted from longer transcripts, which were presented (and often re-presented) in the publications we examined, were formatted with beginnings and endings, and identified with "first position" and "second position," in a way that supported those generalities. Rather than simply argue in support of such observations and suspicions, we spent many hours examining and re-analyzing particular fragments of recorded interaction that occur and recur in publications by Heritage, Raymond, and others.

We developed several papers from recurrent themes we discussed during our meetings, and presented them at a session on "The epistemics of Epistemics" at the 2015 International Institute for Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis (IEMCA) meeting in Kolding, Denmark (small 'e' epistemics was a reference to our examination of the evidential grounds and expository procedures used in formal analytical presentations of 'Epistemics'). A year later we published revised versions of the papers in the October 2016 issue of the journal *Discourse Studies* (Vol. 18, no. 5). The special issue contained an introduction (Lynch and Macbeth, 2016), four articles that critically discussed and reanalyzed fragments of transcript presented in

publications on “epistemics” in conversation (Lindwall et al., 2016; Lynch and Wong, 2016; Macbeth et al., 2016; and Macbeth and Wong, 2016), and two commentaries on those articles by Graham Button and Wes Sharrock (2016) and Jacob Steensig and Trine Heinemann (2016).

Teun van Dijk, the editor of *Discourse Studies*, generously gave us the latitude to assemble the issue and organize the peer review of the articles in it. He also provided the opportunity for quick publication. This created limited time for completion of final drafts of the papers and submission of final copy for publication, and it also provided a limited time window in which to invite commentaries on those articles for publication in the same issue.

Fortunately, the authors of two commentaries that were included in the special issue were willing to devote the necessary effort to read our articles and prepare their commentaries. The one by Button and Sharrock was largely supportive of the articles in the issue, while the other by Steensig and Heinemann defended epistemics in CA, while also acknowledging some of the criticisms expressed in the articles. Heritage and Raymond also were invited to write commentaries but declined, mentioning the limited time given to write comments. Heritage also declined an invitation by the co-chairs of the Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis Section of the American Sociological Association to take part in an exchange with me at the 2016 annual meeting in Seattle. However, following the publication of the special issue, he found the time to draft a lengthy rebuttal to the articles in the special issue, which he posted online several weeks after that issue was published (Heritage, 2016). The draft paper mentioned that, along with other articles by unnamed authors, it would be part of a special “rebuttal” issue of *Discourse Studies* to be published in 2017.

When reading Heritage's (2016) "rebuttal", we were not surprised that he was displeased with our articles, but we were taken aback by the litany of assertions he made about our mistakes and misunderstandings, paired with vociferous denials of what we had read him to say (often in so many words, repeatedly and forcefully) in prior publications. We also were dismayed by the lack of serious engagement with our arguments and analyses, and we strongly believed that his rebuttal should not stand without itself being rebutted. After contacting Teun van Dijk about the possibility of publishing a rejoinder to Heritage's rebuttal, we were told that the journal would not accept further contributions to the debate, and that we would need to go elsewhere to register any responses to Heritage and others in the forthcoming issue. Rather than pursuing the unlikely prospect of finding a journal that would be interested in publishing a further round in a debate that began in another journal, we resorted to posting our responses online (Lynch, 2016 [2018]; Lymer et al., 2017; Macbeth, 2017). The readers we most wanted to reach were those with a particular interest in how epistemics in CA relates to fundamental features that distinguish CA from other social science programs. This is not a large group to begin with, but by our lights and given our own histories, it is an important one. We entreated members of that group to do the following: read the articles and commentaries in the special issue before reading Heritage's rebuttal and our rejoinders.

The special "rebuttal" issue of *Discourse Studies* did not appear until January 2018 (Vol. 20, No. 1). The title and conclusion of Heritage's rebuttal were significantly revised, though the body of the new version was substantially the same (Heritage, 2018). In addition to Heritage's (2018) revised rebuttal, the issue included an introduction and article by Paul Drew (2018a,b), and articles by Geoffrey Raymond (2018), Rebecca Clift and Chase Raymond (2018), Douglas

Maynard and Steven Clayman (2018), Galina Bolden (2018). The more junior authors presented technical defenses of epistemics and dismissed our technical competence with CA, while the old hands rallied around Heritage, echoed his acoustic blasts, and expanded on the degradation ceremony that he had initiated with his rebuttal.

Following the publication of the rebuttal issue, I revised my rejoinder to Heritage (Lynch 2019[2016]) in order to take into account the changes in his rebuttal article and to briefly address some of the other articles in that issue. The group of us who wrote the articles in the 2016 special issue are continuing our discussions and drafting papers that are likely to appear in the months ahead. In the meantime, much of what we wrote following the online publication of Heritage's (2016) rebuttal remains relevant to the entire rebuttal issue.

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