

1 Conversational repair and human understanding: an introduction

Makoto Hayashi, Geoffrey Raymond, and Jack Sidnell

1.1 Introduction

Any serious effort to contend with the real time production and understanding of human actions in everyday interaction can scarcely avoid noting that they are characterized by the routine occurrence of troubles, “hitches,” misunderstandings, “errors,” and other infelicities. Indeed, these phenomena – and participants’ efforts to contend with them – are so ubiquitous that very few approaches within the human and social sciences have avoided commenting on, or contending with them, in some way. In many approaches within the social sciences, researchers looked past these phenomena altogether, treating them as epiphenomenal to the proper object of study (however that is defined) or as matters to be reduced, remedied, or otherwise overcome. More recently approaches from various disciplines have recognized their import in different ways, thereby raising the more nettlesome issue of just what is to be done with them or what can be done with them. Here, approaches vary considerably: some have simply incorporated these phenomena into the larger domain of human conduct being investigated (whether it is the psyche in psychology, ritual and culture in anthropology, or social structure in sociology), conflating a range of matters that are more profitably treated as distinct from one another. In many such cases, however, scholars interested in learning about the mind, self, language, society, and culture have treated these phenomena as special – as even more informative than other types of conduct. For these approaches the ubiquity of such troubles (and their management) makes them especially attractive since their occurrence in the stream of conduct impacts on virtually every aspect of it. The perception that such troubles are special derives from a belief that they entail (or reveal) an authenticity obscured by more “practiced” behavior, or that they offer a window into the mind, or the depths of personhood, identity, and social relations, otherwise obscured by socialization, experience, or politeness. In these respects we might say that such approaches “exploit” such troubles insofar as they are not interested in them as such, but for how the apparently “unpracticed” character of such hitches, or the apparently revealing character of errors and the like, has

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seemed to promise a special opening through which analysts could empirically investigate the human phenomenon of “real” interest to their respective disciplines but which remain “hidden” because of the reflexive character of human consciousness, experience, and action.

From the point of view of the contributors to this edited volume, these infelicities, hitches, and other troubles are now recognized as belonging to a broader domain of human conduct referred to as “the organization of repair” (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks, 1977). In contrast to the apparent appeal of hitches and misunderstandings as “unpracticed” behavior that reveals something more “real” and “enduring” than other forms of human conduct (as indicated above, and in many of the approaches we go on to describe), conversation analysis (or CA) has shown that the organization of repair consists of a broad array of systematically organized, party-administered practices through which a conversation’s participants manage troubles in speaking, hearing, and understanding – as they arise – lest those troubles make continued action, or continued intersubjective understanding, problematic or even impossible. In this respect, the organization of repair can be appreciated as one among a set of basic practices of interaction – what Schegloff (1992: 1338) calls part of the “procedural infrastructure of interaction” – insofar as it furnishes participants with resources for organizing social life *at the point of its production*. This appreciation of repair depends on viewing such hitches, errors, and other problems in their own terms, however, and not primarily as a “window” into other domains or areas of interest. This perspective is by no means exclusionary. As we shall see, an approach that treats repair as a domain of conduct worthy of study in its own right does not preclude the use of repair, its organization, or even naturally occurring instances of it, as a source of analytic insight into other domains of human life; in fact, as we shall argue, the approach adopted by conversation analysis actually deepens and enriches such investigations. To help situate the emergence of this view, and the advances enabled by it, we begin by surveying the most prominent approaches to the study of infelicities, hitches, and other forms of trouble in the production and appreciation of action that predated it (and to which it was, in part, responsive).

In the first portion of this chapter we briefly consider some of the ways in which errors and related phenomena have been investigated in a range of different fields in the human and social sciences. In discussing these matters we will also consider some of the limitations that stem from the particularistic interests that appear to drive these approaches. In the second section we review the essentials of a CA approach to the organization of repair. The aim is not to delimit interest in the phenomenon of troubles – or repair – but rather to establish how a more grounded, technical appreciation of the underlying phenomena and their organization – in their own terms – actually

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enhances such investigations by enabling scholars to make more precise inferences regarding conduct, and the way in which it might be informative in light of their own interests. In the third section we return to the question of how a focus on repair, error, correction, and so on can inform the analysis of other domains of human conduct.

1.2 From “slips of the tongue” to “remedial interchanges”: trouble and repair in the human sciences

Perhaps the most well-known approaches to (so-called) “speech errors”¹ (a very common form of trouble) developed in psychology, where errors made in the course of speech production have been regarded as providing a window into the unconscious and the human mind more generally. Undoubtedly the most prominent figure in this treatment of speech errors is Sigmund Freud (1914 [1901]; 1929 [1916–1917]). Freud begins his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis* with a fairly extensive discussion of what he calls “parapraxis,” which includes slips of the tongue and other speech errors. Notably for Freud, every slip of the tongue is a consequence of deeper unconscious motivations that are allowed expression through such errors. Slips, according to Freud, are not accidental hitches in speech production, but rather are outward manifestations of repressed subconscious thoughts.

Freud also suggests that the mechanisms involved in slips of the tongue may reveal the “probable laws of formation of speech” (1914 [1901]: 75). The possibility that speech errors may allow us to see the “laws” of speech production at work has been pursued more rigorously by subsequent generations of (psycho-)linguists. For these linguists, speech errors provide a valuable means to test a variety of hypotheses regarding otherwise unobservable processes of utterance generation (i.e., models of “linguistic performance”) as well as hypotheses regarding speakers’ tacit knowledge of language structure (i.e., models of “linguistic competence”). Thus, there has been a line of psycho/neuro-linguistic inquiry that investigated speech errors in attempts to model the actual mechanisms of speech production process (e.g., Lashley, 1951; Hockett, 1967; Boomer and Laver, 1968; Fromkin, 1968, 1971; MacKay, 1969, 1970; Levelt, 1983, 1989; van Wijk and Kempen, 1987; Blackmer and Mitton, 1991; Bredart, 1991).² Another, closely related, line of inquiry has undertaken to show how speech errors provide evidence for the psychological reality of theoretical linguistic concepts such as distinctive features in phonology, morpheme structure constraints, syntactic and semantic features in representations of underlying linguistic structure, and so on (e.g., Fromkin, 1968, 1971; Fry, 1969; Green, 1969).³ More recently, those working in the field of natural language processing have started to pay serious analytic attention to speech errors and their corrections in spontaneous speech

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(e.g., Hindle, 1983; Bear, Dowding, and Shriberg, 1992; Nakatani and Hirschberg, 1993; Heeman and Allen, 1994). In these studies, efforts have been made to construct computational algorithms that detect and correct speech errors in processing spontaneous spoken language data. As these developments in the psychological study of speech errors suggest, what began as something of a curiosity on the margins of the discipline now occupies an important, if not central, place within this approach.

In much the same way, anthropologists have (occasionally) acknowledged troubles encountered in the prosecution of action, though primarily in the service of other interests and concerns. Nevertheless, in his *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*, Malinowski (1926) complained that the very methods of anthropology produced accounts that were highly idealized and gave little sense of the give and take of everyday life. Although also engaged in so-called “participant-observation,” anthropologists rely crucially on native testimony – anthropologists ask what a ritual is called, why it is performed, what it means, and so on and receive in return answers in which natives attempt to clarify the significance of the phenomena asked about. The problem, as Malinowski saw it, is that the resulting accounts are “normative” idealizations that typically bear more on what *should* happen than on what does happen in any given case. Of course one of the things that tends to drop out here are the infelicities, errors, troubles, and so on that inevitably attend any bit of human conduct.

However, occasionally the descriptions of anthropologists have included discussion of errors and related matters in their studies. For the ethnographer, such phenomena sometimes provide a means to gain insight into how the people being described make sense of events in the world that surrounds them; in other cases, accounts of trouble and its management are woven into the analysts’ descriptions of the ceremonies and rituals. In his classic account of witchcraft and sorcery beliefs among the Azande in Central Africa, Evans-Pritchard takes the first of these tacks, describing how “embodied trouble” (i.e., injury) experienced by Azande in the course of everyday activity is understood and explained. He writes:

I found it strange at first to live among Azande and listen to naive explanations of misfortunes which, to our minds, have apparent causes, but after a while I learnt the idiom of their thought and applied notions of witchcraft as spontaneously as themselves in situations where the concept was relevant. A boy knocked his foot against a small stump of wood in the centre of a bush path, a frequent happening in Africa, and suffered pain and inconvenience in consequence. Owing to its position on his toe it was impossible to keep the cut free from dirt and it began to fester. He declared that witchcraft had made him knock his foot against the stump. I always argued with Azande and criticized their statements, and I did so on this occasion. I told the boy that he had knocked his foot against the stump of wood because he had been careless, and that witchcraft had not placed it in the path, for it had grown there naturally. He agreed

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that witchcraft had nothing to do with the stump of wood being in his path but added that he had kept his eyes open for stumps, as indeed every Zande does most carefully, and that if he had not been bewitched he would have seen the stump. As a conclusive argument for his view he remarked that all cuts do not take days to heal but, on the contrary, close quickly, for that is the nature of cuts. Why, then, had his sore festered and remained open if there were no witchcraft behind it? This, as I discovered before long, was to be regarded as the Zande explanation of sickness. (Evans-Pritchard, 1976: 20–21)

Like Freud, the Azande seek an explanation for troubles that afflict human conduct. Whereas Freud located that source of errors in the recesses of the human mind, the Azande treat it as utterly obvious that troubles of the kind experienced by the boy in this example result from witchcraft. Thus, it would seem that they locate the source of error not in the human mind but in the world of social relations with known others – a witch can only affect someone personally known to them. But in fact the situation is more complex and the contrast with Freud only partial. For, as Evans-Pritchard explains, the witch is often unaware of his own true nature and power – i.e., that s/he is in fact a witch. As such witchcraft – a capacity for which is understood to be inherited from a parent – is often an *unintended* expression of bad feelings. So, returning to the comparison, we can say that, whereas Freud locates the source of troubles in the unconscious of self, the Azande locate it in the unconscious (or subconscious) of others. The more general point here is that, in the classic anthropological study, a people's way of accounting for troubles encountered in the normal course of events in everyday life is used as a way to understand their belief system.

By contrast, Elinor Ochs Keenan (1973) emphasizes the significance “error” and its management as a central element of Malagasy oratory during the event of “public marriage request.” According to Keenan the central goal of the event – securing an alliance between the families of the bride and groom – requires a delicate balancing of the subsidiary elements necessary for it: efforts to honor the bride's family and build confidence in the groom's family. In this event, each family is represented by a speechmaker, who engages in a dialogic performance in traditional ceremonial speech called *kabary*. However, conceptions of the ground rules of proper *kabary* are not always shared among different families and therefore what constitutes an “error” is open to dispute. For this reason, *kabary* performances are characteristically argumentative, with disputes emerging regarding what counts as “speaking according to tradition.” Thus, Keenan writes:

It takes no great stretch of the imagination to realize that *kabary* performances serve ... [the] personal ends of the speechmakers. They are platforms for exhibiting knowledge of traditional oratory. In the marriage request *kabary*, the speechmakers are concerned not only with the matter at hand, the marriage contract. They are greatly concerned

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with maintaining or enhancing their status as *tena ray aman-dreny* [“true (wise) elder” – MH/GR/JS]. The making and breaking of ‘traps’ must be seen in this light. The speechmaker for the girl’s family may display his knowledge by indicating errors or gaps in the oratory of his adversary by making traps. The boy’s speechmaker, on the other hand, shows his skill by successfully freeing himself from these traps and by generally proceeding with as few errors as possible. The speechmaker for the boy is, then in a bind. He needs to admit a few errors to be a successful ‘requestor’, to show honor to the girl’s family. But, as a speechmaker and elder, he does not wish to be trapped too often lest his status suffer. A consequence of this is that a *kabary* performance may break into heated debate over the point of what constitutes speaking *ana-dalana* [“according to tradition” – MH/GR/JS]. (Keenan, 1973: 229)

Here, then, the way in which the notion of an “error” is debated is examined as part of the practices that *kabary* performers use to negotiate one’s reputation as a skillful orator while attending to the successful accomplishment of the event at hand.

Repair-like phenomena also figure in the trance behavior among the Malagasy speakers of Mayotte (a small island off the northwest coast of Madagascar) as described by Michael Lambek (1981). In his account, Lambek notes that the process through which a new spirit comes into being is organized and accomplished through repair-like challenges and questions that people pose to the newly emerging spirit. Among Malagasy speakers, a spirit that possesses a person constructs a personal identity through the possessed person’s behavior during trance (most notably, by the announcement of its name). When an unexpected identity of a new spirit emerges, that is, when an unexpected name is announced, people ask the spirit to repeat the name, question its validity, negotiate among themselves, and eventually agree to accept the identity of the new spirit. Here, trouble and its solution during the emergence of a new spirit are described as part and parcel of the phenomenon of possession and trance as a social activity.

Much as in anthropology, key figures in the different intellectual tributaries that gave rise to contemporary sociology took up a range of positions regarding the study of errors, infelicities, and other troubles. On the one hand (contra Malinowski’s interest in the give and take of everyday life) Weber’s emphasis on the “ideal/typical” as the central problematic for social science virtually excludes a focus on repair, and the forms of routine trouble to which it is addressed. As Weber (1968 [1956]: 6) writes, “it is convenient to treat all irrational, affectually determined elements of behavior as factors of deviation from a conceptually pure type of rational action.” The resulting persistent opposition of rational and non-rational forms of action dominated the social sciences through the first half of the twentieth century, resulting in what critics came to call a “sociology of error” that was primarily concerned with explaining the “tendency for actors to persist in invalid or erroneous views of the world (and in non-rational courses of action) despite the fact that they

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would be more successful in their projects by correcting them” (Heritage, 1984: 26).⁴ However, in the *Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim (1982 [1895]) recognized the methodological relevance of error, deviation, and trouble as central features of human affairs rather than as phenomena observers should either overlook or seek to eradicate altogether. In Durkheim’s view trouble could make visible the normative structures – the social facts that are constitutive of society. Goffman and Garfinkel, both of whom were followers of Durkheim in their own way, would later cash out this promise in studies of interaction.

In his discussion of “remedial interchanges” in *Relations in Public* (1971), Erving Goffman describes a range of social practices that are relevant to what conversation analysts would later come to analyze as repair. In this work, Goffman examines the process of social control whereby infractions of social norms are discouraged, and argues that “in the realm of public order it is not obedience and disobedience that are central, but occasions that give rise to remedial work of various kinds” (p. 108). He writes:

In major crimes the fuss and bother created by apprehension and trial is of less concern to everyone than the crime and its proper attribution; or at least (it is felt) it ought to be. But in interactional matters things are different. Since the guilt is small and the punishment smaller, there often will be less concern – and admittedly so – to achieve proper attribution than to get traffic moving again. When a robbery is committed, no innocent party is likely to volunteer himself as the culprit; when an interactional offense occurs, everyone directly involved may be ready to assume guilt and to offer reparation. The adversary theme that marks negotiations at court is here not strong; rather a tacit collaboration is likely to be sustained even though the participants may be unaware of their coalition. (Goffman, 1971: 107–108)

Common types of “reparation” offered by those who commit an interactional offense, according to Goffman, are accounts, apologies, and requests. These practices are used by the offender to transform what could be seen as offensive into what can be seen as acceptable by “striking in some way at the moral responsibility otherwise imputed to the offender” (p. 109).

Though Goffman does not discuss cases of repairing trouble in speaking, hearing, and understanding specifically, his description of remedial work is relevant to some of the practices used for conversational repair. For instance, when there is trouble in hearing, an apology expression (“I’m sorry?”) may be used to initiate repair. Its use, according to Robinson (2006), conveys that the recipient of the trouble source turn (i.e., the *I’m sorry*-producer) assumes responsibility for disrupting the progress of the talk, rather than imputing responsibility to the trouble-source speaker (see also Schegloff, 2005).⁵ Also, instead of, or in addition to, an apology expression, an account may be used to justify a request for repetition – e.g., “(Sorry,) I couldn’t hear you.” When a

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correction of what another person has just said becomes relevant, an outright correction – an interactionally offensive move – is typically avoided; rather, a request for confirmation would be used instead (e.g., A: “Single beds are awfully thin to sleep on.” B: “You mean, narrow?” A: “They are awfully narrow, yeah.”; Schegloff et al., 1977).

With his famous “breaching experiments” (Garfinkel 1963, 1967), Garfinkel attempted to destabilize normally stable features of the organization of everyday activities in order to empirically demonstrate how a society’s members establish and sustain a “world in common” through the maintenance of what Schutz (1962) called the “reciprocity of perspectives.” Garfinkel writes:

In accounting for the persistence and continuity of the features of concerted actions, sociologists commonly select some set of stable features of an organization of activities and ask for the variables that contribute to their stability. An alternative procedure would appear to be more economical: to start with a system with stable features and ask what can be done to make for trouble. The operations that one would have to perform in order to produce and sustain anomie features of perceived environments and disorganized interaction should tell us something about how social structures are ordinarily and routinely being maintained. (Garfinkel 1963: 187)

An example of these destabilizing operations is an experiment in which Garfinkel instructed his students to “engage an acquaintance or friend in an ordinary conversation and, without indicating that what the experimenter was saying was in any way out of the ordinary, to insist that the person clarify the sense of his commonplace remarks” (Garfinkel, 1963: 221). For example:

On Friday night my husband and I were watching television. My husband remarked that he was tired. I asked, ‘How are you tired? Physically, mentally, or just bored?’

S: I don’t know, I guess physically, mainly.

E: You mean that your muscles ache, or your bones?

S: I guess so. Don’t be so technical.

(After more watching)

S: All these old movies have the same kind of old iron bedstead in them.

E: What do you mean? Do you mean all old movies, or some of them, or just the ones you have seen?

S: What’s the matter with you? You know what I mean.

E: I wish you would be more specific.

S: You know what I mean! Drop dead!

(Garfinkel, 1963: 222)

Here, the practice that conversation analysts later describe as “other-initiated repair” is used as a crucial component of the breaching experiment. By insistently asking for clarification of what the subject has said, the experimenter succeeded in breaching one of the most basic, taken-for-granted

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assumptions of social life – i.e., that one’s interlocutor will draw on background knowledge of “what everyone knows” and supply whatever unstated understandings may be required in order to make sense of what one says. Other-initiated repair thus provides a tool to uncover the “seen but unnoticed” process whereby “social actors come to know, and know in common, what they are doing and the circumstances in which they are doing it” (Heritage, 1984: 76). We can further notice that breaching these assumptions has a deep moral significance for these participants. So E is first reprimanded for being overly “technical” and subsequently for being obtuse (i.e., “you know what I mean”). With “drop dead,” S conveys that he believes E is not only responsible for the trouble but moreover has produced it intentionally.

This section has provided a brief overview of the ways in which repair-related phenomena have been investigated in various disciplines in the human and social sciences. The next section describes the interactionally grounded specification of the organization of repair by conversation analysts.

1.3 Repair as interactional infrastructure – the conversation analytic approach

The broad array of practices through which action-in-interaction is organized constitutes a natural interactive system – that is, a system where the coordination of action and the mutual understanding that underpins it “is locally organized, recipient designed and subject to local, sequential, contextual, environmental and organizational contingencies moment by moment” (Raymond and Lerner, forthcoming). In such a system, there must be some way for members to manage troubles in speaking, hearing and understanding as they arise lest those troubles make continued action – or continued intersubjective understanding – problematic or even impossible. The organization of repair refers to a set of systematically organized, party-administered practices through which a conversation’s participants manage such inescapable contingencies.

Though now recognized as central to the organization of interaction as such, prior to the 1970s scholars rarely treated practices of repair as worthy of investigation in their own right. A key turning point was a seminal article by Schegloff et al. (1977). This article proved fateful in carving out an empirically specifiable domain of conduct for investigation and in establishing a basic approach to it. The article began by re-specifying three key aspects of what they deemed “repair.”

First and perhaps most crucially, Schegloff et al. offered a “typological amplification” that re-specified how to conceive of the basic domain of phenomena to be investigated. To the extent that analysts even addressed problems in speaking (or hearing and understanding) prior to 1977, most were

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preoccupied with “correction.” For example, Bolinger lamented his fellow linguist’s *lack* of interest in correction, observing that:

Up to now, Linguistic scientists have ignored it because they could see in it nothing more than the hankerings of pedants after a standard that is arbitrary, prejudiced and personal. But it goes deeper. Its motive is intelligibility, and in spite of the occasional aberrations that have distracted investigators from the central facts, it is systematic enough to be scientifically described. (Bolinger, 1965 [1953])

Still, by approaching these phenomena in terms of “correction,” analysts such as Bolinger evidently connected them to language and usage rather than to “action” and “interaction.” For example, as Bolinger evocatively noted in the same paper: “Correction, the border beyond which we say ‘no’ to an expression is to *language* what a seacoast is to a map” (Bolinger, 1965 [1953]: 248, emphasis added).⁶

The “typological amplification” proposed by Schegloff et al. involved replacing this concern with correction with a focus on what they describe as “repair.” This was more than a mere change in terminology since, as an empirical matter, not all errors are corrected (recipients often overlook mistakes and other infelicities if they can grasp the basic import of what is being said), and not all matters that are subject to repair involve errors (as when ambient noise makes hearing a remark impossible). In this respect a focus on correction was both misleading and unnecessarily limiting precisely because a concern with “correction” tends to focus analysis on “mistakes.” As Schegloff et al. observe:

The term correction is commonly understood to refer to the replacement of an ‘error’ or ‘mistake’ by what is ‘correct.’ The phenomenon we are addressing, however, are neither contingent upon error, not limited to replacement ... Accordingly we will refer to ‘repair’ rather than correction in order to capture the more general domain of occurrences. (Schegloff et al., 1977: 363)

This critical distinction established a solid basis for further inquiry into a domain of phenomena grounded in the conduct of participants in interaction with one another (as opposed to one grounded in the various disciplinary interests of analysts). Moreover, in establishing the independence of repair from the phenomenon of error, Schegloff et al. vastly expanded the domain of potentially relevant conduct; since any aspect of conduct can be a source of trouble “nothing is, in principle, excludable from the class ‘repairable’” (ibid: 363).

The second major re-specification offered by Schegloff et al. was addressed to the distinction between “self-” and “other-” initiated repair. Calling whatever comes to be treated as “trouble” the “trouble source,” Schegloff et al. (1977: 363–364) observe that repair can be initiated by “self” – that is the *speaker of a trouble source*, or by “other” – any party *other than speaker of the trouble*