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Ethnomethodology in the Classroom

Introduction

Ethnomethodology is a rapidly developing field of study within sociology. However, as yet, its influence on the sociological analysis of education has been minimal. (1) In this paper it is my concern to show what an ethnomethodological analysis of some actual classroom events can look like and to point to some of the implications such analyses can have for improving our understanding of the social organisation of classroom interaction.

Like any sociological perspective, ethnomethodology is founded on certain assumptions concerning the nature of the social world and the possible ways it can best be investigated.

One fundamental assumption of the ethnomethodological approach is that the social world is essentially a continuously achieved world. (2) It is at all time being created and produced by the members of society. Behaviour which occurs within any social situation or setting, or is part of some social relationship is seen as behaviour which continuously constitutes that setting, situation or relationship. The social world is taken to exist only in, by and through the behaviour which members produce.

Because the social world is seen to have this nature the method of its production becomes a central concern in ethnomethodological analysis. Ethnomethodologists assume that the constant production of the social world is achieved through members' use of methodic practices and it is their concern to describe these practices. What amounts to an analysis for the ethnomethodologist is a description of the methods used by members to make the world happen.

In ethnomethodology the concept 'member' has a particular meaning. It is not a political or legal concept, but rather a social and cultural notion. 'Members' are those with a shared stock of common-sense knowledge about the social world and a common competence in applying that knowledge. Membership involves a recognised competence of a natural language and observably adequate performance in identifiable speech communities. It involves having one's competence to make reasonable and sensible observations and to produce reasonable and sensible talk and activities taken for granted.

Further, membership involves the no problem ability to produce talk and conduct in ways which enable others to have no problems in making an adequate sense of what one is doing. In effect this requires the provision of materials in one's talk and activities which allow others to recognise what we are saying and doing without any difficulty. At the same time it requires the ability to repair the essential indexicality (3) of words and conduct.

In attempting to describe members' use of methodic practices, ethnomethodogists are seeking to uncover the structures of practical activity. These structures are assumed to have the combined features of being context free and yet being context sensitive. (4) That is to say although the ethnomethodologist recognises that talk and activities are 'situated' in that they always come out of, and are part of some particular circumstances of their participants, he also notes that there is a very wide range of situations and interactions in which persons in varieties of identities can operate. The combination of these two observations suggest that there must be some formal apparatus or structures of practical activity which can be found across contexts, yet which can accommodate the situated character of any particular social occasion or event.

In a school, lessons do not 'just happen'. They like all other social occasions have to be achieved by the participants whose methodic procedures constitute any social event for what it is. Lessons, like any social event have to be achieved on each and every occasion of their production and their achievement will be accomplished through members' occasioned use of culturally general methodic practices.

The following brief analysis is an attempt to uncover some of the methodic practices employed by a particular collection of members of the occasion of a particular lesson.

Analysis

Let us consider the materials:

T: E:r--come o:n settle down -- no one's sitting down till we're all ready. ((pause circa 7.00 seconds)) ((General background noises))

T: Stand up straigh -- bags do:wn. ((pause circa 8.00 seconds)) ((General background noises getting quieter))

T: Down I sai. ((pause circa 5.00 seconds)) ((General background noises getting quieter still))

T: Right quietly: sit down ((pause circa 9.00)) ((General background noises))

T: *Right* now then what were we talking about last time --- yes/

P: Sir the Vikins how the --- were going to raid -- Wessex

T: How they were going to raid *Wessex yes* --- and what had they raided *before* Wessex.

If the materials we have above were recorded from the beginning of an actual lesson (and they were) then we should be able to discover in them a machinery which could provide for them being heard as a possible lesson beginning. The machinery would consist of the methods and cultural understandings used by the members present to make the situation recognisable as a lesson and make the relationships operating

between the members, lesson relevant relationships.

To begin the analysis let us take the teacher's first utterance.

T: E:r – come o:n settle down -- no one's sitting down till we're all ready

and first let us concentrate on the second half of the utterance.
I suggest that the speaker can be heard to be doing some membershipping work in his selection of 'no one'. To make a sense of this utterance hearers have to make an adequate repair of this particular identification, and in so doing can be membershipping themselves and the speaker into occasion relevant categories. Hearers need a method for sensibly repairing 'no one'. Who can the 'no one' be describing?

As a membershipping device 'no one' has interesting characteristics in that it can be heard as describing populations less than everybody in the world and more than nobody in the world. In this respect it has similar characteristics to the descriptor nothing. For example it is not unusual to hear members say I've done nothing all day, and yet understand that the speaker may have been doing things all day long - activities like lying in bed or wandering about the streets, etc.

In the actual utterance under consideration, some methods, some sense assembly procedures are required to find a relevant population which 'no one' can be heard to be describing. One general method or procedure available to members is to hear words as collections or co-selections. That is to say members can hear any one word as a co-selection with the words which precede it and follow it. The parts of an utterance can be heard as mutually constitutive in that how any part is heard can depend upon, among other things, how other parts are heard. How a 'no one' is heard, to whom it is heard to be referring, depends upon the co-selections that are made with it and which together constitute the situation of its production.

In this case we notice that a particular co-selection of descriptors has been produced by the speaker. The 'no-one' is some collection of members who on this occasion cannot sit down until they are given permission to sit down. Our common sense understanding of our society tells us that sitting down is usually no sort of problem, because normally we do not have to ask permission before we can sit down. However as members, we also know that there are places and situations when restraints on sitting down at will can and do operate. For example, at formal gatherings there can be set procedures for sitting down and members can be seen to be rude by dis-regarding these formalities. I suggest that the right to tell others not to sit down and the right to make conditions for sitting down are routinely associated by members with particular identities and relationships. That is to say, the activity of telling others they cannot sit down is recognised by members as being routinely bound to particular categories of membership in that the activity is not one which normally any member can expect to execute without some repercussions. (5) Thus for a speaker to tell others they cannot sit down is to provide his hearers with a resource for recognising the speaker as one

who is claiming the right to tell others they cannot sit down. The mere telling of others they cannot sit down does not automatically mean that observers or hearers will recognise the speaker as having that right. An analysis of the speaker as an appropriate category to make such a claim is required to discover a possible legitimacy in the claim. For example, an analysis of the speaker as an inappropriate category to claim the right to tell others when they can sit down can provide for a hearing of such an utterance as a joke. It is possible, for example, for a pupil to be seen to be mimicking a teacher by telling the class they cannot sit down. But the finding of appropriate or inappropriate categories trades on the orientation of members to category bound activities. Following Sacks, I suggest that the orientation to category bound activities is a method that members can employ to make an adequate sense of what they hear and that in this case the speaker can be analysed by his hearers as an appropriate person to make such an utterance and in the making of the utterance can be observed to be displaying himself as that appropriate person. He can then be seen to be claiming for himself a particular identity or membership category. At the same time he is providing for a possible membership category for his hearers. If they recognise him as an appropriate person to engage in that activity and recognise that at is they who are being spoken to and appropriately being spoken to in that manner they have available to them resources for recognising themselves in this situation as being membershipped into categories who can be told they cannot sit down.

Through categorising the speaker and themselves they further provide for the recognition of a possible relationship that may exist between them and the speaker. In our culture certain categories are routinely recognised as paired categories and the pairing is recognised to incorporate standardised relationships of rights, obligations and expectations. (6) An orientation to the use of standardised relationship pairs is another method available to hearers in the analysis of utterances to discover and produce the features of a social situation or event. Thus a sense can be provided for an utterance through the membershipping of the speaker, though the membershipping of ourselves as hearers and through the recognition of the two membership categories as elements of a standardised relationship pair.

In a school 'teacher' and 'pupil' are a readily available pair of categories for membershipping persons. Each category implies the other and together they involve a collection of rights, obligations and expectations for each other. Teachers and pupils can have themselves recognised as such by displaying the features of these rights, obligations and expectations through their talk.

As well as possibly doing all the above work, I suggest further that the utterance under consideration can be heard as an order; an order of a particular sort in that it carries a condition for next action which individual hearers would find difficult or impossible to recognise. How for example can any individual hearer know or recognise when everyone, presumably the speaker included, is ready?

In addition, although the speaker has said that no one is to sit down till 'we're all ready,' he has not said ready for what, and has not said what being ready will look like. In effect he has provided for himself the right to decide next action. He has issued an order and issued it in such a way that only he will be able to say when it has been

carried out. In so doing he can be seen to be doing identification and relational work. Through his talk he is providing for his recognition as the member present with power over those co-present. He has provided for his recognition as the member in charge in this situation.

One general method or procedure members use to make an adequate sense of what they hear is the 'wait and see principle'. That is to say whatever members hear can be heard as part of some things that may 'come after' it. Members can expect that what may come after (and nothing may) will provide some warrant for a sense that has already been made 'for the present', or may provide for the making of a different sense. This also implies that what is heard at any one moment can be used to make some kind of retrospective analysis or re-analysis of what has already been heard.

I suggest that in the materials we are analysing the speaker's next utterances can be heard to be further establishing his identification as the member in charge, or in control, in that they can be heard as controlling activities. In the next three utterances the speaker can be heard to be giving orders or instructions which at the same time, through a prospective and retrospective analysis can be heard as amplifications of the required state of readiness. The possibility of this hearing is further provided for by the subsequent utterance.

'*Right* now then what were we talking about last time . . . yes' which can be heard as the teacher getting the lesson under way. In the utterances before this one the speaker has not provided his hearers with recognisable turns to talk. He has observably been issuing orders, giving instructions, laying down conditions. He has been maintaining his right to speak, by not providing for the transference of the talk to others. The silences or pauses can be heard as his pauses, in that the utterances which precede them do not provide for other speakers to speak, and in that no other speaker is observed to speak. In keeping the talk to himself the speaker can also be observed to be doing further identification work by providing for his recognition as the member present who decides when others will be allowed to talk. However with this utterance he is observably transferring the talk to others by asking a question and thus making an answer the next relevant activity.

In asking 'what were we talking about last time' without spelling out just what last time he is referring to, the speaker can be heard to be asking his hearers to discover an appropriate last time and in so doing to constitute this current talk as another instance of the talk that was produced in that identifiable last time. Through a retrospective analysis the hearers have available to them for the discovery of an appropriate last time, the identifications and relationships which have been provided for in the preceding utterances. To further provide for the use of these identifications the hearers also have the 'we' of this utterance. Thus a possible hearing of last time, is a time when we who are now present with our current identifications and relationships were last all together with similar identifications and relationships.

The hearers appear to have no difficulty understanding which last time is being referred to, because one of them answers the teacher's question immediately and from the teacher's subsequent utterance can be heard to have answered it adequately. The

last time they were together, operating with the identifications they are currently operating with, was when they were talking about Vikings raiding Wessex.

Thus in these few lines over the period of about half a minute the members present at this place, can be seen to have constituted the situation as the beginning of a lesson, through their use of methodic practices and common cultural understandings.

Implications

If we accept the ethnomethodologists' claim that the everyday social world is continuously being created largely through talk (and our day to day experience of ordinary living should provide us with plenty of supportive evidence for such a claim), then analyses of this kind could further our understanding of classroom behaviour and interaction.

To take just one example from this very short extract of talk from a particular lesson, we can see how one teacher works at establishing order in his classroom. Classroom order has to be collaborative to some extent for the teacher to be able to *teach* anything; pupils 'going through the motions' seldom learn much. Yet teachers know from daily experience that classroom order is commonly coercive. It is the teacher who is considered responsible for what happens in lessons and at the very least he is expected to produce and maintain some measure of orderliness. Members speak of teachers being unable to teach when there is chaos in the classroom, when no one is listening to what the teacher is saying, when pupils cannnot get on with their tasks. Thus if he cannot get co-operation voluntarily he has to try other means.

The methodic practices he uses and the cultural understandings and common sense knowledge he invokes in his attempts to deal with this problem will be displayed in his talk. It is possible that we could improve our understanding of classroom control by analysing classroom talk.

More generally analyses of talk produced by teachers and pupils in classrooms may give us new insights into educational achievement. It is possible that conversational competence (7) may be related to learning in some way. I have tried to show that the organisation and production of talk by competent members, although taken for granted by the members themselves, is a complex process. If some children have difficulty mastering particular aspects of this complexity it could impair their understanding of the social situation of classroom interaction and thus lower their capacity to learn.

Notes

1. A.V. Cicourel is one of the few sociologists using an ethnomethodological approach to have produced research on education. See in particular, A.V. Cicourel 'Language Use and School Performance' Academic Press 1974.

2. For a more detailed exposition of the methodology of ethnomethodology see H. Garfinkel 'Studies in Ethnomethodology' (Prentice Hall)

3. The concept of 'indexicality' refers to the notion that words and conduct do not possess intrinsic and unequivocal meaning across situations. A word can have different interactional meanings according to the situation of its use and production. In order to make an appropriate sense of their social environment members continuously have to hear to hear and analyse words or talk as part of the context of their use.

4. H. Sacks, G. Jefferson and E. Schegloff 'A Simplest Systematics for the Organisation of Turn-Taking for conversation.' (Unpublished mimeo.) expand on the context free yet context sensitive nature of these structures.

5. See H. Sacks 'On the analysability of stories by children' in J. Gumperz & D. Hymes (eds.) 'Directions in Socio-Linguistics, The Ethnography of Communication' (Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1972) for a discussion of 'category bound activities.'

6. See H. Sacks 'The Search for Help: No one to turn to' in E.S. Shneidman (ed.) 'Essays in Self Destruction' (Science House) for a fuller explication of 'Standardised relationship pairs.' His examples include husband/wife, friend/friend, parent/child etc.

7. It is important to note that it is the more general interactional competence associated with 'membership' which is being referred to here and not the narrow notion of language skill normally associated with school performance.

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Meditation

Trunk concentrated in stillness like a fierce embrace;
Rough bark the pain-edged prelude to candled orgasms of tenderness.
Roots of desire exploring wounds of fallen fruits of knowledge,
Lighting for me the chestnut's secret flame.

Denise Batchelor