

In Pursuit of Conversation Analysis: An Interview with Professor John Heritage

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INTRODUCTION

On the late-summer evening of September 23, 2017, we had the privilege of speaking over dinner with John Heritage, a plenary speaker at the eighth annual Conference of *The Language and Social Interaction Working Group* (LANSI) held at Teachers College, Columbia University. Dr. Heritage is Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and one of the key scholars in the discipline of conversation analysis (CA).

Early in his academic career, Professor Heritage published the book *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology* (1984), in which he successfully brought Harold Garfinkel's complex and highly technical analysis of "members' methods" (the foundation of CA) to a wider audience. In 1988, he became a faculty member at UCLA—"CA central," where the founders of conversation analysis, including Emanuel Schegloff, Harvey Sacks, and Harold Garfinkel, had been based. Since then, Professor Heritage has been a leading researcher in the field, consistently producing illuminating CA work in a variety of contexts, from media talk to medical interaction. Most recently, his focus has been on the study of epistemics in interaction.

With this interview, we return to where John Heritage started: at the University of Leeds, England, where he was a graduate student focusing on what first made him interested in pursuing CA. We learn about some of the eye-opening events in his life and the past endeavors and accomplishments that helped him reach where he is today.

THE BEGINNING: GARFINKEL

"I first became aware of Harold Garfinkel's work by reading an article that referred to the dissertation that Garfinkel wrote in 1952," Heritage explains in describing his first encounter with ethnomethodology. "At that time, I knew nothing about Garfinkel. I didn't even know who he was. It was about 1972 or '71; I was a new graduate student in sociology. So I was really interested in reading that dissertation. I ordered it, and had it delivered from the Harvard library right to my door in England. It was this huge dissertation and I started to read it."

As he continued to read Garfinkel's dissertation, Heritage recalls, he was beginning to realize that this was one unusual piece of work, and he predicted then that it would change his academic path for the rest of his life. With palpable enthusiasm, he continues describing what it was like to discover such amazing work:

"It was my first major, major eye-opening moment. I couldn't believe it at all. I couldn't believe that the stuff was lying around with no one taking any notice of it. I thought this was the most brilliant thing that I'd ever read. Without question, I still think this is the most brilliant thing I've ever read! I took 140 pages of longhand notes on that dissertation. I had to transcribe, because I couldn't use a photocopier in those days on somebody else's dissertation. So I transcribed it with longhand. I did it for hours and hours every single day. I even had a big bruise

on my finger from that amount of writing. And I was dating this person who I'd like to marry, and she kept saying, 'Why can't you leave the library, can we go now? Can we go now?' And I said, 'No, we've got to keep on doing this.' So, that was really, really amazing work."

DISCOVERING SACKS

Heritage began teaching at the University of Leeds at the age of 24, when he was a Ph.D. student. There, he met a graduate student named Rod Watson, who became an influential figure in his life:

"So, this guy called Rod Watson was one of my first graduate students at the university where I was. Have you ever heard the name Rod Watson? He is a celebrated ancient conversation analyst. He has been mostly known for his work on membership categorization analysis (MCA). So, he arrived at the university where I was with those mimeographed lectures of Harvey Sacks (1964-1972). He was really inspired by Harvey Sacks. He said, 'John, you have to read this. You have to read this stuff real seriously. And I want to do a study like Sacks did.' It was the study at the suicide counseling/prevention center, you know. So, we got hooked up and he did his doctoral work with me. Rod Watson. He is the one who introduced me to Harvey Sacks' work."

Together, they went out and collected data at a suicide prevention center for Rod Watson's dissertation. At that time Heritage was still doing work in sociology unrelated to CA. This, however, would soon change, with his encounter with Emanuel Schegloff and Harvey Sacks' new article "Opening up Closings" (1973).

"When [Schegloff and] Sacks' paper came by and I read it, it was the second eye-opening moment for me," he recalls. "I realized to that point that CA was really, really serious. That paper identified a real dilemma people had—like how to get to the goodbye, goodbye sequence, laid out the steps to accomplish all these things. I thought it was an amazing work, I still do. And I mean, the turn-taking paper ['A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation,' Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974] is a better paper than that, but this one was so inside the data, compared to that. The turn-taking paper was like looking down from a height. This was right in there. I thought that was an amazing paper."

EMBRACING CA

Thanks to the works of Garfinkel, and then to Sacks and Schegloff, Heritage found himself more and more captivated by the world of CA. This was where he found himself facing a divergent point in his academic direction and began leading a "doctoral double life."

"After reading that paper by Sacks, it was over. I mean, I should have been doing my Ph.D. at that time, on unionization of bank workers, looking into questions like 'why do bank workers join unions.' And I had interviewed a lot of bank workers and ran lots of numbers. And I made arguments for that. But meanwhile, I was going with CA for all the time, so by 1975, I was on a two-track. I wrote a total of 650 pages on the bank workers for my dissertation entitled *The Growth of Trade Unionism in the London Clearing Banks 1960-70*. But meanwhile, the only thing I was interested in was CA, so I never stopped. For a single second, I never stopped."

However, things were not always how he would want to proceed on those days. “You know, there were times when all kinds of things went wrong. Sacks had been killed in an automobile accident, and Manny [Emanuel Schegloff] was sitting at UCLA doing the thing he did. Manny’s idea was less kind of enabling to a novice than Sacks’ ideas were. But we kind of got through it, and we got through it really, fundamentally, because first, Anita Pomerantz came. She was really great and helped me a lot. Also, another important person that came was Gail Jefferson. I worked with Gail for three or four years. She mentored me. She was incredible, really incredible. She could be frightening too. So, but if she never had come to England, I don’t know what progress I would have made. CA is a very hard discipline to do on your own, you know; it’s really, really hard.”

ARRIVING AT UCLA

After teaching at the University of Leeds and the University of Warwick, Heritage moved in 1988 to UCLA, where Garfinkel, his first inspirational figure, had taught. It was a bold move, with an incredible opportunity waiting for the young scholar on the other side of the globe. Many of the big names in the field of CA had been there, too—Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson, to name a few.

Heritage’s career thrived with the support of his mentors and colleagues, and thanks to his own efforts and diligence. In 1992, he co-edited *Talk at Work* with another British sociologist/conversation analyst, Paul Drew. Together, they also edited the four-volume set *Conversation Analysis* (2006), a comprehensive package detailing the formative basis of CA and showcasing analyses of interaction in a variety of contexts. In both publications, Heritage and Drew demonstrate that CA is equally applicable to institutional talk as it is to everyday conversation. Whether it is law, medicine, or the corporate world and business negotiations; counseling, education, or public broadcast media; the authors show that social interaction is systematic and orderly, and that social institutions can be studied by analyzing talk-in-interaction.

RETURNING TO THE BASICS AND ADVANCING TO THE FUTURE

Describing his own research, Heritage explains, “I have been looking at social interaction from the perspective of how it’s constructed, and also social, cultural, and psychological factors to impact its implementation and its outcomes. I also research interaction in medicine. A number of papers that I have published are on interactions in the medical environment, including interaction between new mothers and the community nurses, and on decision making in health care contexts, and so on. I have also done work on interaction in political arenas with Steven Clayman, my colleague at UCLA. We have analyzed political speeches and audience reactions to them. We have done a historical study of presidential news conferences over the past 50 years, too.”

In 2010, Heritage and Clayman published a book called *Talk in Action*, for which he said he “poured a lot of effort into writing.” In the first chapter of the book, he returns to where he started, explicating CA’s conceptual frameworks from both Goffman’s (1964) analysis of the interaction order as a social institution and Garfinkel’s (1967) shared methods of practical reasoning. Later chapters are comprised of analyses of talk in institutional domains, such as calls

to 911, doctor-patient interaction, courtroom trials, and mass communication. Heritage emphasizes that the aim of the book is not to draw a dividing line between ordinary conversation and institutional interaction—not because he believes that a clear boundary should not be drawn between them, but because, as he had been claiming, he believes that “practices of interaction in the everyday world are unavoidably drawn on in every kind of institutional interaction” (Heritage & Clayman, 2010, p. 2).

Outlining the three main areas that his research has focused on over the years, Heritage starts with political oratory and moves on to interaction in the medical context. What is the third one? “The third one is my most recent work, analyzing how people claim and defer to ‘epistemic authority’ in interaction, and the identities that are invoked and validated in this way.”

He has never forgotten the excitement he felt in the moment that he discovered Garfinkel 46 years ago, and he still hasn’t stopped expanding his horizons to this day.

THOUGHTS AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Even though from its inception, CA has been concerned with the organization of social interaction in various settings, including institutional ones (e.g., Sacks’ analysis of phone calls to suicide prevention centers), for a long time its attention was primarily directed to “ordinary conversations.” However, a series of studies by Heritage and his collaborators have firmly established the analysis of interaction in institutions as a legitimate area of inquiry within CA. Analyzing talk in institutions is no longer a new trend in the field; indeed, now, various institutional settings *are* where CA researchers bring their expertise. One such setting is the classroom or other educational contexts, like a tutoring, mentoring, or advising session. Educational researchers using CA have contributed greatly to our understanding of teacher practices, student engagement, and various other aspects of the organization of educational encounters. In a sense, then, here at the Applied Linguistics & TESOL Program at Teachers College, Columbia University, we are indebted to Heritage’s intellectual legacy from the very beginning of our journey as academics, educators, and students of language and social interaction.

John Heritage is a household name for any student of CA, and this interview helped us better understand his academic journey and the remarkable contributions that he has made to our field. We got a glimpse into his early inspirations, his first career changes and successes, and the dedication he brings to the field of CA. But most of all, it was heartening to know that a renowned figure like Heritage was once one of us—a curious graduate student. We left the interview filled with aspirations and hope, thanks to his captivating stories and encouraging words.

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