

## Membership Categorization in Action

Elizabeth Reddington

*Teachers College, Columbia University*

*Guys, girls, mothers, sisters, pastors, real estate agents...* What roles do these seemingly mundane labels for referring to people play in social interaction? When and why are such categories invoked by participants, how are they oriented to, and what do they accomplish? These are key questions for membership categorization analysis (MCA), which seeks to uncover the “methodical practices” that members use “in describing the world, and displaying their understanding of the world and of the commonsense routine workings of society” (Fitzgerald, Housley, & Butler, 2009, p. 47).

Like conversation analysis (CA), MCA has its origins in Harvey Sacks’ work on social interaction. Sacks (1992, as cited in Schegloff, 2007) was the first to propose the operation of membership categorization devices, which consist of collections (for example, gender) of related categories (e.g., male/female) that can be understood as belonging together in talk-in-interaction. Categories themselves are associated with certain predicates, the prototypical actions and attributes that members can be expected to perform or possess, as well as attendant rights and obligations (Hester & Egin, 1997). Since they are inherently inference-rich (Schegloff, 2007), categories serve as vital sources of information about their members. Schegloff, in fact, described such categories as the “the store house and the filing system” for our “common-sense knowledge” about “what people are like [and] how they behave” (p. 469).

Despite their common origins, Stokoe (2012) has observed that practitioners of CA and MCA have typically engaged in distinct pursuits. CA’s interest has traditionally been in revealing patterns in turn-taking, sequence organization, and action formation, while MCA has been more concerned with the construction of identity and culture in particular contexts (p. 278). Recent attempts at a closer integration of both ‘sequential’ and ‘categorical’ concerns can be found in Schegloff’s (2007) MCA ‘tutorial,’ a reintroduction of Sacks’ work, and studies such as those by Hansen (2005), who traced how ethnicity was made relevant and deployed as a resource in a meeting discussion, and Stokoe (2012), who analyzed the role of membership categorization in account-giving, advice-giving, and question and answer sequences. As both Schegloff (2007) and Stokoe (2012) have noted, however, one of the challenges and potential pitfalls of MCA lies in demonstrating that it is the participants themselves, and not merely the analysts, who are invoking and orienting to categories.

The short papers collected in this edition of the Forum can be considered an attempt to bridge whatever divide there may be between the disciplines by employing tools from both the CA and MCA toolkits in the study of membership categorization in naturally-occurring interaction. In the first piece, Nada Tadic takes up the problem of demonstrating the relevance of categories that may be invoked only implicitly. She applies an MCA lens to talk among female friends and shows how the participants use gender-based category predicates in efforts to persuade co-participants to adopt a certain course of action. Gender categories also figure in Gahye Song’s and Seul ki Park’s analyses of Korean-language data. Both Gahye and Seul ki reveal how participants invoke ‘negative’ category attributes in order to compliment or praise ostensible members who do not conform to category norms. Examining data from a radio talk show, Gahye shows how the host uses this strategy to compliment her guest’s husband, who at first glance seems different from ‘typical men,’ and how the guest ultimately reverses the process

in responding to the compliment. Seul ki examines a smartphone chat between a male and female friend and traces how the participants identify negative attributes of ‘typical Korean men’ and work to distance themselves, as well as their respective partners, from those attributes. Turning to other MCDs, in her analysis of conversation between two female speakers, Nancy Boblett unpacks the categories of ‘mother’ and ‘sister/older sister’ and their associated rights and responsibilities in order to describe their role in advice-giving—and advice resistance. Darcey Searles and Carol Hoi Yee Lo examine category work in the talk of children and their adult caregivers. Based on their analyses, both suggest that even young children may orient to, and potentially manipulate, category-bound predicates in ‘power struggles’ with adults. Finally, I suggest that category terms may have a vital role to play in story-telling sequences, and I return to the problem first taken up by Nada of how to trace categorization work that is less explicit in nature. It is my hope that this diverse collection of analyses will provide further support for Stokoe’s (2012) assertion that the “‘messy’ discourse phenomenon of membership categories” (p. 299) can indeed be approached in a systematic way, as well as underscore the value of integrating methods and perspectives from both the CA and MCA traditions.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Hansun Zhang Waring for introducing participants in the Fall 2012 Advanced Conversation Analysis course to the complexities of MCA and for her insightful feedback on our work. I would also like to thank my classmates for the lively discussions, both in class and online, and for their willingness to share these forays into the world of MCA.

## REFERENCES

- Fitzgerald, R., Housley, W., & Butler, C. (2009). Omnirelevance and interactional context. *Australian Journal of Communication*, 36(3), 45-64.
- Hansen, A.D. (2005). A practical task: Ethnicity as a resource in social interaction. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 38(1), 63-104.
- Hester, S., & Eglin, P. (Eds.). (1997). *Culture in action: Studies in membership categorization analysis*. Boston: International Institute for Ethnomethodology and University Press of America.
- Jefferson, G. (2004). Glossary of transcript symbols with an introduction. In G. Lerner (Ed.), *Conversation analysis: Studies from the first generation* (pp. 13–31). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Schegloff, E. A. (2007). A tutorial on membership categorization. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39, 462-482.
- Stokoe, E. (2012). Moving forward with membership categorization analysis: Methods for systematic analysis. *Discourse Studies*, 14(3), 277-303.

## APPENDIX

In those papers dealing with naturally-occurring talk, the following transcription conventions (based on Jefferson [2004]) are used:

Underlining indicates **stress** on a word or syllable.

Words in CAPS are spoken **loudly**; words enclosed by degree symbols are spoken **softly**:  
LOUD SPEECH  
°soft speech°

Colons indicate **lengthening of a sound**. The more colons, the greater the lengthening: wo:rd, for example, or wo::rd.

Words enclosed by > < are spoken at a **faster** rate than surrounding speech: >faster speech<.

The up arrow ↑ indicates **raised pitch**; the down arrow ↓ indicates **lowered pitch**.

**Pauses** between or within turns are timed to the tenth of a second and enclosed within parentheses: (time). A perceptible pause of less than a tenth of a second is marked as (.).

Brackets indicate **overlapping talk**:

[talk]  
[talk]

Equal signs denote **latching** of talk:

talk=  
=talk

Dollar signs denote a **smiley voice**: \$word or words\$.

Italicized words in smaller font, enclosed in double parentheses, indicate notes or background information or describe **non-verbal behavior**: ((*description of behavior*)).

Words enclosed in single parentheses signal an **uncertain transcription**: (not sure of word).

## COMMENTARIES

1. Being a Woman: Membership Categorization in Interaction  
Nada Tadic
2. “He Is No Different from Other Men”: Complimenting and Responding to Compliments through Membership Categorization Practices  
Gahye Song

3. A Case of Membership Categorization: Extraction from the “Korean-Male” Category  
Seul ki Park
4. Mothers and Sisters  
Nancy Boblett
5. “I’m Putting Myself in a Time-Out”: Suzi “Going Categorical”  
Darcey Searles
6. “Stop Talking Like That”: A Toddler’s Construction of Identity at a Family Dinner  
Carol Hoi Yee Lo
7. Category Terms as Story-Telling Shortcuts  
Elizabeth Reddington