

Enrico Caniglia, Andrea Spreafico and Federico Zanettin (eds.)

Harvey Sacks. Fare Sociologia, Broni, Altravista, 2017, pp. 164

Philippe Sormani *Université de Lausanne*

The pioneering research undertaken by Harvey Sacks (1935-1975) is probably best known for laying the foundations of conversation analysis (CA), the transcript-based analysis of mundane conversational interaction. Despite of what its name may still suggest, and what is worth remembering, CA was initially developed with a sociological interest in view, namely to discover and describe the interactive production of social order as a recognizable phenomenon, as that phenomenon happened to be encountered, enacted, and expected by its participants. On the basis of audio recordings of conversations and their repeated inspection, Sacks and his close colleagues, Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, described how participants spoke, took turns at talk, identified each other in the process, and manifestly expected (i.e., could be understood to expect) all this of each other. Over the last decades, and with the help of video cameras and transcription programs, this interactive production of social order has been captured, transcribed, and (re-)analyzed as a multifaceted phenomenon *in vivo*, involving verbal, gestural, and material components *in situ*, and thus giving rise to “multi-modal CA” (Deppermann 2013).

Harvey Sacks. Fare Sociologia, the book co-edited by Enrico Caniglia, Andrea Spreafico and Federico Zanettin, offers an apt opportunity to revisit the sociological interest of early CA, both for the Italophone reader and the STS scholar. Indeed, the book brings together Italian translations of four important texts by Sacks, each of which is briefly introduced by the co-editors and co-translators. The first part of the book gathers two translations of methodological statements by Sacks (1963, 1984), whilst the second part offers translations of two exemplary studies (1972, 1975). Where does the “sociological interest” of these studies lie? In a pivotal footnote to his first publication on methodology, entitled “Sociological Description,” the 28-year old Sacks (1963, 8, n. 8). offered a concise answer:

Having produced procedural descriptions of the assembly of a suicide classification[,] it may turn out that it is the category and the methodology for applying it that constitutes the interesting sociological problem.

In hindsight, this “informed guess” sounds like an ironic understatement. Indeed, the quoted passage does not only declare the heuristic interest of the methodological subversion (turning Durkheim’s reliance on

official statistics and the categories drawn upon for “suicide classification” into a phenomenon), but it also suggests that declaration to be informed by actual descriptions (hinting at the possibility of a broader study of categorization methods). The two studies translated for *Harvey Sacks*, the presently reviewed volume, deliver such descriptions of categorization phenomena. “An initial investigation of the usability of conversational data for doing sociology” (1972) offers a systematic analysis of the category-based self-inquiry which, as it happens, may lead a person to conclude that (s)he has “no one to turn to.” In doing so, the study turns the discursive articulation of lay sociological reasoning into an empirical phenomenon, discursive articulation which happens to be organized in terms of identity categories (“family members,” “colleagues,” “friends,” etc.) and their reflexive application (as a speaker, eventually, may self-categorize as a “suicidal person”). The second study included in the volume, “Everyone has to lie” (1975), *inter alia* describes variously observed answers to “how are you” questions and, in particular, how these answers are differently designed depending upon the identity categories implied by speakers (e.g., when addressing each other as “friends”), their sequential sensibilities (e.g., to a negative answer and the extended sequence of explanation that it may entail), and other contextual cues. In offering empirical descriptions of identity categorization at play in conversation (what Sacks coined “membership categorization”), the two studies contribute(d) to investigating the unacknowledged common-sense procedures of sociological discourse. In doing so, the studies deliver upon ethnomethodology’s promise to analyze “everyday life as a phenomenon,” including professional sociology among other domains of expertise (cf. Zimmerman and Pollner 1970). For the Italophone reader, each of the translated texts, methodological or empirical, is introduced by a careful editor’s note, which explains the sociological interest and continuing relevance of each text, as well as of the analytic project that they contribute to (for a related volume, see Caniglia and Spreafico 2011).

What might be the key lesson of early CA, and the discussed translation(s) in particular, for the STS scholar? In one of his lectures, Sacks (1992a) gave a bluntly dismissive answer to this kind of naïvely self-interested question, asked by one of his students (p. 472). Indeed, Sacks’ observational approach of identity categories in action and interaction first invites us to describe how they are used, methodically used by whomsoever (including categories such as “the STS scholar”, “the sociologist” and/or “the Italophone reader”). His approach affords us not only with an explicit and rigorous methodology, a fact which distinguishes Sacks’ reported answer from mere arrogance, but also with subtle reflections on the internal relations between (conversational) phenomena, recordings, data, and analysis *from the very outset* (e.g., Sacks 1963; 1984; 1992a; 1992b). Despite or precisely because of Sacks’ plea for a “natural observational science” of social ordering *in situ*, his legacy (see also, Fitz-

gerald and Housley 2015) is perhaps best read as a call for an unapologetically reflexive STS. To have reminded readers of this critical possibility, however, is only one welcome consequence of *Harvey Sacks. Fare Sociologia*, the book carefully co-edited by Enrico Caniglia and his colleagues.

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