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Social Interaction, Language and Society

This book is about how society is accomplished in and through social interaction, how language is central to this accomplishment and how the interactional nature of social life may be investigated. We invite the reader to share in not only a particular vision of social life, as constituted in and through language and social interaction, but also a form of sociological inquiry that is consistent with and follows from this vision. This form of inquiry is known as ethnomethodology. In this chapter we outline the nature of our conception of social life by considering in turn its three key ideas or components: social interaction, language and society. In the next chapter we explain what we mean by ethnomethodology. In the chapters to follow, various aspects of social life are considered from the point of view we propose. We present analysis and discuss studies consistent with this approach and explain how they implement the form of sociological inquiry that we are recommending. Our overall aim is not just to show what is involved in doing ethnomethodology, but also to invite the reader to try for him- or herself this way of doing sociology.

Social interaction

What we refer to as 'society' is made up of social activities of many different kinds. What makes these activities 'social' is that they are done with or in relation to others. Some activities are collective activities – these are done by several or many persons acting together. Examples of such collective activities are a family meal, a business meeting, a football match or a political election. Other activities may be done by a single individual but with reference to others, or in a context that involves and is made possible by other people. Examples of this are getting dressed in the morning, walking along the street, reading a book or writing a letter. Such activities can be referred to as 'individual' activities so long as it is remembered that, like collective activities, *what* is done and *how* it is done is shaped by the fact that the activity is part of a shared social life, a life that we lead with others.

This is confirmed by the fact that such individual activities are recognizable as the activity they are, not simply to the person who happens to be performing them but to other members of society. In other words, for something done by an individual (or by a number of persons acting together) to be identifiable and describable as 'this' activity (for example, waiting at a streetcorner, reading a newspaper, running to catch a bus) means that the activity in question forms part of a 'grammar' of activities known by and recognizable to the society's members. Consequently, using the term 'individual' to refer to activities done by a single person acting alone does not mean that such activities are somehow less social than others done by persons acting together. Even if an activity is being done by an individual acting entirely alone, it is none the less a social activity in the sense that we intend here.

Another way of putting this is to say that our activities as members of society are fundamentally interactional in character. By this we mean not simply that much we do is done through face-to-face interaction with others, nor even that we do many things through 'mediated interaction', for example, talking on the telephone, communicating by letter or e-mail. More than this, our point is that even things we do alone are informed by our membership of society and our social relationships with others. As we have already indicated, the very possibility of recognizably engaging in this or that activity is provided by such membership. Furthermore, the circumstances in which we are able to be alone and do things by ourselves are socially organized and the things we are entitled to do by ourselves are socially sanctioned. Not only this, but we have learned how to do things – from speaking our native language to using the Internet – through interaction with other people. We can be held accountable by other people for how we do these things, whether we do them in socially acceptable ways or in appropriate circumstances. In this sense everything we do, from the most obviously collective actions to the most 'individual' ones, are made possible by the interactional nature of our social lives. In relation to this point, then, it is not an incidental fact about us that we are members of society, rather it is a fundamental one with regard to who we are and what we do – to *all* that we are and *everything* we do.

Later in this chapter we expand upon what we mean by 'membership of society'. For the moment we will observe that social interaction takes place in many settings: on the street, in the home, at work, in institutions such as hospitals, schools and prisons, and in the corridors of government and the boardrooms of transnational companies, to name but a few. In all these settings, and many more, persons interact with one another to get social activities done. The activities may be as ostensibly simple and commonplace as asking the time or for directions to the railway station, or as complex and momentous as deciding the interest rate of the Bank of England (and therefore the national level of interest rates in the UK). Nevertheless, whether the participants to the interaction are strangers on a city street or the members of the Monetary Policy Committee, their interaction has some general

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features. Two of these features common to all social interaction are the structured character of interaction and the contextual availability of meaning. We discuss these two features in turn.

The structured character of interaction

It is often assumed that interaction between people can be explained in terms of individuals and their characteristics. Indeed, this view has a long and illustrious history in theories of human behaviour. Anyone who has not studied social interaction could be forgiven for thinking that the course of any interaction depends entirely on what the persons involved decide to do or say, based on their individual desires, intentions and predispositions. Since interaction takes place between persons, it is tempting to think that there is nothing more to it but what individuals happen to do. Therefore interaction, one might think, is simply a product of individuals and the 'choices' they make, where these choices are to a degree unrestricted. After all, much interaction has a highly spontaneous character; one does not know what someone is going to say or do until they say or do it. To call interaction 'social', on this view, is to refer simply to the fact that it occurs between individuals. It implies nothing about the *organization* of what is done.

Through much of its history as a discipline, sociology has sought to establish the inadequacy of such an individualist account of human behaviour. Typically it has done so by arguing that behaviour is nowhere near as unrestricted as individualist accounts assume. Sociologists have insisted that how persons act towards one another is constrained in significant ways by their membership of society. In other words, and putting things very simplistically, whereas individualist theories locate the determinants of behaviour 'inside' the individual, sociological theories traditionally have located them 'outside' in the structure of society. Social interaction, from this point of view, is an arena within which the social forces that constrain individuals and shape their behaviour are played out.

The view we argue for in this book differs from both of these conceptions. Both the individualist and traditional sociological approaches are to be rejected, since each treats the interactional character of human behaviour as 'epi-phenomenal', that is, as the product of some more basic factors and therefore of secondary interest. In both approaches, whatever order is to be found in social interaction is explained as the result of something else. Both its origin and character comes about either because of the 'inner' make up of individuals or the 'outer' determinants of society (or some combination of the two). Social interaction has no intrinsic orderliness in its own right; it only has the orderly features that are imposed upon it by such inner or outer factors.

Against this view we will argue that all social interaction is 'intrinsically socially structured'. What we are referring to as social interaction involves any situation in which a person produces an action addressed or directed

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towards another and/or which invites or makes possible a response from another. All such actions are 'structured' in the sense that the character of the action produced by Person A 'conditions' what can be done in response to it by Person B. Let us look at some simple examples:

Example 1
A: Hi, my name's Brian.
B: Hi, I'm John.

Example 2
A: Excuse me?
B: Yes?

Example 3
A: [*wringing his hand*] SHIT!
B: Are you OK?

Note the links between the first utterance and the second in each of the examples. In Example 1 A introduces himself to B, whereupon B produces a return introduction. The two actions go together as a pair; they constitute an 'introduction exchange'. This exchange exemplifies what conversation analysts call an 'adjacency pair', in that A's utterance performs a first action which makes relevant a responding second action by B in the next utterance. (We will discuss adjacency pairs in more detail in Chapter 3). In Example 2 the structure is a little more complex. Again the two utterances form an adjacency pair, but here the structure extends into the third (not as yet produced) slot. A's 'Excuse me?' is responded to by B with a 'Yes', which does two things. First, it indicates that B has heard it as what we might call a 'pre-question marker', and second it responds to A's utterance as such a marker by returning the interactional floor to A with 'permission' to ask the question or make the request that A has in mind. In both these first two examples person B is 'selected' to speak by person A addressing an utterance to him/her. Example 3 illustrates how an action that is not actually addressed to another (A's 'SHIT' is an expletive on hurting his hand) can nevertheless occasion an interactional response. Although B is not 'selected' to speak by speaker A, it is clear that B's response is the proper ('natural') one in the circumstances. When someone near to us suffers a sudden hurt or injury a response such as B's is the expectable (and expected) one. Ironically, were B to have not acted in response to A's hurt, he/she would most likely be found to have acted improperly by ignoring someone in trouble. Thus Example 3 also illustrates how not responding to another can be a kind of action – 'doing nothing'.

To say that interaction is intrinsically socially structured, then, is to note that the actions of the participants are 'tied' together in intelligible and appropriate ways. An action *projects* the kind of thing that can or should be done next, while this in turn, in so far as it is recognizable as a responding

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action, *fits* with what has been projected. The structures involved are not invented on the spot by the individuals that happen to be engaged in this particular interaction, but neither are they reproduced 'mechanically' by such persons. One's social competence consists in the ability to use these structures in producing and making sense of social interaction.

The contextual availability of meaning

What the examples above also show is that mutual intelligibility is fundamental to interaction. Obviously for person B to respond in an appropriate way to person A, it requires that B understands what A has said or done. For persons to interact with one another requires that each has some grasp of what the other is doing or saying. Once again, the individualistic perspective might suggest that the meaning of persons' actions is highly problematic. Presumably the only person who knows definitively what is meant by something said is the individual saying it. Along not dissimilar lines, some recent sociological theorizing, associated with postmodernism and radical reflexivity, holds that all meaning is problematic and relative and that therefore 'common understanding' is at best arbitrary and at worst impossible. In so far as common understandings obtain in social life, such sociologies suggest that they do so largely as a result of the exercise of power. Of course, we would not disagree that the meaning of a word, an action or a situation can be problematic. Thus, we have all experienced situations where someone has said or done something and we have been unsure what they meant by it. But equally, we are all familiar with occasions where it is perfectly plain what someone means. Furthermore, it is a massively observable fact that members of society interact with one another with little apparent difficulty in mutual understanding.

In our view, any adequate account of such mutual understanding has to recognize the role that 'context' plays in the comprehension of meaning in interaction. Taken out of its context of use, just about any phrase or sentence can be viewed as puzzling or ambiguous. Within that context, however, what is meant is normally quite transparent. Thus, while even the most plain and clear meaning can be rendered problematic if one so chooses, such problematizing of meaning involves removing the contextual specifics that make meaning clear. Those sociologists and philosophers who argue for the 'indeterminacy of meaning' do so on theoretical grounds that have little to do with how members of society actually comprehend the meaning of what is said or done. Furthermore, it is only within the confines of academic discourse that the possibility of questioning every common and plain understanding is a legitimate activity. In ordinary social life, in actual contexts of interaction, persons are not given license to systematically doubt the meanings of words and actions. In this sense, then, the skeptical character of postmodernism and radical reflexivity would seem to have little relevance for how people understand one another in everyday social life.

We have hinted above that the individualist view of interaction is associated with a 'mentalistic' view of meaning. According to this view, meaning is something created in the mind of the individual. Proponents of this mentalistic view of meaning argue that since one does not have access to the mind of the other, one can never really know what is meant by their actions. There are three noteworthy problems with this mentalistic view of meaning. The first is that problems of understanding are not ubiquitous: they are the exception rather than the rule. Second, when we experience a problem about what someone means, it is almost never an 'open-ended' difficulty (that is, where one has no idea at all what could be meant). Usually the problem of understanding is quite specific – one is not sure whether what is meant in this context is this or that. Third, when we have such a problem we have ways of dealing with it – by asking for explanation or clarification. For example:

Example 4
Mother: Who else is going to this party?
Teenage daughter: What do you mean?

Here the daughter asks her mother to explain what she means by the question about the party. What might the problem of understanding be here? Is it that the daughter has no idea what her mother means by the question, in the sense that she has no notion of what the words mean? This seems a remote possibility. A more plausible one is that the daughter's problem concerns her mother's motive in asking the question. Grasping the motive provides a way of understanding what is being asked and thus what an appropriate kind of answer might be. For example, is the mother asking for a list of all those who are due to attend the party? But what reason could she have for wanting to know this? Asking who will be present at a party can be one way of judging what kind of party it will be. Perhaps the question is not about *all* who will be at the party, but just certain specific persons. The speaker is, after all, a mother, and what is more, a mother of a teenage daughter. Typically, mothers of teenage daughters are known to be concerned about who their daughters associate with, wanting to avoid her getting 'in with the wrong crowd'. This possibility suggests that the daughter's problem may not really be to do with understanding at all, but is more about the mother's right to ask such a question. 'What do you mean?' may be used to express not a problem of comprehension but of entitlement: what right has the mother got to question her daughter about who she associates with?

Of course, with ingenuity (and a tolerance for implausibility) one could come up with an infinite list of possible things that the mother in the above example might have meant by what she said. One can construct these possibilities by introducing other contextual features and thereby attributing all sorts of (weird and wonderful) possible motives to her. For example, perhaps she is really asking because she would like to come to the party herself: she

is jealous of her daughter's teenage status and would like to relive her own adolescent years. Alternatively, perhaps she is an extreme evangelical Christian and sees the party as a possible opportunity for religious activity: she is interested to know who will be at the party because she is thinking of coming along to distribute religious literature and appeal to the non-Christians present to 'see the light'. The reader may invent other possibilities for him- or herself.

In the absence of any actual contextual information supporting these interpretations, they amount to idle, groundless speculation. However, participants in social interaction seldom have the freedom to engage in this kind of idle speculation about the motives behind the actions of others. The fundamental constraint that operates in all interaction is that persons should, wherever possible, take things 'at face value'. In other words, one should respond to the actions of others on the basis of what those actions seem, obviously or most plausibly, to be. If something seems quite obviously to be a question addressed to oneself, then respond to it as such. The same holds for the meaning of what is said. If the meaning of the question is clear, then respond to it on that basis.

Against the mentalistic theory, then, we suggest that there is no general problem of meaning or understanding in interaction, therefore nothing for a general theory to explain. Rather, problems of understanding are 'occasional'. They arise in specific interactional contexts, and the particular difficulties they involve exist by virtue of that context. It is the contextual availability of meaning that provides the background against which specific actions may on a specific occasion be found puzzling. The occasioned nature of problems of understanding has implications for how meaning is conceptualized. Ever since the writings of Weber, it has been common for sociologists to emphasize the importance of meaning by talking about the 'interpretive' nature of interaction. The term 'interpretation' is useful in emphasizing that participants in interaction have to make sense of what others are doing. Interaction is not a mechanical process of stimulus and response. However, the use of the term 'interpretation' as a general description can misleadingly suggest that interaction involves persons in a kind of continual puzzle-solving: that everything anyone does has to be 'interpreted' before one can decide how to respond to it. We suggest the opposite – most of the time what others are doing is 'transparent'. This does not mean that persons do not make sense, but that most of the time such sense making is massively routine and unproblematic.

Language

So far we have talked about the nature of social interaction. But as the examples we have given above make clear, interaction is overwhelmingly conducted through language. It is in and through language that most of the

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actions we perform are done. Through language we ask and answer questions, request help, give instructions, report problems, make jokes, explain who and what we are, and so on. Language is fundamental to everything that is done in social life: as members of society we live our social lives by talking to and with others. This is true of the 'insignificant' activities we engage in as well as the 'significant' ones. For example, through language we are able to do things like chatting with a friend or asking the time, but also things like answering questions in a job interview or proposing marriage. However, it is not just the activities of individuals that are dependent upon language. The institutional structures of society that you have read about in sociology textbooks – such things as economic organization, the legal system, political and educational structures – are also made possible by language. Such institutions themselves consist of activities of various kinds – business meetings, courtroom trials, parliamentary debates and classroom lessons – which are conducted through the use of language.

In short, social life is permeated by language at every level. As members of society, we use language to describe, question or explain what is going on around us, as well as to perform actions that others may then describe, question or explain. The relationship between language and social life is thus a mutually constitutive one. Without language there could be no social life, at least as we human beings live it. Conversely, without social life there would be no need of language, since it is communication that lies at the heart of language. Through language persons are able to communicate with one another; we need to communicate because we lead social lives together and it is linguistic communication that makes social life what it is.

There are various interests that one could have in language. Our focus in this book will be on language-in-use; we are concerned with the ways that language is used in social activities. Our approach to language contrasts, for example, with the predominant approach taken in the discipline of linguistics. Here the concern is with language conceived as a grammatical system. Linguistic theory seeks to explain the principles by which grammatically well-formed sentences are generated, hence the approach is called 'generative linguistics'. These principles are assumed to be part of any speaker's mental apparatus. The task of the linguistic theorist, therefore, is not to describe 'performance' – how persons actually talk – but to reconstruct the linguistic 'competence' that each one of us, according to the theory, possesses in our minds. To this end, linguistic theorists such as Chomsky (1975) study language in abstraction from its actual use, examining sentences that have been invented by the theorist.

The view of language taken here differs in several fundamental respects from this generative linguistic approach. First, our concern is not with language as an abstract system but as a practical vehicle of communication. From this point of view it is notable that, contrary to what generative linguistics might lead one to think, persons much of the time do not speak in grammatically perfect sentences, or even in sentences at all. Yet the ungrammatical character of much language-in-use does not typically create

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communication difficulties; persons seem quite able to understand one another without prioritizing grammatical correctness. Second, our concern is not with the individual speaker and his or her internal linguistic knowledge, but with the ways that persons achieve 'interpersonal understanding' through language. Whereas linguistic theorists like Chomsky conceive language as an individual and mental phenomenon, language-in-use is a social phenomenon; it 'exists' in the communicative relations between persons. This leads to a third difference, of a methodological kind. Unlike the isolated, invented sentences of the linguistic theorist, the data for our inquiries has to be the actual things that are said by real people in social interaction. Our interest is in how persons use language together to accomplish the social activities that they are engaged in.

What about the view of language taken within sociology? Here too one finds that the dominant approach differs from the one advocated here. The first point to make is that, for much of its history, sociology paid little attention to language and failed to see it as a significant phenomenon. Given the essential and paramount role of language in social life, it is perhaps surprising that sociology for so long took little interest in it. With the exception of the later writings of Durkheim, one will find no mention of language in the works of the founding fathers. During the period of sociology's expansion as an academic discipline, language was marginal at best to its research interests. What could account for this neglect? One possibility is that the very ubiquity of language, its pervasiveness in everything we do, makes it easy to overlook its importance. It is so much a part of what we do that it requires effort not to take it for granted.

We suspect that there is also a theoretical reason for this neglect. The predominant tendency in sociology has been to focus upon the results or outcomes of social activities without asking how language is used to accomplish such results. For example, sociologists traditionally have paid much attention to 'rates of behaviour' – crime rates, suicide rates, rates of industrial or political action of various kinds – and typically have sought to explain these in terms of other kinds of measures. The availability of such rates as sociological data is made possible by the activities of those who have assembled the records from which the rates are compiled, such as police officers, coroners, civil servants, employers and so on. These activities are conducted through language: it is by means of language, for example, that decisions are made as to whether to count an event as a case of this or that statistical type. Yet the linguistic activity that has gone into the production of official records disappears from sight when the rates are treated as free-standing, 'anonymous' phenomena.

In so far as sociologists have paid attention to language, this has often taken the form of theorizing language as just another variable that requires sociological explanation in terms of its relationship with other social factors. Language is often taken to be a 'mediating variable', providing a causal link between general features of society and the fates of individuals. The form of such explanations is twofold: first, socially distributed aspects of

language use such as dialect, vocabulary and idiom are explained by other social factors, for example social class, gender or race. Second, these linguistic features are held to account for the life chances of individuals, involving such things as marital patterns and occupational career paths. We will briefly mention two examples of this approach to language.

The first concerns the relationship between language and educational achievement. A theory of educational achievement that was very popular in the 1970s holds that a critical factor in determining class differences in children's school performance is the linguistic code, or style of speech, that they have acquired as a result of their family background (Bernstein, 1975). Children from middle-class families, the theory proposes, arrive at school equipped with an elaborated code of speech that fits well both with the expectations of teachers and the communication demands that formal education makes upon the child. Children from lower-class backgrounds, however, are said to arrive at school equipped with a restricted code that leads them to be viewed as less able by teachers and which creates difficulties for them in meeting the demands of schooling.

More recently, numerous studies have argued a relationship between language and gender. In the work of Tannen (1990), for example, it is argued that differences between women and men in the style of their conversational interaction reflect basic differences in the social personalities of women and men. Tannen argues that as a result of childhood socialization, men and women are motivated by quite different general orientations in interaction: men towards hierarchy and competition for position, women towards solidarity and mutual support. This individualist/collectivist gender difference is then reflected in how talk is conducted. In their turn, such differences can be seen to reproduce and to have an impact upon the relative life chances of men and women. Tannen claims that women, by virtue of these learned personality characteristics and the linguistic patterns that follow from them, are at a systematic disadvantage in the male-dominated world of work, thus perpetuating occupational inequality.

In these ways language is incorporated within explanations of specific aspects of society. Now, it is not our intention to argue that learned ways of speaking cannot have educational consequences or implications for gender relations. Indeed, that there may be a link between how one speaks and one's chances of educational success or occupational advancement is something that novelists and other writers have noted long before it became thematic within sociology. However, while such connections between language and social relations may be evident, our point is that sociological theories that conceive it solely in terms of causal connections between social structural variables and linguistic interaction take an excessively narrow view of the social nature of language. The causal approach is inadequate because it crucially misses the 'constitutive' nature of language in social life; language is not just one variable among many, nor does it simply play a role in this or that aspect of social life. Rather, it constitutes the very possibility of social life in the first place. Thus, in relation to schooling, language is not

simply (if it is) a basis for teachers' judgements of children's abilities; it is through the use of language that the fundamentals of schooling within which such judgements are embedded are produced in the first place. Without the use of language there could be no such things as lessons and therefore no teacher's questions or pupil's answers. Similarly, that gender is both massively observable in and widely relevant to the activities that make up ordinary social life is largely constituted in and through language. One expression of this is that men and women are conventionally given different names such that if one knows a person's name a reasonable inference can be made about that person's gender.

In recent years the constitutive character of language in social life has come to be recognized to a certain extent in social thought. In place of the causal approach just described, many sociologists nowadays regard language as comprising a system of representations or signs in and through which all social phenomena are realized. Society is a 'semiotic' reality in this view: every aspect of social life shapes and is shaped by language, conceived as structures of linguistic signs. Such structures, or 'discourses' as they are often called, amount to organized sets of linguistic representations that give meaning to social phenomena. The key point made by proponents of this approach is that linguistic representation is never neutral, never simply corresponds *to* the extra-linguistic nature of that which it represents. Thus meaning does not flow from object to sign, but rather the other way round: signs *impose meaning upon* that which they represent. Thus different discourses represent things in quite different ways. Furthermore, discourses themselves differ in their social distribution. While there may be a variety of discourses within society, some are used more widely and propagated more effectively as representational systems than others. Some discourses are apparently 'expert' or 'authoritative' ways of representing an aspect of social life. On this basis, one can speak of 'dominant' (and of course 'subordinate') discourses in society. The more widespread and/or authoritative a discourse is, the more it dominates the way in which social phenomena are thought about and acted towards by members of society.

This semiotic approach to society has become enormously popular and influential in present-day sociology, underpinning studies in areas of inquiry as diverse as media, education, health, work, crime and the family, to name but a few. Across these fields of research studies display strong analytical similarities. Such studies tend to be geared towards identifying the features of this or that discourse and tracing its influence upon the definition and treatment of social issues and problems. As such, the analyses they present invariably have a critical cast, explicitly or implicitly. The semiotic notion that meaning is 'imposed' upon phenomena provides the basis for conceiving socially accepted definitions of issues and problems as irremediably tendentious: they are imposed by some groups upon others in the service of social interests. Where once social domination was accounted for in terms of the control of society's economic resources, now it is held, by discourse analysts at least, to consist in control of society's semiotic structures. By

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revealing the social origins and the arbitrary character of such structures, sociological analyses are held to point towards more rational understandings of social life and 'emancipation' from such domination.

While the political ends that inform contemporary discourse analysis may be laudable, the conception of language it assumes is highly questionable in several respects. First, it presupposes an extremely cognitive view of language. We referred earlier in this chapter to a 'mentalistic' conception of meaning, namely the view that mean consists of ideas in the mind. The conception of meaning that lies at the centre of the semiotic approach is just such a mentalistic view. Meaning is conceived in terms of the relationship between a textual or aural vehicle and an idea in the mind (a 'signifier' and a 'signified' in the terminology of semiotics). However, unlike the individualist theory discussed earlier, semiotics conceives of such meanings as socially shared. On the basis of this assumption, to describe the system of signs is by definition also to describe the organization of people's ideas. Thus language is held to shape and restrict the very possibilities of thought. However, since the system itself resides at an unconscious level, the discourse analyst argues that the semiotic shaping of social experience is not something that members of society are aware of. From the viewpoint of ordinary members of society the discursive formations in terms of which phenomena are perceived and understood are invisible. Furthermore, their 'hegemonic' character means that the meanings they give to phenomena are experienced as objective and natural. Given the assumption of the semiotic approach that persons are only able to conceive phenomena through the discursive frameworks available to them, it is difficult for them to step outside such frameworks and comprehend them independently. It follows that the contingent and historically relative character of the way of thinking and the forms of practice that the discourse provides remains beyond the member of society's ordinary comprehension. Only sociological analysis has the capacity to reveal the structure and operations of discourse.

The cognitivist presuppositions of the semiotic approach entail a gulf in understanding between the sociologist and the ordinary member of society. For reasons that we will explain presently, the notion of such a gulf is inimical to the approach we recommend in this book. The important point to note here is that the view that how members of society think can be read off from a semiotic analysis of the structure of language deflects sociological attention from the detail of people's actual conduct. This neglect of situated action in favour of decontextualized analysis of the meaning of signs is reinforced by a distinction, fundamental to the whole semiotic approach, between the structure of language and its use. As expressed by the founder of semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure, the difference between '*langue*' and '*parole*' concerns two distinct dimensions of language (Saussure, 1983). On the one hand is *langue*, the systematic relations between signs, while on the other is *parole*, the actual ways in which persons use language to communicate in concrete situations. This distinction is not dissimilar to Chomsky's (1965: 4) distinction between 'competence' and 'performance'. Like Chomsky,

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in Sausurre's view no scientific analysis of language is possible at the level of *parole*: how persons actually use language is subject to too many random factors for any generalizations to be possible. But this is no particular loss for Saussure; since the structure of language corresponds to the organization of thought, the analysis of *parole* would in any case tell us little about how people understand their experience.

Language-in-use

The semiotic approach is right to stress the constitutive role of language in social life. Language is not merely a factor or variable to be understood in relation to theoretically-defined problems and issues, but first and foremost is the means by which all aspects of social life are conducted. The key word here is 'conducted'. Members of society use language to do the social activities that make up their lives together. As we have already suggested, everything we do, from the most extraordinary and significant things down to the most insignificant and ordinary ones, including the trivial and uninteresting parts of our lives, are done in and through the use of language. However, though the uses made of language may sometimes be trivial, the fact that language is a mundane feature of all social life is anything but trivial. Furthermore, in our view, by ignoring how people actually use language in social interaction, sociologists both misunderstand the social nature of language and lose sight of the detail of social life. The key point that both the causal and the semiotic approaches to language fail to appreciate is the 'situated' nature of language use. We noted above that context is fundamental to meaning in interaction. In using language to perform activities, members of society shape the words they use to the situation at hand, and use the situation at hand to understand the meaning of words. When persons speak to one another, they do not simply recite pre-determined linguistic formulae, independent of the circumstances of their speech situation. There are, of course, some 'ceremonial' speech situations, in which a ritualized form of words must be precisely recited in order for the desired outcome to be achieved – marriage ceremonies, courtroom oath-taking and the bestowing of knighthood would be examples. However, these occasions confirm the point, for the sense of the required expressions is tied to the particular ceremonial occasion. Overwhelmingly, however, ordinary speech does not involve the use of pre-set linguistic expressions. Rather, persons spontaneously produce talk that 'fits' the situation they are in, including the talk of others. They do so, then, not in some predetermined way but because the words used display a particular understanding of what is happening 'here and now'.

A simple way to illustrate the situated nature of language use is by considering how descriptions are constructed. Descriptions are a universal feature of social life: pretty much everything that is done in any walk of social life involves describing things – events, objects, places, persons, actions and

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so forth. If language use was not situated, it would be reasonable to expect that whenever a given object or event was referred to in talk, by whomsoever for whatsoever reason, it would be described in the same way – perhaps in the way that had been established as the most 'accurate' description. But clearly this is not how description works. How something is described varies according to the circumstances in relation to which the description is produced. As we will see in Chapter 3, the same object or event may be described in very different terms according to who is describing it to whom and for what reason. The issue about the description often is not accuracy but relevance or appropriateness: is this the appropriate kind of description for this occasion or purpose? For example, a spouse who asks 'What sort of day have you had?' to a partner just home from work might find it puzzling to receive a lengthy description of a quite routine journey to work or a detailed account of a telephone call concerning a minor and uninteresting business matter. Similarly, a parent telephoning their student son might be nonplussed to receive, in answer to the question 'What have you been up to?', a description of the night-club that he had attended the previous evening and a detailed account of the numerous 'mixes' that the DJ played. The strangeness of such talk lies in its situational inappropriateness rather than its factual status. In other words, the problem the recipient has in such cases is not 'Is this true?' but 'Why are you telling *me* this?' In experiencing such a puzzle, what is being oriented to is the 'recipient designed' nature of talk. Let us explain what we mean by this notion.

We noted earlier that interaction involves fitting actions to their context and that meaning is understood contextually. A key contextual feature of such understandings is the identity of the participants. Persons do not talk to one another as anonymous 'actors', but as occupants of situationally relevant identities or membership categories. These concepts will be explained in subsequent chapters. For now, we simply note that one of the ways such identities are made relevant is through the construction of descriptions that are geared to 'this person' with whom one is interacting. The term 'recipient design' has been coined to describe the ways in which speakers gear their talk to the relevant identity of the person with whom they are interacting. In other words, it is a general feature of conversational talk – as well as talk of other kinds – that speakers will 'design' their talk to take account of the person to whom they are speaking in the circumstances in which they are being spoken with. Recipient design involves taking into account such things as the knowledge and interests of the other person, the relationship in which one stands to them and, perhaps most importantly, what it is that the other person has just said.

The key point to note here, then, is that language use in interaction has a 'local character'. The situated nature of language use means that what is said in any interaction is being said here and now in *this* situation, with *these* circumstances in mind and *this* interactional task at hand. The form of words that a speaker employs is tied to and displays the character of the local situation at hand.

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Society

We suggested at the beginning of this chapter that the notion of the individual as an entity separate from society is incoherent and fails to recognize the all pervasive character of social life. Yet so far we have said little about the concept of 'society'. As students of sociology, readers will be aware that according to the textbooks it is the study of this phenomenon, 'society', that sociology is all about. Therefore it seems reasonable to expect that sociology will provide a clear account of what this phenomenon consists of. However, on consulting the above-mentioned textbooks, the student of sociology will discover something rather peculiar: that the question 'What is society?' is treated as a theoretical puzzle. It will also become apparent that sociology's prevailing assumption is that solving this puzzle requires a theory that will explain what kind of entity society is, and provide some clue as to its significant features. Reading on in the textbooks, the student will find that there are many candidates for such a theory, that what society is like has been conceived in many different ways. For example, society can be regarded as a kind of 'social organism', on the model of a living creature, with needs that must be met for it to survive. Other theoretical conceptions view society in architectural terms, as involving a 'base' that gives shape to the whole and a 'superstructure' that rests upon the base. Alternatively, society can be viewed as a 'system' of some kind, perhaps on the model of a mechanical system like an engine or – as in the semiotic approach – as a symbolic system like morse code. The history of sociological thought consists in large measure of debates amongst the proponents of such theoretical conceptions and the programmes of inquiry through which they are applied and their detail worked out. Furthermore, it would be no exaggeration to say that research in contemporary sociology consists overwhelmingly in the empirical implementation of such theoretical conceptions. So pervasive are such conceptions of society that the student can be forgiven for concluding that sociological inquiry cannot be done any other way. However, several reasons can be adduced for thinking that a different approach to sociological analysis may be worthy of consideration.

To begin with, the assumption that understanding society is dependant upon possession of a theory has several unfortunate consequences. The first is that it generates the kind of gulf mentioned earlier between professional sociological accounts of social life and the understandings possessed by those whom the sociologist studies. It is commonly argued that ordinary members of society do not possess the theoretical concepts of sociology. The implication is that those aspects of social life that can only be understood by virtue of these concepts are unavailable to ordinary understanding. Persons may be members of society, but precisely what it is that they are members of is assumed to be beyond their ability to fully grasp. By comparison with the understandings that can be derived from the theories of the sociologist, whose accounts are taken as a benchmark for assessing the

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value of knowledge, the understandings of the ordinary members are regarded as second rate; they are both incomplete and faulty. Lacking the theoretical concepts of sociology, the ordinary member of society is unable to transcend the limitations of ordinary understanding. The sociologist, in contrast, uses theoretical concepts to reveal aspects of social life that are 'hidden' from the ordinary person.

From this widely accepted point of view, then, the sociology task is a corrective one *vis-à-vis* the things that ordinary persons think and believe about social life. The stance that sociology usually adopts towards ordinary social life, therefore, is best described as 'professional skepticism'. It is a mark of sociological professional expertise that ordinary assertions, claims, beliefs that are made by members of society about this or that aspect of social life should be regarded skeptically, and therefore as requiring either replacement or explanation. The knowledge that members of society possess and use to conduct their activities typically is deemed to be irrational, ungrounded and in various other ways arbitrary and inadequate. Despite these perceived failings, however, the fact of the matter is that these activities continue to be accomplished. Social life, it would seem, carries on regardless of the deficiencies of understanding allegedly pervading it, deficiencies that are extensively documented by sociologists.

This fact might lead one to question the validity of the conventional sociological denigration of ordinary life and ordinary understandings. Furthermore, it might suggest that the theories of society put forward by sociologists are irrelevant with reference to ordinary social activities. The clear implication of sociology's professional skepticism is that social life would be better organized and more successfully conducted if things were done in accordance with sociology's theories. But why should members of society accept this prejudice? Why should one suppose that members of society require any theory of social life in order to accomplish their activities? It is a sociological assumption that social life is only adequately understood through theory. Perhaps ordinary persons do not have a theory of their social life and the activities that comprise it because they do not need one to carry those activities out.

In contrast to conventional sociological assumptions, then, it may be more reasonable to suppose that ordinary persons are quite well equipped to engage in their social activities without possessing anything like a professional sociological theory of those activities. Of course, this is not to deny that members of society, in the course of their ordinary activities, engage in theorizing about aspects of their social circumstances. But such theorizing, as we will see in the later chapters of this book, overwhelmingly is ad hoc, practical theorizing. Therefore, from the point of view adopted in this book, such theorizing is simply another social activity; that persons construct and use theories about this or that puzzling feature of their experience does not mean that they find social life itself a theoretical puzzle. In other words, there is a fundamental difference between the kinds of theorizing that members of society actually engage in and the kind of theorizing they

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would have to perform in order to match up to the presuppositions of theoretical sociology. Instead of that kind of presupposed knowledge we will show that what members of society actually possess is a practical, working knowledge of how to do the social activities that make up the organization of society.

If members' knowledge is not theoretical knowledge, then what kind of knowledge is it? Persons act on the basis of what they know and understand: about the relations between themselves and others, the circumstances of their situation, the relevant norms and rules to which they should attend in carrying out their activities, and many other things. They know these things not as theoretical objects or topics but as practical matters. The philosopher Alfred Schutz (1962) argued that the understandings through which persons conduct the activities of ordinary life have a fundamentally practical character. What this means is that members' knowledge is knowledge-in-use. Persons employ what they know in the course of acting in the world, not in reflecting upon society from some detached and independent standpoint. For theoretical sociology, this might be seen as confirming the inadequacy of members' knowledge: how can it be expected to be as accurate, valid and so on as sociological knowledge when it is 'pre-theoretical' and driven by practical requirements? However, there is another way of looking at this: that members' knowledge is pre-theoretical and practical means that it is of a different order to the theoretical knowledge sought by the sociologist. It is 'designed' for a different purpose – that of getting things done. If we want to understand it, therefore, we should not assume that it is some lesser version of sociological theory, but a different phenomenon altogether.

For the above reasons, then, the notion that theory must occupy a primary place in sociological inquiry if we are to learn anything worthwhile or interesting about society can be questioned. In contrast with the prevailing assumption that social order is revealed via the practice of sociological theorizing, then, the view taken in this book is that social order is available to ordinary members of society as both a precondition and a product of their activities. In other words, whereas conventional sociology regards the member of society as someone who lacks sociological expertise and therefore adequate grounds for understanding, we will emphasize that the members of society know society from within. We will suggest that they possess working sociological knowledge, that is, knowledge of how society works and how social life is done. It is this knowledge that they use and rely upon and presume others to use in producing social activities. Far from there being no social order other than that revealed through sociological theorizing, for members the orderliness of social life is a taken for granted and an ever-present reality.

The above argument has important methodological implications. If theory is not required by members of society in order to perform their activities, then why should one assume that it is necessary for the sociologist who seeks to understand how those activities are done? We will argue that,

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instead of seeking such a theory, what is required is close attention to the knowledge that members possess and how they use it in producing their activities. Accordingly, instead of asking the question 'What explains social life?' and answering it in terms of some theory of society, we propose to ask 'What do persons relevantly know and how is this knowledge employed in making sense of social life and in carrying out their activities?' Rather than trying to describe such knowledge in general in a decontextualized way, our focus will be upon how such knowledge is employed in specific instances. The radical step, then, involves putting on one side the assumption that sociological understanding is only to be gained through theory. It follows that questions such as 'What is society?' will also have to be put aside. Instead of asking 'What kind of thing is society?', we will ask instead 'What it is that people use to do their social activities and how can these activities be investigated?' In so far as addressing these questions might also produce an answer to the preceding question – about the nature of society – it will be an answer of a radically different kind to that which is provided by sociology's programmes of theoretical analysis.

Many sociologists, of course, would argue that such a focus fails to adequately address what is often referred to in sociological circles as the 'bigger picture', namely the larger or wider social context or social structure within which the production of social activities takes place. We will take up this question in the concluding chapter of this book. For now, we simply point out that for us the question is one of how such a notion of a wider social context can be reconciled with the approach taken in this book. Our answer is that such a reconciliation is indeed possible but not via the conventional route of positing and synthesizing different levels of analysis, that is, the local or situated (often conceptualized as the level of 'micro' social phenomena) on the one hand and the broader structural level (standardly referred to as 'macro' analysis) on the other hand. For us, such a dualistic conception is set aside because it reifies what is, after all, a distinctly sociological conception of social context, namely one that follows from the adoption of a peculiar theoretical attitude towards social life. The distinction between the micro and the macro is, in other words, a particular sociological device for making sense of social life. Our task, rather than presuming and imposing such a theoretical artifact and thereby investigating the social world through the cloudy lens of sociological theory, is to illuminate as clearly as possible how the members of society themselves produce social life in and through their activities.

We emphasize that our focus upon social activities does not mean that social context is insignificant. However, its significance from the point of view taken in this book is at the level of members' orientations and not that of theoretical inventions. Accordingly, then, our reconciliation of a 'sense of social structure' with a focus on members' social activities is afforded by 'respecifying' so-called larger contextual phenomena as 'members' phenomena'. In other words, our interest is in how members of society employ their knowledge of the social world in which they live to fit their actions to

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the relevant context. This means that social context becomes investigable as something to which members of society are themselves oriented and which they invoke in their social interaction with each other, rather than as something the sociologist invokes by theoretical fiat.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have outlined a vision of society as consisting of social activities conducted through social interaction with respect to which the use of language is crucial. The key point of this vision is to highlight a domain of phenomena, namely the practices involved in producing social activities. Since social life consists of social activities, the illumination of what these practices consist of will, we suggest, provide us with a more adequate understanding of society than that provided through the theoretical speculations of orthodox sociology. However, there remains the question of how this project is itself to be conducted and put into practice. In other words, what kinds of investigations follow from the vision of social life we have outlined? In the subsequent chapters of this book, we answer this question by presenting exemplary studies of various aspects of ordinary social life. The approach to sociological inquiry that such studies involve and exemplify is called 'ethnomethodology', to distinguish it from the theory-driven approach that is more frequently taken in sociological investigations. In Chapter 2 we will explain in more detail what we mean by ethnomethodology and how it is methodologically distinctive.

Further reading

A. Duranti and C. Goodwin (eds) (1992) *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

P. McHugh (1968) *Defining the Situation: the Organisation of Meaning in Interaction*, 'Defining the situation and the traditions of sociology.' New York, NY: Bobbs-Merrill. Ch. 2.