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LINGUISTIC INDETERMINACY AND SOCIAL CONTEXT IN UTTERANCE INTERPRETATION

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Two approaches to the problem of interpreting utterances are sketched: a structural account at the levels of sentence and speech act, and an interactional account of their functions and consequences as constitutive of the social order in which they occur. For the problem of utterance interpretation, linguistic analyses can specify potential meanings and functions, but cannot indicate actual interpretations to which conversationalists are oriented. Linguistic analysis alone renders an account that is propositionally ambiguous, functionally equivocal, and interactionally indeterminate. In order to account for how talk becomes determinate for conversationalists, a pragmatically-based interactional approach is offered. A segment of actual conversation that occurred during a first-grade lesson is analysed here, with focus on a description of the contexts in terms of which talk is understood. One utterance in particular, characterized as a PRAGMATIC COUNTERFACTUAL, is discussed at length as a unique product of an interactional account of conversation.*

1. INTRODUCTION. Language is internally structured on several grammatical levels (Chomsky 1965), and is pragmatically organized at certain levels of communicative function (Searle 1969). But the interpretation of actual utterances is a situated accomplishment, depending crucially on several kinds of contexts (Garfinkel 1967, Cicourel 1974, Hymes 1974, Vološinov 1973). Given, then, that speech is both structured and situated, a central problem for any theory of utterance interpretation is to determine how grammatical knowledge interacts with participants' interpretive procedures for arriving at mutual understanding. The central questions of concern to us here are: How do participants use linguistic forms in social scenes as units of interpretation in organizing their conversation and other concerted activities? What range of contexts determines the interpretation of talk? And how can these contexts be described and validated as the participants' own categories?

Two kinds of approaches to these questions are considered. The first is based upon the analysis of linguistic forms, and attempts to account for what a speaker must know in order to interpret utterances. This linguistic approach assumes that speakers share an overlapping lexicon, grammar, and repertoire of speech-act functions that are performed by using the lexico-grammar. The products of linguistic analysis are accounts of lexical senses of words, propositional

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readings expressed by sentences, and the speech acts conventionally conveyed by utterance forms.

For the problem of utterance interpretation, the limitations of the linguistic approach are several: most words have several senses; many sentences are multiply ambiguous as to which propositions they express; and virtually all speech acts are multi-functional and often equivocal as to what acts (as well as what level of act) they convey (Labov & Fanshel 1977). The linguistic approach, therefore, cannot explain how utterances are interpreted—in that it cannot specify those lexical senses, propositions, and speech acts to which speakers are oriented at given points in conversation. Well-defined contexts are as necessary for analysts as they are for parties to conversation.

The second kind of approach to interpretation is based upon the analysis of social contexts; it attempts to account for what participants are doing with their conversation such that they can achieve consensus about what is going on at a given moment. This approach assumes that talk, without reference to the particulars of its use, is fundamentally indeterminate; and that, in the course of organizing sensible moments with each other, people use talk as a social tool, relying on the social work they are doing together to specify the meaning of utterances. The products of such analyses are descriptions of the behaviors which people use in organizing each other, and accounts of the various kinds of contexts which they organize together.

The limitations of interactional approaches are that the analyst must first DISCOVER (a) the units of behavior to which the participants are oriented; (b) the particular contexts, frames, or constraints which are most immediately in effect; and (c) the ways in which the most immediate contexts are embedded in more inclusive social and institutional contexts (also available in the behavior of the participants). Fortunately for the analyst, people in their behavior with each other try out various suggestions as to what they are doing together. The complexity of this material, however, makes analysis slow. Interactional approaches to utterance interpretation run the risk of being too specific; if units of analysis must be continually discovered in-situ, new ways of generalizing from one scene to another must be articulated.

The two approaches differ drastically in the conceptual language offered to the analyst. In this paper, we subject a single strip of talk to both kinds of analysis. The first begins with the examination of linguistic forms; it describes the lexical, propositional, presuppositional, and illocutionary relations among the utterances in the segment, and tries to determine where appeal must be made to social context. In a sense, it seeks the point at which grammar (including the canonical forms of speech-act functions) leaves off, and at which pragmatic processing begins; i.e., at what point must the analyst turn to the social world for cues as to how an utterance is heard? The second analysis begins with an easily recognized setting within American culture (a grade-school reading group), develops methods for describing the group's concerted activities as mutually constituted frames of interpretation, and then attempts a statement of how linguistic form and social negotiation mutually organize utterance interpretation.

As our two analyses develop, it becomes clear that the different tools which they make available to the analyst lead to quite different appreciations of the linguistic behavior of the persons under scrutiny. Interactional analysis is not a simple addition to linguistic analysis, useful only in cases of high ambiguity. Rather, the additional description required in an interactional analysis can transform our understanding of quite regular utterances in ways not easily accounted for by formal linguistic analysis. Despite its limitations, an interactional approach to utterance interpretation may be an essential step toward a complete theory of language.

Linguistic analysis supports statements of the form 'Sentence x may express the propositions $x_1, x_2, x_3 \dots$ ' (with allowance for comic or ironic interpretations, etc., 'bracketed' by appropriate prosodic and paralinguistic features). For purposes of understanding everyday talk, sociolinguistic analysis advances our descriptive powers by supporting statements of the form 'Utterance x may convey the propositions $x_1, x_2, x_3 \dots$, depending upon the conditions $c_1, c_2, c_3 \dots$ ', where conditions are identified by indicators of various social factors.

The interactional approach proposed here aims to support this statement: 'Utterance x may convey the propositions $x_1, x_2, x_3 \dots$, but in the concerted activity and conversation under analysis it is taken to mean none of these; rather, by a curious twist in surface usage, with neither prosodic nor segmental markers of negation, it is taken as a hedged denial of its literal meaning.' Depending upon the circumstances of use, quite coherent and well-formed utterances become organizationally useful and intelligible only to the extent that they commit what Vendler 1976 has called 'illocutionary suicide'; in other words, with the very fiber which they contribute to the conversational thread, they offer the circumstances for their own denial as literal statements. They do so not because they are badly chosen words, but because they are caught on the difficult seas of social interaction; both as literally stated and suicidally understood, they help to arrange next moments which are consistent with past moments. This is a large achievement for a few words, no matter how little they conform to the stereotypical picture of language as a source of clarity, truth, and rationality. Such analyses often run counter to those accomplished by attention to linguistic form alone.

Our two approaches are based on radically different conceptions about how to break down a communicative stream into units of analysis. Since we will be analysing gestures and multiple-person, postural configurations as well as speech sounds, it is crucial to avoid the inane conceptual dichotomy between verbal and non-verbal behavior. Neither talk nor movement constitutes in its own right a proper unit of conversational analysis; the interactional powers which people achieve with either one can be understood only as they are embedded in and constitutive of the chain of activities in which people are mutually engaged. Ideally, talk and movement are studied together, so that the contexts which they both organize and service can be made clear and analytically useful. In any social interaction, people are usually involved in doing many things simultaneously. They are doing more than just listening to sentences and/or noticing gestures. The task before them is much larger than that;

they must constantly rough out what they are doing together, who they are to each other, what they are going to do next, and why. As concerns talk, Labov & Fanshel (70) are quite clear that there are no inherently linguistic connections between utterances: 'obligatory sequencing is not to be found between the utterances, but between the actions which are being performed.' The same can be said of all movements of body parts. Moves (including talk moves) are intelligible to the extent that they have form and consequence, and their consequentiality in conversation can be understood only in terms of what happens across persons and across communicative channels.

The shift to concerted behavior for units of analysis motivates a crucial difference in the way the term 'context' is used in linguistic and interactional approaches to utterance interpretation. By context, linguists usually mean a stable surround or environment that exists before, after, and independent of an utterance, much as a soup bowl stands in relation to its contents. An interactional stand encourages a quite different perspective, according to which behavior is its own context; the bowl and the soup constitute the contexts for each other. In a recent interview (McDermott 1981), Birdwhistell has offered the image of fibers organized into a thread; if you look for fibers, you find no thread, and vice versa. Similarly, talk helps to constitute the contexts in terms of which it is understandable. By pressing this strict sense of context, we develop an account of talk that is not available with a more common-sense approach. Neither sentence nor turn constitutes an a-priori unit of analysis until we locate the thread in which it is a constituent fiber.

With these preliminary considerations,¹ let us turn to our sample of talk.

2. THE DATA. A 20-second segment of videotaped and filmed interaction among six first-grade children and their teacher, while sitting around a table during a reading lesson, is here analysed.² Information about the situation and participants is provided in detail with the second analysis. Table 1 presents a transcript of the segment's first eight seconds, which command the bulk of our attention. The teacher is working with six children at a table in the front of a classroom, but is responsible for the activities of 18 other children at different tables. Immediately preceding the transcribed excerpt, the teacher leaves the

¹ Following Silverstein's recent work, it would be appropriate to distinguish the linguistic and contextual approaches even further in terms of both the different notions of function—referential and intentional vs. indexical (1980)—and the linguistic ideologies—functional-structural vs. dialectic (1979)—which they assume.

² The analysis does not rest on a 20-second strip alone. This strip is a particularly interesting part of a well analysed 11-minute record, which is in turn a part of a fairly well analysed 50 minutes of behavior, across two groups of children in a classroom, which was the object of a year-long participant-ethnography by McDermott. During the 11 minutes of behavior at the reading table, it is usually possible to say, at any point, that everyone in the group is doing one thing together. However, in the 20 seconds in question (and at a few other points), it is difficult to say just what everyone is doing. On such occasions, the participants do work to make clear for themselves, and subsequently for the analyst, the one thing that they should be organized for accomplishing. This is what makes this segment particularly interesting: in figuring out what they are doing together, the participants must identify the contexts for interpreting each other's talk. Much of the analysis was accomplished with a hand-cranked 16 mm. projector.

ONSET TIME	SPEAKER	TURN	UTTERANCE	CONVERSATIONAL ACT	INTERACTIONAL CONSEQUENCE
1.0	Teacher	1	All right, Perry's ready. Who else is ready?	Boundary Marker Description Product Question PROPOSITIONALLY AMBIGUOUS: to read next to call for a turn to read along to read in chorus	Shift group focus Nominate reader? Solicit participation
3.8	Anna	2	Me.	Product Answer	Commitment to read
4.2	Jimmy	3	Not me.	Product Answer	Refusal to read
4.4	Perry	4	CA-	Compliance	Reading
4.5	Maria	5	Can I go?	Permission Request	Solicit turn
4.6	Rosa	6	YOU:::	?Compliance	Mock-reading
6.0	Perry	7	CAN-	Compliance	Reading
6.8	Rosa	8	I could read it.	ILLOCUTIONARILY EQUIVOCAL: Answer Internal Report Explanation Indirect Permission Request Claim	PRAGMATIC COUNTERFACTUAL

TABLE 1. An 8-second transcript of an extended conversational sequence during a 'getting-a-turn-to-read' positioning.

reading group, with these instructions: *All right, let's read it to ourselves, and then raise your hand if you can read it!* The group then fractures into reading, hand-waving, and talking. The transcript begins 2.1 minutes later as the teacher approaches the group, saying *All right*, while still about a meter from the table.

3. LINGUISTIC ANALYSES. The linguistic analyses of our conversational data are at three different levels: propositional, illocutionary, and sequential. Within these, the propositional level includes analyses of lexical connections and pre-suppositions; the illocutionary level includes analyses of implications; and the sequential level includes analyses of discourse rules for determining how speech acts are interpreted as related to one another in conversation. Consider the pair of utterances: *Who else is ready?* and *Me*: these reflect the lexical relation between the interrogative pronoun *who* and the personal pronoun *me*, which share semantic features like [+ person]. The first utterance can be viewed as containing the underlying PROPOSITION 'Someone be ready'; and this can be analysed as the PRESUPPOSED proposition, while something like 'identify someone' is analysed as the FOCUS of the utterance. The *me* of the following utterance then elliptically represents the proposition 'I be ready.' The ILLOCUTIONARY status of the two utterances is that of question and answer. An utterance is illocutionarily designated as a question on the basis of its form (lexical items, order of lexical items, prosodic contours) and its function (the solicitation of information); an answer can derive its status only from an illocutionary relation to a prior question. The two utterances then constitute a conversational SEQUENCE: they are related by virtue of the questioner's intent to convey that she expects an answer, and the answerer's fulfillment of that expectation. Finally, one TRANSACTIONAL CONSEQUENCE of such a sequence could be to commit the respondent to performing some future action (at this point unstated).

Although this analysis of a pair of utterances is fairly coherent, we must point out some limitations:

(1) The constructs here applied to the data derive from analytic theories of grammar, speech acts, and interactional competence; these are theories which specify prior relations among constructs, and which generate descriptive categories for classifying data. It is in terms of these limited constructs that POSSIBLE readings are identifiable. A consideration of the same data with more socially-sensitive constructs can lead to further possible readings: (a) In addition to being a straightforward, conventional, question form, the first utterance above might also be intended and/or interpreted as IMPLYING that 'Someone else should be ready'; (b) the status of question-answer sequences on the conventional illocutionary level does not preclude the possibility that, on other levels of function, the pair of utterances could simultaneously be meant and/or taken as something else (say a threat-response pair, roughly like 'Get ready to read or else' and 'Okay, I will.')

(2) The analysis assumes a RULE OF DISCOURSE operating beyond the grammatical and illocutionary conventions separately expressed by utterances; this rule of discourse must specify how utterances are processed across speakers as being related (say, as question and answer).

(3) Although reference is made to such internal phenomena as intention, expectation, and belief, these are based on an argued fit between internal phenomena and the forms of speech that normatively function to express them. Each of these limitations can be made more manifest in an analysis of the larger transcript.

3.1. PROPOSITIONAL ANALYSIS. We can examine each utterance in this segment for its lexical content, propositional import, and relation to other utterances by virtue of its form, and a few grammatical expansions of its form. The teacher's *All right* might appear to be an evaluative comment of some kind; but we argue (in the following section) that it is used as a means of marking the boundary between the teacher's absence from the group and her subsequent talk. Her *Perry's ready* appears to be a simple description of the student's state; similarly, her interrogative form *Who else is ready?* appears to be a question about the other students' state of readiness. That is, the proposition of her description labels a person and a state, while the proposition of her interrogative seeks the identification of other persons in the same state. In the same vein, Anna's answer in Turn 2, *Me*, identifies a person, herself; and this is equivalent (with a warrantable grammatical expansion) to the proposition 'Anna be ready.' Also, Jimmy's *Not me* expresses the equivalent of 'Jimmy not ready.' In short, there is a tight semantic fit among the items in the class of names and pronouns *Perry*, *who else*, *me*, *not me*; and there is a high degree of topical cohesion (Halliday & Hasan 1976) among the four propositions of readiness. The sequence is, in fact, a grammatically well-formed, indeed canonical, question-answer pair in English (although there are at least three answers to the one question).

These forms, however, are multiply ambiguous. *Perry's ready* and *Who else is ready?* are elliptical for '{Perry / Who else} is ready to —', where the blank is to be filled in by some verb, according to the grammar of English. Exactly which verb cannot be determined on grammatical grounds. So this is the first point at which appeal must be made to the interactional context, namely that these participants are in a reading lesson. The missing verb then could be *read* (as is suggested later by Rosa's *I could read it* in Turn 8). But this does not alleviate the ambiguity of these forms.³

This group is not only involved in a reading lesson, but also in the more immediate context of deciding who is to read next. There are several ways in

³ It is important to distinguish the ambiguity and ellipsis of our case from the classical problem of 'etcetera' in linguistic theory. That is, one could suspect that we are dealing with the absence of ANY relevant information, such as might be expressed by the additional phrases in 'Who else is ready ... {to read page four, from the top, right now, from his seat, before the period ends} ...' And of course no theory should try to account for all that is not said. But the difference here (and the very point of our argument) is that the immediate social context for interpreting the talk is the question of how, when, and to whom the next reading turn will be allocated: it is, if you will, what is 'on the floor' (if not on their minds)—what they are doing, what is going on, what they are dealing with, negotiating, working out etc. Thus it is not the problem of ANY information that might have been appended to the utterance, but of THAT information which was left out and which is precisely at issue for the subsequent interaction.

which this group allocates turns at reading. Thus, the teacher's remarks could express any of the following propositions: '{Perry / who else} is ready ... [1] to read next / [2] to call for a turn to read next / [3] to read along silently with the designated reader / [4] to read together in chorus.' Several consequences follow from this ambiguity. First, the teacher could intend a mixed combination—e.g., 'Perry is ready to read next, so who else is ready to read along with him?' But since she does not SAY this, other combinations could be interpreted; e.g., 'Perry is ready to read along, so who else is ready to take the turn?' Second, a positive answer to this last question could commit the respondent to reading. This is of course a second point at which social rules must be appealed to in order to understand the consequences of talk. Third, since the teacher did not specify the agent and allocating mechanism for the next reading turn, both are to that extent open to negotiation.⁴

In a sense, then, when Anna and Jimmy answer, they cannot be certain of what they are answering, since the teacher may intend a proposition different from the one they interpret and answer. (In fact, each of the children could be interpreting a different proposition; but then it would be difficult to explain the degree of coherence we sense in the interaction.) Moreover, although Anna's answer could commit her to any of the future actions attendant upon the potential propositions, Jimmy's is more complex. On one level, he effectively participates in the question–answer sequence; but by answering negatively, he effectively disengages himself from any responsibility to read. Stretching the analysis a bit, we might even say that his negative answer both denies his

⁴ Schegloff (p.c.) has suggested that the teacher's instruction to the group (... *raise your hand if you can read it*), two minutes before her *Who else is ready?* in our excerpt, can be connected by a simple sequencing rule by which conversationalists 'turn first to immediately preceding utterances for the solution of ellipses'. This rule could be grounds for treating our excerpt as a continuation of a single episode, lasting over a few minutes of apparent interruptions; for treating the teacher's question as less elliptical than we suggest; and for treating Rosa's *I could read it* and hand-raising as efforts to follow the teacher's original instruction. Such a sequencing rule offers us an important connection between a number of behaviors; Rosa's utterance (Turn 8) in particular seems almost to be an echo of the teacher's instruction. By displaying such apparently rule-guided behavior, Rosa at least gives the appearance of sharing an agenda with the teacher. A surface connection of this type can be used to various ends by group members. In this case, however, the sequencing rule does not inform the members how to solve their organizational problem of not knowing exactly what they are doing together. The elliptical gap in the teacher's question seems not to be solved by a rule incorporating her earlier instruction, since the children still respond differentially to her question in an effort to determine WHO has the turn, and HOW they will read. Nor, as we shall see, does the sequencing rule stop the children from using Rosa's utterance to organize themselves as if she had said something less connected. The structural replication between Rosa's *I could read it* and the teacher's earlier instruction does not net Rosa a turn to read.

Numerous connections between our excerpt and other strips of behavior in the film are ignored in this paper—not because the other strips lack any sequential relevance to our excerpt, but because their relevance does not bear directly on the solution of the interactional dilemma which faces the children as they make use of Rosa's utterance. In a more complete account, we would ideally describe all the behavior that gets used in the contexting work which the group members are doing. From that mass of connections, we would try to establish our right to analyse a particular sequence as a problematic one for the participants. It is in the light of that problem, then, that we could analyse how people use their sequencing rules.

readiness to read and signals his readiness to read along with Perry—in that, by answering the teacher's query in any way, he displays the level of attention and participation adequate to 'reading along'.

Examining the remaining forms, we can temporarily ignore Turns 4 and 7, since they are intoned as 'read' lines, and in fact correspond to the first word (*can*) on the page to be read. Turn 6 might represent a reading of the second word in the reading assignment (*can you*); but the child (Rosa) has not looked at the book for some time, and there is doubt as to whether she can read such a word. It is difficult to know how this utterance is sequenced with those around it, other than as a feigned reading (as marked by the exaggerated intonation; see more below).

Maria's *Can I go?* in Turn 5, however, is a partly unsolicited utterance, exhibiting formal relations to the teacher's turn. First, the sentence subject identifies a person, since this is solicited by the teacher's question. The verb *go* probably complements the predicate of the teacher's question, i.e. ... ready to go', which presumably means 'ready to take a turn at reading'. The *can* is the non-standard form of the modal verb *may* used to signal a Permission Request. In any case, Maria's remark goes well beyond a canonical answer; it constitutes a complex response which itself solicits a response. It also introduces, to the pool of competing propositional-topics-on-the-floor, the notion 'Maria take turn.'

Rosa's *I could read it*, moreover, has several formal relations to the teacher's turn. The *I* continues the semantic domain of personal pronouns. Her main verb *read* could conceivably manifest the elliptical verb of the teacher's question. But, most interestingly, her modal verb *could* is ambiguous: it could state her ability, as in 'I am able to read it', or the hypothetical, 'I could read it if ... (say) ... I got the turn.' The underlying proposition, 'Rosa read', introduces a potential 'propositional-topic' which COULD be taken to compete with the 'Perry read' which MIGHT be before the group. In short, at the propositional level, Rosa's utterance is difficult to relate unambiguously to any other utterance, though it could be INTENDED as an answer to the teacher's question.

3.2. ILLOCUTIONARY AND SEQUENTIAL ANALYSIS. Illocutionary analysis is both formal and functional. It assumes that utterances are performances of acts—that IN uttering certain forms, certain conventional acts are characteristically conveyed by speakers. The empirical application of speech-act constructs has enormous problems—e.g. that utterances in conversation are often elliptical (*I'll return* COULD be a promise), and that explicit 'performative' verbs are rare (speakers rarely say things like *I hereby describe this chair as red.*) Without verbal uptake, it is unclear how hearers interpret a speaker's intent, and intention itself is notoriously recalcitrant to specific analysis (a speaker may have many intents, motives, goals, plans etc.—some only implied by an utterance—or a speaker may even be unaware of any unique intention). Furthermore, the so-called 'perlocutionary' effects of illocutionary acts (like believing a proposition, answering a question, or complying with a request) are quite varied, since the speaker has little control over them, whereas the hearer has a wide array of response options, and so on. In general, illocutionary

phenomena are construed as the intentions, beliefs, expectations, and implications conventionally conveyed by utterance forms. The central empirical issue is WHICH phenomena are conveyed WHEN.

Empirical analyses and taxonomies of speech-act types have been proposed (Dore 1977, Ervin-Tripp 1976, Labov & Fanshel 1977, Searle 1979, Wells 1973). One taxonomy (revised from Dore et al. 1978) is applied to our excerpt here. It is meant to reflect only one level of illocutionary act, the one at which types of conventional act are most explicitly manifested by grammatical form. For example, it is formulated ABOVE the level of delicacy which would distinguish among subtypes such as descriptions of objects, events, properties etc. (which are more appropriately analysed at the propositional level) and BELOW the level which would distinguish among acts like jokes, insults, complaints etc. (which require special 'keyings' and 'frame analysis', as in Goffman 1974; cf. also Hymes 1974, Labov 1973, Sacks 1973, 1974). This level of taxonomy is also useful for SEQUENTIAL ANALYSIS, i.e. for analysing how utterances across speakers form minimal sequences of conversation (usually from 2 to 5 turns) which are related topically and illocutionarily (as described in Cole et al. 1978). Finally, this taxonomy and sequential analysis not only include the speech-act types traditionally formulated by philosophers, but also code some of the behaviors required to regulate the conversation (as formulated by Sacks et al. 1974).

In our excerpt, Turn 1 by the teacher is analysed as beginning with a Boundary Marker. It marks a boundary at four interactional levels simultaneously: (a) between a break from reading, when the teacher left the table, and her re-entry to the lesson; (b) between a prior turn at reading (including the intervening 'non-reading' behavior) and the subsequent negotiation for the next turn; (c) between the prior topic and the topic of the new CONVERSATIONAL SEQUENCE which she introduces; and (d) between the prior turn at talking and her own. Further analyses would demonstrate that her *All right* was not topically related to a preceding utterance, nor an Evaluation of prior behavior, nor a Compliance with a prior Action Request (any of which it could have been); but such analyses are not pertinent here.

The teacher's second utterance, *Perry's ready*, can be coded as a Description. Despite its propositional ambiguity (given in the analysis of ellipsis above), it is not equivocal in the scheme of acts used here—unless one quibbles about the predicate *ready* as manifesting an Attribution or Evaluation of Perry's internal state, in which case such adjectives would undermine any claim other than that the utterance is an Assertion of some kind.

The focal problem here is the equivocal act function of *Who else is ready*? We have assumed above that it is a question, since that is the act type CANONICALLY conveyed by interrogative forms (Dore 1977). In illocutionary terms, the speaker is soliciting information (i.e. the 'intended illocutionary effect', or IIE), and the hearer should provide the solicited information (the 'intended perlocutionary effect', or IPE), as formulated in Grice 1967 and Searle 1969. The conventional expression of intention along such lines would appear to be fundamental and necessary for coöperation (cf. Grice) and intersubjective understanding (Habermas 1970).

However, interrogative forms are frequently used to realize Action Requests in English; e.g., *Could you read?* or *Would you close the door?* or *Can you pass the book?* each conveys the speaker's EXPECTATION that the hearer will perform the action referred to by the verb of request (the IPE is to get action, not information). Thus, *Who else is ready?* could be intended as the Action Request 'Be ready.' Labov & Fanshel (82) have formulated a rule for construing such interrogatives as requests:

- 'If A makes to B a Request for Information or an assertion to B about
- a. the existential status of an action X to be performed by B
 - b. the consequences of performing an action X
 - c. the Time T_1 that an action X might be performed by B
 - d. any of the preconditions for a valid request for X as given in the Rule of Requests
- and all other preconditions are in effect, then A is heard as making a valid request of B for the action X.'

What they mean by the preconditions for the imperative (canonical) form of Action Request are, first, the purpose and need for the action, and second, the abilities, obligations, and rights of the participants. In our example, the teacher could mean 'Be ready!', on the grounds that the purpose for the class's interaction is to read, and she has the right (authority) to tell them to be ready. Note that, in the Labov & Fanshel account, any one of the 'understood' preconditions would constitute grounds for hearing *Who else is ready?* as 'Be ready.' We must not only ascertain WHICH preconditions are in effect, but also identify how they are mutually signaled.

Furthermore, empirical support exists for the claim that Perry, at least, interprets the teacher's interrogative as a request, either for him to read or for others to be ready to read along with him. He begins to read, which would be the IPE if the teacher's utterance were intended as a request. More precisely, his reading suggests that he interpreted the teacher's remarks as equivalent to 'Perry is ready to read next' and 'You be ready to read along with him.'

Perry's attempts to begin reading are, in one sense, the easiest to analyse illocutionarily: they are the acts of reading. Thus, such an utterance type is simultaneously a performative act and an interactional accomplishment (unlike the case where Anna's *me* is illocutionarily an answer, but interactionally a commitment to read). But even in so simple an act, we have a second kind of multiplicity. If Perry construes the teacher's remark as implying a request, then his act of reading can be scored as a Compliance with that request. More precisely, if he construes her Description as 'Perry is ready ... TO READ NEXT', then his reading is a seizure of the right to read, on the grounds that he has been given the warrant to do so by the teacher's remark. Again it is the implication of an utterance form (here, a possible reading), plus the specific interactional context, that accounts for his behavior. Alternatively, the teacher need not INTEND to imply he is the reader; Perry need only INTERPRET it as such.⁵

⁵ On the level of conversational organization, Schegloff (p.c.) points out that the teacher's *Who else is ready?* could also be a solicitation of the students to self-select themselves for the next turn at reading; hence Perry's reading could be an attempt to head off loss of the turn to another, rather than his interpretation of her utterance as an Indirect Action Request.

Maria's *Can I go?* in Turn 5 provides not only another (slightly different) example of equivocality, but also an illustration of the role of TURN-TYPES in analysing the sequencing of conversation. As a conversational act, *Can I go?* is scored as a Permission Request. But this scoring requires three considerations:

- (1) Despite its interrogative form, it is not a mere information question.
- (2) The *can* is a non-standard form for the modal *may*, used to request permission.
- (3) The putative underlying proposition—'May Maria take the turn at reading?'—appeals to the social context of being in a getting-a-turn-to-read context.

Moreover, since the utterance occurs within two seconds after the *who* question, it could easily be construed as occurring in a responding turn (as opposed to a turn which initiates or extends a sequence). But given its status as a request, it responds to the expectation of the question it follows, and at the same time solicits an expected response. As a turn-type, then, it would be scored as a COUNTER-INITIATION.

Rosa's *I could read it* is the most difficult of the utterances to interpret illocutionarily. Given its declarative form, it is ostensibly an assertive act. We saw above that it was propositionally ambiguous between an 'ability' and a 'hypothetical' reading. But the same problem with the modal verb *could* also causes illocutionary equivocality. If it is an Assertive at all, it is either an Internal Report (of her ability) or an Explanation (on the hypothetical reading, roughly equivalent to something like 'It's possible that I could read if ...') The modal in this case contributes to both grammatical ambiguity and functional equivocality. Moreover, as an assertive type, it might also count as a Claim to the turn, if accepted.

However, *I could read it* might also be an Answer to the Question *Who else is ready?* The *I* could answer the *who* of the question; Rosa could be supplying exactly the information solicited by the question. Moreover, if the teacher's utterance is elliptical for 'Who else is ready ... TO READ THE NEXT PAGE?', then Rosa's utterance is likely to be an Answer. Its main verb would be the same as the implicit verb of the question, and her *it* would be a pronominalization of the object NP 'the next page' in the question. Finally, her utterance begins exactly three seconds after the question; considering that remarks intervened, that would be within a normal time range for responding to a question.

But the problem is still more complex. In terms of Labov & Fanshel's rules, *I could read it* would qualify as a Request. Part of their 'Rule for indirect request' reads: 'If A makes ... an assertion to B' about 'an action X', and 'B has the ABILITY to do X ... then A is heard as making a valid request for action' (78, 82). In our case, however, Rosa is not requesting the teacher to read. Rather, she could be indirectly requesting the teacher's permission to let her read; in our scheme, she is technically performing an indirect Permission Request. Now, nothing in this conversation prevents *I could read it* from being an Internal Report, an Explanation, a Permission Request etc.; but the utterance cannot manifest all the acts simultaneously, since they are on the same level of illocutionary functioning. This utterance, therefore, illustrates the cen-

tral dilemma of empirical illocutionary analysis: how to constrain the multiplicity of speech-act functions and levels of functions.

As if this were not enough, the interpretation of *I could read it* is even more problematic. In anticipation of the interactional analyses offered below, it can be shown that the actual functional import of the utterance is not assertive, requestive, or responsive. For all practical purposes, it is treated as what we call a PRAGMATIC COUNTERFACTUAL. That is, insofar as we make any claims about its meaning, we want to show how the participants treat the remark as though it conveyed the opposite of what it literally states. It is roughly analogous to the logical counterfactual: 'I could read this page, if I could read at all, but we all sense that I cannot read, so I will not read it.' The evidence for claiming that the utterance is a pragmatic counterfactual is given in the following section.

4. AN INTERACTIONAL APPROACH TO UTTERANCE INTERPRETATION. Here we state the rationale, units, and criteria for a context-sensitive, interactional account of utterance interpretation which we apply to our conversational data. A linguistic analysis specifies the possible conditions, meanings, readings, acts, consequences etc. of utterances in conversation, on the basis of the linguistic code and how it is known. But our interactional approach asks how that code is shared and used, and how it is accomplished as a reality in a given social scene. By definition, context analysis requires that any units be defined ONLY in relation to other units (Birdwhistell 1970, Kendon 1977, Schefflen 1966, 1973). Thus a person's behavior is best described in terms of how it articulates with the behavior of other persons with whom the person is co-constructing an interaction (McDermott & Roth 1978). Our analysis further assumes that participants are never exactly certain of 'what is going on' at any moment of interaction, and must do communicative work to inform themselves of what they are doing together (Cicourel 1974, Frake 1980). What is at issue for conversationalists is always an EMERGENT phenomenon, explicitly specifiable only in retrospect (and then by way of simplifying procedures that may well distort their experience; cf. D'Andrade 1974). What people operate with from moment to moment are 'working consensuses' of what they might be doing together on several levels.⁶ What concerns us here are the participants' actions that accomplish their mutual and concerted activities, where by actions we mean speech acts and body posturings (including gestures).

The structure of behavior in our data is given in Table 2. The participants

⁶ By 'working consensus' we mean the momentary and often fragmentary understandings which people must share in order to organize their concerted behavior. Such a notion, variously articulated and rarely given substance with detailed description, has been at the heart of any sociology derived from either George Herbert Mead or Alfred Schutz. Following Kendon (104), we prefer to use the term only after we have identified 'those aspects of behavioral function which serve to control or regulate the behavior of the participants in relation to the currently established patterns of relationship. This requires that we look for regularities in behavioral relationship, but also that we look closely at places where these regularities change.'

are involved in a first-grade reading lesson in a public school in New York. The UNITS OF BEHAVIOR relevant to our analysis begin at the level of TURNS TO READ: either one individual reads, while the others follow along silently, or else they all read in chorus. The most important level for our contextual analysis is that of POSITIONINGS, because these provide the most immediate contexts for talk—i.e., they answer most directly the tacit question ‘What are we doing?’ Positionings are the postural configurations which the group embodies as the manifestation of what they are working out together. In the entire reading lesson, they exhibit four positionings:⁷ (I) READING, when they are bent over the table, focused on their books; (II) GETTING A TURN to read, when they are sitting up from the table, looking at the teacher or one another for cues as to who will get the next reading turn; (III) ANARCHY, when no concerted activity is apparent; and (IV) WAITING for the teacher to return, or to re-enter the group’s activity. The group is in a possible Positioning II during our excerpted talk. ACTIONS by individuals (such as hand-raising, postural shifts, and turning pages) are the lower-order components of positionings, and are generally constitutive of the more inclusive level of positioning. What is critical about positioning levels is that they are accomplished in concert. Despite coalitions of interaction by two, three, or four persons, occurring within positionings, the group-in-general defines its positioning-context; and variations of postures either reflect definite time-out periods, or else signal the beginning of a change in the group’s positioning.

To be descriptively adequate, context analyses must demonstrate that such units as the above are products of the structuring activities of participants trying to make sense of one another, i.e. trying to define what they are doing together. Their structure must be reflexive. Each member contributes some actions to the positioning-collection: defining what is happening, monitoring others, and holding others accountable for maintaining the working consensus. Such attentional and postural balance is always dynamic. Members move in and out, and are called in and out, of positionings; but positionings HOLD until the group collectively redefines itself posturally.

The CRITERIA used to establish that the context analysis of the data at hand is descriptively adequate have been identified (cf. McDermott et al.) as follows: every unit of analysis of concerted activity must be shown to be formulated, positioned, oriented-to, and used in accountability struggles by the participants. These require some elaboration:

(1) FORMULATING occurs when members claim, describe, or suggest a version of what they are doing together. Although formulations manifest only part

⁷ The description of the structure of their behavior offers considerable simplification of behavioral realities. The getting-a-turn positioning, for example, is not made up only of hand-raising and calls for attention, but rather of a full range of procedure clarifications. The getting-a-turn designation is the most efficient way of simplifying for present purposes the activities of the people in that positioning. A more complete account can be found in McDermott 1976 and to a lesser extent in McDermott et al. 1978. For an account of similar phenomena in other settings, Kendon 1977 and Schefflen 1973 are exemplary.

School	Time in the classroom (5 hours)																							
Lesson	Time at the reading table (30 minutes)																							
Instructional rounds	Reading the book by turns (11 minutes)																							
Turns to read by person(s) designated	Anna		Maria		Ted				Perry		Maria		All				Perry				Ted		Anna	
Group positionings during each reading turn	II	I	II	I	II	I	II	IV	II	I	II	I	II	I	III	IV	II	I	II	IV	II	I	II	I
Actions	Individual movements which by way of form and apparent consequence are recognizable parts of the group's concerted activities: smiles, gazes, gestures, offerings, complaints, readings, fights, etc. Ideally, the effort of a context analysis is to account for all the moves of individual actors in organizational terms. This chart offers a considerable simplification of our context analysis, in that it allows the reader to assume that every action by every member is in fact constitutive of the group positionings.																							

TABLE 2. A hierarchy of contexts for the children and the teacher while reading the book. (Adapted from McDermott et al. 1978:253.)

of 'what's up', they supply some content for what can then be ratified as a momentary social fact for the group.⁸ Formulations not only confirm what has occurred, but also organize what might follow; e.g., if the teacher calls on a child, she confirms that what they had been doing together up to that point was getting a turn. She helps to organize a next thing to do together (one child reading, with others listening); and she helps to establish a possible sequence in terms of which later formulations—that someone new is getting a turn to read—might be greatly abbreviated (reduced to taps and grunts in our data).

(2) POSITIONINGS are organized when all the parties to an interaction organize their postures at the same time, in the same way, and to the same apparent purpose: in doing positioning work, people quite literally negotiate their FIT into a working consensus as to what is going on. Incessant monitoring of each other's behavior is essential, since the people constitute environments for each other's next steps. Simple examples include moving simultaneously 'in-to-the-table, down-to-the-book' for reading, and 'leaning back and away, chatting' etc. for the waiting positioning.

(3) ORIENTING to the structure in the formulated and positioned order can be seen in the collective responses to transition points and breaches of that order; e.g., postural shifts occur at positioning transitions, and sequences of talk differ in relation to positioning. When a child with the designated turn to read aloud stumbles on a word, or stops reading to look around, everyone orients to the potential problem in their agreed-upon organization of behavior.

(4) HOLDING ACCOUNTABLE is often the most telling criterion for the description of concerted activity on the participants' own terms. When a breach is responded to by a call to order, this holding accountable includes the above three criteria. For example, if the teacher says, *Ted, you're not looking at your*

⁸ Our sense of formulation is not limited by what one speaker can do with a given utterance. Rather, we are interested in how people together use the various suggestions which they put forward about what is going on between them. Sometimes this requires a seemingly simple description, as when lectures are introduced by formal announcements; some jokes can also be signaled in advance. However, it is often the case that a clear formulation of what is about to happen sinks the consensual canoe before it leaves the dock. Vendler offers *I allege* as a particularly suicidal utterance. Other cases rely less on semantic intrigue, and the problem exists more in audience manipulation; thus some jokes require that a receiver not know that a joke is being told. This complication only BEGINS to fracture the surface simplicity of what a clear formulation is assumed to do for us in conversation. We are increasingly impressed with the many levels of reality addressed (or contexts serviced) by most utterances. Fortunately, we are getting some accounts of how important contexts can be formulated so suggestively and equivocally that a speaker is freed from responsibility. (Cf. Pomerantz 1978 on critiques within compliments; Schegloff 1972 on status work within spatial references; Sharrock & Turner 1978 on complaints within reports of concern. Goffman 1979 and Jefferson 1974, 1978, on the message content of various 'mutterances', are also essential here.) That clear formulations can be (and perhaps primarily are) a cover for various kinds of alternative agendas is clear in our interactional analysis of the reading group (cf. also Bilmes 1981, Wieder 1974). Acknowledging such complexities in no way vitiates the descriptive utility of the fact that, in order to organize their surface behavior with each other, people employ clear and institutionally mandated formulations of what they are doing. Without such a tool for cooling-out the difficulties of moving through life together, literal accounts of the world would be as accurate as only we linguists like to believe. But, then, there might be no one to talk to.

words, (a) she formulates what Ted should be doing, in order to do what everyone else is doing, (b) she describes a key behavioral feature of the positioning which others are holding, (c) she orients to the contextual order by pointing to the breach, and thereby (d) she holds Ted accountable for doing it subsequently.

5. APPLICATION OF AN INTERACTIONAL ANALYSIS TO CONVERSATIONAL DATA.

The unit of behavior most relevant to our excerpt is the positioning; and the particular positioning exhibited is that of getting-a-turn-to-read. This particular instance of the getting-a-turn-to-read positioning is a little ragged, and does not consistently show all the behavioral features of such a scene throughout its duration. The raggedness is a behavioral demonstration of the confusion which group members are facing, particularly at the beginning of the positioning. From the outset of the teacher's first utterance, the participants seem uncertain of just what is going on among them: they could be calling for turns to read, they could be reading along with Perry, or they could read in chorus. During the 20 seconds between the teacher's opening utterance and the children's finally settling in a reading positioning, a number of possibilities are opened. Table 1 showed how different members (six of the seven members, across just the first eight turns to talk) spoke to different possibilities of who is to read, in what combination, and when. Yet, despite this pervasive indeterminacy and without anyone explicitly saying 'for sure' what is going on, without anyone articulating the dilemma or stating just what the teacher had in mind, apparent consensus was achieved at the end of the 20 seconds regarding one possibility: Perry has the turn, and the others listen.

Consider how the conversation is organized, in terms of the problems of the participants in figuring out what they are doing together. What the teacher formulates with *All right* on her re-entry to the group is, first, a Boundary Marker between her absence and presence, and also a transition in positioning and conversational sequence. Her *Perry's ready* formulates backward, describing what Perry said some minutes before (*I'm ready!*), as well as his current state. It also formulates forward, in that it elliptically implies the possibility that he may read next. Her *Who else is ready?* formulates forward, in that it conventionally expects a response—either an Identification of someone, or a Compliance with the implicit requests to read or be ready. The first two children's answers are a clear orientation to the identification possibility, and Maria's question-response orients in still another way.

Note the reflexive status of talk as DOING the immediate social context (cf. Wieder). That is, the first sequence of talk both creates the social context and depends upon it: it establishes a possible 'getting-a-turn' context, and the talk is understood in terms of that possibility; but other alternatives, e.g. that Perry already has the turn, are also explored. Just as with a postural shift, the talk here suggests a context; and it asks the participants to use that context as a guide to their interpretation of various behaviors around the table. Gradually, people pull their behavior together in the direction of Perry reading; and the guide to interpretation that had them looking for a turn alters course as they direct their attention to the reading book.

As might be expected, Rosa's *I could read it* is the most interesting and complex utterance interactionally. Recall that, apart from its propositional ambiguity and functional equivocality, it was interactionally indeterminate. Here we give the interactional evidence for its being a PRAGMATIC COUNTERFACTUAL, i.e. an utterance that is treated as a reversal of what it literally expresses. As noted above, Rosa's statement, as a literal description of her readiness or ability, could refer back as an Answer to the teacher's *Who else is ready?* At the same time, as a potential self-commitment to read, it organizes a possible next social order for the group. Thus, as both an answer and a commitment, interactionally, Rosa's statement seems to make literal sense. And so it appears to be taken, at least to the extent that no one accuses her of not making sense. However, a closer look at the contextual alignments of her behavior suggest a different story.

First, as a literal answer and commitment, Rosa's *I could read it* stands out for being ignored. Unlike the other calls for a turn, Rosa's claim is loud, clear, and isolated by momentary silences on both sides. What makes it most noticeable, perhaps, is that the teacher was about to say something to Perry at about the same time Rosa begins her remark. Although no sound appears to come from the teacher's mouth, she moves toward Perry and opens her mouth as if to begin to talk. As Rosa says *I*, the teacher slowly adjusts her lips to a position of silence (as if swallowing her words), moves back away from Perry, glances at Rosa, looks down while wiping her nose, and looks at Rosa again as the student finishes her words. So Rosa's utterance is attended to and not contradicted. But neither is it answered; as a literal statement, it seems to be left dangling as the group goes on with the business at hand.⁹

The second reason why the utterance appears a bit unusual is that it seems badly timed, since there are increasing suggestions 'on the table' that group members are coalescing toward a consensus that Perry has the turn to read, and that they are doing together what the teacher might have had in mind upon entering the group and saying what she did, namely reading along with Perry. From this much alone, we have a strong sense that Rosa merely APPEARS to be carrying out the most obvious social order of seeking a turn; but she is simultaneously serving other sequential arrangements that would effectively 'lose' her the very turn to read that she appears to call for. Her utterance may not be answered, but it may be nonetheless useful to all the members of the group.

When the talk is analysed within the configuration of multiple activities with which it is sequenced and aligned, the contradictions in Rosa's behavior are more obvious:

⁹ Goffman (p.c.) has extended our argument with the suggestion that Rosa's *I could read it* 'could be SELF TALK, but done loud enough to get its point across—a standard transformation of the form. In which case, everyone understands all too well what she means ...; thus, in acting as though they haven't heard her, they are anything but ignoring what she has said. For they are responding ... in precisely the manner her utterance was designed for.' For a wide range of insights into the speech behavior of the strategically lonely or confused in the midst of a small crowd, see Goffman 1979 in particular and 1981 in general.

(1) When the teacher re-enters the group, as she scans the students and asks her 'readiness' question, Rosa looks away from the teacher and 'out of' the group. As others begin to respond (*Me; Not me* etc.) and the teacher glances at THEM, only then does Rosa look at the teacher. This is one of many instances in which the teacher and Rosa organize gaze aversion at moments relevant to calling for and getting assigned a turn to read.

(2) As the teacher arrives at the reading table and begins to sit down, she and Perry do a postural 'dance' together, each of their movements co-occurring with and complementing one another (e.g., their torsos turn toward each other at the same time, then back to the group, then down to the table etc.) In terms of the talk, the dance begins at the end of *Who else is ready?*; it lasts, in its most marked form, until Rosa's *I could read it*. This kind of well-sequenced mirroring of movements across persons has been shown to mark many interactions in which people achieve rapport and share agendas (Charney 1966, Schefflen 1973).

(3) Rosa's pattern of gaze aversion with the teacher seems well timed with the teacher-and-Perry dance, at the culmination of which the teacher looks to Perry while Rosa looks at the teacher. It is at this moment of least possible attention from the teacher that Rosa says *I could read it*.

(4) Rosa's utterance is virtually simultaneous with the teacher's beginning to direct a statement to Perry—a possible moment of confirmation that the reader has indeed been chosen. By the time Rosa speaks, the circumstances for a literal interpretation of her statement as a commitment may be missing. Along with gaze aversion at turn-relevant moments, this pattern of Rosa's interrupting the teacher, just as the teacher seemingly settles on a reader, is frequent throughout the film record.

(5) Anna and Maria watch the teacher and Perry from across the table; this is possibly the beginning of organizing a group focus on Perry as the designated reader, with others simply following along. At the moment that Rosa begins her utterance, Maria is moving her torso forward across her book toward Perry. (When the working consensus is that the group is engaged in pedagogy, as different from calling for a turn or waiting, the children near a designated reader often look at the reader's book rather than their own.) Maria's move, then, may be further evidence that, as a literal statement, Rosa's utterance is ill-timed—in terms of a growing consensus that Perry already has the turn to read.

(6) As Rosa finishes speaking and the teacher is looking at her, Rosa throws herself across the table, down and away from the teacher; she thereby concludes an elaborate behavioral sequence, arranging to be unavailable for any commitment to read, although maintaining a place in a group structured around reading tasks.

By virtue of her timing and surrounding behavior, Rosa seems to have given us a complex utterance with two sides. On the one hand, the statement is interpretable literally, to the extent that the formulated order specifies that the children are competing for turns to read, and can at such times self-select for a turn. On the other hand, to the extent that Rosa's statement builds from and

helps to confirm the passing from the 'getting-a-turn' to the 'Perry reading' formulated order, it is interpretable counterfactually. The group, we recall, is having a difficult time deciding which of these two orders controls the moment—a fact which leaves Rosa's utterance unremarkable as an apparently appropriate literal statement, but simultaneously useful as a counterfactual statement, confirming that Perry has taken a turn to read.

We are not alone in our interpretation of Rosa's utterance as a reversal of what a literal reading suggests. The other members of the group also took Rosa's utterance to mean that she was not going to read. Indeed, much of the confusion that the group members were experiencing about what the teacher might have been calling on them to do, in her opening remarks, seems to be resolved at the point of Rosa's utterance. It is as if Rosa's calling for a turn to read confirms the collective suspicion that Perry has already been assigned the turn.

The final seconds of the segment, available in Table 3, reveal that group members have clearly focused on Perry as the reader—and that Rosa's utterance, like so many of her cries during the reading group, fall on ears organized for asking not so much about what she is saying, as about how her utterance might be useful.

ONSET TIME	SPEAKER	TURN	UTTERANCE
6.8	Rosa	8	I could read it.
8.6	Anna	9	Can't we please go over it with everybody?
9.8	Perry	11	No.
9.6	Rosa	10	I wanna go around.
13.2	Teacher	12	That's the word you drew a line under.
15.2	Anna	13	... in the ...
16.0			Ahhh (confirmation)
16.6			YOU::
17.6	Perry	14	YOU.
18.2	Teacher	15	Right,
18.6			You.
18.4	Perry	16	CAN YOU—
19.8			CAN YOU

TABLE 3. Transcript of the final 12 seconds of the confused getting-a-turn sequence. During this time, the children and the teacher continue to seek a concerted solution to the problem of defining what they are doing together. During the first eight seconds, it became clear that Perry had been probably called on to read; from this point on, alternative formulations of what might be happening are phrased against this possibility. At the postural/kinesic levels, Perry and the teacher form a tight dyad, and the others gradually align themselves to the form of a reading group listening to Perry read.

In Line 9, Anna, who originally called for a turn to read, makes a second suggestion that is appropriate only after she has understood that the turn has been offered to Perry ('*Can't we please go over it with everybody?*') In Line 11, Perry rejects her alternative plan—a task that would most likely be taken up by the turn-giver (teacher) or receiver (Perry). Finally, Rosa complains that she wants to go around—i.e., to take turns in a way that is spatially sequenced to each child's right-hand side. This complaint makes sense only after someone

has been given the turn. (In fact, at other times in the reading-group film, Rosa's call for 'going around' appears only after the turn is given; cf. Dore 1981.)

Rosa's *I wanna go around* is more than just intoned as a complaint. Already leaning over the side of the table away from the group, she adds a measure of displeasure by stretching her arm back toward the center of the table and slamming her fist in time with saying *around*. But it is too late for a complaint! The group has coalesced, with Rosa's help, around Perry; and Rosa's behavior is ignored. In terms of the problem before the group, Rosa's display now carries little information. As the group settles in to move on without Rosa, she squirms about in her seat, unattended—and even stands up for a moment—before settling down with the group as Perry reads *Can you* a second time.

While the children ignore Rosa's complaining and squirming, the teacher helps to confirm that Perry is the reader by directing the children to a word in the book (*you*), pointing to its presence on the work board where the children had earlier decoded and underlined it. Note that the teacher starts her pedagogical input with the second word in the reader. Perry alone (Lines 4 and 6) has read the first word. Further, the *you* in the teacher's utterance (*That's the word you drew a line under*) refers to Perry, who was in fact the child who underlined that word at the board about 15 minutes earlier in the reading lesson.

The 20-second story of this group is explicitly performed in both postural and conversational terms. For the first ten seconds, the group skirmishes around the table, suggesting by words and movements various versions of what they are doing together. During this time, the answer to the question of what group members are collectively doing is hard to define, and all behavior is spotlighted for possible clues. For the next ten seconds, the group is more focused, and their words refer to a more obvious state of affairs (if only to register complaints). Rosa is allowed her 'time-out' from the group without being chastised. Finally, the whole group moves into a reading positioning, listening to Perry read *Can you come out, Patty?*

The pivotal point in this shift comes during the time of Rosa's utterance. We must be careful not to isolate the utterance: it comes along with a myriad of behavioral details which we have summarized with terms like 'timing', 'focus', 'gaze aversion', 'moving down and away from the group', 'postural dance' etc. Our point has been that, at a time when everyone is still guessing about what is happening, Rosa's utterance—by the way it ties to various co-occurring strips of behavior—helps guide the group to the perception that reading (and not turn-calling) is expected of them, and this despite the fact that a literal interpretation could have moved the group in the opposite direction. Although Rosa's utterance is ineffectual as literally stated, it has been put to work in sorting out the social context at hand; it is effective in terms of the practical circumstances facing the group. Listeners can find statements effective in ways poorly predicted by formal analysis. Can we, as analysts, afford to be any less careful than the listeners we claim to describe?

Finally, although the following evidence is not based upon our own linguistic and postural analyses, it is nevertheless relevant to our claim that Rosa's

utterance is not taken as any analysis of its form might predict. The classroom under analysis was observed for much of the school year, and other reading sessions were videotaped. Rosa was rarely observed to get a turn to read in the group. On occasion, she could be seen mimicking segments previously read by others. Also, she often declared her ability to read, but rarely received any verbal uptake. This persistent negative feedback, in the context of a classroom in which children are asked to compete with each other in the acquisition of literacy skills, suggests that Rosa's utterances about her reading are treated differently both from others' remarks to that effect and from Rosa's remarks to other effects. In sum, when Rosa says *I could read it*, others react as if she means that she will not read it, probably cannot read it, and that they should continue as if someone else were going to read the page in question. Of course Rosa does her job well, and prepares her claims with a maximum effort at illocutionary suicide. The members of this group use this knowledge about Rosa not just to handle their interaction with her, but also to organize their behavior with each other across the whole group. Rosa's utterance is, accordingly, not just a statement about her affairs, but a tool which group members use to formulate and accomplish their concerted activity. An analysis of talk that takes this fact into account offers conclusions about specific utterances which are not available in less context-sensitive analyses.

6. CONCLUSION. This paper focuses in great detail on a small strip of naturally occurring talk. We have had a complex story to tell about a few words; and we have shown some of them to be different from what they would seem in a more traditional analysis. The words are in no way remarkable, and the collusion and duplicity that mark their utterance and interpretation are perhaps at the core of conversational practices in human institutions (in which all people must organize what they do together without full knowledge of what is to come next, i.e. without knowing the full contexts for their behavior). What is remarkable is that so much analysis has been required for us to show how the words functioned in the lives of a few young children and their teacher. We have shown how the interpretation and function of the words are missed by formal linguistic analysis, and we have proceeded to detail the ways in which a more contextual approach leads to a different appreciation of their complexity. This is a victory only to the extent that some of the tools of context analysis, here on exhibit, can be used to explicate similar phenomena in other conversations. The result should be a more socially sophisticated linguistics, and a social science with a linguistics to which it can turn in search of a tool for describing participation in everyday institutions.

Two advances have been made: one in our use of context as a descriptive tool, the other in a display of the interactional arrangement of utterance possibilities. On the first count, we have tried to demonstrate what is often claimed, but rarely displayed—namely that the interpretation of talk is largely organized by context (see Searle's 1979 *INVENTED* contexts vs. our *DISCOVERED* ones). This advance lies in the use of a notion of context that adequately models how

people organize their time together. Talk is not simply a set of propositions transmitted from encoder to decoder, in which context is occasionally useful as an added interpretive grid through which to pass strange utterances. Rather, people use talk reflexively to build the very contexts in terms of which they understand what they are doing and talking about with each other.

The second advance follows from the first, and suggests that utterance organization and interpretation are interactional phenomena that are most completely analysed in terms of what many persons, both speakers and listeners, accomplish with them. Schegloff 1979 has argued well that interactional considerations are built into grammatical arrangements. We have not pressed so deeply, but have suggested only that, however arranged, utterances must be understood in terms of their consequences across persons, in terms of the contextual work by which people arrange their time together.

The fit between utterance interpretation and interactional consequences is best seen in our account of utterances seemingly understood in ways which are not easily read from surface form. Vendler has suggested that communicative acts of self-destruction, e.g. the liar's paradox, exist only in logic; natural-language speakers are neither fooled by nor interested in such obvious contradictions. This is true to the extent that speakers converse with each other only to transmit coherent propositions. Our account of the interactional management of talk indicates that they have far more at stake than coherence. It is true that conversationalists hear quite extraordinary statements (e.g. paradoxes) in quite ordinary ways;¹⁰ at the same time, ordinary statements can be heard in quite extraordinary ways, e.g. the PRAGMATIC COUNTERFACTUAL we have described. Logical paradoxes are not the only route to illocutionary suicide. In the interactional arena, ordinary statements can lead groups to the brink of turmoil. The point is that interpretation depends on context—on people organizing each other to temporarily indeterminate ends, within the constraints of their situation. As Birdwhistell has argued (cf. McDermott 1981:297), not only are lies collusional, but 'all truths are collusional ... the nature of truth is always bound by the shape of the context, truth and falsity are matters of agreement ... the condition of sending the signal which arranges for deception may rest in a variety of places within the deception system.' What is said here about truth and falsity is true about any frame for utterance interpretation: intelligibility, coherence, force, usefulness. All utterance interpretation is public, and subject to negotiation across persons. It is also collusional; i.e., it is subject to the constraints of contexts which are reflexively maintained, and are made possible in part by the utterances to be interpreted. It takes the coöperation of many people to arrange a conversation that makes sense and comes to a proper ending.

¹⁰ For a stunning demonstration of how the complexities of conversational sequencing require inattention to the paradoxical logic of utterances such as *Can I ask you a question?*, see Schegloff 1980. For a less detailed analysis of inattention to more outrageous forms of contradictory talk, Garfinkel 1967 is essential.

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