

The Interactionist Perspectives of George Herbert Mead and Harvey Sacks

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Abstract

The perspectives of George Herbert Mead, as found in various texts developed from his lectures (edited and published posthumously by his students), and Harvey Sacks' lectures (recorded and edited by Gail Jefferson) and writings on interaction, are examined to show the differences and occasional similarities between their points of view. Mead's perspective is shown to be that of the analyst/theorist whereas Sacks' focus was on ongoing practical accomplishments by members of society.

Keywords: interaction, Mead, Sacks, conversation analysis, ethnomethodology, gesture, attitude, meaning, significant symbol, symbolic interaction, Pollner, explicative transactions, Schegloff

1. Introduction

G. H. Mead (1863-1931) and Harvey Sacks (1935-1975) are two important figures in American sociology, the first well-recognized and the second only more recently achieving recognition. This paper will offer some comparisons and contrasts between them. It will also focus on their views of interaction to show some of their similarities as well as their differences.

Mead was primarily a philosopher whose influence from his lectures at Chicago in such courses as Social Psychology has been recognized and widely quoted by that branch of American sociology called Symbolic Interaction.

Sacks was trained in law at Yale (1959) and in sociology at the University of California, Berkeley (Ph.D. 1966). His lectures at UCLA and the University of California, Irvine, influenced and contributed to the founding of conversation analysis as well as contributing to the development of ethnomethodology.

Both lectured extensively and published little in their lifetimes. Mead's lectures at the University of Chicago in the 1920s and '30s were transcribed by his students and later published posthumously.¹

Sacks' lectures were tape recorded, transcribed, duplicated and then widely distributed during his lifetime. This informal method of publication enabled Sacks' thought to reach a wider, though still limited, audience of friends, colleagues, and scholars. Sacks' lectures were not published in any

substantial form until 1989² though fragments from his lectures had been edited (by Gail Jefferson his former student and later collaborator and colleague) and published in various places.³ The entire corpus of his lectures, from 1964 to 1971, was published by Blackwells in 1992 and his writings appeared in various journals and edited collections.

Mead's lectures eventually were published in four books: *Mind, Self and Society* (1934); *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (1936); *The Philosophy of the Act* (1938) and *The Philosophy of the Present* (1932). These books represent the major fields of Mead's interests; social psychology, social philosophy, the history of ideas and pragmatism. *The Philosophy of the Present* was published in 1932 based on the notes and drafts of his Carus Lectures delivered late in 1930 but never brought to completion before his death in 1931.

Sacks died early at age 40; Mead died at age 68. Mead's thought was continually developing and maturing. His lectures from 1927 and 1930 represent the development and achievement of many years of work. Sacks' genius showed at an early age. His lectures in 1964 and 1965, at the age of 29 and 30 are already accomplished, developed and strikingly original.⁴

2. Comparing Mead and Sacks

If Mead was primarily a philosopher and Sacks was a sociologist (also trained in law), what constitutes an important basis for comparison? Here we can look at their views of interaction because I would argue that if some of Mead's notions about interaction had been developed more extensively they would be more compatible with what Sacks later developed as conversation analysis. A detailed comparison of the two would show the following:

Mead was *not interested* in the detailed analysis of interaction, whether it be in the conversation of gestures or with the use of what he called "significant symbols," i.e. language. Sacks *was interested*.

Mead *was* interested in interaction as it relates to the stages of development of the self, in play and in games, and as it relates to taking the role of the other and the generalized other. Sacks had *no interest* in such conceptualizations and, in fact, his work could be seen as antithetical to the development of such concepts.

Sacks *was interested* in the study of interaction in order to discover the orderliness, the organization, of action whereas Mead *was not*.

Sacks *was interested* in the discovery, description and analysis of social order. The study of social order he saw as sociology's main topic.

Mead was *not interested* in the organization of interaction as a topic in itself. He *was interested* in the results of interaction, for example, its consequences for the development of the self.

Sacks *was interested* in conversation primarily because, as he saw it, social actions are accomplished in and through talk. Mead lacked such a notion of social action and because of his social behaviorist inclinations, used examples of gross bodily activity and bodily expression and examples from animal interaction for his discussions of the "conversation of gestures." (Surprisingly, Mead's detailed discussions of "conversation" are not of humans talking to each other but of dogs fighting.)

Both were interested in language but Sacks was interested in how social actions are accomplished using language, i.e. language in use, whereas Mead was interested in a theoretical analysis of how language develops and its importance for the self.

Sacks *was interested* in interaction as a process which occurs between persons, is situated, ongoing, and developing.

Mead *was interested* in the resultants of interaction, the consequences of interaction for the development of the self, rather than the analysis of interaction for the study of how meanings in interaction may emerge and change.

2.1. Mead on Interaction

In his discussion of the conversation of gestures, Mead provides us with a view of interaction that, were it to be developed consistently, could lead to an interestingly different outcome. In his famous example of the dogs, Mead says (1967 p. 42-43):

“the act of each dog becomes the stimulus to the other dog for his response. There is a relationship between these two; and as the act is responded to by the other dog, it, in turn, undergoes change. The very fact that the dog is ready to attack another becomes a stimulus to the other dog to change his own position or his own attitude. He has no sooner done this than the change of attitude in the second dog in turn causes the first dog to change his attitude. We have here a conversation of gestures. They are not, however, gestures in the sense that they are significant.”

But what does Mead (1967, p. 43) mean by “gesture”?

“Certain parts of the act become a stimulus to the other form (organism) to adjust itself to those responses, and that adjustment in turn, becomes a stimulus to the first form to change his own act and start a different one. The beginning of a response becomes the stimulus to the first form (i.e. the dog) to change his attitude, to adopt a different act. The term “gesture” may be identified with these beginnings of social acts which are stimuli for the response of other forms.”

Gesture, thus, seems to be a visible, observable bodily action which may be part of a longer sequence of actions. The one part which is a stimulus to the other to produce an “adjustive response” is the gesture.

Here we see not a description of an empirical instance of a series of actions by two animals but a selection from their actions of that which Mead, as the observer, can identify as “stimulus” or as “response.” This behaviorist framework is used by Mead to locate and identify acts which precede and follow each other. That which is identified as stimulus must precede that which follows as response. One organism must be identified as producing the first and the other organism as producing the second. These are requirements of the theoretical framework.

Or, as a second example, child and parent. He says here we can have “the stimulating cry. The answering tone on the part of the parent-form and the consequent change in the cry of the infant-form.” In this example, the “gestures” may be vocal, i.e. the cry and the answering tone. Again, one party produces that which is the stimulus for the other party’s response. But now Mead makes an interesting move. He does not stay at a strictly behavioral level in his discussion. He says, (Mead, 1967, p. 44-45)

“...these phases of the act carry with them the attitude as the observer recognizes it, and also what we call the inner attitude. The animal may be angry or afraid. There are such emotional attitudes which lie back of these acts, but these are only part of the whole process that is going on. Anger expresses itself in fear: fear expresses itself in flight.

...we can see then that the gestures mean these attitudes on the part of the form, that is, they have that meaning for us. We cannot say that the animal means it in the sense that he has a reflective determination to attack. A man may strike another before he means it; a man may jump and run away from a loud sound behind his back before he knows what he is doing. If he has the idea in his mind, then the

gesture not only means this to the observer but it also means the idea which the individual has."

In one case the observer sees that the attitude of the dog means attack, but he does not say that it means a conscious determination to attack on the part of the dog. However, if someone shakes a fist in your face you assume that he has not only a hostile attitude but that he has some idea behind it. You assume that it means not only a possible attack but that the individual has an idea in his experience. When, now, that gesture means this idea behind it and it arouses that idea in the other individual, then we have a significant symbol."

"In the case of the dog-fight we have a gesture which calls out an appropriate response: in the present case we have a symbol which answers to a meaning in the experience of the first individual and which also calls out that meaning in the second individual.

Where the gesture reaches that situation it has become what we call "language." It is now a significant symbol and it signifies a certain meaning" (Mead, 1967, p.46).

Here there are some interesting problems. Mead moves from a behavioral level to a mentalistic position. The act "carries with it" the attitude. This "attitude" may be the "inner" attitude of the actor and may be an emotional attitude such as anger or fear. How can the observer know that these attitudes are present "within" the actor? The gestures "mean these attitudes." That is, they are inferred from the gestures. Further the "inner attitude" may be intended and conscious though not necessarily. If the actor "has the idea in his mind" then gesture "means the idea." This bit of circular reasoning provides Mead with a neatly closed system and the certainty that "ideas" and "intentions" can be discerned. However, if, according to Mead, one may act "before he means it" as in the case of striking another, then it is not the case that intended meaning is present prior to all actions. Nevertheless, Mead gives greater emphasis to attitude, intention and meaning because that is where what he calls "significant symbols" are involved, i.e. language, and it is this which characterizes the higher stages of development, i.e. humans. But also note that he has solved the problem of knowing the other's inner attitude or meaning. The observer, he says, sees that "the attitude of the dog means attack" and the observer can also see that the gesture means "the idea in the mind" of the actor i.e. the shaking of the fist means a hostile attitude and "some idea behind it." This is apparently transparent. For Mead there is no problem of "knowing the other's mind."

Confirmation seems to be provided in the case of significant symbols, i.e. language, in that the observer shares the same symbols (language) as those being observed. That a symbol "calls out that meaning in the second individual" (and also in a third individual, i.e. the observer) is taken for granted by Mead. Understanding the other is not a problem. Understanding is apparently achieved immediately and without ambiguity. In this respect it must be stated clearly that for Mead, who is taking the observer's perspective and is using hypothetical and constructed examples, such matters as understanding, meaning, ideas, and attitudes held by the other are not problematic. Presumably, and by implication, they are not difficulties for the interactants either.

We might ask whether, in their use, language and significant symbols are problematic. What we find is that they are not for Mead (1967, p. 54):

"what language seems to carry is a set of symbols answering to certain content which is measurably identical in the experience of the different individuals. If there is to be communication as such the symbol has to mean the same thing to all individuals involved."

And (p. 56) "in the human situation there is a different response which is mediated by means of particular symbols or particular gestures which have the same meaning for all members of a group."

Here another question may be not only “is this so” but “why must this be so”? Mead’s position would seem to be that once significant symbols are developed (and he does give us some examples of how they develop in the first place) their meaning must be the same for those who use them in communication. There would seem, thus, to be no room for ambiguity, vagueness, uncertainty, or even lying in communication.⁵

Why does Mead want “universal discourse” or “symbols that mean the same thing to all”? His assumption is that only when all share the same meaning is joint action or concerted action or patterned action possible. However, his example of the crowd would suggest otherwise. In this example (Mead, 1967, p. 55)

“people get into a crowd and move this way, and that way; they adjust themselves to the people coming toward them, as we say, unconsciously. They move in an intelligent fashion with reference to each other, and perhaps all of them think of something entirely different, but they do find in the gestures of others, their attitudes and movements, adequate stimuli for different responses. This illustrates a conversation of gestures in which there is cooperative activity without any symbol that means the same thing to all. Of course, it is possible for intelligent individuals under such conditions to translate these gestures into significant symbols, but one need not stop to translate into terms of that sort. Such a universal discourse is not at all essential to the conversation of gestures in cooperative conduct.”

Here the situation is one of persons in a crowd, sharing the same time and space, visibly present to one another. Coordination of actions and cooperation is possible. How is it possible? The suggestion, based on his earlier analysis of the conversation of gestures, is that it is stimulus and adjustive response, somehow, for each of the persons. The actions of the others provide the stimuli which lead to a subsequent adjustive response.

But what are they actually doing? What constitutes a stimulus and when does a response become a stimulus for a next response? And is action so neatly sequenced? Can we say who did what first and who did what next? This situation, for Mead, is not theoretically nor practically interesting. It is assumed that nothing very complicated is going on. The notion of “conversation of gestures” is enough to gloss the complex of actions of the various parties co-present.

Contrastingly, for Sacks (and Garfinkel) the crowd, like traffic, or waiting in lines, needs to be analyzed to discover how the persons involved are managing to “organize themselves.” If there is concerted, coordinated, organized action in this instance it is indeed without significant symbols, in Mead’s terms, but it is not enough to say that it is explained by the conversation of gestures.

If Mead even acknowledges that cooperative action can occur without “universal discourse” and “significant symbols,” should such instances as this not be examined to learn how they achieve their coordination? Might it not also be possible for the child to know how to behave in social situations, not by “role-taking” or “role-playing,” but by observing and coordinating her actions with those of others involved in the immediate situation? The close examination of how such coordinated action is achieved in setting aside such concepts as “stimulus” and “response,” as well as role, which serve to organize our observations in advance of an examination of the actions of the persons in the situation.⁵

2.2. The Conversation of Gestures and Conversation Analysis

When Mead (1967, p. 75-76) comes to the question of meaning, he has some intriguing ideas which could lead to a more direct examination of the process of interaction.

“Meaning arises and lies within the field of the relation between the gesture of a given human organism and the subsequent behavior of this organism as indicated to another human organism by that gesture. If that gesture does so indicate to

another organism the subsequent (or resultant) behavior of the given organism, then it has meaning. In other words, the relationship between a given stimulus – as a gesture – and the later phases of the social act of which it is an early (if not the initial) phase constitutes the field within which meaning originates and exists.

Meaning is thus a development of something objectively there as a relation between certain phases of the social act; it is not a psychical addition to that act and it is not an “idea” as traditionally conceived.... The gesture stands for a certain resultant of the social act, a resultant to which there is a definite response on the part of the individuals involved therein so that meaning is given or stated in terms of response.”

Later, (Mead, 1967, p. 77-78) says:

“awareness or consciousness is not necessary to the presence of meaning in the process of social experience. A gesture on the part of one organism in any given social act calls out a response on the part of another organism which is directly related to the action of the first organism and its outcome; and a gesture is a symbol of the result of the given social act of one organism (the organism making it) in so far as it is responded to by another organism (thereby involved in that act) as indicating that result. The mechanism of meaning is thus present in the social act before the emergence of consciousness or awareness of meaning occurs. The act or adjustive response of the second organism gives to the gesture of the first organism the meaning which it has.” (italics author’s)

But note, his analysis is of meaning in general not of situated meanings or of interaction in process. Nevertheless, if his idea were taken seriously, we could see how it would lead to a view of meaning in interaction as emergent and situated. His move to a general, more abstract level, however, is a move toward universals and typicalities. He does not focus on “meaning as a process in interaction” except as a general matter.⁶ The process by which meaning develops is not studied as an ongoing process. Nor are meanings seen as contingent and situated. Rather, once the analyst has decided what the actors “must mean” by their acts, such an interpretation of “meaning” is then presented as the resultant of the analyst’s work.

To take the actor’s perspective seriously and to treat meaning as processual, contingent, situated, and emergent would be to take a radically different view – and that is what Sacks does.

Again, according to Mead (1967, p. 76):

“Meaning involves this three-fold relation among phases of the social act as the context in which it arises and develops: this relation of the gesture of one organism to the adjustive response of another organism (also implicated in the given act) and to the completion of the given act – a relation such that the second organism responds to the gesture of the first as indicating or referring to the completion of the given act. For example, the chick’s response to the cluck of the mother hen is a response to the meaning of the cluck; the cluck refers to danger or food, as the case may be, and has this meaning or connotation for the chick.”

Here he mistakenly assumes that the cluck already is meaningful i.e. that, in this context, it will be recognized as to its meaning by the hen. But how is it recognized? Surely not every cluck is the same nor is it an either/or meaning. It is not consistent with his view to say that the cluck “refers to” danger or food because later, on the same page, he says “the act or adjustive response of the second organism gives to the gesture of the first organism the meaning which it has.” That is, it is not that the cluck meant danger when it was uttered but that in the other’s response to it we see that it is taken as meaning “danger.” And here we trip over our own locutions because it is not “taken to mean” but rather is “constructed to mean” i.e. the response provides us with an understanding of the meaning of the prior act. It is here, perhaps, that Mead sees meaning as emergent, coming in and

through the intractions of the parties. Some may worry that this leaves out the intention of the producer of the first act. And so it does. However, do not assume that the producer lacks purpose or intention, only that since we, as observers, cannot be certain as to what it might be, we must see how the other party responds to discover what the meaning is for that party. It is this view of interaction which Sacks takes seriously. It has certain implications, some of which can be stated as follows:

- 1) the meaning of an utterance, for the parties in interaction, cannot be presumed to be known by the observer, prior to the response of the other.
- 2) this applies to gestures as well as to significant symbols (e.g. words). The observer, by virtue of knowing the same language as the parties being observed, cannot presume to know what words and actions will “mean” in and on this occasion.
- 3) the context of action must be taken seriously. The context includes an act by one party and the subsequent action by the second as well as prior and succeeding acts.
- 4) Mead’s view with regard to gestures should not be limited to gestures and animal examples but applies equally well to significant symbols.

2. 3. Another Veiw of Mead

Melvin Pollner (1979) attempted to show how Mead’s notion of meaning could be used to examine how meanings are constituted in interaction. Pollner’s concept of ”explicative transactions” based on his study of interaction in traffic courts, shows how the

“meaning of what one has done before is established by what another does next.” (p. 246) That is, the significance or meaning of what one party in the court, the plaintiff, does is established by what the judge does next. (e.g. what would be honored by the judge). Defendants would have to offer their version and only later could it be known by them whether it was an “excuse.” Or, what could stand as “an adequate plea” was constituted and explicated as defendants entered pleas and were responded to by the judge. In Student Court, an adequate plea was constituted as nothing less than the legally specified utterance of “guilty” or “not guilty.”⁷

Quoting Mead, he argues that this is similar to the idea that “the organic processes or responses...constitute the objects to which they are responses.” Mead’s example, he says is most relevant in that it is “...the dog’s retreat from the baring of teeth by the other dog implicitly constitutes the baring of teeth as an indication of a subsequent attack: the “retreat” simultaneously discovers and creates the possibility of “threat.” (Mead, 1967, p. 76)

But it seems that Mead is talking about a stimulus-response model of interaction in this example such that the earlier part of a series of actions (stimuli) can come to be associated with those actions that occur later in the series. The earlier baring of the teeth is associated with the subsequent attack, a later action in the series. Mead calls it an “indication of a subsequent” action. As an indication, it can be said to stand for or represent that which will come later although a more neutral description may simply be to say it precedes that which follows. As a “precedent” it is not necessarily an “indication.” To call it an “indication” is to interpret it as to its meaningful relationship to subsequent action. Such an interpretation is an analyst’s construction. And, as an analyst’s construction, any subsequent action may be interpreted as “meaningfully related” to the prior.

Thus, it is the case, as Pollner (1979 p. 253) says, that “substantive meanings are a gloss (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970) for transactions or relations through which those substantive meanings are achieved.” Such “substantive meanings” may be those proposed by analysts as well as those proposed (used) by members involved in the interaction.

What Pollner adds to our examination of Mead is an interpretation that would consider the processes of the constitution of meaning directly, something which Mead does not do except in his brief examples of the conversation of gestures. Once significant symbols, i.e. language, are introduced, Mead does not attend to the process of meaning constitution as a matter that involves act to act sequences. To do so would be, as Pollner (1979, p. 253) calls it,

“to attend to the ‘-ing’ of things...the course of activity...which presupposes, preserves, and thereby produces the particular “thing.” The analysis of ‘-ing’ often requires an archeological perspective, for there are often many levels – physiological, experiential, praxeological and cognitive – through which social objects are created and sustained.”

Mead was more focused on the resultant, not the process of constitution. And for Pollner, and for us, it is clear that Mead’s lack of focus on the process of meaning constitution leads him to assume “objectivated meanings,” known and shared in common by members, embedded in language and speaking practices, and understood as to their meanings by others (i.e. observers) who share the same language.⁸

Sacks, in contrast, is engaged in an effort to make sociology a “natural, observational science” in the same way that other sciences, such as astronomy and biology are engaged in systematic observation of naturally occurring events. To carry out strict observation, according to Sacks, means that one would be concerned to discover how organisms (persons) actually do whatever they do, how persons in interaction, for example, carry out their activities.

His assumption is that the way they carry out their activities is “stably describable.” That is, there is some order or organization to the way they carry out their activities and that that order is describable.

The study of a culture would entail such observations of the naturally occurring, ordered actions engaged in by persons. If there is no set of similar experiences that all members of a culture engage in as they learn the culture, and, if from their earliest days they only encounter a small portion of the entire culture, then there is no specific set of practices that is necessarily more important than any other to study. If there is “order at all points” as Sacks says, then order can be found in any activity that is examined. It would be,

“extremely hard not to find it, no matter how or where we looked. ...and if we figure that that is the way things are to some extent, then it really would not matter very much what it is we look at, if we look carefully enough.” (Sacks lecture 33, Spring 1966)

Sacks’ problem or set of topics is social order, and the methods used in its production, wherever it may be found. That study is not to be prejudged as to its importance, i.e. the sociologist is not to say that some things are more important or more deserving of study than others. Therefore, one does not have to start with a theory that so specifies.

His aim is to develop a grammar of social actions, a grammar of activities in the sense that grammar, as in language, is the form and structure, including the sequential arrangement, of its constituent elements.⁹ The discovery, analysis and description of the grammar of action uncovers the methods used in the production of social order, the methodical ordering of those elements which make up the action, its constituent, organized, reflexively organized, elements.

The orderly arrangement of elements is rule-bound, it is reproducible, and recognizable. Its disarrangement or rearrangement or the absence of one of its sequenced parts may be noticeable, attended to, modified, corrected, or redone by those engaged in the action. According to Sacks (1984, p. 24):

“we would want to name those objects (e.g. a greeting, an insult, a compliment) and see how they work, as we know how verbs and adjectives and sentences work.”

Thereby we can come to see how an activity is assembled, as we see a sentence assembled with a verb, a predicate, and so on. Ideally, of course, we would have a formally describable method, as the assembling of a sentence is formally describable. The descriptions not only would handle sentences in general, but particular sentences. What we would be doing, then is developing another grammar. And grammar, of course, is the model of routinely observable, closely ordered social activities."

Sacks therefore insists on observation and not on hypothetically constructed examples or the analysis of "typical" cases. Here, again, is a contrast with Mead. Theory is to be based on observation. One would start with that which occurs, and not with what is imaginable or constructed or with concepts from any particular theory. That which occurs will be found to include things that are not even imaginable. Sacks would start with something he noticed, actually witnessed or heard, then collected in the form of a note. Later he dealt only with what were naturally occurring and tape recorded (and transcribed) events.

His move to study conversation was not because of a decision that conversation was more important than any other activity. Rather, it was conversation that could originally be recorded on tape and then transcribed. It was "something to begin with," he said (Sacks, 1984, p. 26). And it was not some particular conversation that would be of interest but rather that, whatever conversation was studied, the idea was to transform it into an interaction that was the product of what he called "a machinery" i.e. its grammar, or the grammar which organizes it into whatever it is. (i.e. that which makes it, or constitutes it as an orderly set of or series of actions).

If there is "order at all points" then it doesn't matter where one starts. If conversation is available in a form that enables it to be carefully studied, then it is one place where one can begin. And it is social actions, the social order, the organization of social actions, that is the topic of concern – not what people are talking about.⁹

There is another point on which Sacks argues for the shift to a methodological and theoretical perspective which takes as phenomena those matters which are observable using methods which allow investigators to reproduce the same findings. As Schegloff (1989, p. 21) has described it, Sacks wanted to produce a science. A science should produce findings which reveal the order and organization in social life. And a science would use methods which are reproducible by others in order for them to be able to produce (or negate) the findings of that science. His approach to the study of talk does both – and his insistence on an empirically based science means that "data" are actual doings and sayings and not hypothetically constructed ones. Later, his insistence on the tape recording as necessary represents an insistence that there be reproducibility of the very ways that speakers carry on their talk.

He is thus able to show how members actually produce their talk (acts and immediate next acts), what their methods of production actually are, and how that talk provides the context for next actions. Thus, interaction is seen as progressively building the context. According to this view, then, the next act can reveal what the preceding act "meant." Meaning is progressively constituted. And since interaction proceeds temporally, next acts can revise, modify, or preserve those meanings previously developed. Next acts, because of the possibility of providing contexts for revisions of the meanings of prior acts, remain relevant. What an action comes to is not necessarily settled and done in immediate next turns.

However, the claim that such modifications actually occur would require demonstration or proof based on what actually happens subsequently. If next acts do not address or in some fashion make modifications with respect to the preceding ones, then those preceding ones may stand. Their standing or persistence or enduring character may appear to us as ordinary members of the society, or to us as analysts of the actions of ordinary members, as now "objectified," i.e. as objectified meanings or meaningful actions whose sense is somehow independent of the process of their construction. This "retrospective illusion" as Merleau-Ponty (1945) called it, is itself a

phenomenon, a method, whereby, for members, meanings are taken to be enduring. To call it a “retrospective illusion” is only to label a process; showing how that process achieves its character remains unanalyzed. Whether one chooses to analyze it or not, or whether it is or is not analyzable, that it does “happen” that meanings are taken to be persistent is at least empirically verifiable in the study of talk, namely, that conversationalists do not, for example, continue to deal with the same matter once certain types of acts occur. Thus, for example, once a return greeting is done, another greeting is not produced by the first speaker. If it is, then what happens next may show that the return (or more specifically, what was said by second speaker in next turn) was not heard, was misinterpreted, or misunderstood. Such actions provide empirical evidence for whether the return greeting was heard, understood, accepted, considered appropriate, etc; what is said much later may show that it was not heard/understood, but that first speaker continued regardless.

What Sacks and the conversation analysts argued is that such meanings may be provisional, that only what the parties do later can be the proof of what their understandings were, and that any other claims by the analyst as to what the parties “know” which is not grounded in what they can demonstrably be shown to be doing, is an analyst’s claim which is not deserving of acceptance as a claim which has been validated.

3. Conclusion

As Mead’s work became interpreted and transformed into the symbolic interactionist perspective⁹ (by Blumer and those who followed), his epistemological and methodological position was accepted, namely, natural events were to be considered in terms of their typical features; the significance of these events was to be interpreted by the analyst/theorist; the significance of these events for the development of the self or for any other presumed or posited aspects of social being (e.g. role, generalized other, self, etc) was to be explicated in terms of generalized conceptualizations; and generalized, explanatory theorizing was to be preferred to descriptive or analytic examinations of the internal organization of interactional events.

For Sacks, an alternative view was adopted. Social order and organization was to be discovered in and through the actual practices (interactions) engaged in by members; abstract and general conceptualizations were to be avoided unless they were directly connected to first order constructs in use; the significance of events (and interactions) which were studied was to be sought in the meaning these had for those engaged in them; and the aim of the analyst was to explicate cultural events in terms of how those events achieved their sense as ongoing practical accomplishment.

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Endnotes

¹ *Mind, Self and Society*, first published in 1934, was based on “two sets of excellent student notes on the course together with excerpts from other such notes and selections from unpublished manuscripts left by Mr. Mead. A stenographic copy of the 1927 course in social psychology has been taken as basic. This set, together with a number of similar sets for other courses, owes its existence to the devotion and foresight of Mr. George Anagnos. Sensing, as a student, the importance of the material of Mr. Mead’s lectures (always delivered without notes), he found in Mr. Alvin Carus a sympathetic fellow-worker who was able to provide the means necessary to employ persons to take down verbatim the various courses. The completeness of the material varies considerably, but the set basic to this volume was very full. The whole is by no means a court record, but it is certainly as adequate and as faithful a record as has been left of a great thinker’s last years....

The basic manuscript has been greatly enriched by the faithful and full notes of another devoted student, Mr. Robert Page, notes especially valuable since they are for 1930, the last year in which the course was given in its complete form at Chicago. Into the 1927 material (when rearranged, pruned of superfluous repetitions, and stylistically corrected) were inserted portions of the 1930 material, both into the text and as footnotes. The same was done to a much lesser degree with material from other courses, and selections from other sets than 1927 and 1930 are indicated by giving the year after the selection...” (Morris, C W. “Preface” in Mead 1967:vi)

² Harvey Sacks, Lectures, 1964-65, Edited by Gail Jefferson, Special Issue, *Human Studies*, vol. 12, nos. 3-4, December 1989. The complete set of his lectures is in Harvey Sacks, *Lectures on Conversation, Vols. 1 and 2*, Edited by Gail Jefferson and with an Introduction by Emanuel Schegloff, Oxford, U.K. and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992

³ See for example the following papers edited by Gail Jefferson and based on various lectures: Hotrodter: A Revolutionary Category, (in Psathas (Ed.) 1979: 7-14); Notes on Methodology (in Atkinson and Heritage (Eds.) 1984: 21-27); On doing being ordinary (in Atkinson and Heritage, 1984: 413-529); Some considerations of a story told in ordinary conversations (in Quasthoff and Gulish (Eds.), 1987a: 127-138); On the preferences for agreement and contiguity in sequences in conversation, (in Button and Lee, (Eds.), 1987b: 54-69); and ”You want to find out if anybody really does care” (in Button and Lee, (Eds.), 1987c: 219-25).

⁴ Sacks received his A.B. in 1955 after three years at Columbia College, his L.L.B. in 1959 from Yale and his Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley in 1966. He had already begun lecturing at UCLA in 1964 where he held an appointment as Acting Assistant Professor of Sociology and later (1968) moved to the University of California, Irvine. His death in late 1975 came in an automobile accident.

⁵ Nor do the symbolic interactionists later take this perspective in the analysis of situated actions. They also move to an analytic level in which the typical, the shared, the understood, is discussed as already known and unproblematic.

⁶ As Mead himself says, (p. 70) “a language simply lifts out of the social process a situation which is logically or implicitly there already. The language symbol is simply a significant or conscious gesture.” (Although he later seems to say the significant symbol is qualitatively different from the gesture.)

⁷ Another of Pollner’s main points is that “the developing session may act as its own socialization agent. Explicated features become available as a set of instructions and resources for further action and inference. ...even the routine, non-exceptional flow of events explicates the situated meaning of events as routine and non-exceptional. ...the setting makes observable its explicable possibilities and its ‘silently tolerated inexactitudes’ to borrow Reichenbach’s phrase. In this way, every transaction in the ongoing activity may become fraught with instructional possibilities.” (Pollner, 1979)

⁸ For the definition of grammar, see Webster, New World Dictionary, “form and structure of words (acts with their customary arrangement in phrases and sentences (syntax) and ...language sounds (phonology) usually distinguished from the study of word structures and word arrangements of a given language at a given time or 3. a body of rules for speaking and writing a given language, based on the study of its grammar

⁹ One reason for writing this paper is to try to discover why those approaches based on Mead, e.g. symbolic interactionism, are not interested in the detailed study of interaction as a process, in conversational interaction as a topic, and in the study of how meanings are ongoingly constituted, i.e. the process of “meaning construction.” I think that conversation analysis, (now referred to as CA) such as that developed by Sacks, have important and significantly different contributions to make to the study of the social process which the Meadian perspective is unable to accomplish.

When I once asked, in 1967, Herbert Blumer, a leading American exponent of symbolic interaction whether he didn’t agree that the next development in symbolic interactionism would be in the direction of phenomenology and ethnomethodology, he became very upset and loudly said “NO”. This, to me is an indication of his recognition of the different epistemological and methodological positions of these perspectives.

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