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Mountains, Cones and Dilemmas of Context: The Case of ‘Ordinary Language’ in Philosophy and Social Scientific Method

Paul K. Miller & Tom Grimwood, University of Cumbria, UK.

Abstract

The order of influence from thesis to hypothesis, and from philosophy to the social sciences, has historically governed the way in which the abstraction and significance of language as an empirical object is determined. In this paper, an argument is made for the development of a more reflexive intellectual relationship between ordinary language philosophy (OLP) and the social sciences that it helped inspire. It is demonstrated that, and how, the social scientific traditions of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis press OLP to re-consider the variety of problematic abstractions it has previously made for the sake of philosophical clarity, thereby self-reinvigorating.

Keywords: Context; ethnomethodology; indexicality; language; sequence.

Mountains, Cones and Dilemmas of Context: The Case of “Ordinary Language” in Philosophy and Social Scientific Method

Over three decades ago, in *The Fractal Geometry of Nature*, Benoit B. Mandelbrot outlined a now famous critique of traditional Euclidean thinking, proposing that mathematics, as a science of the real universe, cannot remain fixated on abstract and “ideal shapes.” “Clouds are not spheres,” he argued, “...mountains are not cones, coastlines are not circles, and bark is not smooth, nor does lightning travel in a straight line” (Mandelbrot 1982, 1). The universe itself is, for Mandelbrot, composed of the complex, the irregular, the unpredictable and the ostensibly chaotic. Moreover, the true shapes of nature are actually much more intuitive (and, indeed, ‘natural’) than the ideal shapes of mathematical missives. If we were to encounter a perfectly conical mountain, we might well be a little disturbed by it. We would at the very least consider it something of a peculiarity. Jagged slopes and uneven peaks are, however, features of the real landscapes we know.

Mandelbrot’s fractal geometry is, thus, premised on a rejection of the idea that natural phenomena as-they-occur are somehow too “messy” to be objects of proper scientific investigation, and that nature can only really be studied in terms of its relationship with ideal forms. The everyday unpredictability of real-world systems, from biological evolution through stock market behavior to trends in fashion and art, and the manner in which the most statistically insignificant variables can induce the most ground-shaking changes (quite literally, in some cases), are not obstacles to the understanding of our environments, but prime features of them. In order to properly comprehend these phenomena, thus, Mandelbrot argues that it may be necessary to discard the expectation of precise prediction, the search for absolute certainty that is the conceptual linchpin of traditional science. This does not, however, also entail the abandonment of pattern. Indeed, he maintains, everyday features of

the material and human universes are often subject to relatively simple but demonstrably recursive rules that facilitate the formation of highly complex objects in largely unpredictable, but decidedly patterned and eminently describable ways.

This short discussion of Mandelbrot's work might well be seen as something of a parable pertinent to the tradition of Ordinary Language Philosophy (henceforth OLP) originally emergent of the work of J.L. Austin (1962; 1961), a practice which is often beholden to a range of problematic idealizations and abstractions of its own. In order to provide an encompassing philosophical argument regarding the world of human interaction, some level of abstraction seems necessary to render the argument meaningful: not because of the demands of any formal argumentation, but rather as an important (and pragmatic) link between particular cases and their more general application. It is over-simplistic, no doubt, to claim that the "division" between (respectively) the social sciences and philosophy can be seen as fully emblematic of this. Nevertheless, it does provide a framework for recognizing that, during the last few centuries, theoretical positions and their subsequent "fixes" have mostly arisen in philosophy, and have latterly been imported into the social sciences in a largely unreflexive relationship.

In this paper, we examine one such relationship pertinent to the understanding of everyday language: the relationship between ordinary language philosophy, and a tradition in the social sciences that it helped inspire, that of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (henceforth CA). As discussed in greater depth later, in developing a novel (and rigorously empirical) approach to the study of practical interaction, ethnomethodological approaches draw heavily upon the European philosophical traditions of phenomenology, particularly as expressed in the work of Alfred Schütz (1967), and also on ordinary language philosophy itself, as typified by Austin's explorations "performative speech" (1962; 1961) and the

accounts of “thick description” authored by Gilbert Ryle (1954; 1949)¹. In many respects, we might well consider ethnomethodology to be a “bridge,” of sorts, between the sensibilities of the phenomenologist and the ordinary language philosopher which can help us address a range of key issues. While debates regarding the relationship between OLP and its intellectual progeny have been sustained in the social sciences for many years now², however, input from ethnomethodological research into debates within OLP has remained largely conspicuous by its absence. The result is that the abstraction at work in the movement from hypothesis to thesis when studying “ordinary/everyday” language has been largely overlooked.

From this position, we attempt to address a few ways in which the “traditional” flow of ideas between one field of philosophy and one area of social science might be more extensively mutualized. In particular, we explore how three particular abstractions common within OLP might prove less analytically problematic when ethnomethodological sensibilities are added into the investigative equation. These are: (1) the abstraction of “language” itself, (2) the abstraction of significance in language and (3) the abstraction of evidence for language. In exploring the nature of these abstractions as they appear in OLP, we further utilize Mandelbrot’s thought (above), as an illustrative device for critiquing the (traditional) mono-directive move from theory to practice.

The Abstraction of “Language:” Langue and Parole

Why is “ordinary” language problematic for both philosophy and the social sciences? One of the more influential answers can be found in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure who, in his

¹ Not to mention the later Wittgenstein (1953), who himself shares a number of similarities with the British ordinary language approaches.

² See, particularly, Coulter (1991, 176-195; 1979).

posthumously published *Course in General Linguistics* (1959), made the now famous distinction between *la langue* (language) and *parole* (speech). Centrally, he proposed that *la langue* is homogeneous in character, an abstract set of underpinning principles (grammar, syntax and so forth) which is social, systematic and analyzable. Any actual language is, therefore, “...a self-contained whole and principle of classification” (Saussure 1959, 9) without which no meaningful incidence of *parole* would be possible. *Parole*, on the other hand, is:

...many-sided and heterogeneous; straddling several areas simultaneously - physical, physiological, and psychological - it belongs to both the individual and to society; we cannot put it into any category of human facts, for we cannot discover its unity. (1959, 9)

Therefore:

In separating language from speaking we are at the same time separating: 1) what is social from what is individual; and 2) what is essential from what is accessory and more or less accidental. Language is not a function of the speaker; it is a product passively assimilated by the individual. It never requires premeditation, and reflection enters in only for the purposes of classification... (1959, 14)

In short, everyday speech is just too “messy” an object for formal investigation and, consequently, “...from the very outset we must put both feet on the ground of language [*la langue*] and use language as the norm of all other manifestations of speech” (1959, 9). *La langue* is, for Saussure, the only touchstone from which proper analysis can proceed.

In the century that has followed Saussure's original intervention, this notion of language as a "pure" phenomenon, and everyday speech as its disorderly variant, has been the foundation for a range of structurally-oriented approaches to the study of language throughout the humanities and social sciences.³ Despite its intuitive character and academic incorrigibility, however, it is a notion that is very difficult to uphold when we take a more forensic look at the real world of human interaction. The foundational point here, and as CA pioneer Harvey Sacks reminds us, is that everyday speech itself is the "primordial" site of language acquisition and use. It is not scripted or pre-ordained, and the complexities of turn-taking, and the management of intersubjectivity therein, are accomplished largely ad-hoc (Sacks 1992a; 1992b). The vast bulk of individuals initially learn their language through everyday interaction with other, more practiced users of that language. It is only as an output of this informal process that we then find ourselves in a position to read, and indeed write, books about formal grammar. From this point of view, the relationship between parole and langue is far from unidirectional: the latter is less an originary structure, and more of a compound, theorized and idealized version of the former.

This leads us back to Mandelbrot's observation regarding the peculiar manner in which general (social) scientific method tends to examine the world as-it-occurs, form abstractions, and then re-embed these abstractions in the world as if they are themselves the "real deal." In Saussure's thesis this rendering process actually works to define *la langue* into existence and, thereby, provides for the very possibility of claiming by contrast that the phenomenon from which it was originally derived is somehow of a "lesser" order. Much as the Earth would continue to orbit the sun irrespective of humans' capacity to "discover"

³ Particularly well-known examples being Noam Chomsky's *Language and Mind* (2006), and the two volumes of Jürgen Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* (1987; 1984)

gravity, so the same humans would most likely continue to interact verbally whether or not they had invented the discipline of linguistics. It is rather doubtful, however, that a philosophy or social science capable of minimizing the significance of everyday speech could even have been developed had people not already been chatting for some millennia.

The Abstraction of “Significance:” The Place of Language in Philosophy

This is, of course, not to propose that philosophy has always denigrated the value of everyday speech. Indeed, one could well argue that language has been at the center of philosophical practice since the Ancient Greeks. However, a brief glance over the history of philosophy will show us that the significance of language has also been tied to the very idea of what philosophy “is.” Language, we could maintain, is not just an object of philosophical investigation, but also a method of distinguishing authentic philosophy from its “imitators.” Most of Plato’s dialogues, for example, usually involve the analysis of “what is said” of particular concepts in everyday life, and how this can guide us in finding the ideal Truth of those concepts. Plato can also be found repeatedly distinguishing Socratic philosophy from its rival schools – in particular the rhetorical tuition of the Sophists – on the grounds of differing characterizations of language (Plato 1999, 308-352, 313d-e). Specifically, he focuses on differences between Socratic and Sophist ideas regarding (a) the purpose of linguistic analysis (respectively, whether it is used to decide truth or persuade through probabilities), and (b) the value of language itself (whether it is used for advancing knowledge, or for personal financial gain). It is, however, only comparatively recently that this centrality of language – both as investigative object and a method of identification – has been fully explored (Hanfling 2003, 25-41). This “linguistic turn” perhaps begins in the 18th century, with Condillac’s (2001) argument that language forms the model of our human knowledge. In taking this position, Condillac explicitly opposes the fundamental principles of

Locke's empiricism and, along with this, Locke's claims that the rhetorical employment of language was a "perfect cheat" next to an objective account of sense-experience (see Locke 1947). This dispute between philosophy and rhetoric continued in the nineteenth century, especially with the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. The objective truth that was held in such reverence by philosophers, Nietzsche argued, was itself merely a "mobile army of metaphors" (1999, 146)⁴. Far from being a simple instrument of our reason or reference to our reality, Nietzsche claimed it was language – metaphorical, metonymic and deceptive – that shaped our "objective" ideas such as selfhood, morality and knowledge. This radical critique was less a philosophy of language, and more an undermining of philosophy's central claims to knowledge.

Despite the presence of these radical and distinctive voices, the first half of the twentieth century saw the influence of logical positivism begin to permeate thought across broad swathes of the (Western) intellectual landscape, with a visible knock-on effect within the social sciences. This school also placed great emphasis on the role of language in the formation of philosophy but, and in utter opposition to the likes of Condillac and Nietzsche, the concern was fundamentally reductive. The task of philosophy was to "clear out" the unsolvable problems that ambiguous or non-verifiable language had created. Philosophical propositions must be stated in such a way as to be observably "true" or "false." If they could not fit this propositional form, then they had no meaning or serious significance, and, as Wittgenstein – though not himself aligned with the Vienna circle – famously claimed in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "...we must pass over [them] in silence" (1961, §7). A clear contrast can be appreciated, therefore, between the positivist understanding of language as an

⁴ An argument more recently articulated in the Social Psychological domain as "Death and Furniture," a reflection upon "The rhetoric, politics and theology of bottom line arguments against relativism" (see Edwards, Ashmore and Potter 1995).

“untidy” conduit of a more abstract and significant truth, and a more rhetorical account which suggests that concepts such as meaning, truth and significance are themselves rather messy.

If the fierce reductionism of the logical positivists was only briefly popular, their insistence on verifiable, propositional information as the main criterion for understanding and conceptualizing language has endured in a number of domains. Not least among these are several salient fields of social science, and particularly those of the cognitive persuasion. As John Heritage summarizes, there has been therein:

...a pervasive and long-standing view which treats language exclusively in terms of its representative function. Within this view, the meaning of a word is what it references, corresponds with, or stands for in the real world. Within this view, the function of sentences is to express propositions, preferably true ones, about the world. [This] view of language has remained a tacit assumption for generations of social scientists. (1984, 137)

In cognitive psychology, for example, we are encouraged to conceptualize the words people use as little more than “tainted” manifestations of the real stuff of investigation - measurable cognitive schemata, top-down processing mechanisms and so forth⁵. In mainstream social research, the use of tick-boxes or Likert scales in questionnaire design actively precludes an individual from using their own words to answer a question, instead limiting possible responses to those defined and coded as “proper,” relevant and useful by the researcher (Silverman 1994; 1997). Even in some areas of contemporary qualitative sociological and psychological research, practitioners are encouraged to “tidy-up” their transcripts of

⁵ See Edwards (2012, 425-435) and Potter (2010, 657-678; 2005, 739-747) for strong elaborations upon this theme.

interviews or focus groups such that they are a clearer representation of what the participants “really meant.” In all cases, the mandate is the same when considered in terms of Mandelbrot’s parable: assume that the mountain actually stands for a cone, and then measure the dimensions of the cone.

Given the longstanding dominance of such thinking in these major disciplines, it is perhaps no surprise that some of the most advanced and practical social scientific critiques of this mode of reason are emergent from sub-disciplines thereof: interactionist models of sociology (Garfinkel 1967; 1996; 2007; Sacks 1963; 1984a; 1984b) and subsequently social psychology (Billig 1997; Potter and Wetherell 1987; Edwards, Ashmore, and Potter 1995; Harre and Gillett 1994). As aforementioned, these critiques are at least in part conceptually inspired by the likes of Austin and Searle, who years beforehand challenged the positivist assumption that questions of truth and meaning must begin from propositional knowledge (that is, statements that can be verified as “true” or “false”) by arguing that any philosophy of ordinary language should actually begin with what people ordinarily say.

The Abstraction of “Evidence:” Ordinary Language Philosophy

It is with Austin, therefore, that we see a more constructive bringing-together of thesis and hypothesis, which acknowledges the slipperiness of “everyday” interaction, yet retains the need for a sense of patterns or “rules” in communication. There are two crucial components in this shift from logical positivism to analytic ordinary language philosophy. The first is the move away from analyzing the meaning of single words or propositional statements as purely descriptive (Austin 1962, 1-3; 1961, 56). Sentences, Austin argued, do things in a rich variety

of ways that were not limited to the “constative.”⁶ Certain utterances do not simply describe, but rather perform their own truth. Declaring “I take you to be my lawfully wedded wife” has no objective external reference point: we cannot ask, “Is that sentence correct? Has he really taken her to be his wife?” because the performance itself – literally, saying “I take you...” – is what verifies the truth in question.

Having established that certain speech-acts are not simply constituted by abstract statements but by their living performances, the second move of “ordinary language philosophy” was to categorize our everyday statements accordingly, such that we are still able to distinguish sense from nonsense. Performative sentences may sidestep the “true” or “false” judgments of propositional analysis, but can nevertheless be subjected to criticism; these sentences can still be “wrong,” or, in Austin’s own terms, infelicitous (1962, 14-15).⁷ This attention to the possible failures of ordinary language leads to two important points: on the one hand, it re-asserts the need for a philosophical account of everyday conversation, to safeguard the judgment of the “right-ness” or “wrong-ness” of a speech act. On the other hand, while the “...uttering of the words is, indeed, usually a, or even the, leading incident in the performance of the act,” Austin notes that the speech itself “...is far from being usually, even if it is ever, the sole thing necessary if the act is to be deemed to have been performed” (1962, 8). The task of designating felicitous and infelicitous speech acts requires attending to the significance of context, or, in Austin’s words, the total speech situation:

...in order to explain what can go wrong with statements we cannot just concentrate on the proposition involved... as has been done traditionally. We must consider the total

⁶ Hence the title of his famous lectures on the subject, *How to Do Things with Words*.

⁷ Austin herein has several ways of re-incorporating the notion of “true” and “false” to performative sentences: he talks of their accuracy, their appropriateness, and, perhaps most charmingly, their “happiness.”

situation in which the utterance is issued – the total speech-act – if we are to see the parallel between statements and performative utterances, and how each can go wrong. (1962, 52)

This focus upon context re-introduces a familiar concern over the designation of “authentic” discourse. It is this insistence on the total speech situation, as a framework within which Austin’s examples of ordinary language are placed, which arguably highlights the key tension at work in the very idea of an “ordinary language philosophy.” Proposing that a total speech situation can be accounted for – i.e. that we can situate a statement fully within a clearly defined context – inevitably involves the introduction of certain assumptions regarding how this context might be discerned. As Jacques Derrida (1988) famously argued, this discernment was, for Austin, almost entirely based on the speaker’s intention. If a statement was taken out of this context – i.e. interpreted differently from its intention – then its meaning faded. However, this seems to leave the “total speech situation” as either inherently reductive (it only concerned itself with one half of the conversation – the intentional speaker – and therefore cannot be considered a “total” speech situation) or excessively unwieldy (if concerned with every possible permutation of how a conversation may or may not be interpreted).

In these terms, it is highly noteworthy that the use of ordinary language in the work of Austin is limited to invented examples (commonplaces, stock phrases and imagined statements). These are, as illustrative cases, far easier to locate within a “total speech situation” than our real, everyday interactions. While these invented examples are, of course, claiming only to generally represent everyday interactions, and not affirming any normative decree that “this is how language should be used,” such a use of invented examples – however commonplace in philosophical and rhetorical practice they may be – can often

effectively re-state the tension we have been endeavouring to outline. On the one hand, Austin's focus on "infelicities" in language allowed him to affirm the meaningfulness of performative sentences and the general usefulness of ordinary language; on the other, however, it also seems to somewhat reverse the initial fascination with the "ordinariness" of language itself. This, then, leaves us with two troubling implications. Firstly, it seems to involve the use of abstracted idealizations to overturn the dominance of idealized abstractions. Secondly, it may be that the act of inventing an example, rather than the act of speech or conversation itself, which allows the Derridean critique of context to be negotiated. If the manner of the example used serves to limit the breadth of the total speech situation (whether intentionally or otherwise), then the source of that example becomes highly significant. To return to our Mandelbrot-tinged leitmotif, we might suggest that while no longer presuming the cone to be more important than the mountain, or indeed that the cone is the mountain, Austin instead theorizes from a rough pencil-sketch of some crags that could be a part of any mountain, or no mountain at all. Arguably, Austin's concern is only a reflection of the general process at work in both philosophy and the social sciences, by which the everyday is constituted in a whole-part model of social interaction. That which does not sit neatly within the theoretical whole is presumed to be fragmented, non-serious or unhelpful: in short, infelicitous. In this sense, the employment of the "everyday" has lent itself to a general theory of language which, ironically, ignores the specifics of our day to day interactions.

This method of theorizing the everyday thus displays a curious interdependence of, on the one hand, radical critique, and on the other, an adherence to the existing structures of meaning the critique is aimed at (for example, Austin's "total speech situation"). The "everyday" sense of language is raised as an objection to the illusory holism of philosophical and linguistic systems, in order to pull out its fragmentary and ambiguous edges; but in doing

so infers an ideal sense of “the everyday” that is no less holistic and no less illusory. This echoes observations made by Michael Lynch (1997, 200):

Although as speakers of a natural language, we already know what rules are and what it means to explain, give reasons, or follow instructions, this does not mean that our understanding can be expressed in definitions, logical formulas, or even ideal-typical examples. [emphasis added]

Rather, Lynch argues, it is only by examining everyday (naturally-occurring) cases of interaction, that we can instead explore how such features become “...relevant to particular contexts of activity” (1997, 200).

Let us consider one of Austin’s own invented examples, provided in his most primordial analyses of performative utterances (1962, 64-65): “I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow.” Austin argues that such a statement does not actually constate anything at all; rather it is an action in itself, or at least a part of one. In this case, he takes this to be the self-identical act of betting. If uttered as an isolate expression, this might well be a fairly full explanation of the expression here but, in real interaction, very few “isolate expressions” actually exist (Billig 1997). Rather utterances occur within chains of activity which define and redefine interpersonal “meaning” at the local level (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974).⁸ Austin sets this train in motion when he suggests that, rather

⁸ As well as the wider social level – as Bourdieu takes Austin to task for in “Authorised Language: The Social Conditions for the Effectiveness of Ritual Discourse.” “Most of the conditions that have to be fulfilled in order for a performative utterance to succeed come down to the question of the appropriateness of the speaker – or, better still, his social function – and of the discourse he utters.” (Bourdieu 1991, 111) While attending to the dynamics of social context, though, Bourdieu tends to focus less on the fluidity of context as a constantly renewed and reappraised part of everyday language itself; hence why we mention him here only in passing.

than “just concentrate on the proposition involved...we must consider the total situation in which the utterance is issued” (1962, 52). To which, it seems Austin may have something like the following in mind:

Fred: “I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow.”

John: “Well, I bet you sixpence the sun is going to shine.”

Fred: “You’re on!”

Herein, John orients to Fred’s utterance as a bet; this is displayed in his own subsequent action – an “uptake” (1962, 65) of the bet. Consider, on the other hand, the following (imaginary) case:

John: “I’ve got us tickets for the cricket tomorrow.”

Fred: “I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow.”

John: “Oh, come on, show some optimism!”

In this case, Fred’s utterance certainly has a performative character, but is not, however, simply rendered infelicitous by the lack of an obvious uptake. Instead, John’s response indicates that it has been received as a complaint about the incorrigible capacity of the British weather to spoil plans, or possibly as an implicit self-commentary on Fred’s own pessimistic character, or both.⁹ It is difficult to tell exactly which, because the conversation does not further unfold; and necessarily so, as this is a simple imaginary illustration. Any clarity of the intentional act as a guarantor of the performative (which, as previously

⁹ Moreover, the sense of the entire exchange is wholly dependent on both participants sharing knowledge regarding the fact that one cannot play cricket in the rain; and at a more intimate level what value a sixpence might have to the seriousness of the bet performed.

mentioned, Austin locates at the center of the total speech situation) stems not from Fred's utterance, but from the limiting conditions of an imagined situation; which is legitimized by the broader context of the point we are trying to express as part of the paper. A range of empirical studies either using CA, or heavily influenced by it, have demonstrated a very different range of functions for the expression "I bet." Many of these are connected to this issue of making assessments in conversation (Pomerantz 1984), and corollary matter of epistemic authority in interpersonal situations – i.e. situated rights to make claims about that which is being assessed (Kärkkäinen 2003). Roulston, deMarrais and Lewis (2003, 659), for example, show how a trainee interviewer (Heather) uses the following assessments in the business of praising her respondent:

"I bet she was so excited."

"You must have been a superstar."

"I bet he saw you and just was taken."

"You would have been wonderful."

To assess any state of affairs in conversation generally (and quite reasonably) requires that a speaker have some form of access to the state of affairs that they are assessing. To assess an issue, person, action or thing without any direct access can potentially have negative consequences for local social solidarity (Silverman 1997); it can be a face-threatening act to another party (Goffman 2003), and/or risk accusations that assessors themselves are presumptuous, bigoted, uninformed and so forth. This is an issue to which speakers can be seen to pervasively attend in interaction, deploying a range of fine-grained strategies to account for otherwise hearably "groundless" claims. With respect to the examples above, the authors observe that the expression "I bet" serves the exact same function as "You must" and "You would" in terms of situated identity-work. Fundamentally, it acknowledges Heather's

relative lack of entitlement to assess some scenarios to which she, herself, had no direct access.

The broad matter of epistemic authority in conversational assessments is investigated in greater detail by Heritage and Raymond (2005), who locate such assessments more explicitly within actual activity chains. In the conversation between Lottie and Emma below, for example, they demonstrate how Emma “...struggles to find a basis for affiliating with a first assessment whose very construction...denies the access necessary for building agreement.” (2005, 17):

- 1 Lot: [h h]Jeeziz Chris’ you sh’d see that house E(h)mma yih’av
2 ↓no idea.h[hmhh
3 Emm: [I bet it’s a drea:m.

Heritage and Raymond observe in particular how Emma’s response (line 3) to Lottie’s original assessment of the house in question (lines 1-2) expresses a “simulacrum” of agreement by producing a parallel assessment that simultaneously “thematizes her lack of firsthand experience” through the modalising character of the phrase “I bet.” Adding the full Jeffersonian CA transcription conventions¹⁰ allows the temporality of the conversation as-it-unfolds to be recognized.

In this sense, dialogical examples of recorded conversation reveal both how complex ordinary language can be, but also how total speech situations are formed, moment-by-moment and turn-by-turn, within ordinary conversation itself. This is not, furthermore, a simple appeal to “context.” The boundaries of such a context are also formed within the interaction of the dialogue, rather than from simply situating the proposition in terms of its

¹⁰ Summarised in Appendix 1.

intended sense. By way of example, consider the following brief excerpt from a recorded interaction, taken from Garfinkel and Sacks (1970, 350)¹¹:

1. HG: I need some exhibits of persons evading questions. Will you do me a favor and evade some questions for me?
2. NW: Oh dear, I'm not very good at evading questions.

Note firstly how utterance 2 has both referential and performative properties; it is in this sense a formulation (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970). It not only functions as a reflexive statement on the nature of the conversation (and conversationalist), but also performs an action – it evades the question. Secondly, the referential and performative aspects of the formulation have an entirely contradictory relationship with each other. Thirdly, this particular formulation only makes sense, in spite of its erstwhile contradictions, within a particular sequence of talk. It is this sequencing that provides the key distinction between the invented example of propositional interaction, and the inventive empirically-rooted interactions. The result is a tension within the very idea of an “ordinary language philosophy:” a tension between language in its everyday, mundane sense, with all of its slip ups, miscommunications, and mis-hearings, and the requirement of a systematic or over-arching explanation.

The purpose of this overly-brief narrative has not been to give a full account of the place of “ordinary language” in philosophy and social science, but rather to highlight three key issues surrounding such a placement. Firstly, there is the issue of the status of language itself; i.e., whether language is instrumental (as the empiricist tradition of Locke held) or formative (such as the philological approach of Nietzsche suggested). Secondly, the issue of

¹¹ Note that, for the clarity of this particular argument, the original transcription symbols have been removed.

the significance of language: whether “academic language” should be ordered in a hierarchical relation to “everyday language” (on the one hand, the view encapsulated by the positivists, which sees everyday language as a kind of deformed and often irrational “version” of meaningful, philosophical language; on the other hand, the view that the latter arises and is given meaning only from the former). Thirdly, there is the issue of how we approach the “everyday” – discuss, analyze and make claims over it – whilst maintaining both methodological integrity and empirical accuracy. It is with a view to this discussion of the problematic operationalization of “abstracted” reasoning in both philosophy and the social sciences that we turn to our final set of concerns.

Taking Each Mountain as it Comes: Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis

Thus far, we have seen how the lack of engagement with the “messy” level of language has contributed to a range of issues at the theoretical level. What happens, then, when we begin from the level of the everyday, and engage precisely with the kind of “messiness” thus far alluded to? For answers to this question, we turn initially to the work of Harold Garfinkel (1967), the founder of the ethnomethodological tradition. As Heritage (1984) notes, Garfinkel drew upon an eccentrically diverse network of intellectual roots in formulating what became the ethnomethodological approach in the late 1950s. Foremost among these were phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and (as aforementioned) Alfred Schütz, sociologists Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Talcott Parsons, and Gestalt psychologist Aron Gurwitsch. Subsequent ethnomethodologically-oriented investigation has, however, drawn further

explicit inspiration from the work of (among others) Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Austin and, especially, the later Wittgenstein.¹²

Although ethnomethodology has evolved and diversified across the course of its development since Garfinkel's original interventions, the vast bulk of the work in the field remains fundamentally true to a set of central, systematic principles set out in Garfinkel's own *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, published in 1967. The first of these is, in a classically phenomenological mind-set, that social order is itself cooperatively constructed and maintained by members of society or social groups¹³. This means that, while messy, the everyday social world is not bereft of rules. Rather than focus on what these working rules are per se, however, the core target of social analysis for Garfinkel should be the methodical description of the shared (but tacit) social skills that people utilize in the construction of their ordinary social worlds, and their attribution of meaning to everyday events and activities: "ethnomethods." Given that rules are constructed and deconstructed at every moment, it is not the transient and flexible rules themselves that matter, so much as the manner in which the rules are realised, followed and/or ignored. Thus, common-sense knowledge becomes central to ethnomethodological study for all the reasons it was, according to Garfinkel, often treated as a residual category within traditional scholarly work. The analyst should, thus, "...by paying to the most commonplace activities of everyday life the attention normally accorded to extraordinary events, seek to learn about them as phenomena in their right" (1967, 7). Secondly, and at the heart of all ethnomethodological work, is Garfinkel's

¹² This is nowhere more seamlessly evident than in Jeff Coulter's *The Social Construction of Mind* (1979), which draws strongly upon neo-Wittgensteinian themes in articulating a powerful ethnomethodological account of the relations between action, thought and language.

¹³ Garfinkel largely adopted this particular model of the social world as a response to what he regarded as Talcott Parsons' unsatisfactory, normatively-deterministic solution to the Hobbesian "Problem of Order" (Parsons 1937).

observation that social life, and the way that people make sense of their everyday interactions, can only be based upon an observation, identification and description of their practical activities. Rather than assume, for instance, that people simply follow rules in social life, the focus should be upon the practical ways in which the rules are “actualized,” given that it is only in the practical reasoning procedures of members of society that any such rules are rendered visible at all.

In terms of direct research, then, the ethnomethodological imperative to rigorously observe the methods through which members of societies produce and interpret information in intersubjective exchange, thereby constructing a meaningful world in which to interact. To illustrate his point, Garfinkel appropriates the term “indexicality” from general linguistics (see Bar-Hillel 1954 for a detailed exploration within that discipline). In its traditional sense, “indexical” denotes a word or expression the meaning of which is strongly context-dependent; one that draws its meaning from the pragmatics of its communication, be that the biography of the speaker, the immediate prior exchanges, previous conversations, the nature of the relations between two speakers etc. In short, a word is “indexed” in a particular concrete interaction and from this it derives the mass of its significance, though even then there are still potential ambiguities¹⁴. Garfinkel, however, extends this principle to the whole range of ordinary language: for him, naturally occurring talk can only be seen as meaningful in terms of the pragmatics of its transmission. Words are prone to have multiple uses, the corollary of which is that phrases are naturally “incomplete.” Talk, therefore, is always to

¹⁴ It should be noted that Sacks (1992a) explicitly credits Wittgenstein with having initially “exploded” the pertinent problem of sense and reference in “indicator terms,” and their shifts of referent with each use. As Lynch (1997) observes, this class of term had often been used by logicians to illustrate the apparent irrationality of everyday language, and the need for a more limited and standardised set of analytic operators to display what was “really” meant by speakers.

some extent ambiguous, or at least potentially subject to more than one interpretation. However, rather than seek a “remedy to the indexical properties of practical discourse” (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970, 339), indexicality itself should be seen as the very thing that facilitates practical understanding. Indexical expressions are not parasites on objectivity, but prime and enabling features of ordinary language itself.

[Indexicality] allows a relatively small number of descriptive terms to be used in different ways in a huge variety of different occasions to give just the required inflexion...General and open ended terms are given precise sense and reference by their use in context. Indeed, without this features an enormous number of descriptive terms would be needed, each of which would have to be learned and understood by both speakers and listeners. (Potter 1996, 44) [Emphasis Added]

People involved in conversation are thus constantly engaged in interpretative work to accomplish the meaning of any given utterance, and this accomplishment is based upon common understandings of local interactional context. Interpreting the amalgamation of words and context that facilitates both sense and reference is, moreover, a highly skilled process. Ordinary interaction only appears smooth and ordered, natural and unproblematic in most cases because members are so practiced at it.

In sum, then, Garfinkel’s project effectively directs the study of ordinary language-use away from traditional attempts to purge social discourse of the “uncertainties” of indexical expression, or to replace its presumed “subjectivity” with more “objective” formulations. The extra-situational generalization of meaning is, for him, not only unfeasible, but undesirable. It would tell us nothing about the real world of meaning, and instead establish an additional layer of theoretical “gloss” that only muddies the waters in terms of

understanding concrete social activity. To return to our Mandelbrot-based metaphor, superimposing the cone upon the mountain to no extent makes the mountain easier to see. Indeed, and as David Silverman eruditely notes, the superimposition of such abstract-normative constructs only really serves to let the phenomenon of interest “escape from view” (Silverman 1997). The very argument for “intractable ambiguity” is parasitic on the pre-theorization of ideal meanings, whereas the fact is that people engaged in everyday activities do surprisingly frequently understand each other perfectly well, against all the theoretical odds. Instead, Garfinkel advocates an exploration of how people use ordinary language in intersubjective activity, and make sense (and reference) of it by employing indexical expressions in a routine way. It is in this respect, as Jeff Coulter observes, that the meaning of any language in-use “...is to be determined by the elucidation of its practical, engaged use-in-context by competent (acculturated) users of the language and by its implications in courses of practical conduct.” (Coulter 1991, 189)

This particular directive proved the chief inspiration for the modern discipline of conversation analysis¹⁵ which was, as a coherent set of principles, pioneered chiefly by Garfinkel’s collaborator Harvey Sacks in a series of lectures in the 1960s and early 1970s¹⁶.

For Sacks:

¹⁵ Fuller accounts of CA and Sacks’ intellectual roots can be found in Hutchby and Wooffitt (2008), Silverman (1998) and, definitively, in Sacks’ own *Lectures on Conversation* (1992a; 1992b).

¹⁶ It is worth noting that CA is considered by some to be a tradition in its own right, distinct from the ethnomethodology. Potter and Wetherell, for example, point to the way that although “Conversation analysis is very much an outgrowth of ethnomethodological research [although] its analytical approach is rather different.” (1987, 81). To many scholars, however, it remains so intertwined with ethnomethodology that distinctions are quite difficult (and, moreover, pointless) to sustain. Edwards, for example, simply suggests that “CA is the application of ethnomethodological principles to the empirical study of talk” (1997, 84).

The idea is to take singular sequences of conversation and tear them apart in such a way as to find rules, techniques, procedures and maxims (a collection of terms that more or less relate to each other and that I use somewhat interchangeably) that can be used to generate the orderly features we find in the conversations we examine. The point is, then, to come back to the singular features we observe in a singular sequence, with some rules that handle those singular features, and also, necessarily, handle lots of other events. (Sacks 1984b, 414)

In short, take each mountain as it comes. He continues;

So what we are dealing with is the technology of conversation. We are trying to find this technology out of actual fragments of conversation, so that we can impose as a constraint that the technology actually deals with singular events and singular sequences of events - a reasonably strong constraint on some set of rules. (Sacks 1984b, 414-415)

Although self-avowedly a sociologist, Sacks' work reveals a wide range of largely philosophical influences, reflecting the previous history of "everyday language" from the Ancient Greeks up to Wittgenstein. "Like Socrates, his aim in some sense, was to remind us about things we already know." (Silverman 1998, 31). To this extent, he retains similar intentions to that of the "ordinary language philosophy" discussed above. However, in place of idealized or invented examples that invoke statements as isolated propositions, this approach addresses the tacit communicative competences which underpin the production of conversational exchange, the practical kinds of interactional work to which utterances are put and, crucially, the way that these utterances are designed with respect to the sequences of talk

in which they occur. Indeed, a key focus of CA is the way in which conversation unfolds within a locally-managed system of turns, demonstrating how participants use prior turns as resource for the design of new utterances, and how these utterances themselves delimit the range of possible following turns. Such analyses provide an obvious challenge to the use of invented examples in ordinary language philosophy:

One cannot invent new sequences of conversation and feel happy with them. You may be able to take a ‘question and an answer’, but if we have to extend it very far, then the issue of whether somebody would really say that, after, say, the fifth utterance, is one which we could not confidently argue. One doesn’t have a strong intuition for sequencing in conversation. (Sacks 1992a, 5)

As such, the careful observation of naturally-occurring conversation allows for an analyst to provide a description of the interpretative work, the practical reasoning, being done by the participants regarding what has been said and what, thus, can be said in order to achieve particular ends. This is what conversation analysts term the turn-taking “proof-procedure.” (Levinson 1983, 321). Rather than attempt to analyze an utterance, account or description as a meaningful “thing” in isolation, CA situates any given utterance of any length in the context of its interactional milieu to show how the former is oriented to the latter, and, thus, generate an understanding of specific meanings derived from those negotiated by the participants in interaction.

In this manner, it is possible to elucidate meaning from even the ultimate “ambiguous” expression: a non-expression, silence. In situated action, silence can, in theory at least, mean prospectively anything: gaps in conversation between two or more people are not, however, simply “empty” spaces, but can be loaded with significance; significance

discernible from how the interlocutors interpret that silence – such as deciding who is “meant” to be speaking at a particular time, whether their refusal to speak is an affirmation or negation of what has been said before, and what future actions are available. Moreover, what actually constitutes “a silence” in everyday talk is itself equivocal. One might well consider pauses of, say, 0.5 seconds to 1.5 seconds to be of relatively little consequence in conversation. As Davidson (1984) highlights, however, in practical examples of the issuing of “invitations,” apparently microscopic absences of verbal activity are regularly interpreted by the speaker issuing the invite as being prefatory to some mode of rejection, and are visibly and recurrently precipitative of further verbal action on the part of that speaker to mitigate such an unfavorable or difficult outcome. In short, they are prone to “jump back in” and offer reasons to accept the invite before the (expectedly negative) answer can be given.

Garfinkel notes, thus, that through careful observation of people’s use of ordinary language, it is always possible to view how their words:

...with all their uses, and for every method of their assembly, are constituent features of the settings they make observable. Members know, require, count on, and make use of this reflexivity to produce, accomplish, recognize, or demonstrate rational-adequacy-for-all-practical-purposes of their procedures. (1967, 8)

In these terms, it is clear that not only is the abstraction of talk from its context highly problematic, but equally so is the abstraction of that context itself. As John Heritage summarizes:

The situation of action is essentially transformable. It is identifiable as the reflexive product of the organized activities of the participants. As such, it is on-goingly discovered, maintained, and altered as a project and a product of ordinary actions.

Situational constitution is essentially a ‘local’ and immanent product of methodic procedure rather than a result of ‘pre-existing’ agreement on ‘matters of fact. (1984, 132)

Conclusion

The work of Sacks and Garfinkel challenges the assumption with which we began this paper: that is, that there exists a clean distinction between *langue* and *parole* – not to mention mountains and cones. Their work on conversation has suggested that “everyday language” is not, in fact, too “messy” to yield patterns and meaning, and, furthermore, that the very idea of a “meaningful” statement is constructed within the sequential interaction itself, rather than propositional forms. The two key potential contributions of CA to the philosophy of ordinary language are, then, that, (a) conversational propositions themselves are only given meaning within a dialogical sequence, which is invariably highly nuanced and conditioned according to the contextual details of the situation; and (b) that the very limits of this context are themselves constructed within the conversation. This is not to propose that such observations render OLP obsolete, any more than Mandelbrot’s work proposes all conical shapes in mathematics be replaced with mountainous vistas. Rather, the challenge is to re-consider the variety of problematic abstractions, often made for the sake of well-meant clarity, which can permeate OLP. Not least among these is its inveterate use of imaginary examples, which are not problematic simply for being invented, but more so for not being as inventive as real dialogical sequences often are.

We are not arguing, of course, that the philosophy of language, and ordinary language philosophy in particular, should simply stop and immediately adopt empirical examples for all of its analyses. While Heritage may be correct to argue that the situation of action is essentially transformable, anything that CA can “say” in this respect is always limited to the

domain of its data; whereas, clearly, such data gives rise to philosophical problems which it cannot solve in and of itself. The relationship between language, selfhood and truth that originally brought philosophy and ordinary language together (as in Plato, Condillac, Nietzsche, Austin, and so on) remains one which necessarily exceeds any single instance of dialogue. Likewise, the ethics of dialogue itself – which we have not discussed here, but forms a natural extension of the question surrounding the theory and practice of language – remains a set of normative principles that the descriptive data-sets of CA cannot shape on their own. The challenge to the distinction between langue and parole does not remove the important distinction between thesis and hypothesis at work within the fundamental concerns of philosophy and the social sciences.

What this paper has challenged, though, is the order of influence from thesis to hypothesis, and from philosophy to the social sciences, which has historically governed the way in which the abstraction and significance of language as an empirical object is determined. It would seem, instead, that one of the key ideas to emerge from this meditation upon the study of everyday language is that the relationship between theory and practice is itself a dialogue of sorts.

In part, one wonders if the lack of two-way exchange that is evident, in this respect, in the philosophy of language is reminiscent of our original example. Academic territorialism can reduce such prospective dialogues to a tedious re-stating of traditional borders (whereby philosophy looks for the “big ideas” and social sciences the “hard evidence”), and the mountains separating philosophy from the social sciences remain themselves abstract yet monolithic, and resoundingly taken-for-granted. The modest aim of this paper has been, through a dialogue between a philosopher and a social scientist, to isolate one small area in which philosophers, for all they have given to the social sciences, may have something to glean in return.

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Appendix 1: Standard Jeffersonian Transcription Symbols

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| (.5) | The number in brackets indicates a time gap in seconds (i.e. in this instance, five tenths). |
| (.) | A dot enclosed in brackets indicates a pause in the talk of less than two tenths of a second. |
| ·hh | A dot before an ‘h’ indicates an in-breath by the speaker. More h’s indicate a longer breath. |
| hh | An ‘h’ indicates an out-breath. More h’s indicate a longer breath. |
| (()) | A description enclosed in double brackets indicates a non-verbal activity. |
| - | A dash indicates a sharp cut off of the prior word or sound. |
| : | Colons indicate that the speaker has drawn out the preceding sound or letter. More colons indicate a greater degree of ‘stretching’ of the sound. |
| () | Empty brackets indicate the presence of an unclear fragment in the recording. |
| (guess) | The words within a single bracket indicate the transcriber’s best guess at an unclear fragment. |
| . | A full stop indicates a stopping fall in tone, not necessarily the end of a sentence. |
| , | A comma indicates a continuing intonation. |
| ? | A question mark indicates a rising inflection, not necessarily a question. |
| * | An asterisk indicates a ‘croaky’ pronunciation of the immediately following section. |
| ↑↓ | ‘Up’ and ‘Down’ arrows represent a rising or falling intonation, respectively. |
| CAPITALS | With the exception of proper nouns, capital letters indicate a section of speech louder than that surrounding it. |
| ° ° | Degree markers indicate that the talk they encompass was noticeably quieter than that surrounding it. |
| <u>underline</u> | Indicates speaker emphasis |

Thaght

A 'gh' indicates a guttural pronunciation in the word.

> <

'More than' and 'less than' signs indicate that the section of talk they encompass was noticeably quicker than surrounding talk.

=

'Equals' indicates contiguous utterances.

[

Square brackets between adjacent lines of concurrent speech indicate the onset and end of a spate of overlapping talk.

Author Biographies

Paul K. Miller is a Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology at the University of Cumbria, in Lancaster, UK. His research interests are in conversation analysis, ethnomethodology, discursive psychology, the philosophy of language and the psychology of decision-making, with a core substantive focus upon professional-client interaction in the domain of (mental) health and illness.

Tom Grimwood is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Cumbria. He researches on philosophical and cultural hermeneutics, focusing on the formative role of ambiguity within acts of interpretation, and the relationship between the history of philosophy and applied social practices.