

Ethnomethodology and Communication: an interview with Rod Watson

Adriana Braga

Abstract

During his stay in Brazil in September 2011, Dr. Rod Watson gave this exclusive interview to E-Compós, in which he speaks of his career, on the relationship between ethnomethodology and communication and about theoretical and methodological issues of communication phenomena.

Adriana Braga: Professor Watson, could you tell us about how you got started on your career and some of your influences?

Rod Watson: *I took my Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Sociology at University of Leicester, England, which at that time was a leading university in Europe for that discipline. The head of the Sociology Department was Ilya Neustadt, who was certainly the most eminent teacher of sociology in Great Britain. He made British sociology far more cosmopolitan, for less parochial than it had previously been. He was from the Ukraine and had studied in Belgium too, so we were introduced to a range of Eastern and Western European sociologies and also to North American approaches. We had a range of visiting sociologists from all around the world, including Gerhard Grohs from Germany and Reinhard Bendix from the U.S.A. Another visitor, Peter I. Rose from Smith College U.S.A., generously taught me how to do fieldwork in race relations, which I did.*

My teachers included Norbert Elias, one of the most eminent sociologists of the 20th Century

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and the group that worked with him in his perspective on the “civilising process”: chief among these was Eric Dunning. I was also taught by Anthony Giddens, now Lord Giddens, about Erving Goffman. Though it took me a long time to realize it, Elias and Giddens’ teaching on Goffman were decisive influences in re-focusing me on issues concerning communication, social interaction, rules and conduct and in the anti-cognitivist approach which Elias’ brilliant critique of the distinction between inner and outer processes.

At doctoral level, first at the University of Leeds and then at the University of Warwick, I first worked with the phenomenologist of religion, Robert Towler and then with John Heritage and Alan Dawe on the analysis of communications as human agency from an ethnomethodological and conversation analytic point of view. My thesis was on the telephoned communications of suicidal intent and personal troubles.

I worked first at Didsbury College, which then offered University of Manchester degrees, then at Lancaster University, for a year which was almost entirely intellectually null, and then at the University of Manchester.

At Didsbury and Manchester I learned about naturalistic, “social-anthropological” approaches to sociology including Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology, Sacks’ conversation analysis, symbolic interactionism / pragmatism, Rose’s “Ethno Inquiries” and other approaches that

built upon the Goffman / Elias strands of my education. Many eminent naturalistic sociologists came as visiting professors to Manchester. Chief amongst these were Howard S. Becker, Erving Goffman, Anselm Strauss, Joseph Bensman, and also Harold Garfinkel, Harvey Sacks, Jim Schenkein, Gail Jefferson, and others. These were all very important in my re-focusing as a sociologist on the “linguistic turn” considered praxeologically.

As a visiting professor at New York State University’s Buffalo State College, I worked and published with symbolic interactionists such as Thomas S. Weinberg, Gale P. Largey and Herbert Auerbach, on issues such as the interactional sociology of the senses and communication, on the communication of sexual identities, and on the analysis of videos of police interrogations of murder suspects. This last project was conducted with Georg Adoff.

Adriana Braga: The Communication Studies field is still relatively young, and borrows much of its theories and methods from other disciplinary fields. In the interface between Communication and Social Sciences, how do you evaluate an ethnomethodological approach to communication?

Rod Watson: *This is an important question and it is also important that communication studies has developed as a field. Even now, much of sociology has not really taken the ‘linguistic turn’: it is as if people could produce social*

order without being able to communicate with each other! Even those sociologists who have taken that turn, in a way, have only done so in the most abstract and theory-driven way, often generated by a “Cultural Studies” orientation which is not always terribly helpful. That’s why we need communication studies as an explicitly-defined field. Communication is a field rather than a disciplinary perspective per se (to use the philosophers Paul H. Hirst’s distinction, in his article in a famous book edited by R. Archambault). As such, it can richly benefit from eclecticism, from selective inputs from various disciplines such as psychology, sociology, etc.

It is sad, then, that communication studies has sometimes come to be colonised by another field, media studies. Media studies is a real juggernaut, and has come to dominate many aspects of communication studies. Of course, the media, including the internet media, are very important, but this importance is often highly dramatised by media studies, sometimes to apocalyptic levels. However, the fact remains that the most basic, the most ubiquitous phenomenon is interpersonal communication in mundane contexts – in family household interaction, on the street, at work, in pubs, at sporting occasions and so on.

Given the all-pervasive nature of speech exchange in everyday interaction, it is ironic that many Communication Studies departments play down or ever ignore such important

phenomena in favour of media communication. Ethnomethodology and, particularly, conversation(al) analysis can redress this unfortunate imbalance. These approaches can give us richly detailed and specific analyses of communication in specific social contexts in ordinary life, thus obviating many disciplines’ and fields’ “disdain for the particular case”, as Wittgenstein (whose later work has greatly influenced British ethnomethodology), put it. Essentially, ethnomethodology uses a strong version of ethnography, often aided by video-data on particular instances of actions-in-context and conversation analysis uses audio/video data on a range of turn-by-turn organised speech exchange systems, particularly that of ordinary conversation, which has primacy among the systems. The main orientations of conversation analysis are the analysis of membership categories in context and, which is the major approach, the analysis of utterance sequencing in context. They have contributed a radically naturalistic approach to communication studies and many conversation analysts such as Anita M. Pomerantz, Steven Clayman and Paul L. Jalbert work in Communication Studies departments.

Adriana Braga: Recently, you did research in Cambridge for information-based companies, such as Microsoft and Xerox. How does Ethnomethodology analyses phenomena of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI)?

Rod Watson: *Yes, I have worked to varying degrees with Rank Xerox UK's intelligent systems laboratory in Cambridge, with the World Digital Research Centre at the University of Surrey and, still, with Microsoft Research UK in Cambridge. I am also a Professor of Social Science at Telecom ParisTech in a department that focuses on the use of information and communication technology (ICT). I have also done some doctoral supervision for the Oxford University Computing Laboratory, which resulted in some papers on HCI, including one written for a collection edited by Adriana Braga ("CMC, Identidades e Género: teoria e método". Covilhã/Portugal: Editora da UBI, 2005) and one with Christian Greiffenhagen called "Visual Repairables in Visual Studies" (2009, vol. 8, n.1, pp. 65-90, Sage) and papers with Richard Harper (forthcoming) who is the Director of Microsoft Research UK and is an ethnomethodologist too! I have, however, had a relatively minor involvement with these companies compared with other ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts.*

In the U.S.A., ethnomethodologists such as Lucy A. Suchman, Marilyn Whaler, Jack Whalen and Randy Trigg have examined many features of the insertion of ICT into human courses of action and interaction in specific contexts – often (though not always) work contexts. Their work contributed richly to the development of workplace studies and work practices as a distinctive field.

Ethnomethodology can contribute greatly to the way in which people learn to use and make practical sense of ICT in the frame of reference of a particular practical task, e.g., plotting the position and path of trains on a line of the London Underground (see the work by C. Heath, P. Luff and J. Hindmarsh). Ethnomethodologists have also analysed such things as the work of software engineers in designing a software, the communication practices of persons on videophones (or videophones – see de Fornel) and in videoconferencing: the range of specific topics is immense, and this means that much ethnomethodological research is done outside universities. This is a good thing at least in the sense that there remains a great deal of prejudice against ethnomethodology and conversation analysis within universities, and particularly in the more antiquated Departments of Sociology, within the U.S., continental Europe and the U.K. The use of audio and video data is an ethnomethodological and conversation-analytic speciality in this field and has gained valuable results. These approaches are, thus, the major influences in worksite studies – often the two approaches are used in combination in this field as Heath and others have shown.

Adriana Braga: How can a naturalistic approach be made that focalises media-related phenomena?

Rod Watson: *I shall focus upon the ITC media. One major contribution of ethnomethodology and*

conversation analysis has been a re-modelling of the user. In particular, in France Bernard Conein (University of Nice Sociology Dept.) and Christian Licoppe and Marc Relieu (of Telecom ParisTech, Nice-Sofia-Antipolis) have a jointly-taught M.A. course in the remodelling of the user. The user is conceived not in a highly abstract, top-down way that is often beloved of software engineers (e.g. in terms of a sequence of branching choices, or in game theory terms or mathematical terms) but instead in a “ground floor up” way, based on actual audio-video recordings of actual persons’ use of ICT in “natural” (ordinary) contexts. In those contexts we see that the users is nothing like the “cultural dope” or very simple puppet that Garfinkel says is also typical of classical sociologies, to a greater or lesser degree, but is in fact a subtly competent social actor vis-à-vis mobile phone use.

A key example, in which I have participated in research, is how remotely distributed co-conversationalist on mobile phones operate when one interlocutor has to give locational directions to his/her co-conversationalist. The engineering solution to wayfinding on mobiles tend to use the “car satellite navigation” algorithm, i.e., the shortest distance between two points. However, that algorithm is not used by co-conversationalists using mobiles in real circumstances. Instead, huge amounts of background knowledge are used – whether the direction giver knows that the direction receiver knows certain streets and landmarks, how

the directions giver conceives of the direction receivers correct position vis-à-vis this state of knowledge, etc. In this way we can learn about the actual use, the actual lived experience not just of mobile’ phones per se but of doing specific things, specific tasks with mobiles. Of course, this massively reconfigures the usual simplistic model of the user.

*In turn – and this brings us back to Wittgenstein’s later philosophy – we end up with an anti-cognitivist model of the user as a social actor (on this general matter, see the special issue of *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 25, nº2, March 2008 entitled “The Debate Over Cognitivism”, edited by myself and Jeff Coulter). Instead of a mentalistic, information-processing model of individual sense making we have a conception of sense-making as a collaborative cultural practice in a social (interactional) context. A recent example of an analysis written on an anti-cognitivist basis is one of mine entitled “Trust in Interpersonal Interaction and Cloud Computing” in the joint University of Cambridge Philosophy Department and Microsoft Conference “Trust and Cloud Computing”, presented in April of this year.*

Etnometodologia e Comunicação: uma entrevista com Rod Watson

Resumo:

Durante sua estada no Brasil, em setembro de 2011, o Dr. Rod Watson concedeu esta entrevista exclusiva para a E-Compós, na qual fala de sua carreira e formação, sobre a relação entre Etnometodologia e Comunicação e de questões teóricas e metodológicas dos fenômenos comunicacionais.

Etnometodología y Comunicación: una entrevista con Rod Watson

Resumen:

Durante su estancia en Brasil en septiembre de 2011, el Dr. Rod Watson dio esta entrevista exclusiva para E-Compós, en que el habla de su carrera, sobre la relación entre la etnometodología y la comunicación y acerca de los problemas teóricos y metodológicos de los fenómenos de la comunicación.

Expediente

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