1 | Asymmetries in dialogue: some conceptual preliminaries

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The contributions to this volume deal with dialogue and spoken interaction, and especially with asymmetries in these kinds of discourse. The overall orientation implies that the authors have adopted a particular perspective; rather than studying, say, social power in society and culture, they seek their empirical basis in discourse data. The aim is to look for generalizations about asymmetries *in situ* in dialogue and discourse. This is, of course, the common point of departure for most analysts of conversation and discourse.

Another point, shared by many if not most dialogue-oriented scholars (Marková and Foppa, 1990; especially Marková, 1990), is that dialogue (discourse, texts) and contexts are mutually inalienable; a dialogue, or a contribution to it, is co-constituted by utterances and their relevant outsides. Yet there is considerable disagreement, at least in the scientific community at large, as regards how and to what extent analysts should bring contextual information to bear on the process of identification and interpretation of discourse patterns. Some researchers (e.g. Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Schegloff, 1987) opt for an approach based more or less exclusively on discourse (or texts) as such. Others (e.g. Cicourel, 1980; Corsaro, 1982) strongly argue for the use of complementary sources of information: ethnography, data about individual actors and organizational frameworks; documents and instructions used by actors, especially professionals, as background and as inputs or outputs of institutionalized dialogues; and people's discourse *about* the discourse under study. The last mentioned point covers what people say they do in their respective social encounters; people's self-evaluations and self-interpretations of particular
encounters as stated, e.g. in (post-)interviews and self-confrontations, as well as general statements and theories produced by individuals and organizations in, e.g. official rhetoric. While most of the contributors to this volume would insist on taking even historical and/or cultural contexts into consideration, at least in a more comprehensive analysis, they all retain an empirically based theoretical interest in dialogue and discourse. This volume focuses on the interactional environments and consequences of asymmetries.

Asymmetries in dialogue: the term and its extension

As is amply demonstrated in this volume, 'asymmetries in dialogue' can be taken to mean rather different things. The term does not stand for one well-defined notion. Rather, we prefer here to introduce it as a cover term for a wide spectrum of phenomena, each of which will need a more precise and refined analysis in various contexts.

Some neighbouring concepts in the semantic field

'Asymmetry' as an overall term can be used to describe several phenomena in and behind dialogue. (For a definition of 'dialogue', see Luckmann, 1990.) Sometimes other terms, like 'inequality' (or 'in equity'), 'domicence', and 'imbalance', are preferred in the literature. All these seem to be opposed to terms like 'symmetry' (in, e.g. participation), 'equality' or 'commonality' (of knowledge), 'mutuality' and 'reciprocity' (in, say, interaction and dialogue). In an attempt to establish some order in the semantic field, let us begin by briefly considering the last mentioned notions with respect to dialogue and its prerequisites (for a more thorough treatment see Graumann, forthcoming).

Commonality (or sharedness) of knowledge (or language, assumptions, etc.) refers simply to the knowledge (etc.) which is objectively shared by people who engage, or might engage, in communication with each other. Mutuality (of knowledge and assumptions), again with respect to dialogue, refers to the assumptions by each communicating individual that (s)he shares knowledge ('common ground') with the others, and that the others know or assume that each communicator makes this first mentioned assumption of common ground (Clark and Marshall, 1981). Reciprocity, finally, would be more directly tied to the dialogical activity itself, referring to the circumstance that, in the co-presence of others, any act by one actor is an act with respect to the other; more precisely, any act is done with the purpose or expectation that the other will do something in return, i.e. respond or, as we could also say, reciprocate the action. For example, if A greets B, he or she normally expects a greeting in return. Similarly, if A asks a question, he or she expects B to answer (or at least respond in some other way, e.g. by a counter-question), and if/when B responds, he or she, in turn, expects or anticipates a response or reaction from A. Reciprocity thus refers to the basic interdependence between interlocutors and between their dialogue contributions. Reciprocity inheres also in the smallest dialogue contribution, i.e. the utterance; such an elementary unit is dependent on the other's contribution(s), and it is codeterminant of the other's next contribution.

It can be argued that reciprocity in dialogue presupposes mutuality, i.e. mutually assumed common ground, and, of course, that mutuality entails commonality. If we take reciprocity as an abstract notion to be a defining feature of social interaction, of which dialogue is a special form (Luckmann, 1990), then it follows that dialogue must also involve some mutuality and sharedness of premises for communication, and of knowledge, presuppositions and interests. But this in no way means that the extent to which there is commonality, mutuality, and reciprocity, is total. On the contrary, we know that knowledge and opportunities to participate are only in part common and equally available, mutually assumed and symmetrically reciprocated. This means that asymmetries and inequalities of many kinds are compatible with mutuality and reciprocity. Also, mutualities and reciprocities vary; for example, some reciprocated actions as it were mirror each other mentally or socially (e.g. greetings), while others are of a complementary kind (e.g. question–answer); and the same applies at more global or aggregated levels (e.g. Linell, 1990, pp. 168–72). (It is important to be careful here; while reciprocity as an abstract notion (in the singular) is taken to be inherent in the nature of dialogue, reciprocities of different kinds (in the plural) are empirically present to different extents under varying social conditions.) In other words, asymmetries and inequalities are not only compatible with assumptions of mutuality and
reciprocity, they are themselves essential properties of communication and dialogue. Indeed, if there were no asymmetries at all between people, i.e. if communicatively relevant inequalities of knowledge were non-existing, there would be little or no need for most kinds of communication!

We propose to use ‘asymmetry’ as a general term referring to various sorts of inequivalences in dialogue processes. Sometimes, the term ‘inequalities’ can be used almost coterminously, although we prefer to use that term for various background (e.g. social-structural) conditions for dialogue, such as (differences in the distribution of) knowledge and social positions (see Drew, Chapter 2; Keppler and Luckmann, Chapter 7; also p. 12-17 below).

‘Asymmetry’ as a comprehensive term can be used of both globally manifest patterns (e.g. what we call ‘dominance’ below) and local properties. Local asymmetries may be tied to single exchanges (‘adjacency pairs’) (a greeting and its reciprocation would be only mildly asymmetrical, while, e.g. a promise and its acceptance form a much more asymmetrical pair) or to single turns; there are basic asymmetries tied to the allocation of speaker versus listener roles. ‘Dominance’, on the other hand, should, as regards discourse, be taken as a less neutral and somewhat more precise term to be used of certain global properties, i.e. in principle quantifiable and aggregated patterns emergent over sequences (entire social encounters or dialogues, or parts or phases thereof), as will be further explained below (on p. 8-9). Given such a usage, the term ‘dominance’ would not be productively applicable at the level of single turns; for example, to say that the speaker dominates over the listener in terms of amount of speaking or interactional control would be nothing but a trivial assertion. Farr (Chapter 11) points out that the asymmetries involved in the predicaments of speaker versus listener and actor versus observer can be symmetrically distributed, if we look at them over longer stretches of dialogue.

Following rather well-established usage, we take the term ‘local’ to refer to single utterances and turns, single exchanges (e.g. ‘adjacency pairs’), and contributions in their relation to immediately preceding and anticipated next contributions (cf. Linell, 1990: ‘local context’), while the term ‘global’ would apply to longer stretches of dialogue, or sequences treated at ‘higher’ levels, such as ‘stories’, ‘topics’, ‘activities’ or ‘speech events’ and ‘phases’ thereof; such global units are often anchored in socially or culturally sedimented genres. We can then say that ‘reciprocity’ inheres in the most local units as well as in the more
global units, as Bakhtin (1986) points out. Asymmetries, too, are present at all levels. ‘Symmetry’, on the other hand, would be meaningfully employed, in the case of dialogue and discourse, only if applied to a sequence; it makes no sense at the level of the single dialogue contribution (utterance), since the asymmetries tied to the speaker versus listener roles are self-evident. In other words, we propose that the terms/concepts ‘symmetry’ and ‘dominance’ be used only globally, as referring to properties emergent over sequences, while ‘reciprocity’ and ‘asymmetry’ can be used both globally and locally.

Asymmetries of knowledge and of participant status

A dialogue is about something (the topic) and between people interacting (the participation framework). Using this simple dichotomy, we find that the chapters in this volume deal with asymmetries of different kinds.

Several of the chapters (Drew, Wintemantel, Knoblauch, Keppler and Luckmann, Linell and Jönsson) touch upon various aspects of asymmetries (or inequalities) of knowledge. As several of the authors note, asymmetries of knowledge are important only when they are made communicatively salient. For example, if A knows more than B about some topic T, this inequality is of no relevance until it becomes exploited and themedatized, e.g. when occasioning A to launch an item of ‘conversational teaching’ (Keppler and Luckmann). Similarly, Drew (Chapter 2) emphasizes that, within dialogue studies, asymmetries are interesting only in as far as they become consequential for the talk in actual dialogue. This means that mere inequalities of cognitive states, for example A knowing things B does not know, and vice versa, are not in and by themselves of primary interest. Instead, we might look at inequalities of knowledge with respect to the particular interactions and phases thereof under analysis. Such inequalities may concern, among other things:

- Differences in rights (entitlements) to develop topics and exploit knowledge, and in the allocation of epistemic responsibility (Rommetveit).
- Varying access to and control of particular perspectives on topics (relevances), as in cases of professional-client or
Asymmetries are ubiquitous properties of dialogue

One may look upon social communication as directed towards making things ‘common’ to interlocutors, as based on efforts to equalize knowledge and mutual influence. Yet every new conversational move presupposes asymmetry of knowledge and, if it is a new initiative, it moves the interaction from a state of rest (silence) into a situation in which the speaker, by performing his or her communicative act, requires an additional move from the other, thus bringing about a disturbance in the equilibrium. At the same time, once a contribution has been jointly accepted and understood, a local topic has been settled. Dialogue thrives on this tension between exploiting asymmetries and returning to states of equilibrium.

We take asymmetry to be an intrinsic feature of dialogue. Basic asymmetries are also involved in the smallest units of dialogue. An utterance may be analysed in terms of its responsive and initiatory (retroactive and proactive) aspects; it is both dependent on prior context and defines the conditions for possible continuations. By responding to prior communicative events, by making his or her utterance ‘conditionally relevant’ in the local context, the utterer, at some level, complies with conditions already defined. On the other hand, by taking the discourse further, by initiating new topical aspects, he or she tries to govern the contributions to follow. Hence, there is a basic asymmetry involved in this dialectic between being controlled and being in control, which is part and parcel of the ‘power’ of basic dialogue mechanisms (Linell, 1990).

Similarly, there is an obvious asymmetry between speaker and listener. Even if the listener is ‘present’ in the speaker’s utterance, both in its basic other-orientedness (‘recipient design’) and by the listener’s co-authoring it (back channelling, filling in utterances, verbal duetting — see, e.g. Goodwin, 1979), the speaker is still its major author. However, there are cases where the responses are minimal simply because the speaker’s contribution itself is minimal. In general, there are important differences between the predicaments of the speaker and the listener (Farr, Chapter 11).

In responding to prior talk as well as in taking topical and interactional initiatives, when speaking as well as when listening, actors in dialogue are profoundly dependent on each other. This interdependence, the crucial and mutual reliance on the other, is always present. Yet even if there are mutual
interdependences, these are seldom symmetrically distributed; some interlocutors are characteristically more subordinated to their partners than others. It is particularly appropriate to recall that a child, in learning to speak and communicate, has no choice other than that of relying on its partner in getting to understand what its own words mean (Rommetveit, 1983). Therefore, learning to become a conversation partner presupposes asymmetries of various kinds.

Hence, we take it as a reasonable point of departure that all dialogues (and, of course, multi-party conversations) involve asymmetries (inequalities, inequivalences, etc.) at different levels. This can be stated as a general claim, even if, in some contexts, actors jointly orient to ideal norms of equal rights to speaking turns, equal rights and/or abilities to introduce and sustain topics, and symmetrical distribution of discourse participation (Habermas’ notion of ‘ideal dialogue’ seems to be an attempt to characterize such a set of ideal norms),5 or if, indeed, such properties are taken to be empirically true of some types of (weakly institutionalized) talk exchange, sometimes loosely referred to as ‘informal’ or ‘ordinary’ conversation. In other words, even relatively ‘symmetrical’ conversations involve asymmetries of various sorts.

This also means that ‘asymmetries’ must be taken as a concept that is neutral with respect to success or non-success in communication. Some asymmetries do lead to obstructions, problems and failures of communication (Käsermann, Chapter 5), but there is no logical relationship between asymmetries and problematic talk (Drew, Chapter 2). In fact, some asymmetries are arguably necessary for effective communication to develop (Wintermantel, Chapter 6; Linell and Jönsson, Chapter 4).

Asymmetries are multi-faceted and heterogeneous

Asymmetries can be further subcategorized along several dimensions, e.g. as regards domain (knowledge versus participant status) or scope (local versus global asymmetries). (See also below on source: exogenous versus endogenous types.) These, of course, are all in need of further analysis.

One family of asymmetries consists of those which can be seen as patterns of dominance emerging over sequences. In line with our introduction, we use the term ‘dominance’ of manifest properties of interaction, dialogue and discourse; of more or less ‘objective’ patterns which, once identified, may receive many different interpretations (e.g. with respect to social power, see below). Dominance in dialogue is clearly a multi-dimensional phenomenon. There are several ways to disentangle these dimensions. One categorization (Linell 1990) amounts to distinguishing between the following four types. Quantitative dominance concerns the relation between parties in terms of amount of talk, measured simply, e.g. in terms of number of words spoken. Interactional dominance has to do with the distribution of ‘strong’ versus ‘weak’ interactional moves (initiatives, responses). In talking about semantic dominance, one would characterize a person as dominant if he or she determined the topics sustained in a discourse, and imposed interpretive perspectives on things talked about. Finally, strategic dominance would involve contributing the strategically most important interventions. Interactional dominance, or, if you prefer, control, taken as ‘a property of sequence management and turn design’ (Drew, Chapter 2: p. 43) may be investigated in several ways, one of which would be the IR (initiative-response) analysis (Linell et al., 1988) employed by, e.g. Rommetveit (Chapter 9) and Marková (Chapter 10). It should be pointed out that strategic dominance is not quite aligned with the other concepts; it comes closer to power (as defined below), it is more dependent on exogenous factors, and it involves evaluating retrospectively the outcomes of the whole interaction, including some more or less long-term effects.

Asymmetries are dependent on both individual and social factors

Dialogues are produced by individuals in social interaction, and patterns of asymmetry or dominance are generated in actual social intercourse. Some of these patterns may be dependent on properties of individuals (personality, biography, abilities and disabilities), and some on roles tied to professions, organizations, social strata, etc. It is important to emphasize that whatever asymmetries or symmetries are actually found, these are not merely expressions of individual intentions or motives. There are also social structures and traditions ‘speaking through’ actors. Accordingly, the speaker role is a complex one (Goffman, 1981). Some of these personal versus cultural identities in dialogue can be characterized in terms of ‘voices’ (Bakhtin, 1986; Wertsch, 1990; Aronsson, Chapter 3; Linell and
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Jönsson, Chapter 4), which are heard with varying degrees of 'loudness' in different phases of dialogues.

Asymmetries in discourse are contextualized; dependence on and co-constitutive of endogenous and exogenous conditions

Another way to distinguish among asymmetries, especially patterns of dominance, is to attribute them to different sources: either they can be imposed or imported from outside ('extrinsic' or 'exogenous'), derived from social power or authority and pre-established as constraints on interaction, or they are dialogue produced ('intrinsic' or 'endogenous'), derived from asymmetries between dialogue initiatives and responses as basic mechanisms of interaction. (A distinction similar to the one just suggested would amount to distinguishing between setting-, status- or role-produced dominance and actor-produced dominance.) Of course, exogenous and endogenous asymmetries are not two independent sets of factors. Rather, the same manifest pattern usually exhibits both. Asymmetries dependent on extrinsic sources must be occasioned, reconstructed, sustained or confirmed in actual discourse, thus re-established in situ, and, conversely, dialogue-generated asymmetries are constrained by predetermined conditions (social structures existing prior to the interaction).

In the next section we will shift perspectives and look upon asymmetries in dialogue from the viewpoint of background social structures. However, let us emphasize here and now that dominance in dialogue and interaction, on the one hand, and social power, on the other, must never be confused. Yet, this is easily done since terms like 'power' and 'dominance' often go together, both having to do with someone's having direct or indirect access to, or possession of, resources (e.g., economic means or, in communication, e.g. discourse space), normally at someone else's expense (e.g. at the expense of one's interlocutors). It seems reasonable to define (by stipulation, but in line with existing tendencies in actual usage) 'power' as having to do with latent resources or potentialities, while dominance concerns manifest action properties or actualities, or, if you will, some sort of resources put to actual use (see above).

If 'power' is conceived of as latent potentialities, it seems convenient to discuss microphenomena in dialogue in relation to social power. Thus, social power is supposed to represent some-thing relatively stable: socio-economically determined, culturally embedded and institutionally congealed. A clear distinction between (social) power and (manifest) dominance roughly along these lines will allow us to capture some important features of discoursal practices. For example, a person who possesses power need not be, or at least not always be, dominant in interaction. In fact, there is ample evidence that, in many situations, power must be used strategically, not overused, in order for the actor to be efficient. Dominant dialogue behaviour, along one or other of the dimensions mentioned above, may sometimes indeed be a sign of relative powerlessness on the part of a given actor. Therefore, the analyst must always keep the distinction in mind; it is one thing to identify dominant actions, another thing to determine what they mean or what they are signs of.

Asymmetries are socially (re)constructed

Some aspects of asymmetries are clearly correlated with, even predefined by, positions in social hierarchies. For example, experts and professionals talking with clients and lay persons in various sorts of institutional contexts (Agar, 1985), such as court trials, police interrogations, doctor consultations, classroom interactions, occupy a position of power, authority and expertise. These, together with routinized ways of carrying out the interaction, will have a clear impact on the manner in which the discourse unfolds. Some classical positions in the sociology of power (Parsons, 1951) involve the assumption that patterns of interaction are predictable from the predefined power relationships; actors would just step into stable roles of interaction (Heritage, 1984). Without denying that social interaction may largely be institutionally congealed, many researchers who have actually studied institutional discourse have found that there is active and dynamic interactive work on. As Goodwin and Heritage (1990: p. 14) put it, the 'way in which . . . discourse identities intersect with a range of social arrangements involving entitlement to knowledge can lead to participation framework dynamics of considerable complexity.'

Parties accommodate mutually, and there is room for variation even in such highly routinized environments as courtrooms (e.g. Linell, 1991). Yet interactants regularly collaborate on the reconstitution of roles and positions. For example, even if legal professionals, i.e. judges and attorneys, provide ample
opportunities for defendants to lay out their own versions, such chances are not always taken. If defendants are unwilling or feel incapable of volunteering expanded answers to questions, professionals will then be forced to fall back into habits of posing highly specific and constraining questions permitting the interviewees to respond only minimally. Thus, both parties in court or in a police interrogation collaborate on reconstructing question–answer sequences of certain types (Linell, 1991; Linell and Jönnson, Chapter 4). Similarly, Heath (forthcoming) and Maynard (forthcoming) demonstrate, using data from medical interviews, that patients regularly refrain from voicing their own perspectives, particularly when the doctor delivers the most important information, the diagnosis, and that this is true even if the doctor's proposed diagnosis is strongly at variance with the patient's expectation. Patients strongly tend to adopt the clinical perspective. Yet, Maynard, in his paper on asymmetries in doctor–patient discourse, argues in the following vein (Maynard, forthcoming).

Previous research, including language-based studies, say or imply that this asymmetry represents the imposition of physician's power and authority, which reproduces the society's overall, external, institutional structure. The argument here is that, within institutional discourse, more is going on than this. To be sure, patients and parents seek expertise in regard to their worldly difficulties and receive avowedly official reports and technical versions of these difficulties in ways that promote or reproduce the institution of medicine. However, if such reports and versions are bad news, their delivery will be predictably difficult in a purely local, embodied, interactional sense. Therefore, clinicians as ordinary members of society can be expected to have devices for handling these interactional difficulties. Exploring such a possibility requires comparative analyses of institutional discourse and everyday conversation, which shows that complicating a recipient's perspective in a bad news delivery allows for at least the appearance of understanding and mutuality in this highly-charged situation. In short, the asymmetry of discourse in medical settings may have an institutional mooring, but it also has an interactional bedrock, and the latter needs sociological appreciation as much as the former. Finally, if medical discourse has such a bedrock, no doubt various institutional discourses – in legal, educational, and other settings – do as well.

Asymmetries in dialogue: the contexts
Contexts in and contexts behind the text

One may surely assume that human beings from entirely different backgrounds, even alien cultures, would be able to interact when thrown together and thus build up patterns of practical sense which were not pre-existent as a background resource. It is an elementary philosophical-anthropological assumption that such patterns of action-orienting meaning are originally built up in the actions of human beings, somehow, somewhere, sometime. Yet it is also obvious that the majority of us most of the time do not start from scratch in social encounters but draw upon resources of a social reality which are not indigenous to the situation. We do not invent language anew in every dialogue nor even create patterns of the use of language. But (somehow) human systems of communications are the results of human interaction, and their maintenance and modification is a matter of concrete communicative processes. Similarly, we do not create systems of obligations, injunctions, sanctions – in short, the institutions of a social structure – again and again in each social encounter, although we maintain, modify and, on rare occasions, even overthrow social structures of various kinds in concrete social interaction.

The orderliness of practical sense in dialogue and, more generally, in social interaction is accomplished by human beings as actors – rather than as puppets controlled by instincts, social structures or other forces. Although it is produced in the here and now of social encounters, the producers draw both upon the immediate situational resources and upon the resources built up in the long chain of past accomplishments of their predecessors. In other words, the ‘accomplishments’ of the actors in a social encounter are always also ‘re-accomplishments’. The same, the closely or remotely similar interactional and communicative problems which they face have been encountered by others before them. ‘Solutions’ to the problems have been sedimented in the institutions of a social structure, the traditions of a language and of language use as, e.g. in communicative genres (Luckmann, 1989), and in a social stock of knowledge, which, of course, includes knowledge of institutions and communicative codes and genres.

All these realities are ‘external’ social facts in the Durkheimian sense, not subject to change by individual fancy. They are both resources to draw upon in social interaction and constraints upon individual action. The social structure, regulating among other things the distribution of power, the communicative media and the social stock of knowledge, are ‘asymmetrical’. They are characterized by varying degrees of inequality in their distribution within a society. From the point of view of the empirical analysis of dialogue and social encounters, the social
stock of knowledge is particularly important because both social structure and communicative media and genres are ‘reflected’ in it. As resources these ‘external’ social realities become relevant to actors inasmuch as they are ‘represented’ in their subjective stocks of knowledge. The point is obvious in the analysis of asymmetries of knowledge in dialogue, but it is also valid more generally for other asymmetries, e.g. those connected with power and dominance. Some general observations on the social distribution of knowledge are therefore in order.

Individual and social stocks of knowledge

Individual stocks of knowledge are formed in biographically unique sedimentations of the experience of individuals. The necessary condition for their being built up is a substructure of cognitive operations, an elementary structure of consciousness. But it is not a sufficient condition, and it explains very little of the concrete systems of orientation of individual actors. No more than a small portion of knowledge in any individual stock is constructed in autonomous problem-solving activities. The larger portion is derived from a social stock of knowledge, i.e. a socially objectified and socially distributed reservoir of meanings which is capable of functioning as an individual system of orientation for individual action. Human beings do not acquire knowledge by starting from scratch. They are born into a world in which other people already know a good deal. Sometimes, indeed they must solve problems themselves; more often they only need to learn the solution found long ago by others. There is not only a division of labour in the functioning of society, there is also something akin to a division of labour over generations in the history of culture.

The processes by which elements of a social stock of knowledge are transmitted to individual stocks of knowledge are determined by a historical social structure. The social structure is a network of institutions and a set of inequalities; to this extent it restricts the distribution of elements of the social stock of knowledge to typical individual members of the society. The social structure thus also contains typical transmission processes, regulations of access to knowledge, and strategies and rhetorics of legitimation for the inclusions and exclusions of potential recipients of knowledge.

The social distribution of knowledge

A completely equal distribution of knowledge is impossible except under highly unrealistic conditions (Schutz and Luckmann, 1974: Chapter 4). One such condition is that the biological differentiation of human beings should be without any social consequences. Another condition is that the biographically unique sequence in which knowledge is acquired should play no role. Furthermore, the concrete intersubjective, face to face conditions for the communication of knowledge, one of the essential presuppositions for the development of any social stock of knowledge, would have to be eliminated and the accumulation of knowledge would have to be stopped at a given level. But granted that these are highly unrealistic assumptions, what would be an almost equal social distribution of knowledge?

A simple social distribution of knowledge concerns elements that are universally relevant and are, accordingly, routinely transmitted to everyone. The processes of transmission are phased temporally. At every given point of time, all ‘normal adults’ therefore possess all those elements of the social stock of knowledge that are socially defined as relevant for ‘everyone’. But there are also elements which, e.g. are relevant only for men or only for women, according to how men, women and relevance are defined in a given society. Some knowledge will be routinely transferred only to men, some only to women.

Though we have used obvious and, empirically, the most important concrete examples of factors contributing to the social distribution of knowledge in ‘simple’ societies, it must be stressed that a generally valid material determination of the kinds of knowledge involved is not possible. The structural factors on which rest simple social distributions of knowledge generally determine the distinction between ‘general knowledge’ and ‘special knowledge’. But what belongs to special knowledge in a society can be general knowledge in another and vice versa.

General knowledge is routinely transmitted to everyone, special knowledge only to certain kinds of people, although in principle all knowledge would seem to be accessible to everyone. However, there is no compelling motive for everyone to acquire special knowledge, and occasionally institutional barriers oppose such an acquisition. But everyone knows more or less who is in possession of which forms of special knowledge. The social distribution of special knowledge is an element of general knowledge.

Complex social distributions of knowledge, on the other hand,
knowledge in its totality is, of course, no longer accessible to everyone. But there is an interactionally, and communicatively, perhaps, even more important consequence of the increasing specialization of knowledge in modern societies. Information about specialized knowledge, where and when it is to be found, is no longer a part of the supply of 'equally' distributed general knowledge. Therefore, uncertainties about the degree to which knowledge is shared by participants in interaction who do not know each other well will be found more often in such societies and, therefore, the problems of recipient designs are likely to be more acute.

Asymmetries in dialogue: some methodological remarks

If one is interested in the analysis of empirically occurring dialogue, it is safest to start out from phenomena which are demonstrably there. Drew (Chapter 2: p. 44) underscores the aim of identifying asymmetries which 'are demonstrably relevant to the participants themselves, and so have consequences for, and are manifest in the details of talk'. Similarly, Goodwin and Heritage (1990: p. 16) identify one of the salient aspects of the contribution of conversation analysis (CA) as 'its insistence that the categories used to describe participants, action and context be warranted by demonstrating that the participants themselves are demonstrably oriented to the distinctions embodied in the categories in the course of their activities'. In other words, we would deal with 'distinctions' which are relevant for actors as they produce and make sense of talk: differences which are occasioned and dealt with in discourse, confirmed, negotiated or reconstructed in interaction, regulating it or being regulated in it. Yet we may not always agree on what is 'demonstrably there'. Despite Drew's (Chapter 2) recommendations to stick to what is 'brought to the interactional surface', some of us will occasionally be interested in less transparent phenomena: deeper asymmetries, hidden meanings, silent misunderstandings, etc. Given this, it may be appropriate to end this introduction with some methodological remarks on 'external' realities as the context of dialogue (cf. the previous section).

It is an important analytical principle to search for explanations of social interaction in the concrete encounter itself. There is no doubt that the 'orderliness' of the interaction, its practical sense, is an accomplishment of the actors. Nor can there be
serious doubt that actors draw upon situational and external resources in accomplishing practical sense. Social realities 'external' to social encounters and dialogue are the 'context' first for the actors on the social scene who produce their 'texts' in mutual awareness of that 'context' (Scheffler and Sacks, 1973), and second, therefore, necessarily also for the observer who wants to understand the scene.

So if the analyst, too, must draw upon the context for an understanding of the discourse, why should he or she obey the methodological principle of staying with the text, with what is concretely 'there' in a social encounter? One reason is fairly obvious. General knowledge about social structure, language and culture is in considerable danger of being distorted for dogmatic and ideological reasons. And even if it is reasonably free from distortion, it tends to guide the analysis from the specific to the general too soon. The principle thus does not deny the importance of 'external' context, nor is it anti-theoretical — but it does direct attention to the details of concrete evidence first.

Furthermore, although it may be assumed that 'external' social realities, relevant as context to the actors, will manifest themselves more or less obviously in their actions, the 'more or less' points to a serious methodological problem. In the case of the 'more' it will be relatively easy to link a dialectical asymmetry, e.g. of knowledge, to an external structural asymmetry in the social distribution of knowledge. The evidence will be in the text. But what about the 'less'? The actors may reciprocally take so much for granted about the context that they will not show the relevance of a particular external factor in talk. Here the analyst should resist the temptation to speculate prematurely. An even more intricate problem is presented by another situation. The actors may be ignorant of a particular external factor which thus does not contribute to their accomplishment of practical sense in interaction. But the all-knowing observer who has done careful ethnographic background work may be convinced that the factor determines the conditions for the interaction and for what is accomplished within it. It is therefore a thorny methodological issue how, and under what conditions, analysts can identify 'silent' features in empirical data. Yet although this issue cannot be resolved here, many prefer to remain with what is there in the dialogue as long as possible.

Notes

1. There is, in other words, a need for a cover term for the phenomena just mentioned, and 'dominance' seems to be a reasonable candidate. However, we should be careful not to confuse this use of the term with other uses which are more or less established in various disciplines. For example, we are not taking 'dominance' in the senses developed within the psychology of personality (where it refers to certain personality traits) or within primatology (where dominance refers to certain (overt) primate behaviours). And, above all, dominance must not be confused with (social) power (see p. 10 above).

2. Assumptions of symmetry and equality are clearly also part of folk theories of what a 'true dialogue' is. Also, in conversation analysis (e.g. Atkinson and Heritage, 1984), equal rights to participation and development are stated as characteristic of 'ordinary conversation'.

3. Linell, however, in his paper 'The power of dialogue dynamics' (Linell, 1990), uses the term in two senses: somewhat metaphorically, as potentialities inherent in dialogicality (thus related to 'intrinsic' aspects); and as the deployment of this power, and the potentialities derived from it, in exercising social power (cf. the 'extrinsic' aspects).

4. This paragraph is based on considerations presented in Luckmann (1982).

References

Heath, C. (forthcoming), 'The delivery and reception of diagnosis in
Asymmetries of knowledge in conversational interactions

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In this chapter I shall focus on asymmetries of knowledge between participants in naturally occurring interactions, for the most part in ordinary conversations. Many of the ways we think about discourse rely on our treating conversations as some kind of standard of 'equal participation' between speakers. Discourse in other settings - especially in workplace or institutional contexts - seems characteristically to be a distortion of what is taken to be the symmetrical relationship between speakers in conversation. However, Linell and Luckmann (this volume, Chapter 1) caution us (as others have done) that such a dichotomy between symmetric conversation and asymmetric institutional discourse oversimplifies the nature of asymmetry, and disregards ways in which speakers' participation in conversation may on occasion be asymmetric. Linell points out that it would be 'counterproductive to believe in two mutually exclusive families of situations', if that were to result in our ignoring the ways in which 'mundane conversation' may from time to time be characterized by asymmetries between speakers (Linell, 1990). With that in mind I shall consider some episodes in conversation in which asymmetries of knowledge are manifestly relevant for the talk.

To begin with, I should explain why I choose to focus on asymmetries of knowledge. There are, of course, other dimensions of asymmetry, not the least of which concerns participation rights in talk. In conversation, turns are allocated equally between participants: more precisely, the rules or procedures for allocating turns (Sacks et al., 1974) do not favour any particular participant or category of participant (except perhaps 'current speaker', who may get first shot at allocating a next