Journal of Pragmatics 233 (2024) 105–107

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Pragmatics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

Obituary

In memoriam: Emanuel A. Schegloff 1937–2024

Emanuel Schegloff died on May 23, 2024, at his home in Santa Monica, California. He was preceded in death by his colleagues Harvey Sacks and Gail Jefferson, and survived by his wife Myra Schegloff and daughter Naomi Schegloff. His passing invites reflection on his long scholarly career, which began in Sociology at the University of California and would eventually come to have cross-disciplinary and worldwide influence. He was a co-founder, with Sacks and Jefferson, of conversation analysis (CA), a field of study targeting naturally-occurring interaction for direct observational study.

Schegloff received his undergraduate education in sociology at Harvard (BA 1958), and his graduate training at the University of California, Berkeley (PhD 1967). His initial interests centered around the sociology of knowledge and culture, which were pursued at Harvard through studies with Talcott Parsons and Barrington Moore, and later at Berkeley in a Masters thesis on trends in literary criticism. He then began to explore knowledge production at the nexus of law and psychiatry, which in turn led to an interest in psychiatric interactions, and eventually to the study of interaction itself as a topic in its own right. Key figures in Schegloff's early development included Harvey Sacks, a fellow student at Berkeley; Erving Goffman, who would serve as his dissertation advisor; and Harold Garfinkel at UCLA.

Schegloff's 1967 dissertation, a study of telephone conversation openings, anatomized the action sequences through which callers and call recipients coordinate entry into a state of focused interaction. The subject matter is broadly congruent with Goffman's earlier discussion of "access rituals," but Schegloff's approach is strikingly different: concrete, granular, precise, systematic in its treatment of collected cases, and supported by the presentation of transcribed examples. The title chosen for the dissertation - *The First Five Seconds* - alludes to Pittenger, Hockett, and Danehy's earlier psychiatric interview analysis *The First Five Minutes,* while the much tighter timeframe suggests the novel micro-analytic focus and foreshadows the nascent conversation analytic enterprise. The first publication to emerge from the dissertation, "Sequencing in Conversational Openings" (1968) was also the first published work in CA.

After a brief period at Columbia University, Schegloff moved to UCLA where he served in the Department of Sociology for 40 years. He was also affiliated with the Department of Applied Linguistics, and the interdisciplinary Center for Language, Interaction, and Culture which drew faculty from Anthropology, Applied Linguistics, and Sociology.

Any attempt to assess Emanuel Schegloff's achievements encounters a difficulty that Gene Lerner noted upon the occasion of Schegloff's retirement from UCLA. It's customary to survey the scholar's *contributions* to a field of study; but Schegloff also *co-created* the conversation analytic field to which he contributed. He did so in a domain, everyday interaction, widely presumed to be both intrinsically disorganized and essentially trivial, a dismissive attitude then deeply entrenched in his home discipline of sociology as well as in linguistics, the other discipline to which he was oriented over the course of his career. All of this adds immensely to the challenge, both for Schegloff in his endeavor and for anyone trying to take the measure of what he managed to accomplish. It's an entirely singular order of achievement.

So what does one have to do to create a field like conversation analysis? First and foremost, one has to establish that there is something there worthy of study. Other scholars need to be won over to the idea that there are researchable phenomena within the apparent clutter of naturally occurring interaction, and that these will repay investigation. And it helps to also show that these phenomena, far from being trivial, in fact connect to the real world of social conduct or action and that they have "legs". In Schegloff's terms, they fit within and adumbrate larger domains in the organization of conduct in interaction, and that these can be viable areas of research to which others may contribute in a cumulative project that will advance understanding of those domains.

The shape of the CA field and its areas of study are by now widely recognized: action formation and ascription, sequence organization, turn-taking organization, overall structural organization, repair, person-reference, etc. The structure of the field

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2024.09.009
0378-2166

has become familiar and largely taken for granted, so much so that it's easy to lose sight of the fact that someone had to come up with this arrangement, and show how the various components relate to one another and how they may be developed. While the field continues to expand into new domains of inquiry, from multimodality to epistemics and beyond, it's remarkable how many of its components emerged from initiatives originating in Schegloff's dissertation research and in subsequent collaborations with Sacks and Jefferson.

Beyond this, building the CA field required fashioning a new methodology capable of dealing with the material of talk in interaction. Data of this kind are highly detailed and seemingly chaotic, as well as "soft" in the sense of being shot through with subjective meaning for the participants. This subjective dimension, moreover, cannot be set aside or ignored because it is not just an extraneous overlay, being centrally implicated in the move-by-move construction of interaction itself. How can researchers come to terms with this kind of material? And how can they defend their analyses of it? What does defensible work even look like in this area?

Here again, many scholars are by now familiar with the methodology of CA, which includes sequential case analysis and the management of case collections, both mobilized in the service of a form of analysis that is thoroughly grounded in data-internal evidence of the emergent orientations of the interactants themselves. These are the taken for granted tools of the trade, so to speak, but someone had to come up with this tool-kit, and it bears emphasis that it amounts to a style of inquiry that was highly original in the social and linguistic sciences at that time. Indeed, the decision to treat the "messy" details of spoken interaction – disfluencies, overlaps, silences, etc. – as something to be preserved in transcripts and leveraged as evidence rather than "cleansed" from the data, was unprecedented. Moreover, it's by no means obvious that the various components of this new methodology would fit together. Sequential case analysis and the analysis of collections embody somewhat opposing sensibilities, emphasizing context-sensitivity and patterned recurrence respectively. Someone had to demonstrate that, and how, these diverse tools could be made to work together and indeed that there's a synergy in their combined use.

The creator of the nascent CA field faced further challenges. He had to put all these conceptual and methodological pieces together into a coherent enterprise. He had to communicate that innovative enterprise to others who might wish to join it. And he had to defend the enterprise against scholars from various quarters who were either predisposed to not appreciate it, or were motivated in opposition because of the way it tended to encroach on the territory of existing fields.

Part of what makes Schegloff's groundbreaking papers so rich and stimulating is the way they are designed to address these many challenges simultaneously, not through programmatic statements but rather in the context of specific empirical investigations. He is almost never *merely* occupied with the task of documenting some phenomenon of interaction; he is also working to show how the phenomenon at hand fits into some larger domain of organization or multiple domains, often not previously known or recognized as researchable prior to his explication. And he is also putting his analytic procedures on display to an extraordinary degree, providing methodological guidance for those readers who may wish to do similar research with their own data. There are Schegloff papers with more or less explicit tutorials on how to analyze single cases and exploit the affordances of their sequential embeddedness, how to assemble and curate collections, how to understand and deal with boundary cases and deviant cases, and so on. Many of his empirical studies thus do double duty, also pointing the way toward uncharted interactional territory and exemplifying new methods for its study. Upon re-reading Schegloff's foundational papers, one is struck not just by their compelling findings, but also the elegance with which the larger field-building project is being simultaneously managed and interwoven into each paper's narrative.

Emanuel Schegloff did not, of course, create this field single-handedly, but his fingerprints are all over the shape of CA in its present form. He was particularly well-suited to meet the various challenges sketched here, having extraordinary analytical and communicative skills, a singularity of purpose evident from his earliest papers through to the last, and a big-picture vision for the field and its place in the social sciences. Perhaps more than anyone else among the CA's founders and early practitioners, Schegloff understood that conversation analysis could be not only a powerful resource for other areas of study, from language and cognition to institutions and cultures, but also a primary field of study in its own right. While not ruling out the various applications, he viewed such efforts as premature and was a tireless advocate for the study of ordinary conversational interaction as an essential enterprise with intrinsic value as "the primordial site of sociality." In his later years he nonetheless validated the field's expanding reach across academic disciplines and praxeological areas, characterizing interaction as "the infrastructure for social institutions, the natural ecological niche for language, and the arena in which culture is enacted." Some colleagues may have chafed against the restrictions of Schegloff's original vision, but it is difficult to deny the importance of his vision for the genesis of a rigorous and enduring enterprise devoted to explicating human interaction at the heart of social life. That enterprise is now practiced in most of the world's countries, in numerous disciplines including anthropology, cognitive science, communication, linguistics, psychology, and sociology, and in professional schools and practice areas such as health sciences, emergency services, education, technology and software design, and artificial intelligence.



Photo courtesy of Myra and Naomi Schegloff.

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