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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of conversational actions and category relations exhibited in an episode of argument between a brother and sister during a family meal. The paper is based on two sets of auspices: on a conversation analytic concern with the interconnection between the sequential and categorical 'layers' of organization to which parties to talk-in-interaction are demonstrably oriented, and on 'Sacks' Conjecture' regarding children's culture and adult-child 'culture contact'. In terms of these auspices, the analysis shows that the children use both sequential and categorical cultural resources to produce their argument. To adapt a concept of Garfinkel's (1967) – the documentary method of interpretation – the category relationship between the children is the underlying matter that the sequential particulars are used to reflexively document and constitute. Specifically, through the sequentially organized particulars of degradation and resistance the children recognizably and reflexively constitute their category relationship.

Keywords

children's argument, children's culture, conversation analysis, ethnomethodology, membership categorization analysis

Introduction

Until recently, the major focus within conversation analysis has been on the sequential organization of talk-in-interaction. As the inventor of the discipline, Harvey Sacks, pointed out, however, there may be various layers of organization that may be oriented

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to by the participants in courses of talk-in-interaction (Sacks, 1992b: Lecture 5, Spring 1972). For Sacks, one of these, to which he devoted extensive attention, involved the use of membership categories, membership categorization devices and associated organizational phenomena. According to Schegloff (1992: x), Sacks' interest in categorizational topics waned post-1968 in favour of an emphasis on sequential organization. Nevertheless, Sacks' work on these topics inspired the development of 'MCD analysis' during the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Drew, 1978; Jayyusi, 1984; Payne, 1976; Sharrock, 1974; Watson, 1978, 1983) and, as it later became known, 'membership categorization analysis' (e.g. Eglin and Hester, 1992, 2003; Hester and Eglin, 1992, 1997; Watson, 1997). The relationship between the sequential and the categorical dimensions of talk-in-interaction provides one set of auspices for this paper. It seeks to explore some discernible connections between the sequential and the categorical, specifically between conversational actions and category relations, in the context of some particular instances of talk-in-interaction.

If the relationship between conversational actions and category relations affords one set of auspices for the research reported here, another is provided by the nature of the data subjected to analysis. These consist of some children's talk-in-interaction during a family meal, specifically an episode of argumentative talk between a brother and sister. The analytic focus is on their conversational actions and categorization activity engaged in accomplishing the talk and in constituting the character of their particular relationship. This second set of auspices consists, then, of ethnomethodological and conversation analytic work, encompassed by (if not always acknowledged or originating directly from) 'Sacks' Conjecture'. According to Garfinkel, Giron, Livingston and Sacks (1982),¹ 'Sacks' Conjecture' consisted of setting aside the orthodoxy of developmental psychology and socialization theory, and replacing them with the notion that children's culture had its own integrity and internal coherence and could therefore be investigated as a phenomenon in its own right. Furthermore, if there was (to some degree a separate and independent) children's culture, then the 'culture contact' between children and adults could come into analytic view. The conjecture anticipated two interrelated directions of inquiry in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. The first involved the respecification of the use of the 'developmental scheme' and 'socialization theory' by adults in their dealings with children (e.g. MacKay, 1974; Mehan, 1976; Payne and Ridge, 1985; Speier, 1971, 1973, 1976). The second provided for a focus on children's cultural resources used in the constitution of children's activities and relationships (e.g. Butler, 2008; Church, 2009; Corsaro, 1979, 1985, 2005a, 2005b; Danby, 1998; Danby and Baker, 1998a, 1998b; Goodwin, 1982, 1990, 2002, 2006b, 2007; Hutchby, 2002, 2005a, 2005b; Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998; Maynard, 1985a, 1985b, 1986; Waksler, 1991; Wootton, 1997, 2006). Of these two directions of inquiry, the focus here is primarily linked to the second in so far as it is concerned centrally with the cultural resources used by the children in producing the argumentative talk and the category relations between them.

Setting and data

The data analysed here is a family meal (evening dinner) involving two parents (Jen, the mother and Harry, the father) and two children (Russell, a boy aged 12 and Maggie, a girl aged 7) in their family home. The meal occurred at the kitchen table and one of the

parents (Harry) had not arrived home by the time it was ready. The rest of the family began the meal without him and he arrived 20 minutes 'late'. The naturally occurring talk-in-interaction produced just prior to and throughout the meal was audio-tape recorded and transcribed.

The interaction between the children during the meal is frequently fractious and combative. There are insults, arguments and even occasional mild physical violence. Generally speaking, it is Russell who initiates these instances of interpersonal conflict. In this paper, we will present a 'single case analysis' of a particular episode of argumentative talk between the children (Sacks, 1984; Schegloff, 1987, 1988; see also Hutchby and Woofitt, 1998: 120–30). As a single case analysis, the focus is on the cultural resources that the children use in accomplishing the argument. Furthermore, not only is the talk-in-interaction recognizable as argumentative, it also contains hearable degradation and resistance. Our analysis seeks to describe the cultural resources used to accomplish these recognizable features of the talk-in-interaction and to show category relations are reflexively accomplished in and as conversational action.

The data is as follows:

1. J: Have some chee-put some cheese on your potato now and it will melt (10.0)
2. ((Maggie starts to get up)) Sit down I'll get you a drink
3. R: And me please
4. M: *Milk*
5. J: Milk or water Russ?
6. R: Water please (1.0) *SIT DOWN*
7. M: *I KNOW I SLIPPED*
8. J: *Ok* there's no need to [shout] at her
9. R: [If you] slipped you're just standing there goin'=
((does action of Maggie's claimed slipping))
10. M: =[No]=
11. R: =[Ooh] [I slipped!] ((mimicking))
12. M: [*I went back*]wards like that
13. (1.5)
14. R: *SIT DO::WN*
15. M: *I KNOW [don't talk] with your mouth open*
16. J: [She is love]y ((s.v.))
17. R: Hmm How am I meant to talk then?
18. J: *Russell*
19. M: You've got a m[outhful]
20. J: [*Russell*]
21. R: Ner ner ner ner ner [ner] (('talking' with mouth closed))
22. J: [J- Ma]ggie just leave him alone – ignore him he's being
23. purposely (3.0) Kevinish
24. M: Mm
25. R: I'm not
26. J: And you *are* eati'- er talking with your mouthful (11.0) what did Harry say when
27. he phoned then?
28. R: Erhm h-he was leaving somewhere and he'd be back in ten minutes

Conversational actions and category relations

The relationship between conversational actions and category membership (Sacks, 1992a, 1992b) has been examined in a variety of contexts, including courtrooms (Drew, 1978, 1992), police interrogations (Watson, 1983) and classrooms (Payne, 1976). Persons are recognizable as incumbents of membership categories by virtue of their conversational actions, just as the sense of their actions is informed by category membership. Furthermore, these may be matters of consensus or dispute (Drew, 1992; Watson, 1983). In the context of family life, it has been shown that different kinds of social relationship within families are constituted through the conversational actions of various kinds. For example, Speier (1976) showed how adult/child relationships are accomplished through an asymmetrical distribution of rights to engage in particular kinds of conversation action. Similarly, Sacks (1992b: 318) analysed how the membership category 'burdensome old man' evolved in the course of talk about having a taste of some herring during a family meal. The old man's resistance to offers and re-offers, through refusals, was treated by co-participants as evidence that he was an incumbent of such a category and therefore stood in a particular kind of relationship to his relatives. His refusals were 'obstinately' produced sequentially, that is they were the product of a series of offers and re-offers; without their insistency, the obstinacy would not have emerged.² It has also been shown by Goodwin (2006a) that different kinds of social organization/social relationships amongst children can be constituted through the formatting of different kinds of talk. She analyses directive/response sequences between adults and children and shows how these practices reflexively construct local identities for children either as 'accountable to their parents for their actions or dismissive of their parents' directives'.

In investigating the connection between conversational actions and category relations it should not, of course, be presumed that there is an automatic correspondence between forms of talk, categories and relationships. Compliments, for example, may be paid for a variety of reasons and may be understood in a variety of ways. A compliment may be paid as a form of 'buttering up', or as a way of displaying physical attraction for a person. Likewise it may be understood as a 'sexist' remark, or as a sign that someone likes someone else. In other words compliments may be heard to invoke various types of social relationships *for members*. The kind of relationship invoked will be a locally produced interactional matter.

The data contains some recognizable features in relation to conversational actions and category relations. First, the talk is recognizable as argumentative. Whilst the terms 'argument' and 'argumentative' can have different meanings, for example 'making an argument' in the sense of putting a case for a position in contrast to 'having an argument' in the sense of 'arguing *with*' someone (Hutchby, 1996: 20), from the point of view of conversation analysis argument is understood as a sequentially organized, interactional process. The defining feature of argument is the Action–Opposition sequence (Maynard, 1985a). As Hutchby (1996: 23) points out,

approaching arguments as Action–Opposition sequences in this sense allows us to investigate participants' use of locally emergent features of the talk in constructing their disputes. Among other things, we can look at the kind of actions that get treated as arguables and the sorts of normative cultural code that speakers utilise in identifying arguable actions. (Maynard, 1985a, 1986).

As the analysis will show, the episode analysed here begins with an arguable action to which there is an oppositional move and which in turn is treated as an arguable action, and so on in a succession of Action–Opposition sequences. However, ‘the kind of actions that get treated as arguables’ indicate another layer of organization in addition to the sequential. Specifically, there is recognizable conflict about the nature of the category relationship of the children. It is these category relations which can be understood as providing the grounds for opposition in the first place. Russell can be heard to attempt to degrade his sister by directing her, by indicating the fallacious character of her accounts and by making fun of her conversational incompetence. Through these conversational actions Russell attempts to build a particular relationship with his younger sister. She, in turn, resists his directive and his casting of her account as fallacious and she attempts to counter his degrading talk by issuing a directive of her own, thereby seeking to counter the category relationship attempted by her brother.

The following analysis is divided into four main parts: (1) Direction, degradation and resistance; (2) The fallacious account; (3) Resistance and mockery; and (4) Ending the argument.

Direction, degradation and resistance

The Action–Opposition sequence in and through which the episode begins consists of a directive from Russell and a retort by Maggie:

6. R: Water please (1.0) *SIT DOWN*
 7. M: *I KNOW I SLIPPED*

Thus, Russell issues a directive to Maggie, to ‘sit down’ (line 6). This can be heard to reiterate Jen’s earlier directive to Maggie that she should sit down when Maggie apparently stood up to fetch a drink for herself, as follows:

2. J: ((Maggie starts to get up)) Sit down I’ll get you a drink

Two initial observations can be made about Russell’s directive, ‘*SIT DOWN*’. Firstly, it reiterates a *parental* rule invoked earlier by the mother. It is a rule conventionally and typically associated with parenting in this kind of setting. Furthermore, this is not the only invocation of the rule about remaining seated at the dinner table; the rule is invoked at various points during the meal, mostly in response to requests from Russell to leave the table whilst other members of the family are still eating. However, notwithstanding these parental uses of the sitting down rule, in Russell’s utterance quoted above the rule is now a *child’s* resource. Secondly, as a ‘reiterated’ directive, Russell’s instruction to his sister to ‘*SIT DOWN*’ can be heard to speak on behalf of his mother; he repeats his mother’s earlier directive. One salient feature of directives, like other first parts of adjacency pairs, is that they make relevant a response, in this case compliance or non-compliance. If compliance is not produced in response, then its noticeable absence can provide the grounds for the directive’s repetition. Russell makes use of this property of adjacency pairs – the noticeably absent completion of the pair – in producing his

directive in the first place, and in building into it the complaint and the accusation that Maggie has not complied with the earlier directive. Maggie's failure to comply can be heard then to warrant and to legitimate Russell's directive and to lend it the force of a directive *reiterated* on behalf of his mother.

Russell's '*SIT DOWN*' not only projects compliance from Maggie, it also has prosodic features which accentuate and upgrade its character. Thus, the directive is said *loudly*, *commandingly*, *coercively* and *authoritatively*. Taken together, both the form of Russell's utterance as a directive and its prosodic features not only project obedience, compliance and deference as its second pair parts, they also project a particular social relationship (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Goodwin, 2006a). With respect to social relationships amongst children, in particular, Goodwin (1990) has shown how directives may be built from different linguistic resources, yielding different 'shapes' to the directives, which in turn constituted 'very different kinds of social organization in children's peer groups' (Goodwin, 2006a: 517). Some directives constituted hierarchical organization, whilst other directives, formatted differently, constituted or were heard to project egalitarian organization/relationships (cf. Ervin-Tripp et al., 1984; Goodwin and Goodwin, 2001 [2000]). Russell, then, can be heard to be not only requiring compliance, as a 'turn at talk', he can be heard to *demand* it and to be asserting his right to issue the directive to his sister in the first place (cf. Watson and Sharrock, 1991), implying a 'form of social organization' – a particular kind of category-relationship between its issuer and its recipient.

Conversational objects such as commands or orders are routinely and conventionally predicated on particular categories of person, such as sergeants or teachers who, as Payne (1976) indicates, can be heard to constitute themselves as incumbents of these categories through their use of such category-bound activities and to constitute others, such as soldiers or pupils, with whom they are relationally paired in a standardized fashion, as proper recipients of these first pair parts. As recognizable incumbents of such categories, issuers of commands and orders can expect, furthermore, via the conventional category-tying and visible legitimacy of their actions, to have their commands and orders met with appropriate second pair parts in the form of compliance and obedience. However, not just anybody can issue a command or an order and expect to have it obeyed. Siblings, as is the case here, do not conventionally have commands and orders predicated on their membership categories – at least, not unless there is some special warrant for this, in 'special' circumstances and on specific occasions.

With respect to the occasioned predication of commands, it is clearly the case that on some occasions, for example, where the parents leave their children in the family home whilst they go out by themselves, one (typically an older) sibling may be left 'in charge' of the other (typically younger) sibling. The sibling in charge becomes a proxy parent. Such an arrangement may have the associated yield that orders and commands may be issued by the older to the younger on the grounds that they are given with the parents' assent and direction. This, of course, is not precisely the set of circumstances which provides for Russell's command that his sister '*SIT DOWN*'. After all, his mother is present at the table. Nevertheless, Russell can be heard to speak on behalf of his mother and beyond this, of course, Russell can also be heard to upgrade this 'sponsored' reiteration by shouting; he builds the reiteration with this prosodic feature.

It has to be emphasized, however, that the kind of relationship so constituted is a matter for members and so it is necessary to examine what the recipient makes of a directive, however it may have been formatted. It is one thing to say what we, as witnesses to the tape recording, can hear in Russell's talk, and quite another to have available the analyses of the participants themselves and, in particular, the analysis of Russell's sister Maggie, to whom the directive is issued. For this reason, our focus will now be shifted to Maggie's oppositional response to Russell's directive.

Maggie's response completes the Action–Opposition pair. However, her opposition does not consist in a refusal to comply with the directive. As far as can be inferred from the absence of a repetition of the directive, Maggie *does* sit down and in this way *may* be seen to have complied with Russell's directive, but she accompanies this action with the retort, '*I KNOW. I SLIPPED*'. With respect to '*I KNOW*', it seems clear that this makes accountable the nature of her sitting down as far as Maggie is concerned and offers resistance to the category-implicativeness of Russell's directive. Thus, in saying that she 'knows' that she should be sitting down, she can be understood, firstly, to mean that she knows that there has been an earlier directive from her mother to sit down. However, Maggie can be heard to do more than acknowledge that there is a directive to remain seated currently in force. In addition, she can be heard to say that she knows that her mother has already brought this rule into play, she has not forgotten and *therefore* that there is no justification for Russell to reiterate his mother's directive and to presume to speak on her behalf. She can be understood to mean that she is sitting down not because of *his* directive but because of *her own* competence and volition. She is doing it because 'she knows', not because he is telling her to do so.

In making her sitting down accountable in terms of her own competence and volition, as following from the conditional relevance of her mother's original invocation of the rule to remain seated, Maggie can thereby be heard to deflect, neutralize and make redundant Russell's directive and to resist the category imputation it implied. How then does '*I KNOW*' accomplish 'resistance'? Her logic appears to be this: because her compliance does not follow from his claimed position as commander, but from her own knowledge and volition, he is not therefore a commander relative to her. If *her* action is not a result of his command, *his* action therefore cannot amount to commanding. Furthermore, if his action is not accountable as commanding, she is not a *commandee*. Russell's attempt at constituting the commander/commandee relational pair of categories is therefore effectively undercut, neutralized and resisted. In other words, her 'I know' can be understood as a conversational action that opposes the category relationship implied by Russell's directive: that he is in a position to issue it, that he has authority over her, that she is less knowledgeable than him, and that she owes him deference. She is *not* one to be directed; his selection of her as directable *by him* is inappropriate and unwarranted.

In the second part of her retort Maggie asserts that she 'slipped'. This can be heard as an account (Scott and Lyman, 1968) for the action that occasioned Russell's directive. In providing her account, she can be heard to analyse Russell's directive as accusatory: he is accusing her of being deviant, of breaking a rule. Maggie's response 'I slipped' rebuts the accusation and offers an account which *excuses* her behaviour: she accidentally slipped off her chair; she admits that was not sitting down but the slipping and hence the

not sitting down was not her responsibility. She did not leave her seat purposely because she knows that she is not supposed to get up from the table. She was not doing the thing that Russell is using as grounds for his directive; she ‘knew’ there was a rule in play about sitting down, and she was following it, not breaking it. Her actions may have given the appearance of breaking the rule – because she was standing, not sitting – but this was because she found herself in the midst of an action that was not of her own volition – she slipped. Given the absence of intention, so Maggie’s logic would appear to run, she cannot justifiably be charged with an offence.

Just as Russell sought to upgrade his directive shouting in a hearably commanding and authoritative way, Maggie’s ‘*I KNOW*’ retort exhibits matching prosodic features; Russell shouts, Maggie shouts back. The shouting continues in the second part of Maggie’s retort. ‘*I SLIPPED*’ is articulated with similar forcefulness. In matching and reflecting back his fierce intonation, Maggie augments the resistance contained in her exhibited category analysis of Russell’s conversational action and in her account of what brought about deviation from the sitting down rule.

The fallacious account

Following Maggie’s account, Jen intervenes (line 8) with ‘*Ok* there’s no need to shout at her’. The ‘*ok*’ can be heard in several ways. It can be heard as directed to both children, meaning ‘that’s enough’ arguing; it can also be heard as an acknowledgement of Maggie’s account; and it can be understood as an acknowledgement of Russell’s directive as having reiterated on her behalf the earlier directive to ‘sit down’. However, the next part of the utterance is clearly directed at Russell, since it was his last utterance that was shouted at his sister. The key point, however, is that the intervention does not succeed; the argument does not stop as a result of Jen’s intervention. One way to understand this is that Jen does not censure Russell for his directive to Maggie but only for the way that he said it. It is perhaps because of Jen’s implicit legitimation, then, of Russell’s directive (however wrong he may have been to shout it out) that he continues the argument by treating Maggie’s account as arguable and by opposing it. Thus, as the episode goes on:

9. R: If you slipped (.) you’re just standing there goin’=
 ((does action of Maggie’s claimed slipping))
 10. M: [=no=]
 11. R: [=Ooh] I slipped! ((mimicking))

As this extract shows, Russell opposes Maggie’s account that she slipped. Treating earlier oppositions as arguables is, of course, a standard method for continuing and developing arguments (Maynard, 1985a). In particular, like accounts in general, Maggie’s account can be assessed as acceptable or non-acceptable, and makes possibly relevant as a next utterance an assessment of its truth or falsity. Russell can thereby be heard to accuse his sister of offering a false account. Specifically, he indicates the inadequacy of Maggie’s description by showing that if she had indeed ‘slipped’ then such an action would not have produced the end-result of ‘standing’ that Maggie claims. His method of doing so apparently consists of an enactment of getting up from the table. However, as

the data shows, before Russell can finish his oppositional enactment, Maggie herself produces an opposition to it, disputing the descriptive adequacy of his enactment with the retort, 'no'. Nevertheless, Russell then continues with and completes the enactment by mimicking her explanation ('ooh I slipped').

From his point of view, Maggie's description of her action as 'slipping' just does not make sense; as far as he is concerned, her standing up must have been caused by some action other than slipping. In fact, as he has already implied, she deliberately stood up. The grammar of slipping, so to speak, from Russell's point of view, is that it results in falling over or down, not standing up! Her reasoning and hence her account does not make sense. It is one thing to produce an account which, although false, at least shows some plausibility and understanding of how everyday actions and outcomes are related, but it is altogether a different matter to offer accounts which are out of touch with the everyday realities of slipping and standing. Hence, Maggie's account is itself accountable and offers Russell an opportunity to further degrade his sister. Thus, not only is she someone who can be commanded (from his point of view), she is also foolish and ignorant in that she cannot offer a reasonable, sensible and plausible account of her own actions.

Nevertheless, it is also clear that Maggie's resistance to her brother's degrading talk is not broken. She has already said 'no' but now offers continued resistance, with her own enactment of what she did. That is, after he has completed his accusation with this piece of mimicry, Maggie produces an enactment of what happened with which she seeks to show that she is in fact telling the truth. Of course, in order to do so, she has to 'stand up' again. As she does so, she accompanies her action with the retort:

12. M: I went backwards like that

The four utterances just analysed comprise two Action–Opposition sequences. The first sequence, comprising his enactment and her denial, is followed by the second immediately after, comprising his mocking mimicry and her responding enactment. The argument might have been terminated at this point but, as the data indicates, Russell pursues matters further. Indeed, it is perhaps unsurprising that he does so in so far as Maggie's action has just put herself into the position of one who, by standing up to confront Russell's version of how she 'slipped', is now arguably again in breach of the sitting down rule.

Resistance and mockery

Russell does not miss this opportunity for further opposition. Rather than calling into question her enactment, that is, her demonstration of how she fell off the chair, Russell instead repeats his earlier directive, '*SIT DOWN*'. Clearly, his grounds for doing so are that she is again standing up. In demonstrating how she slipped, she has had to get to her feet and as such, she *can* again be directed to sit down. Russell, then, can be said to make good use of this opportunity. Furthermore, his repetition of the directive replicates the prosodic features of its predecessor: it is again said loudly and forcibly. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Maggie then recycles, both in content and prosodic character, the first part of her earlier retort, '*I KNOW*'. However, rather than following the pattern established by

the earlier Action–Opposition sequence, Maggie takes the initiative, so to speak, by following up her *'I KNOW'* (which again can be heard to repeat the earlier category analysis and category-relation resistance) with a directive of her own:

14. R: SIT DO::WN
 15. M: I KNOW don't talk with your mouth open

There is, then, a strong resemblance between this pair of utterances and the pair that occurred at the beginning of this argument. Such resemblance exhibits a common feature of arguments, namely their repetition or chaining of Action–Opposition sequences (e.g. 'You did', 'No I didn't', etc.). However, what is significant here is that Maggie's opposition forestalls this prospect by issuing a directive of her own. So far, Maggie has been on the receiving end, so to speak, of degrading directives and accusations and she has attempted to resist them through rejection and rebuttal and by offering an alternative account. As indicated earlier, her initial rejection of the directive with *'I KNOW'* and her account *'I SLIPPED'* was followed by more accusations from Russell and then a repetition of the original directive. Maggie would seem to be 'under the cosh'; her retorts are immediately met with new accusations and directives. However, with this utterance she can be heard to attempt to 'turn the tables' on Russell with a directive of her own, thereby putting herself in first position and requiring *him* to respond to her rather than *her* remaining on the receiving end of Russell's degradations.

Maggie's directive is a finely tuned reflection of and opposition to Russell's original directive. He invoked a parental rule, speaking on behalf of his mother, with all the force of legitimacy that this affords, and now she manages to produce a counter-attack that he too is breaking a parental rule, namely, he is speaking with his mouth full. Like Russell's directive, Maggie's too involves a rule which had previously been invoked by the mother during the course of the meal:

- R: Can I have tha'? (1.5) It's five pounds.
 J: Well do you want to tell me about it when you have finished your mouthful?
 because I didn't understand any of that (1.0) Which one is it?
 and:
 M: Chicken (1.0) chicken cock
 R: S::Hhhh
 J: You:: can spell a word after you've finished what you've got in your mouth

Despite the delicate symmetry of its tie to Russell's invocation of the parental rule about sitting down, and her competence as regards the sequential organization of argument, Maggie's invocation of the parental rule about speaking with one's mouth full is incorrectly articulated; she gets the rule wrong. Presumably, she means to say, 'don't talk with your mouth *full*' but instead she says, 'don't talk with your mouth *open*'. Once again, the tables are turned as her mistake provides Russell with new resources to exploit for further argumentative and degrading talk. Recognizing the absurdity of Maggie's utterance, Russell is quick to take advantage through its literal treatment, allowing him to mock his sister with the question, 'Hmm, how am I meant to talk then?' Again, Maggie

is 'on the losing end' of the exchange. She attempted to resist and to turn the tables, to launch a counter-attack, but all that has happened is that she has made a fool of herself and presented her brother with another opportunity to add to the accumulation of degradations accomplished so far in the argument.

As the following extract shows, Maggie reiterates and self-corrects her directive. However, Russell ignores her and in spite of Jen's warning, he takes advantage of Maggie's mistaken articulation of the rule and produces a demonstration of what would happen if he did indeed comply with it as expressed and actually talked with his mouth shut!

19. M: You've got a m[outhful]
 20. J: [Russell]
 21. R: Ner ner ner ner ner ner ((talking with mouth closed))

Russell, in other words, answers his own question, 'how am I meant to talk then?' with an example of just 'how' one would talk with one's mouth shut. Such talk amounts to unintelligible gibberish, hardly a sensible conversational practice. The demonstration serves, once again, to downgrade his sister, this time by showing what ridiculous results would follow from conformity to the rule she invoked. It also serves, by implication, to upgrade himself at her expense.

Ending the argument

Just what Maggie's options are at this humiliating point in the episode is not left in her hands. Arguments, as has previously been shown (Coulter, 1990; Dersley and Wootton, 2001; Maynard, 1985a) can be developed in various ways; their trajectories are manifold and contingent. So far, the trajectory of this particular argument has been plotted by Russell's opportunistic resourcefulness, his conversational and argumentative skill in exploiting locally occasioned resources: previously invoked parental rules, dubious accounts, unconvincing embodied demonstrations, and incorrect statements of parental rules. He is given, however, no further opportunities to exploit because Maggie does not respond to his speaking with his mouth shut. Instead, Jen intervenes and the argument between Russell and Maggie is terminated:

21. R: Ner ner ner ner ner [ner] (('talking' with mouth closed))
 22. J: [J- Ma]ggie just leave him alone – ignore him he's being
 23. purposely (3.0) Kevinish
 24. M: Mm
 25. R: I'm not
 26. J: And you *are* eati'- er talking with your mouthful (11.0) what did Harry say when
 27. he phoned then?
 28. R: Erhm h-he was leaving somewhere and he'd be back in ten minutes

Several features of Jen's intervention can be noted. Firstly, it involves some advice or instruction to Maggie: 'just leave him alone' and 'ignore him'. In other words, do not pursue the argument any further. Secondly, Jen formulates the character of the argument

that has occurred so far. That is to say, she describes what Russell has been doing as 'being purposely Kevinish', which means he is playing at arguing for its own sake, being deliberately argumentative (in the style of the stereotypical 'teenage' character 'Kevin' in the TV sketch, 'Kevin and Perry' from the *Harry Enfield Show*). Given this, the advice is that whatever Maggie does, Russell will take advantage of it in producing more argumentative talk and more degradation; Maggie will not win. Thirdly, Jen then takes Maggie's side by reiterating on her behalf the rule that Maggie had attempted to invoke, namely that Russell *is* talking with his mouth full.

Russell has no answer to this intervention, at least at this point, and the argument is terminated. However, even if the degradation of his sister he managed to achieve has now come to an end, there remains a sense that the category relations between brother and sister are asymmetrical. He degraded and downgraded her, she resisted, he persisted, humiliating her attempted recovery, only then for her mother to come to her aid. She may have been spared further humiliation from her brother but Maggie has now been categorized as somebody who is unequal to him as a 'sparring partner'. She is one who needs help and protection from her mother because Russell is better at 'doing arguing' than she is. For all its good intentions, Jen's intervention serves to confirm, at least in this sense, the category relationship Maggie had sought to resist.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper it was stated that two sets of auspices provided for the analysis contained within it. The first involved a conversation analytic concern with the interconnection between various 'layers' of organization to which parties to talk-in-interaction are demonstrably oriented, two of which are the sequential and categorical. The second, involving 'Sacks' Conjecture', consisted in ethnomethodological and conversation analytic studies of children's culture or, more specifically, the cultural resources used by children in the production and organization of their talk and other activities. In terms of these auspices, an analysis of conversational actions and category relations in the context of an episode of argumentative talk between a brother and sister during a family meal has been presented. It was shown that the argument was organized both sequentially and categorically. The parties used a variety of structures to produce its local sequential orderliness. Thus, the brother could be heard to degrade his sister via his conversational actions – directives, accusations, enacted descriptions, mimicry and mockery – whilst she in turn resists them through her rebuttals, accounts, counter-enacted descriptions and other oppositionals. In these and various other ways, the children displayed their rich and sophisticated conversational competence in producing the argument. The argument was also organized categorically; it was recognizably about the category relationship between the children, and the sequential structures were deployed in the service of their dispute. To adapt a concept of Garfinkel's (1967) – the documentary method of interpretation – the category relationship between the children was the underlying matter that the sequential particulars were used to reflexively document and constitute. Through the sequentially organized particulars of degradation and resistance the children recognizably constituted their category relationship.

Notes

1. We thank Doug Macbeth and Matthew Speier for making this manuscript and other unpublished materials by Sacks available to us. We would also like to thank Ian Hutchby for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Naturally, any defects that remain are our responsibility, not his.
2. For further discussion of this example, see Williams (2000: 130–34).

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