

***Talk at Work: Interaction in Institutional Settings.* Edited by Paul Drew and John Heritage. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, Pp. 580)**

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## BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

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*Talk at Work: Interaction in Institutional Settings.* Edited by Paul Drew and John Heritage. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, Pp. 580)

This collection of essays offers a diverse sampling of case studies dealing with the phenomenon of spoken discourse as a form of social interaction. More specifically, it deals with institutional talk as the “central medium through which the daily working activities of many professionals and organizational representatives are conducted” (p. 3). In the authors’ view, institutional talk need not necessarily take place in the public work setting, but may occur in private contexts where the focus of interaction is work-oriented. This introduces the notion of formal settings, where prescribed patterns characterize conversational exchanges, as opposed to non-formal settings, where there is greater flexibility in the interactional patterns. Nevertheless, the majority of studies in the collection deal with the contexts of the formal variety. While dealing with different contexts of interaction, all the works in this volume approach this phenomenon from the perspective of conversation analysis, a tradition developed in the early sixties by such researchers as Harvey Sacks and J.L. Austin, and subsequently elaborated through the work of colleagues such as John Searle, Emmanuel Schegloff, Gail Jefferson and many others. The introductory chapter to this collection offers a detailed overview of the development of this field, as well as a thorough treatment of the theoretical principles on which it is based. Highlighted is the manner in which turn-taking in conversation may be sequentially analyzed and interpreted in terms of discourse and socio-interactional contexts. As such, this section is a good introduction for scholars previously unfamiliar with the field.

The work is divided into four main sections, the first of which, “Theoretical Orientations,” contains the introductory chapter by Drew and Heritage, as well as a discussion of activity types and inference by Stephen Levinson. Particularly interesting is a study by Emmanuel Schegloff emphasizing the importance of considering the local elements of occasion, as well as the general characteristics of that category of occasion in the interpretation of talk, a perspective reminiscent of Malinowski’s separation of context of situation and context of culture. To illustrate his point, Schegloff analyzes a television encounter between journalist Dan Rather and former American President George Bush.

The second section of the work is entitled "The Activities of Questioners," which contains separate articles on the role and speech behaviour of professional interrogators such as psychiatrists, journalists, courtroom examiners, and an interviewer of candidates for an academic posting. These articles are then complemented by those in section three, which deals with "The Activities of Answerers." Here we find articles dealing with the behaviour, as answerers, of patients, news interviewees, and job applicants. This last article, by ethnographer John J. Gumperz, illustrates the problems faced by members of ethnic minorities as they attempt to cope with interview contexts where the different cultural premises of the interviewer and interviewee may result in a breakdown of communication. This is a theme which Gumperz has addressed for many years, and the reader is referred to his film *Cross Talk* for a graphic illustration of the difficulties attached to inter-cultural communication.

Section four brings the study full circle with a series of studies concerning "The Interplay Between Questioning and Answering." Here are offered articles on interaction in the medical (counselling of first-time mothers; delivering distressing diagnostic information) and legal domains (cross-examination in a rape trial), as well as an article on the telephone-mediated communication involved in calls for emergency assistance. A final article deals with interaction in informal settings between those recounting personal problems and those to whom this information is addressed.

While this volume contains little discussion of traditional oral performance and communication, the methodological and theoretical frameworks it offers are not without value to the ethnographer/folklorist who might wish to investigate culture-specific patterns as they relate to discrete folkloric events and interaction. The value of conversation analysis and discourse analysis is that their application is not restricted to specific kinds of interaction. Rather, they constitute valuable and alternative—but not contradictory—ways of expanding our understanding of the nature of oral tradition, as we delve ever deeper below its surface textual manifestation in an effort to elaborate its essence as a communicative, interactional process.

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