Membership Categorization Analysis

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Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) is one means of explicating the practically oriented, common-sensical, and cultural reasoning of people as they go about their social lives. In particular it focuses on the recognizability of people as certain sorts of people or, more specifically, people as certain sorts of members of society, and how this recognizability is a resource for members in their dealings with each other. And as one of the primary ways in which we 'deal' with each other is through language, MCA is often brought to bear on the analysis of how people use language in situations of everyday life.

As with other strands of Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis (EMCA), there is a special way to understand what is meant by 'analysis'. When we use the term MCA, we are here of course referring to the ways in which we, as analysts, explicate some empirical material, however we can also use the term as a gloss for what the people in our empirical material are doing – they are categorizing each others as certain sorts of members of society. Thus what we, as analysts, are doing is simply bringing to light members' own analyses. MCA should thus not be thought of as, for example a theory of social categorization that is applied to some empirical materials to test its predictability, rather as the explication of peoples' own resources for social life.

Membership categorization analysis has its beginnings in the work of Harvey Sacks (1972, 1992) who became interested in the way in which categorizations rely on social categories, e.g., policeman, mother, deviant, and how these and associated social categories might be organized into collections, known as membership categorization devices.

"My attention shall be exclusively limited to those categories in the language in terms of which persons may be classified. For example, the categories: 'male', 'teacher', 'first baseman', 'professional', 'Negro', etc., are the sort I shall be dealing with. Frequently such 'membership' categories are organized, by persons of the society using them, into what I shall call 'collections of membership categories', categories that members of society feel 'go together'. They are not constructed merely as aids to my analysis; whether or not a particular category is a member of a particular collection is, in each and every case, a matter to be decided empirically." (Sacks, 1966: 15-16; original emphases; cited by Jayyusi, 1984: 212)

The central elements in the use of social categories, according to Sacks, are membership categorization devices and a set of "rules of application". Rules of application match categories from a device to indi-
viduals or collections of individuals. Of particular interest is the "consistency rule" and it's corollary the "hearer's maxim". The consistency rule states, roughly, that if a category from a MCD is used to categorize a member of a particular population, then all other members may be categorized with categories from that device. One may view the consistency rule as applying to the production of a categorization such that speakers may co-select categories from within the same device. The hearer's side of the consistency rule is termed a "hearer's maxim":

"if two or more categories are used to categorize two or more members of some population, and those categories can be heard as categories from the same collection, then: hear them that way" (Sacks, 1992A: 221)

Furthermore, such categories may provide for inferences concerning typical activities of their incumbents. Such activities are referred to as being category-bound (Sacks 1992).

Of special interest to Sacks, and those who have followed him has been the following problem: Given that a person may be described “correctly” in an infinite number of ways on a given occasion, what are the principles of a “proper” description? One such principle by which a description becomes proper is through it being heard as relevant in lieu of it falling under a membership categorization device relevant to the talk at hand.

The classic example from Sack’s, derived somewhat atypically from a book of stories by children, is how we understand the expression “The baby cried, the mommy picked it up”. Sack’s contends, and the reader is encouraged to try this on their own, that we hear the “mommy” as the “baby’s mommy”. The basic idea is that if we can hear the rendering of the categories, mommy and baby, as belonging to the device, members of a family, then we hear them that way. We may say that picking up their babies is a category bound activity of mommies, something mommies are expected to do. Thus when offered a description of some mommy picking up some baby, we infer they are members of the same family unless of course we know of some reason not to do so.

Membership categorization analysis, along with the analysis of turn sequencing and recipient design provided by Conversation Analysis (CA), provides a powerful analytic toolkit with which relationships between interactants can be understood (Sacks 1992; Antaki and Widdicombe 1998; Hester and Eglin 1997). Moreover, MCA has been further developed since the early work by Sacks, both conceptually and empirically. Jayusi (1984 &1991) brought forth the the moral and normative character of categories and categorization. Recall from the mommy and baby example above that we expect mommies to pick
up babies. It is not far from that to suggest that we expect them to do so as they should do so, and in this way issues of normality and morality can be seen to come into play. For more empirical work in this vein, see for example Antaki et al, 2008; Armanin 1997; Baker, 1997; Eglin & Hester, 1999; Heritage & Lindström, 1998; Hutchby, 2001; Stokoe, 2003. The second major conceptual development within MCA has been Watson's (1978) extension of the notion of category-bound activities to the more general notion of category-bound predicates. Thus not only activities, or actions, may be bound to categories but also a wide range of characteristics, essentially whatever can be 'properly' predicated of an incumbent to the category. Not only can we hear mommies as 'picking up babies, but also as being of a certain age, of having certain kinds of knowledge, and so forth. The notion of category-bound predicates has become quite general in MCA research. It is important to point out, however, that both with the moral or normative implicativeness of categories as well as category predicates, their applicability is always bound to concrete situations of categorization and should not be thought of as 'context-free' properties of linguistic expression, as would be the case, for example in linguistic semantics or certain varieties of ethnomethodology.

Belonging to the 'family' of Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis, MCA is rarely an object of abstract theorizing. Rather in discussion of it is always, data, consisting of as close a record as possible of human interaction, is always at the foreground. Let us then have a look at a bit of spoken interaction to get sense of how membership categorization analysis works. The data come from a video recording of a group of university students engaged in a 'project group meeting' i.e. a group with the task of conducting a study and writing a report by the end of term. At our point of entry in the transcript, they are making a list of the tasks they have before them.

1. ERN: which days days [we have is it two or what]
2. LOU: [but this is my eat pasta ]week
3. ERN: "your what?"
4. LOU: "I have to eat pasta all week"
5. ERN: "why that"
6. PET: you gotta me kiddin me (.) you're not on one of those stupid diets are you?
7. LOU: uh no no no I'm must a I'm just er (.)
8. PET: you [broke]
9. ERN: [did you] lose a bet?
10. LOU: just broke
11. PET: yeah ha ha [ha HA HA HA gid]dy e giddy e giddy me:::
12. LOU: [that's my diet]
13. ERN: [(xx)]
14. PET: [which] brings us to another subject (1) shouldn't we arrange like to do something fun with each other again soon?
In line 1 ERN is asking which days a particular task is to take place. LOU begins a turn at line 2 where ERN's ongoing inquiry may finish, and in overlap with ERN notes a particular feature of the week which ERN's inquiry concerns, that it is her 'eat pasta week'. LOU succeeds in taking the turn as noted by the repair sequence which follows, and thus her contribution becomes the focus of continuing activity. LOU's contribution at line 2 is subjected to repair, initiated by ERN in line 3, to which LOU responds by reformulating her attribution of the week in question in line 4. This then is subjected to another repair initiation by ERN as to the reason for the attribution or why LOU has to eat pasta all that week. Thus we get the sense that whereas the first repair sequence, lines 3-4 may concern a mishearing of what LOU has said, the second, beginning at line 5 concerns rather how the 'eat pasta week' is to be coupled with LOU. In MCA terms we can say it like this: what sort of category is LOU a member of such that 'eat pasta week' is a proper predicate? What follows are three candidate accounts posed as inquiries for why LOU will have a 'pasta week'. The answer to this will depend on her reasons of having an 'eat pasta week'. PET inquires, in 'teasing' fashion at line 6 if she's on 'one of those stupid diets', PET inquires if LOU is broke and ERN inquires if LOU has lost a bet. LOU denies being on a diet at line 7, does not attend to the question of losing a bet, and answers affirmatively that she's 'just broke' in line 10. Thus LOU 'uncouples' a connection between herself and being on a diet at all, much less 'one of those stupid' ones. In doing so, we might say she resists being categorized as that 'type' of person, whatever that type might be worked out to be.

PET carries on in line 11, nonetheless, rejecting LOU's account of her pasta week as being a matter of being broke with what sounds like an ironic 'yeah', laughter tokens and by repeating part of his initial contribution at line 6. His 'giddy e' can be understood as 'kidding me'. LOU continues her turn in line 10, in overlap with with PET, with the clause in line 12 'that's my diet', which we can hear then as proposing that being broke is the only reason for her particular diet of the week. Thus her diet, as it were, should be understood simply as the food she is to eat that week, i.e. another sense of the word 'diet, and not a particular diet, i.e. one for losing weight. LOU has managed then to resist being heard as the type of person who would go on a 'stupid diet', as being an incumbent of a category with that possible predicate. Instead, she has managed to make herself out to be an incumbent to the category of people whose diets are adjusted to their, dire, economic situation. Using our member's knowledge of people like LOU, ERN and PET, the category of 'poor student' does not seem too far off.

Further reading
For a longer and more extensive overview of MCA, see Housley & Fitzgerald 2002. There has been some debate on the relationship between conversation analysis, with its focus on sequentiality, and MCA. Details concerning this can be found in Watson 1997, Wowk & Carlin 2004, Schegloff 2007. MCA has been particular salient in work on what is known as 'institutional interaction. For an overview of this research, see Drew & Heritage 1992. Finally, as for all things concerned with Ethnomethdology, Conversation Analysis and Membership Categorization Analysis, there is the invaluable recourse consisting of bibliographies, amongst other things, provided by Paul ten Have at http://www.paulten-have.nl/. 
References


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