Requesting and Rejecting in Algonquin: Notes on a Conversation

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Introduction

The analysis we develop in this paper\(^1\) began with some relatively casual observations on how people accomplish the activities of making requests and rejecting requests in two Algonquin communities: Winneway and Pikogan. Beginning with these initial categories we sought to discover structural features of request and rejection deliveries which might underlie them. The analytical work did not consist of developing a technical version of the lay characterizations with which we began. The initial categories we started with interested us in the data, but our analysis of the materials led us to considerations which we could not have entertained in the pre-analysis stage. If our analysis is to have any merit, we believe that the issues which it leads us to consider ought to be of interest beyond the domains of requesting and rejecting.

It seems that social interaction is, to a large extent, verbal interaction, and we believe that orderly features of talk can be located and described — not merely linguistic features but interactional features.

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The kind of analysis we are doing in this paper is called "conversational analysis". Conversational analysis attends to the analysis of social activities by attempting to show how every utterance in conversation has a social-organizational feature attached to it that other people can orient to. Since intentions, motives, and meaning get realized through a reliance on these social-organizational features, it seems reasonable to suggest that culture may be reflected through talk, even though this realization might not be recognized by the members of a community.

The work which has done the most in making talk into a topic for study has been that produced by Harvey Sacks and his students. Two major issues of a sociolinguistic nature have received attention from Sacks: (1) membership categories of speaker-hearers, in which the attempt is made to go beyond the surface analysis of talk by proposing a linkage between members' language categories and how people do description and accomplish activities; and (2) the sequential organization of conversation. According to Sacks, people are seen as using social knowledge and practical, common sense reasoning in three ways: (a) to recognize and make recognizable conversational utterances as possible instances of things like stories, jokes, complaints, etc.; (b) to accomplish conversational activities such as gaining a turn at speaking, closing a conversation, and so forth; and (c) to do a vast number of activities such as promising, criticizing, requesting, etc. The studies carried out by Sacks in the exploration of the orderliness of conversation suggest that the accomplished character of the organization of talk stands up to formal analysis. Sacks's earliest interest was concerned with the phenomenon of description. He claimed that in and through their talk people are continually describing their social world to one another. Anything and everything is describable: things people have done or want to do, events they have seen or not seen, attitudes, motivations, states of minds, feelings, etc. It would not be misleading, according to Sacks, to think of the social world as constituted by its ability to describe itself.

There seem to be two basic approaches to understanding culture which are reflected in the approaches taken by ethnomsemantics and ethnomethodology. The goal of ethnomethodology is essentially the.

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2Harold Garfinkel's initial policy statement (1967) was concerned with the study of members' methods of practical, common-sense reasoning. Ethnomethod-
same as ethnosemantics; that is, to explicate culture where culture is knowledge, “whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to a society’s members” (Eglin 1976). James Spradley (1979:5) defines culture as the “acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior” and it was by following this definition of culture that we initially attempted to base our cultural studies. Now, however, we tend to look at culture as a set of methods for doing things, and we take it that a person’s knowledge of his or her society is methodological rather than merely substantive, or “knowledge how” rather than merely “knowledge about”, and where the “how” is interpretational. The idea is not new and is not ours (cf. Garfinkel 1967; Eglin 1976; Turner 1976), but we are beginning to see the value of the view that people know their society as methods of interpreting its objects where those methods are cultural knowledge.

First, we want to focus on one conversational fragment, an exchange, which we believe helps to illuminate the differences between the two perspectives. The example is from Eglin (1976):

A: Do you want a coffee?
B: No thanks, I just ate.

From what we understand from reading Spradley (1979), there is a mistake here. That is, since coffee is not eaten but drunk, B should have said something like, “No thanks, I’m not thirsty”, or perhaps, “No thanks, I just had a cup”. The way B does answer, however, may lead one to believe that he has his semantic domains crossed. After all, in the category of “things to eat”, one is unlikely to ever elicit “coffee”. The problem is: a methodology for culture learning which leads to the conclusion that semantic domains are crossed fails to account for the acceptability of such an exchange. That is to say, B’s response was brought off without further remark, bemused looks, or a request for clarification. From an ethnosemantic perspective the analyst may have reason for constituting B’s response as a mistake, thus running the risk of standing in a corrective position to members’ talk. Also, an ethnosemantic treatment may overlook

ology makes the claim that members’ everyday activities are made recognizable and commonplace by virtue of the methods by which members produce and categorize these everyday activities and events. Roy Turner (1970:187), following Garfinkel, writes “Members provide for the recognition of ‘what they are doing’ by invoking culturally provided resources".
some interesting interactional structures embedded in the exchange. We paraphrase Eglin's (1976) more detailed explication as follows.

First, A makes an invitation in the form of a question. That B hears it as an invitation can be seen from B’s offering of an excuse in addition to his rejection of the offer. In declining an invitation, and we may consult our own members’ knowledge about this, it is common to try to avoid being rude. After all, one may wish to be invited again some time. Assuming that A’s utterance is not merely an offer for coffee but an invitation, we might ask: an invitation to what? One possibility is that it is an invitation to take a break, a social encounter which is typically signalled formally by drinking coffee, or some related activity. In this context, B’s utterance, “I just ate”, may be heard as saying that B has already taken a break (which may or may not have included coffee). In this way B provides acceptable grounds for turning down the invitation.

Now we can begin to see how the apparent conflict between the two semantic domains, “things to drink” and “things to eat”, may be resolved. The solution relates both domains to the social occasion rather than merely to semantic domains. That is, by examining a structure such as an invitation-rejection adjacency pair, we can bring off an acceptable exchange. Surely there are normative and conventional relations between utterance types such as to comprise an exchange and it ought to be the hearer’s task to discover them, just as it ought to be the questioner’s task to make them observable and recognizable. The task of the analyst, then, is to explicate and describe how people instruct each other to hear particular utterances in a certain way during the course of the utterance, and without having to come out and say so in so many words. The question becomes: how is the utterance “No thanks, I just ate” to be heard as an answer to a question that does the work of declining an invitation? Note that there are no syntactic or semantic resources for hearing B’s answer as a rejection to an invitation, and A does not supply an accompanying description to label it. It is hearable as a rejection to an invitation by virtue of its position after an utterance which is heard as an invitation. Because people commonly analyze their concerted interaction in its course as a condition of its very production, and in so doing exhibit that analysis for their own and others’ use, that achievement is analyzable by professional students of language and language use (anthropologists, linguists, sociologists, and so on).
Requesting as a Member’s Accomplishment

One of the more revealing methodologies for explicating and understanding culture is by considering the ways in which people make use of the location of a cultural particular — person, event, object, utterance — to decide upon what it means. By “location” we mean the positioning or placement of a cultural particular in a variety of contexts and settings, and it seems reasonable to think that the most accessible place to start is with sequential positioning in conversation. How so?

One of the projects we have taken on is concerned with trying to learn something about Algonquin culture by examining conversational fragments with an interest in discovering and describing how people do things in and through talk. The following conversation took place in the bush during the month of May, 1981:

A1: Adi e inigik tasotibaigan kidji mibizowan ooma?
   ‘How long does it take you to drive here?’
B1: Waiej pejigotibaigan acitc abita.
   ‘About an hour an a half’.
B2: Kin dac?
   ‘You then?’
A2: Waiej pejigotibaigan acitc abita
   ‘About an hour and a half’.
A3: Kitinata na ickwabitakijigan?
   ‘Do you have a lot to do this afternoon?’
B3: Panima niga mikidan nimigiwan acitc kidji kizisibadjigean ibwamaci tagwicig nikokomim
   ‘I have to clean up the house and do the laundry before my wife comes back’.
A4: Kikackiton na abidan kidji ipizowan ickwabitakijigag?
   ‘Can you make a trip for me this afternoon?’
B4: Ee, nikackiton.
   ‘Yes, I can’.

First, we take it that a question such as A1 may not merely be asking for information but may be a pre-request for a favour. B, however, hears and responds to A1 as a request for information. One question might be: how could A1 be sensibly answered? Aside from the fact that we hear B1 as an appropriate response, we have it available to ask: what kind of question is A1? Already we have noted that A1 is perhaps not what it first appears to be. It is not, after all, merely a request for information but the prelude to a request
for a favour, perhaps even the request for the favour itself. We can begin to see how even such an apparently simple thing as answering a question involves rather complex sense-making activity. The sense-making activity is not just confined to the hearer, either. The asker of the first question in this conversation, A, is also engaged in sense-making work in order to produce a question in such a way that the answer A wants can be produced. Thus A’s question, and B’s reply, makes available talk which is intended to be sensible to the other. The talk can thus be analyzed for the sense-making work which produced it. Now we might ask: how could the question be sensibly asked to produce the desired result?

From a non-Indian perspective, one might say: for A to skip utterances A1 through A3 and go immediately to A4. After all, in non-Indian society when one wants to request a favour one typically asks outright — for example, “Can you drive me to town?” The conversational fragment we are looking at, though, reminds us of a game. Viewed as a game, we have it available to see A1 as the first move in the game and B1 as the countermove. A1 evidently does not produce the desired result so A makes another move with another question (A3), “Kitinata na ickwabitakijigan?” (Are you busy this afternoon?). Surely a question such as A3 is easily capable of producing the desired result in non-Indian society. That is, although A1 can truly be misheard, A3 is much more pointed. It is hard to mishear a question such as A3. In non-Indian society, if someone asks you, “Are you busy this afternoon?” a non-Indian is likely, depending on the context, to hear such a question as a pre-request utterance. Likely one will answer, “Yee (or no), why do you ask?” and expect a request for a favour or perhaps an invitation. The fact that A3 was heard by B as another request for information rather than a pre-request for a favour takes some explaining.

Again the game analogy is useful. If we take A3 as A’s second move in the game, then B3 is another countermove. The object of the game is for A to get B to offer his services. If B offers his services without A having to ask directly, then A wins the game. If A has to ask directly for a favour, then B wins the game. So B3 is another successful countermove to A3 which eventually leads to B winning the game. In most situations (but not all), A would have taken an utterance such as B3 as a “no”. As it was, A was forced into direct asking, a dispreferred practice in Algonquin society (cf. Spielmann
It is at this point that we make the claim that the conversation being examined supports the view that culture is methodological. In non-Indian society, there does not seem to be such a negative stigma attached to directly asking someone to do something for you. In Algonquin society, there does seem to be a negative flavour related to direct asking. Although we can recall instances where the game is sometimes played in non-Indian interaction, it is common in Algonquin interaction. For another example, consider the following conversation which took place in English between two Algonquins, one a speaker and one a non-speaker.

A1: When are you leaving?
B1: Tonight
A2: Why don’t you stay at my sister’s tonight?
B2: Okay
A3: Jim wants a ride, too.

In this fragment we can see a similar structure. In utterance A1 a first move is made which does the work of a pre-request, the request itself coming in A2, “Why don’t you stay at my sister’s tonight?” That A2 is heard as a request for a ride the next day is evident from A3, “Jim wants a ride, too”, which immediately follows B’s willingness to stay at A’s sister’s house for the night. A generalizable feature of this fragment is that people making requests in Algonquin society can propose and recipients accept that a request is being made implicitly in the course of interaction. Note that no mention is made in the conversation to rides or getting a ride until the request has already been made by A and accepted by B.

The domain of topic in conversation seems to be organized by procedures that work to ensure that topics flow into one another, and certainly this feature of conversation can be seen in the above transcript. Topical maintenance and shift appear to be extremely complex matters in conversation and many interactional accomplishments of activities are implicated in the management of topic. If, for example, we were to examine utterances A1 through B2 without taking into consideration utterance A3, certainly our analysis of the topic of the conversation would be quite deficient. As it is, we have it available to see that the topic of the conversation is not, after all, about where B is to spend the night but whether or not B is willing to give A a ride the next day.
Rejection Techniques and Actions Chains

Another issue in the analysis we are developing relates to rejection. Going back to the original conversation which took place in the bush in May, 1981, we take it that B used some typical evasion devices which point to a way of indicating rejection, or of trying to say “no” without having to come out and say it directly, thus risking the possibility of A losing face (cf. Spielmann 1985). A typical Algonquin way of indicating rejection is exemplified by the following conversation.

A: Kitinata na?
   ‘Are you busy?’
B: Adi wi iijaian?
   ‘Where do you want to go?’
A: Odenag niwi ija.
   ‘I want to go to town.’
B: Nitcagimidewiakizonan nidodaban.
   ‘My car’s out of gas.’
A: Manodj.
   ‘Never mind.’

In examining request responses in Algonquin we encounter instances where the response provides for the possibility of conversational trouble, where actual performances are discrepant from preferred performances. By a preferred performance we mean that when someone requests a favour the preferred response is acceptance. The concept of “preference organization” was designed to describe the characteristic differences which occur in the ways speakers accomplish alternative actions, for example accepting/refusing an invitation. The term “preference” does not refer to the personal desires of the individual speakers, but rather to structural features of a turn at speaking and sequence structures in which alternative actions are routinely packaged. We use the terms “preferred” and “dispreferred”, then, to refer to (1) the seeking/avoidance of alternative courses of action which are (2) reflected in characteristic features in the design of the actions involved. Preference research has shown that for a variety of first actions, such as requests, dispreferred second actions are routinely avoided or delayed. Preferred actions, on the other hand, are usually performed directly with little or no delay.

Returning to the conversation above, the role of preference organization in relation to making requests appears to be quite strongly
associated with the avoidance of threats to face and the avoidance of the possibility of outright rejection (the concepts of “face” and “face-work” are discussed later in the paper). As Pomerantz (1978) has demonstrated, speakers may revise their utterances-in-progress so as to forestall anticipated rejections. One forestalling device is a pre-sequence utterance such as A asking, “Kitinata na?” (Are you busy?). A’s utterance acts as a ground-clearing device directed at establishing the appropriateness of A’s subsequent action of making a request. In such a case, the possible rejection of the request coming from A may be avoided by the recipient’s indication that the activity is not possible. As it turned out in the situation, about half an hour later B hopped in his car, which was allegedly out of gas, and drove to town. It seems, then, that one typical way of avoiding saying “no” to a request in Algonquin is by playing the game by offering an excuse, legitimate or not, for not being able to grant the request.

Upon the completion of a request utterance a slot opens up for a response utterance. That is, a request provides the occasion for a response. Further, responses to requests may be coordinated with an already existing structure in the conversational analysis literature. One kind of structure which connects request responses with a request itself is what Anita Pomerantz (1978) has termed “chained actions”. She characterizes an “action chain” as a type of organization in which two related actions, Action 1 and Action 2, are linked such that the performing of Action 1 provides for the possibility of the performance of Action 2 as an appropriate next action (hereafter referred to as A1 and A2). Using Pomerantz’s example from compliments and compliment responses we can begin to see how these action chains work. One kind of action chain for compliments is:

A1: A compliments B
A2: B accepts/rejects the compliment

another being:

A1: A compliments B
A2: B agrees/disagrees with the compliment

With an action chain, then, the second pair-part is not obligatory but optional. In the example above we can see that there are two things happening simultaneously; (1) the response slot is being filled, and (2) it is being filled with an A2. In the example above the action chain consists of:
A1: A requests a service from B
A2: B turns down the request

We may now formulate the interactional problems as follows: how does someone who receives a request for a favour in Algonquin society orient to the request so as to transform the results of that orientation into a preferred response? With the formulation of the problem arise at least two related problems, one for the request recipient and one for the person making the request. The recipient's problem has to do with sustaining and protecting the current interaction with a preferred response. The person making the request seeks to avoid giving occasion for a dispreferred response. Our specific concern in this paper is with the preferred response when indicating rejecting.

It seems that, in Algonquin, upon receipt of a request the recipient who wants or has to offer a rejection still has options available. One of those options we can locate in our materials shows the recipient offering a rejection notice which informs the person making the request of an intent to reject in the recipient's next turn of talk. The person making the request, so informed, ought to do some work in order to provide grounds for the recipient to terminate the rejection action in next turn. Note this three-part structure in the above conversation.

A2: Odenag niwi ija.
   'I want to go to town'.
B2: Nitcagimidewiakizonan nidodaban'.
   'My car's out of gas'.
A3: Manodj.
   'Never mind'.

In this fragment we have an instance of the request being made (A2) and the request recipient utilizing a rejection notice (B2) followed by the person making the request backing off and aborting the rejection operation (A3). The preferred action sequence for the rejection operation is:

1) Request
2) Notice of intent to reject
3) Termination of request

Technically this sequence can be described as containing two actions beyond the initial request; the rejection notice (2) and the termination of the request (3). Certainly in Algonquin society face-to-face interaction is constructed in such a way as to make requesting
favours prone to the kind of trouble considered in this paper. That is, it seems that the generation of requests in ongoing conversation will, at times, give rise to the need for a concerted effort between the person making the request and the request recipient in order to sustain and protect ongoing interaction. The following examples follow this same pattern of the request recipient using a rejection notice utterance.

A1: Odaian na conian kikokomim?
    'Does your wife have any money?'
B1: Adidok.
    'I don't know.'
A2: Manodj.
    'Never mind.'

and,

A1: Kigagi ijiwijinan na?
    'Can you take me somewhere?'
B1: Nikitci tatakadenan.
    'It would really put a strain on me.'
A1: Kawin nigod.
    'Okay.'

Of course, the person making the request has the option of pursuing the matter until a direct “yes” or “no” is obtained. This option, however, seems rare in Algonquin interaction.\(^3\)

Now we can begin to get an idea of how a rejection to a request works in Algonquin, how it is displayed in everyday talk and how it gives rise to other utterance classes. That is, we want to be able to make a claim about some feature of interaction that works apart from

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\(^3\)For example, consider the following.

A1: Do you have ten dollars?
B1: I only have enough for the weekend.
A2: I need ten dollars.
B2: I only have enough for myself.
A3: Just ten dollars.
B3: Okay.

The person who recounted this conversation, B, went on to tell us how uncomfortable he was that he was directly asked three times for money. His method of saying “no” in B1 and B2 was ignored and he told us, “I just had to lend him the money but he made me feel bad.” Such examples, though rare, seem to support the claim that direct and persistent asking is a dispreferred practice in Algonquin culture.
the materials we got it from. Earlier we referred to the conversation where B says, “My car's out of gas” as containing a technique for indicating rejection indirectly, which does the work of sustaining and protecting the current interaction and which avoids the possibility of conversationalists losing face. The concepts of “face” and “face-work” are most likely common to every culture, yet the ways in which face is perceived, sustained and protected are certainly different in every culture. Erving Goffman was perhaps the first to describe face-work as the actions taken by a person to maintain his or her image by avoiding or correcting situations which threaten the face that a person wants to project. Goffman claims that face-work is an essential force holding interaction together and he talks about a person having two points of view; (1) a defensive orientation toward saving one's own face, and (2) a protective orientation toward saving the others' face. He writes:

Some conversational practices will be primarily defensive and others primarily protective, although in general one may expect these two perspectives to be taken at the same time. In trying to save the face of others, the person must choose a tack that will not lead to loss of his own . . . and, he must consider the loss of face that his actions may entail for others. (1967:14)

With Goffman’s comments in mind, we can begin to see how a direct rejection of a request in Algonquin culture may be considered a dispreferred response. In Algonquin culture it seems that direct rejection may lead to loss of face and possible interactional trouble. Thus, culture-specific techniques are available to avoid such a possibility, techniques which can be located and described by analyzing conversational transcripts. Other cultural features play a part in the development of preferred techniques in Algonquin culture, and we describe these techniques more fully in another paper we are working on. In general terms, then, the preferred procedure for indicating rejection in Algonquin culture has to do with providing excuses and avoiding direct rejection. The dispreferred procedure relates to direct rejection with the possible loss of face.

Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to apply some principles from conversational analysis to Algonquin conversation with an interest in
furthering our knowledge of Algonquin culture. We are claiming that by examining how people go about doing something in and through talk we may be able to better understand this thing we call culture. In this paper we have drawn a lot from some very simple conversational fragments. It seems reasonable to suggest that more complex fragments could yield more complex ways of doing things and that one profitable way of viewing culture is that members’ knowledge is methodological, or “knowledge how”, where the “how” is interpretational. We leave the final comment to Eglin (1976).

People know their society as methods of interpreting its objects, where those methods are language games, such as conversation, and their settings. Insofar as such methodological games comprise typical reasons, motives and intentions, . . . then far from being mental events, properties, or states, these are instead interactional through and through. (1976:16)

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