

■ *Charles Goodwin*

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

A Competent Speaker Who Can't Speak: The Social Life of Aphasia

Web-enhanced article

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This article examines how a man able to speak only three words because of a severe stroke is nonetheless able to act as a competent speaker, indeed position himself as the teller of a complex story, by linking his limited talk and embodied action to the talk and action of others. This suggests a view of what it means to be a speaker that does not take as its point of departure the mental life and symbolic competence of the individual, but instead focuses on the practices required to participate in the public processes of sign exchange that constitute talk as a primordial site for human social life.¹ [Talk in interaction, aphasia, embodiment, narrative, gesture]

Sitting at the core of almost all theories about human language ability, the moral ability to form social contracts, and social action in general is what Martha Nussbaum refers to as "the fiction of competent adulthood" (2001)—that is, an actor, such as the prototypical competent speaker, fully endowed with all abilities required to engage in the processes under study. Such assumptions both marginalize the theoretical relevance of any actors who enter the scene with profound disabilities and reaffirm the basic Western prejudice toward locating theoretically interesting linguistic, cultural, and moral phenomena within a framework that has the cognitive life of the individual as its primary focus. This article examines how Chil, a man able to speak only three words because of a severe stroke, is nonetheless able to position himself as a competent person, indeed a powerful actor, by linking his limited talk to the talk and action of others. He can produce complex statements by leading others to speak the words that he not only needs, but for which he claims authorship. By thus building in concert with others the events that constitute his lifeworld, Chil situates himself as a competent speaker capable of finely coordinated action. Only when the unit of analysis expands beyond the grammatical abilities of the individual to encompass multiparty sequences of talk and embodied action can his ability to act as a speaker be theorized.

In 1979, Chil, a 65-year-old successful New York lawyer—a man who made his living through his ability to use language—suffered a massive stroke in the left hemisphere of his brain. The right side of his body was paralyzed and he suffered severe aphasia, losing almost completely the ability to produce meaningful language. After intensive

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therapy his entire vocabulary consisted of three words: *yes*, *no*, and *and*. For years after the stroke, his wife would dream that he was again able to talk to her. But thirteen years later, in 1992, when the interaction that will be examined here was recorded, these were still the only three words that Chil, then 78, could speak.

Chil did, however, have a wider communicative repertoire than this limited vocabulary would indicate. First, his ability to understand what others were saying, though not perfect, was excellent. Second, he was able to use prosody to display both affect and a range of subtly differentiated stances toward talk and other events. Prosody can be used both linguistically and to display emotion and stance (Schirmer et al. 2001). Despite his inability to speak, Chil was able to use prosody to make visible, recognizable linguistic units. For example, he could display prosodically that he was constructing a list, despite his inability to put any semantic content in the list (relevant content could typically be inferred from the talk and activity that surrounded Chil's utterance). People watching him on tape frequently claim that they can infer a specific sentence he is trying to express from his prosody (I am not certain of this myself, but offer it as a possibility since it has been independently noted by a number of different listeners). Frequently, he used strings of semantically meaningless "nonsense" syllables, such as *Duh dih duh*, as carriers for intonational tunes that could express positive and negative assessment, stance and affect of various types, and so on. Moreover, by producing single words or strings of his three words—for example, *No no no*—with varying prosody, he could use his limited vocabulary to create a range of quite different actions with varying meaning (e.g., a three-unit *No no no* was systematically different from a single *No*). Indeed, when the unit being analyzed includes both his words and their intonation, it would be accurate to say that his vocabulary was in fact larger than the written versions of his semantic repertoire would indicate.

Third, attention has recently been drawn to how "the spared or heightened emotional abilities of aphasic [speakers] may play a facilitatory role in the comprehension and production of communication in language-impaired people" (Lorch et al. 1998), and this was certainly true for Chil. He displayed emotion through both prosody and embodied displays. His visible emotion frequently led to consequential changes in the actions of his interlocutors. For example, when their attempts to figure out what he might be trying to say led them down an inappropriate path, a display of frustration by him could lead to a relevant frame shift in their questioning (Goodwin 1995).

Fourth, Chil was able to gesture. Since he was paralyzed on one side, the gestures he could produce were more limited than those of fluent speakers. They were nonetheless quite extensive and capable of being timed and placed with fine precision relevant to his own and others' talk (Goodwin 2003a). For Chil, as for many others suffering from aphasia (Fex and Mansson 1998; Klippi 2003; Wilkinson et al. 2003), gesture constituted a significant communicative resource. In addition to pointing, he could produce handshapes for numbers, and indeed this effectively increased his vocabulary, for such numbers never appeared in his speech. When faced with the task of trying to saying something, Chil could sometimes be seen to work to transform what he wanted to say into something that could be indicated through numbers (Goodwin 2003a). He thus demonstrated both clear awareness of the strengths and limits of his semiotic repertoire, and a creative restructuring of tasks in order to produce relevant action with his limited resources. Fifth, Chil lived and acted within a social and material environment that could be invoked in many different ways to convey to others something that he wanted to say or do.

A person able to speak only three words might seem an atypical, marginal figure for the study of human language, a defective actor who can be easily ignored without theoretical loss. Indeed, this is rather explicitly argued in contemporary formal linguistics, where all relevant linguistic activity is lodged within the idealized speaker, an entity able to construct the complex symbolic structures that constitute the grammatical sentences of a language (Chomsky 1965). From this perspective, someone like Chil who is not able to accomplish this task does not count as a proper speaker. Such a view of the speaker has enormous theoretical and methodological

consequences. To begin with, all phenomena of interest are located in a particular place: the mental life of the speaker. It is here that the psychological and neurological structures necessary for linguistic competence are to be found. In addition, as indicated by Chomsky's (1965) hyphenated "speaker-hearer," the hearer is simply a mirror image of the speaker, an entity defined in her entirety by possession of the requisite mental abilities to decode the sentences produced by the speaker. Other meaning-making practices that constitute the hearer as a consequential actor in the production of talk, such as embodied signs for displaying orientation toward the speaker (Goodwin 1981), are irrelevant and absent from the geography of cognition put in place by the notion of an ideal speaker-hearer. Moreover, language structure is the only sign system accorded analytic interest, and the primary unit of analysis is the well-formed sentence. This focus treats as uninteresting Chil's far more limited talk, as well as structures that do not fall within the boundaries of the sentence, most crucially the way in which an individual speaker's talk is shaped as meaningful through its placement within larger sequences of action (Sacks 1995; Sacks et al. 1974; Schegloff 1986). As will be seen shortly such multiparty structures are central to Chil's ability to act as a speaker.

It might be argued that scholars interested in language as a social phenomenon transcend such limitations. Consider, however, how Vološinov (1973) theorized dialogue in a work that occupies a central place in the Bakhtinian canon and that has constituted the point of departure for much important work within linguistic anthropology on reported speech and the dialogic organization of culture. In direct opposition to Saussure (1959), and with a critique that would apply as well to contemporary formal linguistics, the first half of Vološinov's work argued strongly and powerfully for the central importance of dialogue and the actual utterance as the primordial site for the analysis of human language: "The real unit of language that is implemented in speech . . . is not the individual monologic utterance, but the interaction of at least two utterances — in a word dialogue" (Vološinov 1973:117). However, Vološinov then immediately transformed dialogue, an intrinsically multiparty activity, into a phenomenon that should properly be studied within the mental life and consciousness of the individual speaker: "How, in fact, is another speaker's speech received? What is the mode of existence of another's utterance in the actual, inner-speech consciousness of the recipient? How is it manipulated there?" (Vološinov 1973:117). Indeed, Vološinov argued explicitly that the dialogic organization he was interested in was fundamentally different from mundane dialogue, that is, sequences of talk by different speakers: "[T]his phenomenon is distinctly and fundamentally different from dialogue. In dialogue, the lines of the individual participants are grammatically disconnected; they are not integrated into one unified context. Indeed, how could they be? There are no syntactic forms with which to build a unity of dialogue" (Vološinov 1973:116).

Vološinov's solution to the problem of how to study dialogue within the mental life of the individual was the analysis of reported speech. He thus drew attention to a most interesting phenomenon that has subsequently been the subject of important lines of research by linguistic anthropologists and others (see, for example, Lucy 1993). However, by framing the focal phenomena of interest in this way, Vološinov domesticated his radical critique of existing linguistics, something that seemed to call for investigating language in the actual lived interstices of human social life, into a research program that remained focused on both the individual speaker/author and on the written versions of language. These two foci traditionally formed the primary data both for the linguistic program he was so vigorously opposing and for literary criticism (Bakhtin's own specialty).

Vološinov's analysis of the dialogic organization of language requires a speaker with rich language structure. Chil, with his three-word vocabulary, could not produce the syntactic structures required to portray one speaker quoting the talk of another. Despite its emphasis on dialogue and the intrinsically social nature of language, Vološinov's framework offers no more analytic resources for describing how

Chil might be able to function as a competent, effective speaker than does Chomsky's ideal speaker-hearer.

Despite their strong opposition to each other, both formal linguistics and the dialogic framework offered by Vološinov share a number of crucial assumptions. First, both assume that in order to be a speaker, an actor must have the ability to produce complex linguistic structures—for example, a variety of well-formed grammatical sentences. Second, both frameworks place particular importance on linguistic processes situated within the mental life of the individual. For Vološinov, dialogue can be systematically studied only via a single speaker who is quoting the talk of another (or via the single author of a literary text). Third, both frameworks are profoundly logocentric: they focus exclusively on language. No other sign systems or meaning-making practices are given any attention whatsoever. However, constituting the identity relationship that sits at the heart of human language—the mutual orientation of speaker and hearer—may well require sign systems beyond language itself, and indeed we will see that embodied displays are particularly important for Chil. Finally, in large part as a result of this logocentricism, in both fields data typically takes the form of written versions of language.

Describing how Chil is able to act as a speaker and make meaning by tying his limited talk to the more elaborate talk of others enables us to look at how and where language is organized within a different analytic framework, one that focuses not on processes within the individual or on structure within the talk of a single speaker or narrator, but instead on how language is organized as a public sign system. By virtue of this public organization, multiple actors can use the structure of the talk emerging in their midst to build action in concert with one another (something well demonstrated by the extensive research on the sequential organization of talk-in-interaction; e.g., Sacks 1995; Sacks et al. 1974). By participating in this interactive field, parties with very different resources and abilities (Chil providing an extreme example) are nonetheless able to use language, including grammatical structures that are beyond their capacities as individuals to create, to build relevant action. Moreover, within such an interactive field, language typically does not stand alone but instead is used in conjunction with other semiotic resources, including most crucially a range of quite different kinds of displays visible in the orientation and action of the participants' bodies, as well as structures in their environment.

Resources other than talk are central to Chil's ability to act as a consequential speaker, but this is not unusual. Except in cases where contact between the participants is restricted to talk alone (phone calls, for example) the prototypical locus for human language use is in the midst of an ecology of meaning-making practices in which quite different kinds of sign systems build action through the way in which they mutually elaborate one another (Goodwin 2000b). Language does not stand alone as an isolated, self-contained system. Thus, the hearer participates in the construction of an utterance through embodied displays rather than talk (Goodwin 1981).

The intrinsic multimodality of human language use raises important theoretical and methodological issues for linguistic anthropology and related fields. If the data record offered for analysis contains only a transcript of the participants' talk, crucial features of the practices they use to build action, along with a semiotic environment that is quite consequential for the organization of the talk in progress, are rendered invisible. Chil's situation forces us to confront such issues.

The investigation of Chil's language use and communicative practices is relevant to and builds from a growing body of research in a number of different fields on the linguistic and social consequences of injury to the brain. A very important line of research, extending at least as far back as Paul Broca's work in the 1860s, has used aphasia to try to discover how the brain processes language and to describe the great variety of language-related impairments that result from damage to the brain (see, for example, Goodglass 1993; Menn and Obler 1989). Of necessity, most of this research investigates individuals with aphasia under carefully controlled experimental conditions. It has long been recognized, however that the severity of language loss does not

in fact correlate well with the ability to communicate and function in the world. As noted by Audrey Holland (1982), aphasics communicate far better than they speak (see also Avent et al. 1998; Meuse and Marquardt 1985). This has led to a range of research on the pragmatic organization of aphasic communication (for example, Avent et al. 1998; Bloom and Obler 1998; Dronkers et al. 1998), including a double issue of the *Journal of Neurolinguistics* devoted to the topic (Paradis 1998); and neurolinguistic research on the importance of phenomena such as gesture (Fex and Mansson 1998), emotion (Lorch et al. 1998) and prosody (Schirmer et al. 2001) has also emerged.

However, while the crucial importance of pragmatics is recognized in this line of work, it has been noted that "there is no widespread use of pragmatic assessment in the management of aphasia" (Avent et al. 1998:209). This gap has led to efforts to develop clinical tools for assessing pragmatic competence (Ramsberger and Menn 2003). Such research has also demonstrated the importance of moving analytic focus beyond the individual:

[A]ssessment of communication in aphasia is incomplete without a consideration of the effects of the conversational partner and setting. . . . [I]ntervention directed at partner behaviour is as important as any remediation targeting the underlying impairments. Indeed, . . . it is only in live communicative settings that one can accurately gauge which formal impairments have the greatest consequences for mutual (mis)understanding. [Springer et al. 1998:237]

Similarly, Oelschlaeger and Damico (2003:211) note that "within the discipline of clinical aphasiology, we are becoming progressively aware of the need to study the communicative ability of persons with aphasia in authentic conversational settings." However, a relevant setting in fact includes a number of quite different components, which vary from study to study. Most frequently such a setting includes the partner of the aphasic individual, sometimes talking with a therapist and sometimes alone together. Many of these conversations take place in the clinic, but some studies (including the present one) follow Holland's (1982:50) suggestion that "pertinent information about aphasic communication can be gathered by observing a subject's everyday interactions in the home environment." In addition to participants and setting, a most crucial feature of the environment that forms the context for human communication is the structure of the discourse that occurs there. For example, many clinical assessments are structured to maximize extended turns at talk by the patient while minimizing the contributions of the therapist or interviewer. This is done to obtain as large a sample of talk by the patient as possible, with as little interference as possible from others (for example, by having the patient describe a picture). However, if the patient's capacity to construct relevant meaning depends upon the ability to work in concert with his or her interlocutors, as in Chil's case, then such extended talk by a single individual does not adequately demonstrate his or her communicative competence. If instead, discourse is structured with a systematic exchange of turns in which both patient and interviewer make substantive contributions that build upon the talk of others—for example, more like mundane conversation, and in another sense like Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, in which a party goes beyond his or her abilities as an individual by using resources provided by others—then a wider range of the aphasic speaker's pragmatic abilities can reveal themselves. Discourse can be structured in this fashion in a clinical setting with very powerful results (see, for example, Wilkinson et al. 2003) and incorporated into assessment instruments (Ramsberger and Menn 2003). In brief, although context is crucially important for revealing or rendering invisible the pragmatic abilities of someone with aphasia, that context encompasses a range of quite different kinds of phenomena (Goodwin 2000b; Goodwin and Duranti 1992), including setting, participants, and discourse structure, which interact with one another in complicated ways. There is no single ideal context, and relevant data can be obtained in many different places. Yet, the way in which discourse is organized and the forms of interaction that different kinds of organization make possible for participants appear to be of central importance.

Discourse organization is relevant in other ways as well. In recent years there have been a number of extended studies of the communicative abilities and discourse organization of Alzheimer's patients (see, for example, Blonder et al. 1994; Hamilton 1994; Ramanathan 1997). The discourse orientation of this research, frequently in the settings where the patients actually live their lives, is most relevant to the present study. Alzheimer's disease, with its catastrophic memory loss, is very different from aphasia. As Tony Wootton (1997) notes, loss of short-term memory has disastrous consequences for the flexible local organization of talk and action that is central to the sequential organization of conversation. In contrast to research on aphasia, which consistently finds surprising pragmatic competence despite severe language loss, Lee Blonder and her colleagues report that Alzheimer's patients experience "deterioration in communicative competence" (Blonder et al. 1994:50). The distinctive memory problems that characterize Alzheimer's disease seriously impair precisely the resources that Chil uses to make meaning despite his aphasia; that is, the ability to tie to the local talk of others with precision and detail. I have found the conversations with people suffering from Alzheimer's to be radically different from interaction with Chil, and far more difficult to participate in. Indeed, his daughter pointed out that rather than declining with age, Chil's memory actually got better after his stroke because, if he wanted to say something new, he had to hold it in his mind until local interactive events emerged that provided him with a point of departure for invoking the new topic.

Consistent with the central importance of discourse organization, a developing line of research that is most relevant to the current analysis uses the findings of contemporary work on the study of talk-in-interaction as a point of departure for investigating aphasic discourse (Halkowski 1999; Perkins 1995; Wilkinson 1999a). In recent years a number of volumes exemplifying this approach have appeared (Goodwin 2003c; Lesser and Milroy 1993; Wilkinson 1999b). For example, the analysis of repair, including word searches, in conversation (Goodwin and Goodwin 1986; Schegloff et al. 1977) has proved a fruitful point of departure for the study of the pervasive issues of word finding and negotiating mutual understanding in discourse in which one participant has impaired linguistic resources (Anward 2003; Laakso 2003; Oelschlaeger 1999; Oelschlaeger and Damico 2003; Perkins 2003). The analysis of aphasia in discourse can be seen to stand as a quite separate line of inquiry from research that uses aphasia to investigate the neurological organization of language in the brain. However, a number of scholars have used findings from the study of aphasia in discourse to suggest that there may not be a simple mapping between brain structure and output, but that instead visible deficits in language structure constitute converging solutions to the task of building meaning and action in discourse with limited linguistic resources (Heeschen and Schegloff 1999, 2003; Wilkinson, Beeke and Maxim 2003). It is thus possible that the two fields can mutually inform each other. This focus on how language structure is used to build consequential social action through systematic interactive practices contributes as well to linguistic anthropology's concern with the mutual organization of language and situated social life.

Data and Background

Chil was a close family member of mine. From the time of his stroke in 1979 until his death in 2000, I visited him several times a year. Right from the time of his stroke, I recognized that his ability to understand what others were saying and to respond in sequentially relevant positions demonstrated communicative abilities that were beyond those described by his doctors (one of whom predicted that he would spend the rest of his life essentially as a vegetable). I was aware that my own interest in how talk and action are shaped through processes of multiparty interaction provided analytic resources that could shed light on how someone with severe aphasia could nonetheless function as a powerful speaker in situated talk-in-interaction. However,

until 1992, thirteen years after his stroke, I made no effort to record his interaction with others.

I began recording at that time for two reasons. First, my own experiences of working with Chil to accomplish relevant action with him convinced me that his situation could shed new and important light on basic practices central to the organization of talk-in-interaction in general. Second, I believed that documenting what he was able to accomplish might help to change the way in which people with severe brain damage and impaired language abilities are frequently stigmatized as cognitively impaired, less-than-normal human beings. For this reason, I find it important to play videotapes of him interacting with others when I give talks about this research. A description of someone whose entire vocabulary is three words can lead readers or an audience to expect someone with very severe cognitive impairments. Watching Chil interact (which unfortunately is not possible in a printed article) quickly and dramatically demonstrates this to be false. Given the great number of people who suffer strokes every year, I believe that challenging the taken-for-granted stereotypes of such people is an important task. Chil also felt this to be important and wanted the videotapes of him to be used in this way.

I recorded approximately 210 hours of interaction in which Chil was a participant. None of these recordings were in clinical environments; all were made in the actual settings where Chil lived his life. Most took place in his home, although a few were in settings such as stores where Chil was shopping. Many of the recordings in the home were made in the kitchen and dining room, where meals were prepared and eaten and people talked before going out for the day. A substantial number of recordings were also made in Chil's living room while he was watching television and talking with others, and in his bedroom as he got up for the day (a substantial task because of his paralysis), washed, and later went to bed. A few were also made in his backyard. Analysis of various aspects of Chil's interaction have appeared in a number of publications (Goodwin 1995, 2000a, 2003a; Goodwin and Goodwin 2001; Goodwin et al. 2002). The sequence to be examined here occurred in his kitchen as a meal was ending. I frequently interacted with Chil, and my experience of working with him to figure out what he wanted to say and do deeply informs my interest in explicating the practices he used to make himself understood to and with others.

It is difficult, indeed probably impossible, to provide a definitive diagnosis of Chil's condition. The term *aphasia* describes a loss of language function resulting from injury to the brain. Chil's stroke, with its characteristic loss of speaking ability but preservation of considerable comprehension, almost certainly affected Broca's area, the region of the brain that is thought to govern speech production. There is, however, a great deal of variation in the nature of the damage done to individuals and in the language deficits that result from injury to the brain. In 1980 (approximately a year after his stroke), the rehabilitation clinic Chil lived in for several months offered the following initial diagnosis: "Severe expressive and moderate receptive aphasia, moderate dysarthria [difficulty in articulating words caused by impairment of the muscles used in speech] and verbal apraxia [difficulty in executing volitional movements implicated in the production of speech]." It was further stated that "the patient is unable to produce any intelligible speech. . . . When asked to answer simple questions, he often responded appropriately with a gesture, but was unable to provide a verbal response." His discharge evaluation in January 1981 stated that he had

made limited improvement in all areas of language function. . . . [His] receptive language skill remained moderately impaired. . . . Responses to simple yes/no questions remain correct 70 percent of the time. . . . He appears to comprehend most simple conversation; however, as the message becomes more complex, auditory comprehension disintegrates. [He] continues to have difficulty following complex commands, reflecting both auditory comprehension deficits and limb apraxia. . . . Spontaneous and expressive speech remains unintelligible. . . . Dysarthria and apraxia appear to be the most evident debilitating

factor. . . . Reading comprehension is inconsistent depending upon the task. . . . Reading a paragraph remains impossible.

Nevertheless, a speech therapist familiar with videotapes of Chil said recently that “there seems to be significant discrepancy between Chil’s communicative skills on the video and his status described in the discharge summary” (Jeanne Katzman, personal communication, May 15, 2004). In her opinion, his excellent prosody, including what appeared to be linguistic prosody, and good ability to gesture indicated a less severe aphasia, with verbal apraxia perhaps being a very important factor in his extremely limited ability to speak.

Telling a Story While Unable to Speak

This article focuses on a story told by Chil about events that happened in his family 50 years earlier. A hallmark of, and indeed prerequisite to, narrative would seem to lie in the ability to produce utterances with rich language, such as the grammatical resources required to report the speech of others (Vološinov 1973) and to construct the complex, stance-taking, laminated speakers brought to our attention by Erving Goffman’s (1981) deconstruction of the speaker into multiple structurally different kinds of players, such as animator, figure, author, and so on, all simultaneously inhabiting a single strip of talk. With his three-word vocabulary and almost complete absence of syntax, Chil clearly lacks such resources and would thus seem unable to be a competent and effective storyteller. In a very real sense, he would seem to be a defective speaker. His limited linguistic production would seem to represent him as someone unable to occupy crucial social positions constituted through talk, such as storyteller or consequential participant in a speech event. Insofar as the ability to use language is central to what it means to be a human being, Chil could be seen as a defective person, someone who lacks some of the most central competencies necessary to be considered a full-fledged social and linguistic actor. And, indeed, in our society people with aphasia are frequently treated as marginal, less-than-complete persons. However, when the unit of analysis moves beyond the individual to participation in speech events in which language is organized as a public sign system, a very different picture of Chil’s abilities, competence, and social position emerges.

The events that are examined were recorded on June 30, 1992. Chil and his wife Helen are having lunch in their kitchen with his son Scott and his wife Linda. When Helen and Chil were first married, they lived in California, and Scott was born there in 1943. Very shortly after their son’s birth, Helen and Chil moved east and spent the rest of their lives near New York City. On the morning when this interaction occurs, the newspaper has reported that a large earthquake occurred in California and this leads to talk about earthquakes. Chil’s story will eventually focus on another earthquake and the danger posed by a wobbling picture over the crib where Scott, then an infant, was sleeping almost half a century earlier. The sequence to be examined begins when Linda asks Chil if he has ever “been in a big earthquake?” (line 1 in Figure 2). In response, Helen produces a first story (which will not be examined here) describing how she looked at an apartment building swaying across the street from her. This is followed by Chil’s story about the picture over the crib.

Locating Chil’s Story

Since Chil cannot speak, he faces a formidable task in precisely locating and shaping as a public telling a single event that happened almost 50 years in the past. How does he do this? Just after Helen finishes the first earthquake story, Chil turns to her and produces an utterance (line 32 in Figure 1) that is hearable through its prosody as requesting something from her. Then in lines 34–38 he produces a series of gestures:³

With the benefit of hindsight, the gestures Chil makes after his initial point can be seen as indicating something over someone’s head (the second image in Figure 1),

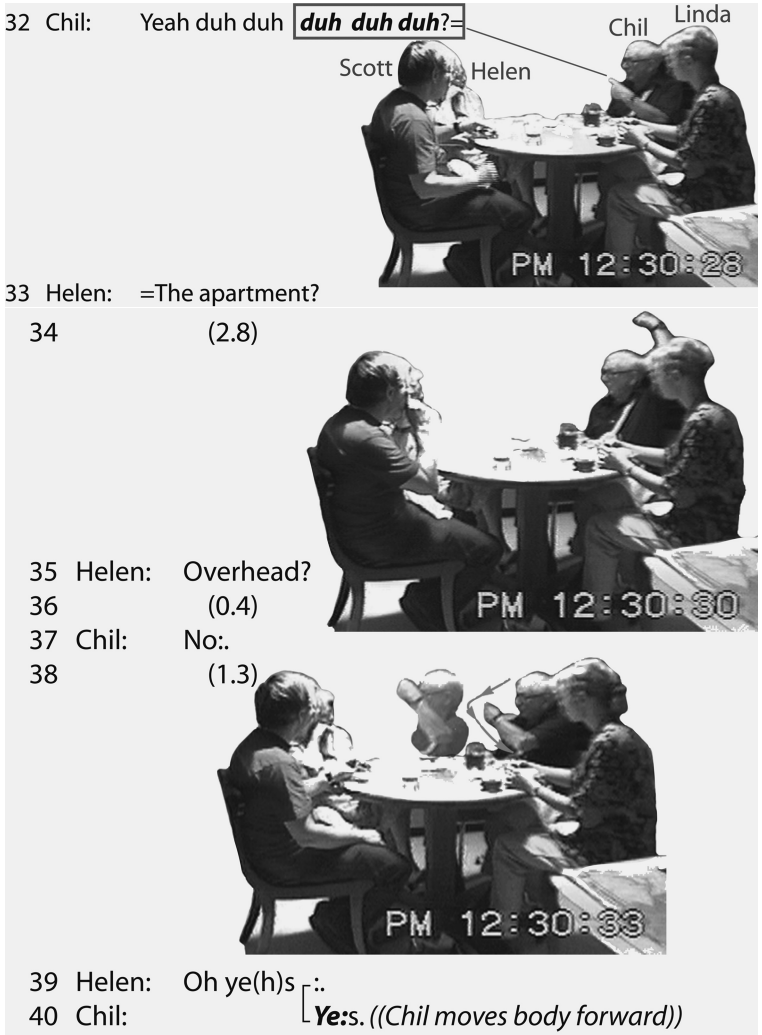


Figure 1
Invoking the story through gesture.

probably followed by an enactment of a picture frame. Indeed, it would seem to be recognition of something like this that enables Helen to locate the story about the dangerous picture over the baby's head, which she then tells. Analytically, the issue is not to find an accurate gloss for Chil's gesture, but instead to describe the practices used by the participants to make sense out of his hand movement so that they can build in concert with one another relevant subsequent action, such as the story that eventually gets told.

Since Chil's vocabulary is so limited, gesture provides him with a major resource for communicating with others, and his use of gesture has a quite distinctive organization. Overwhelmingly in human interaction, hearers have little difficulty finding a relevant sense for a gesture, and do not interrupt the speaker to ask what the gesture means. When Chil produces a gesture, however, his interlocutors almost always act as if they have been faced with a puzzle of some type, and instead of moving forward to a subsequent action, they query Chil about what the gesture might mean with a series of guesses (for example, lines 33 and 35 in Figure 1). What is distinctive about Chil's

use of gesture, and what generates this systematic sequence, is that he cannot speak as he gestures.

The talk that fluent speakers produce as they gesture (and gesture is something that is done overwhelmingly by the party who is speaking at the moment) provides an interpretive framework that hearers can use to make sense out of the gesture. Simultaneously, the gesture typically provides information that is not in the talk. Talk and gesture thus mutually elaborate each other and indeed are deeply parasitic on each other. Gesture achieves its typical transparent intelligibility through the way it is embedded within a larger ecology of meaning-making practices. An utterance containing a gesture, then, is a hybrid object constructed through the simultaneous use of two structurally different kinds of sign systems.

How is the coherence of actions built through multiple sign systems to be explained? One very important approach to the study of gesture, well exemplified in the work of David McNeill (1992), has focused on how gesture and the language that accompanies it are parallel manifestations of a single underlying psychological process. While this may well be true and is richly demonstrated in McNeill's work, an analysis that takes as its locus the psychology of the individual is clearly inadequate for Chil's use of gesture. Rather than emerging from a common locus within the individual mind, the talk that explicates Chil's gestures is produced by someone else. Thus, after Chil's initial gesture, Helen in line 33 offers a first guess as to what he might be indicating: "The apartment?" This guess makes relevant a next move from Chil, who produces a more elaborate gesture that is in turn answered with another guess from Helen: "Overhead?" (line 35). This guess is rejected by Chil.

The rejection, however, is accompanied by yet another gesture, which enables Helen at last to strongly claim that she recognizes what Chil is indicating and to begin the telling. This process, in which a gesture from Chil makes relevant a particular kind of next move from his addressee (an utterance providing a candidate understanding—a possible gloss—of what he might be meaning and doing with this gesture) provides an architecture for intersubjectivity, a set of systematic practices that enable him to say something meaningful despite his inability to speak, by recruiting the language abilities of others. Although it might be argued that Chil's inability to talk is atypical, what occurs here demonstrates that quite apart from the psychological processes implicated in their production, gesture and the talk it is tied to also have a crucial existence as forms of public practice.

When one talks of human interaction, it is common to think of the entities interacting with one another as either individuals or utterances. However, the distinctively human ability to construct relevant meaning and action in concert with others is also crucially dependent on the interaction within the action of structurally different kinds of sign systems, such as talk and gesture. Both in the utterances of fluent speakers and in Chil's case, gesture functions as intelligible action through the way it is elaborated by and elaborates talk to which it is tied. For Chil's gesture to function as relevant, consequential action there must be a reallocation of participant roles within this ecology of sign systems, with an interlocutor rather than the gesturer/speaker providing the language necessary to explicate the gesture. Chil's ability to position himself as an intelligent, competent actor requires the collaboration of others. If one conceptualizes an actor in conversation as a person capable of producing meaningful utterances that shape and are shaped by the actions of others, then Chil's incumbency in the role of speaker is not restricted to either his own actions or the boundaries of his body, but is instead assembled through a process in which others provide some of the materials he requires to build relevant talk and action.

What resources and practices are used by Chil's interlocutors to locate from his gesture a single event that occurred almost half a century ago? How does Helen even begin to produce the guesses that she does? To start with, Chil's action is deeply indexical in that it emerges within a sequential context that provides strong projections about what a move he might make there will be concerned with. The sequence begins with a question from Linda, marked through her gaze as addressed to him, about

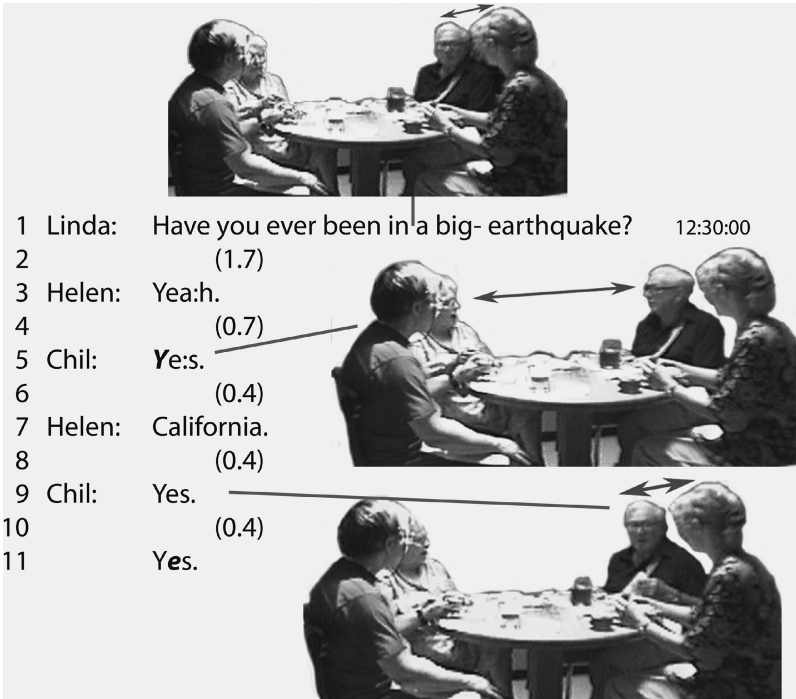


Figure 2
Chil visibly positioning himself as a teller.

whether he has ever been “in a big earthquake” (line 1). After Helen also replies affirmatively and Chil agrees, he turns back to Linda (lines 3–5) with a strong affirmative answer to her question (line 11).

Thus, by the time the gesture Chil uses to initiate this telling occurs, he has already positioned himself as someone who has something to say about a specific event, an earthquake he experienced. Moreover, as displayed by Helen’s “California” in line 7, which Chil agrees to, the event that will constitute his telling must have occurred during the two years that Helen and Chil lived in California. When the local sequential context is used as a point of departure for coming to terms with the gesture, his interlocutors are not faced with the task of searching blindly through everything that has happened in the past 50 years; instead they can look for a particular type of rare event, a big earthquake, that occurred during a comparatively brief period. Additionally, the gesture Chil uses to initiate his telling occurs immediately after Helen finishes her story. Sacks’s (1995:249–259) analysis of second stories demonstrates how subsequent stories are frequently built by using an immediately prior story as a structural template that is systematically transformed in relevant ways. Chil’s gesture might thus be publicly seen as attempting to invoke a new telling that is parasitic in some way on the story that was just heard—for example, a story about an earthquake that he and Helen experienced in California.

In addition to the way in which Chil and his coparticipants use the local sequential environment as a point of departure for the work required to bring forth his story, the embeddedness of his action in a consequential social history is also crucial. Through his gaze and posture, Chil specifically addresses his action to his wife Helen, to the exclusion of others present: Helen is of course the only one present who shared the experience of the event Chil is indicating and could thus describe it to others. His ability to get this story told emerges from his participation in a relevant social group that extends over most of a lifetime. In a very real sense, crucial parts of Chil’s memory



Figure 3
Chil locating his wife as his addressee.

as something that could be articulated to others disappeared when his wife died in 1999. Chil's memory as a discursive object, as well as many other aspects of who he is as a person, extends beyond the boundaries of his skin to encompass resources provided by others in relevant local contexts as well as a history of participation in consequential social groups.

These contextual resources are not, however, enough to unambiguously locate the event Chil is seeking, or even to bring it immediately to the mind of Helen, someone who shared the experience of that event with Chil. Since Chil cannot produce language, with its rich repertoire of conventionalized signs, he must rely on extended inferential work by his interlocutors to uncover what might otherwise be said with a simple expression such as "Remember the picture over the baby's crib?" Rather than an absolute projection, the local sequential and social context provides a point of departure, a place for Chil to try to shape the actions of others through interventions such as his gestures. This process will, however, require the active collaboration of others, who must engage and work with his signs in ways that extend well beyond simply decoding conventionalized meanings. Fortunately, the sequential organization of interaction provides an architecture for the accomplishment of this intersubjectivity (Goodwin 2003a; Heritage 1984). Chil and his interlocutor can check and negotiate their provisional understandings through a collaborative process of meaning making, as we saw Helen do earlier.

Chil's Voice as a Storyteller

Once the story gets under way in line 42, the issue emerges, for participants as well as analysts, as to who its teller is. It is common in conversation for multiple parties to know about or have shared experiences of the events being told in a story (spouses and other partners are an excellent example). The presence of multiple possible tellers can be dealt with in a number of ways (Sacks 1995:437–443; Goodwin 1981:149–166). One knowing speaker can visibly hand the story off to another, who is then positioned as the only, or at least principal, teller (Goodwin 1986). Alternatively, the story can be cotold by multiple speakers (Ochs and Capps 2001). Such coconstruction is typically analyzed as a situation in which several speakers jointly produce the talk that makes up the story.

In the present data, although Chil prompts Helen to produce the talk that constitutes the story, he does not in any way position her as the only, or even the principal, teller. On the other hand, neither does he coconstruct the story in any traditional sense, since the only words he contributes to it are "no" and "yes." Instead, Chil visibly claims and occupies the position of teller (indeed, principal teller) by the way he orients

41 (0.3)

42 Helen: Scott was sleeping. 12:30:36

43 (0.2)

44 Chil: **Yes.**

45 Scott: Uh ha.

46 What happ[ened.

47 Linda: Really.

48 (0.5)

49 Chil: Yes. PM 12:30:38

50 Helen: En the picture over the be- uh the crib fell-on ()

51 Linda: Ohmy: [goodness.

52 Chil: [No: PM 12:30:43

Figure 4
Tellership in multiple bodies.

his body and the detailed prosodic organization of his talk. Thus as Helen begins to describe what happened, Chil moves his gaze from Helen to Linda, the story's principal addressee. Gazing toward someone is a pervasive practice for displaying that the party being gazed at is being addressed (Goodwin 1981). By gazing toward the addressee of the story, Chil thus visibly positions himself as one of its tellers. Through such practices, someone unable to produce the language through which the story of the moment is told positions himself as its speaker.

Over Helen's utterance "the crib fell" in line 50, Chil reaches over and taps Linda with an expression on his face that might be glossed as something like "Listen to this!" Again he is visibly acting not as a recipient to Helen's story, but rather as one of its tellers, someone who is animatedly guiding its recipient's reaction through facial expressions and gestures that mark relevant stances toward what is being said, and looking toward the addressee to take into account her reaction.

Chil's positioning himself as teller is also visible through the way in which he produces the "Yes" in line 44. If just the transcript of the talk were taken into account, line 44 could appear to be an action directed to Helen, an agreement with what she just said. However, as he says "Yes," Chil moves his gaze from Helen to the story's addressee, Linda, and thus positions himself as someone who, as much as Helen, is telling Linda what was substantively said in line 42. Indeed, what Helen has just said is incorporated into Chil's "Yes" through the indexical tying that is visible here. Moreover, Chil's prosody is also visibly doing telling rather than simply agreement.

In sum, the position of teller of this story is not lodged within a single body, but rather is distributed across multiple actors. Helen provides the talk and linguistic structure necessary to describe the events in the story. However, in a variety of ways the story is as much Chil's as Helen's. He is the one who recalled it as an answer to Linda's initial query and then worked hard to get Helen to remember just this incident. As the story gets under way, Chil visibly displays that he is one of its tellers through his body and prosody.

To look at these same phenomena from a slightly different perspective, Chil's speakership cannot be analyzed either as something that resides in his body alone or as something defined by his individual abilities (or deficits). He can and does lead others to produce the words he needs while he visibly (and correctly) acts as one of the authors of those words and as teller of the story in progress. He thus positions himself, and is treated by others, as a consequential participant in the public, multiparty activities built through language (Wittgenstein 1958, sections 1–8) that sit at the center of human interaction—indeed, as a storyteller despite his inability to speak.

Shaping the Story

Further evidence that Chil is not simply riding on Helen's coattails by, for example, visibly piggybacking on what she might happen to say without in fact being an author of that talk is provided by what happens next. After Helen says in line 50 that "the picture over the be- uh the crib fell on()," Chil intervenes with a strong "No:" (line 52), and thus challenges what she has just said.

Typically, disagreements such as that initiated by Chil in line 52 include an account explicating why what was said is being treated as wrong. Although Chil cannot produce the words necessary for such an account, he does attend to the relevance of this structure by producing a gesture, lifting his hand over his head as he says "No:" and

50 Helen: En the picture over the be- uh the crib fell-on ()
 51 Linda: [Oh my: goodness.
 52 Chil: [No:.



53 (0.7)
 54 Linda: Fell?
 55 (0.5)
 56 Chil: No:.
 57 Scott: [started to fall?
 58 (0.2)
 59 Chil: Yes:.
 60 Scott: En you stopped it?
 61 Chil: [No:.
 62 Scott: [or you- moved it-
 63 you just saw it bouncing all over my head.
 64 (0.2)
 65 Scott: near it.
 66 (0.5)
 67 Chil: Yes.
 68 (0.5)
 69 Scott: [Wow.
 70 Chil: [Yeah



Figure 5
 Shaping the story.

then turning his gaze first to Helen and then to Linda. This gesture in this sequential position (i.e., in a place where an account for the disagreement is relevant) is viewed by others as an attempt to convey an alternative to what Helen has described. In essence, he constructs a multimodal utterance, one part through talk (the word *no*) and the other through sequentially positioned gesture. His action leads immediately to a series of guesses by Linda and Scott as to what Chil might actually want to say (lines 54, 57, 60, 62–65), and it is through Chil's answers to these guesses that the rest of the story gets told.

In brief, Chil does not simply accept what Helen says, but challenges her and leads the story in new directions when her talk diverges what from what he wants said. He thus acts not simply as a teller who affiliates with his body to a story being produced through the talk of another, but instead as the principal teller, that is, as the person with ultimate authority to determine the correctness of what is being said.

Discussion

Although he can barely speak, Chil positions himself as a forceful, consequential storyteller. The resources needed to do this do not reside within his skin, mind, or self alone. Instead he requires the collaboration of others, as he mobilizes their power to speak in order to say what he wants said. His ability to constitute himself as a relevant speaker requires a larger social and semiotic matrix that encompasses the bodies, talk, and actions of others, as well as the way in which they are situated together within a particular historical, social, and material environment (Goodwin 2000b, 2003b; Hutchins 1995).

The process through which Chil's ability to act as a speaker is mediated through others does not in any way put him in a subservient position. Indeed, through the way in which he challenges what others say, he constitutes himself as someone with powerful agency. It may be that not only is his position as both a speaker and a powerful actor expanded through his invocation of these distributed, socially organized resources, but that the positioning of others is simultaneously diminished or at least reshaped significantly. Helen, his wife, sometimes complained that as others devoted so much effort to figuring out what Chil was saying, her own voice got lost. And in fact we find here that when Helen offers her version of this event, which they shared in common, Chil contradicts her.

One version of how action gets built through language attaches central importance to a primary intention located inside the mind of the speaker, with the work of the hearer being conceptualized primarily as decoding the signs produced by the speaker to recover that intention. Chil's situation provides a particularly strong and vivid example of how interlocutors orient toward someone as intending to say or express something quite specific. His hearers work very hard to try and figure out what he wants to say, and they accept without question his statements that their guesses are wrong. However, that very same work demonstrates the inadequacy of theories that focus exclusively on the mental life of a single individual, such as the speaker. Instead, what Chil says, indeed his very ability to say something at all, emerges through an interactive process in which the practices of interpretants are as consequential as the signs he produces. Although Chil's impairments, especially his catastrophic inability to produce linguistic signs, make the importance of this process particularly clear, it would seem to be true of talk-in-interaction in general. Rather than simply attempting to recover what others are saying, performing a naked *explication de texte*, subsequent speakers characteristically operate upon what has been said and transform it in terms of their own projects (Goodwin and Goodwin 1987). In the data examined here, it appears that Chil and his interlocutors are only partially successful in articulating just what he is trying to say. What is at issue is a public process of sign use in which a sign's meaning and performed action do not reside exclusively in the intentional act of the party producing that sign but are instead constructed and shaped in part through subsequent operations on that sign.

Consider what Chil would look like as a person if his ability to think and act were investigated in an experimental setting designed to probe and make explicit the abilities he possessed and lacked as an individual person. If he were deprived of the ability to use and shape the talk of others, to participate in meaningful social interaction, to draw upon a lifetime of shared memories with his wife and family, and the material and social resources of his home environment, he would be constituted as a very defective actor, someone able to say and do almost nothing. Chil's ability to construct meaningful action, his visible cognitive activity, and his status as a consequential actor emerge from the way his actions are embedded within the talk and action of others. His speakership and status as a consequential actor are constituted through how he operates in the midst of a relevant, richly sedimented social world and participates in meaningful courses of action that enable him to draw upon the resources of others.

Conclusion

This article has investigated how a man with a three-word vocabulary is able to invoke and elicit a complex story about events that happened almost half a century earlier. By describing the practices he used to act as a storyteller despite his linguistic impairments, this study contributes to a growing body of research focused on the surprising pragmatic abilities of persons with severe language loss because of damage to the brain. However, it also has more general relevance to the study, in linguistic anthropology and elsewhere, of how language is organized as a social phenomenon and how it functions as a central resource for building the consequential actions that make up the lifeworld of a particular social group.

Many approaches to the analysis of language and pragmatic phenomena such as speech acts (Searle 1970) treat the mental and psychological life of the speaker as the locus of human language. Note, however, that words such as *yes* and *no*, the core of Chil's vocabulary, are terms that tie to the talk of others. His vocabulary presupposes a world inhabited by others, and moreover one that is being continually structured by their semiotic activities as talk and the actions constituted through that talk shape the local environment of action from moment to moment. By tying to and reshaping that talk, he treats their language not as a hidden psychological process but as a public sign system, and moreover one that he can help structure through his consequential participation in it. By so doing, he uses the rich language structure of others for his own purposes, incorporating what they are saying (including grammatical constructions that are literally impossible for him to produce) into his own actions, indeed acting as the author and principal teller of stories whose words are spoken by his interlocutors.

Chil's telling is far beyond his own competence as an individual speaker. He lacks not only the grammatical capacities required of Chomsky's ideal speaker, but also the ability to quote the talk of others that sits at the center of Vološinov's analysis of dialogue. What Chil is able to accomplish calls into question the use of such criteria to determine what a speaker is. Although Chil lacks the linguistic competence to quote the talk of another, his positioning of himself as both a speaker and an actor is built precisely through his ability to incorporate, tie to, and reuse the talk of others for his own purposes (indeed, quotation might constitute a special case of a far more pervasive set of practices for building action by reusing structure provided by the talk of others).

Language is constituted not only as a public sign system but also through the mutual use of public practices for building action and meaning in concert with others. To act as a speaker, Chil is not faced with the impossible problem of building complex sentences and is thus not doomed to fail and spend his life as at best a marginal actor. Instead he confronts the cognitively demanding task of structuring his participation in courses of action with others so that he can draw on their linguistic and other abilities to say and do what he finds relevant. But such practices are used by fully fluent speakers as well. His capacity to act as a speaker emerges from his ability to participate in dialogue through use of the sequential practices that sit at the center of the organization of

talk-in-interaction. Chil's position as a speaker and as a human social actor, an entity whose competence does not reside within himself alone but is deeply embedded within the actions of others as they build lives together, was perhaps captured by John Donne in 1624, in *Devotion XVIII*:

No man is an island, entire of himself;
every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was presented in the panel "Morality and Epistemology: Stance-Taking in the Discursive Constitution of Personhood" at The 101st Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, November 20–24, 2002, in New Orleans.

2. Talk is transcribed using a version of the transcript system developed by Gail Jefferson (Sacks et al. 1974:731–733).

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Applied Linguistics
3300 Rolfe Hall
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1531
cgoodwin@humnet.ucla.edu