Chapter 9

# Participation and Community

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## AN ECOLOGY OF MULTIPLE SIGN SYSTEMS

There exist several different approaches to the study of participation. A research tradition in fields such as linguistic anthropology uses models proposed by Goffman in works such as *Footing* (1981) as a point of departure for the construction of typologies for different kinds of participants within speech events (for instance, ratified versus unratified participant, hearer or overhearer). Within such a categorical framework, little attention is paid to how parties build action in concert with each other through ongoing analysis of what each other is doing, and how such mutual reflexivity is relevant to the collaborative production of future action. Another approach to participation focuses on how newcomers become competent members of a community through processes such as peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Although this is certainly relevant to what is described here, it pays less attention to the detailed, moment-by-moment organization of specific, temporally unfolding activities.

In this chapter, participation is analyzed as a temporally unfolding process through which separate parties demonstrate their understanding of the events in which they are engaged by building actions that contribute to the further progression of these same events. Such a view of participation links cognition to the interactive organization of action. It requires detailed analysis of the specific activities that parties are participating in as they build courses of action in concert with each other. Through the way in which

this perspective on participation encompasses participants' orientation toward each other, the details of language use, tools, documents, and relevant structure in their environment, it provides a way of investigating the distinctive work practices and professional vision of particular social groups, and of describing how the structure of tools being used contributes to this process. Central to all of this is a view of human knowledge and action being organized within an ecology of sign systems, rather than in a single semiotic modality (C. Goodwin, 2000). Within such a framework, individual signs can be partial and incomplete because their relevant sense and use is constituted through the way in which they mutually elaborate other co-occurring signs.

This is vividly illustrated by Chil, a man with severe aphasia who nonetheless manages to act as a powerful speaker in conversation by getting others to say the words that he needs. His competence as a speaker is lodged not within his brain, but rather through his ability to participate in language practices in which the actions of others also play a significant role (C. Goodwin, 2003a).

Because of severe damage to the left hemisphere of his brain, Chil is able to speak only three words: "Yes," "No," and "And." Despite this severely restricted vocabulary he functions as a powerful participant in conversation. He is able both to say a great many different things and to produce complicated action. To accomplish this he does not function as an isolated actor, but instead builds meaning and action in concert with others within a relevant environment. His situation provides an opportunity to investigate how ongoing participation in courses of action with others within a consequential community is central to the organization of human action and cognition. Conceptualizing someone with aphasia as building action within a world that is simultaneously being structured by the actions of others, rather than as an isolated individual faced with the impossible task of constructing rich linguistic structures, has implications for the design of tools that might aid people in such circumstances.

## CONVERSATION 1: THE BIRD CALENDAR

As noted previously, participation is investigated here as a temporally unfolding process through which separate parties demonstrate to each other their ongoing understanding of the events in which they are engaged by building actions that contribute to the further progression of these very same events. Parties participate in specific courses of action while taking into account: (a) what each other is doing, (b) the consequences this has for the organization of future action, and (c) the frequently relevant structure in the environment.

The practices used by Chil to construct meaning help make this more clear (for more detailed analysis of this sequence, see Goodwin & Goodwin,

2001). In Fig. 9.1 the participants around the table are admiring a calendar with pictures of birds that one of them has just received. As a new picture is revealed, Pat, the woman on the left, assesses or evaluates it by saying "*Wow!* Those are *great* pictures" (line 2).

Chil, the man with severe aphasia, is seated on the right in Fig. 9.1. Despite his impoverished linguistic abilities, he also assesses the picture, using a string of nonsense syllables ("Dih-dih-dih-dih") to carry an appreciative prosodic contour (line 1). Note, however, that his assessment occurs much later than Pat's, indeed when her talk has almost reached completion.

It might be argued that Chil's delay is a manifestation of his cognitive deficits, for example that he lacks the ability to respond to relevant events with normal timing. However, when his embodied behavior is examined, a quite different picture of what is happening emerges. When Pat begins her *"Wow!"* he is looking down at the food he is eating. To assess something, to judge it in some fashion, an actor must perceive it. Immediately on hearing Pat's *"Wow!"* he raises his head and moves his gaze to the object being assessed. Only when this has been completed, and he is actually looking at the calendar, does he perform his own assessment. Note also that he does not move his gaze toward the source of the sound to which he is reacting, Pat, but instead recognizes that the activity in progress is an assessment and immediately moves to the object being assessed. His understanding of, and contributions to, the events in progress are displayed as much through the precise movements of his body as by his talk.

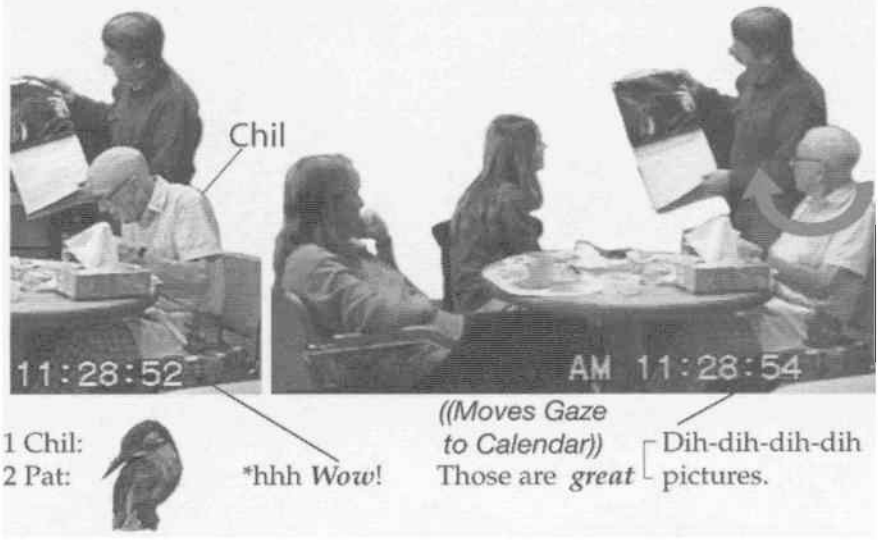


FIG. 9.1. Conversation about a bird calendar. Chil, a man with severe aphasia, participates with Pat through vocalization and visible embodied behavior.

Chil's use of visible embodied behavior as well as talk to participate in the assessment, the activity that the parties are currently pursuing together, both displays his understanding of the events in which he is engaged, and contributes to the further shaping of these very same events. If analysis is restricted to his linguistic output, he appears to be a severely impoverished actor, indeed almost an idiot who talks in nonsense syllables. However, focusing on how he *participates* with others in the joint construction of relevant action allows us to recover his cognitive competence, and to demonstrate his ability to engage with precision in speech activities, despite his almost complete inability to speak. Rather than acting as an isolated, self-contained agent, his cognitive abilities are lodged within a community of other actors who participate with him in the construction of the actions and events that make up the lifeworld they inhabit together.

This view of participation has several consequences:

1. Study of participation in this fashion requires analysis of the specific activities in which the parties are engaged in. The notion of a situated activity system is central (Goffman, 1961; C. Goodwin, 1996; M. H. Goodwin, 1990).
2. Rather than being accomplished within a single semiotic modality, such as language, participants build meaning and action by using the resources provided by a larger ecology of sign systems (see also, Hutchins, 1995) that can include talk, a range of different kinds of sign systems displayed by the visible body (gesture, for example, displays of orientation through gaze and posture, or multiparty participation frameworks), and semiotic and other forms of structure in the environment. Within such a framework, any individual sign can be partial and incomplete. Chil's nonsense syllables, prosody, and gaze mutually elaborate each other to create a whole that is not visible in any of its constituent parts.
3. The organization of participation within emerging courses of action has consequences for vision and perception as forms of socially organized practice. The temporally unfolding activity in which Chil is participating systematically leads him to gaze at a particular place within the complex visual environment of the room in Fig. 9.1, and to formulate what he sees there in ways that are relevant to the activity. The multimodal organization of this activity, the way in which it encompasses not only language but also visible displays by the body and orientation to, and formulation of, objects in the environment, allows us to describe with some precision how actors construct relevant events through participation in emerging courses of action.

Chil manages to function as a powerful speaker in conversation by getting others to speak the words that he needs, and also by using structure in

his local environment (including relevant objects, the talk of others, and the way in which the spaces that constitute his lifeworld are sedimented with meaning). Timing and sequential positioning are crucial to this process. The practices that he uses may have consequences for the design of tools that could facilitate the communication of people in his position. To oversimplify, much research focuses on the construction of tools that would give someone such as Chil resources for the construction of complex symbolic objects, such as sentences. Of necessity, many of these tools are quite complex, and indeed their construction can probe the boundaries of research in fields such as computer science.

The practices that Chil uses suggest an alternative: the design of rather simple tools that would allow someone with aphasia to invoke structure in the environment in a way that is appropriate to the unfolding organization of the activities in which he or she is engaged. Rather than focusing primarily on construction of complex symbolic objects, such tools might place a premium on timing, the ability to rapidly act in concert with others in ways that are appropriate to the moment-by-moment unfolding of human interaction—to reflexively participate, that is, in the construction of the ongoing events.

Before providing a specific example relevant to such possibilities, let me note a few caveats. First, I am not a designer, and this is being offered simply as data and practices that might stimulate the thinking of others. Second, aphasia and other forms of brain damage are highly variable. Chil's particular mix of strengths and weaknesses should not be taken as typical for all aphasics.

## CONVERSATION 2: SAN FRANCISCO OR REDDING?

In Fig. 9.2, Chil is sitting at his kitchen table with his daughter Pat and son Chuck. They have been talking about the births of Pat's two children. Both were born in California, one in San Francisco, and the other in Redding (a city in northern California). The births occurred approximately 20 years ago when Pat lived in California. Chil and his wife, who live near New York City, went to California for the births. Chil has been using gesture and other resources to get Pat to recall incidents about the births which they are telling Chuck.

In line 2, Pat starts to talk about something that happened in San Francisco. Chil immediately intercepts her talk with one of his three words, "No." Pat then changes "San Francisco" to "Redding" (note how the replacement of the first place name with the second is displayed explicitly through the way in which the "I was in X" format is recycled). Because of the injury to his brain, Chil is completely incapable of either saying a word such as "Redding" or of constructing the sentence that encompasses that lexical



1 Pat: But I liked-
2 I was in San ***Fran***cisco.=
3 Chil: =No.
4 (0.6)
5 Pat: When I was in ***Re***dding.
6 Chil: Yes. Eh ┌dih.
7 Pat: └ I had ta get the heck out of there.

FIG. 9.2. Conversation about a birthplace. Chil uses his limited vocabulary (yes, no, and) and directional gestures to shape the conversation.

item. However, in a number of significant ways he is the author of what is said in line 5. Thus, if he had not intervened, Pat would now be talking about something quite different, some event that occurred in San Francisco. Moreover, although the transcript does not fully capture this, as she speaks Pat displays that Chil is the ultimate authority as to the accuracy of what she is saying, as indeed would be the case if she is now trying to provide the correction he signaled was needed with his "No." Thus, she raises her head while gazing intently at him while lifting her eyebrows with a facial expression that seems to indicate that she is checking with him. Chil does in fact treat what Pat says as an action that requires his verification by responding to it with a "Yes." In essence he has gotten Pat to speak words that he can't and, in so doing, to move the conversation in a new direction, one that he has chosen.

What resources enable Chil to function as a consequential speaker in conversation despite his almost complete inability to speak? First, his limited vocabulary ("Yes," "No," and "And") presupposes that he is living and acting in a world already inhabited by others, and structured in fine detail by their semiotic activities. "Yes" and "No" are second pair parts, terms designed not to stand alone, but instead to function as next moves to actions produced by others. They thus have a strong indexical component in that

recipients use the semiotic structure of the talk being responded to as a point of departure for understanding an action such as "No" by Chil.

With his "No" here, Chil is not objecting to life in general, or any of the millions of things in the world to which he could be opposed, but instead to something that the prior speaker just said, the most salient possibility being the place name that she just produced. Pat can reasonably infer that he is asking her for a different place name. These possibilities are further constrained by the local history of the discourse in progress where Pat has been talking about two births that occurred in two different cities. She can and does succeed by producing the other city (Redding instead of San Francisco) in response to his objection. The locative character of the solution Chil wants is further suggested by the pointing gesture that co-occurs with his "No." Indeed, he is actually pointing in the direction (west) that is at issue. Note also how his actions presuppose a cognitively complex coparticipant, one who is not simply decoding what he says, but using that talk as the point of departure for structured inferences. One pervasive model of a speaker's competence focuses on mental processes within an isolated individual. Here Chil functions as a consequential speaker through his ability to participate in public, socially organized language practices.

## POSSIBLE TOOLS

Much research into the design of tools that could help someone such as Chil communicate focuses on tools that would enable a speaker to produce complex symbolic structures, such as sentences. The computer program through which the physicist Stephen Hawking (whose speech problems result from something other than aphasia) is able to talk is one example. Such tools, and the research that makes them possible, are important and can help many people who have difficulty producing speech. In essence, such research tries to recreate the complex symbolic processes of the prototypical competent speaker. By contrast, Chil can use very simple tools, a word consisting of only a single syllable, to say something novel and complex. He does this by tying to and invoking relevant structure in his environment. He is not an isolated monological speaker, but instead an actor operating within a world inhabited by others and structured in fine and relevant detail by their activities.

This may have the following relevance to the design of tools for someone such as Chil. Instead of trying to produce complex symbols, and treating an actor such as him as an entity required to produce sentences from scratch in isolation, it might be possible to design simple tools that could rapidly and reflexively intervene in unfolding courses of action by tying to semiotic structure produced by others. Something like a simple buzzer, although

with a more pleasing sound, comes to mind, perhaps one that could include relevant intonation contours. Although not described here, Chil's use of intonation for both action and the display of emotion is crucially important (see Goodwin, Goodwin, & Olsher, 2002).

Looking at this from a slightly different perspective, some aphasic speakers are able haltingly and slowly to construct far more vocabulary items than Chil. Although their aphasia is considered less severe, the onward movement of the conversation in progress can be severely delayed, as the construction of each word becomes a task in its own right. This situation can become difficult for interlocutors. By way of contrast, what would be preserved by a simple tool that tied to structure in the ongoing talk of others, and what was preserved in Chil's way of participating in the talk of others, was the rapid, reflexive *timing* of typical interaction. It has been suggested that the very severity of his aphasia paradoxically helped him function as an engaging and effective conversational partner, by eliminating futile efforts to produce relevant vocabulary.

I raise the possibility of trying to design very simple tools that invoke structure in their environment in part because of a conversation I had with a new PhD student in computer science at a conference recently. I was interested in talking with her because she had just given a paper on aphasic speech. I suggested that she look at the actual interaction of people with aphasia, but she said that for her research it was adequate to focus on transcripts of the talk they produced. Consider what transcripts of Chil's talk, in isolation from that of his interlocutors, would look like. I also suggested that very simple tools might be extremely powerful. She told me that she could never get tenure unless she designed complex computer programs. Moreover, it helped her lab, and her standing at her new university, to require expensive equipment for her research.

In brief, despite his catastrophically limited ability to produce language, Chil is able to function as a powerful speaker in conversation. This is possible because he does not act as an isolated speaker, the prototypical locus for the study of language in contemporary formal linguistics, but instead constructs meaning and action by participating in talk-in-interaction with others.

There is not space here to investigate how participation in activities can encompass not only talk and different kinds of embodied displays, but also tools, documents, situated writing practices, and various kinds of structure in the environment. For example, the tools used by archeologists, chemists, and oceanographers provide architectures of perception that entrain the embodied participation of different actors in specific ways, structure cognition and provide historically shaped solutions to the distinctive tasks posed by the work of particular communities (C. Goodwin, 1994, 1995, 2003b; Hutchins, 1995).

## CONCLUSION

By participating together in courses of action, separate parties both display their understanding of the events in which they are engaged, and build meaning and action in concert with each other. Through this process, a community is constituted in a number of different ways. Chil's aphasia provides a particularly clear example. Not only his social, but also his cognitive life depends on the way in which talk is embedded within the activities of a small local community, those who are interacting with him. He is able to build consequential meaning and action only by participating in courses of action with others.

That participation has a moral dimension. Despite his impairment, those who share Chil's lifeworld with him treat him as a cognitively alert human being, someone who can understand others, and who has intelligent, relevant things of his own to say. Indeed, they invest considerable effort to figure out just what he wants to tell them. This situation could be very different: It would be quite possible for others to assume that someone who can barely speak is an idiot and exclude him from participation in those discourse practices that constitute him as a fully fledged human being. Yet in most central ways, the community that encompasses Chil is brought into being and structured through the ways in which members of that community participate in relevant courses of action together.