# Letter to the Editor Re:
# Anita Pomerantz' Epilogue to the
# Special Issue on Sequential Organization
# of Conversational Activities, Spring 1989

GAIL JEFFERSON

Dear Sir,

Along with several other conversation analysts that I know of, I disagree with Anita Pomerantz' "Epilogue" to the Special Issue on Sequential Organization of Conversational Activities. I disagree with it altogether—in its major theme, its various arguments, and its particulars. I was struck, however, by its manifest good will, and found myself reminded of that classic science fiction film *The Day the Earth Stood Still,* in which the spaceman Klaatu steps down from his flying saucer, announces "I come in peace and with good will," and is shot on the spot. But in this case the shots are coming from inside the space ship.

While I do, deeply, appreciate the good will involved, I think it may be one source of the trouble. That is, in an effort to bring conversation analysis and speech communication closer together, Pomerantz presents conversation analysis in a way that makes it appear amenable to certain speech-communication approaches, when it simply is not.

Specifically, she engages in an exercise in "translation" from technical conversation-analytic terminology into common-sense lay terminology "as a resource for carrying on good dialogue with our colleagues." Although she does suggest some differences between the two fields, and does assert the necessity for "technical descriptions of phenomena," the exercise in translation can too easily be understood to show that such technical terms as are used by conversation analysts can perfectly well be grasped in non-technical terms. The proposal that such words as burdensome, delightful, touchy, satisfying, comfortable, etc., "capture ways that actors relate to actions" and can be directly substituted for conversation-analytic terminology, could be understood as a proposal that that terminology is just a complicated way of saying what otherwise can be said with lay, common-sense, interactants' terminology.

What Pomerantz doesn't say, which I think needs very much to be said, is that a central constraint on conversation-analytic work is that

in the interests of subjecting the details of actual events to formal analysis, lay concepts not be directly used as analytic instruments. Harvey Sacks, in his lectures, goes after the entire field of sociology at one point, and the authors of *The First Five Minutes* at another, for being "unanalytic" and proceeding "in an altogether lay fashion." He points out that by simply using this or that lay category or formulation, "they may make sense to us, but they're doing it simply as another Member. They haven't described the phenomena they're seeking to describe – or that they ought to be seeking to describe." (Fall 1965, Lecture 4, page 6, and Fall 1966, Lecture 3, pages 3-4).

That can be a diabolically tricky distinction – describing Members' activities in lay versus analytic fashion. It becomes even more difficult when it turns out that conversation analysts do in fact use lay characterizations. Anyone who has been to a data session or read the Sacks lectures knows that. But the usage is, or seeks to be, quite particular; specifically, say, *pre*-analytic. Where, as Sacks puts it:

Our aim is to get into a position to transform, in what I figure is almost a literal, physical sense, our view of [ given bit of talk] as some *interaction* that could be treated as the thing we're studying, to interactions being spewed out by machinery, the *machinery* being what we're trying to find.

(Edited Winter 1970, Lecture 1, page 26, emphasis mine)

And he goes on to remark that we don't want to suppose that we are dealing with "two people doing some interaction, rather than the actualization of a series of techniques."

Perhaps the following excerpt from one of his lectures will clarify the distinction. He's been discussing a piece of data in very experiential terms, and sums up with:

Put kind of straightforwardly, what I figure is going on is that. . .Portia thought then and there that Kate might have done something that embarrassed, maybe angered, annoyed, Carl. She then proceeded to tell Carl how good a person Kate was, in some aid of Kate.

Now that's an altogether informal, unproved, perhaps unproveable, perhaps irrelevant-to-prove-it, characterization of what took place. And it's just the sort of observing that, when it appears in a student's paper, we thoroughly discourage. However, it is one legitimate and fruitful way to approach materials, for the initial observations themselves, and in that that sort of sophisticated lay observation of a scene is one way that you come to find items that can be extracted and developed quite independently of the observations one initially made; where the initial observations need not, then, be presented. *One needs to see if those sorts of observations, that sort of a discussion, can lead to something that could perhaps transcend it and turn it into some sort of serious statement,* other than the statement I offered, and which perhaps Portia herself could offer.

(Spring 1970, Lecture 7, page 3, emphasis mine)

In other places, Sacks talks of the use of lay characterizations as "anthropomorphizing humans," and proposes:

I'll make a principled statement, which is quixotic enough but I believe in it. I figure it's okay to anthropomorphize humans. I don't think it's any worse for sociology to anthropomorphize than, say, for physics to do it. No better, but no worse. All research anthropomorphizes its objects. This is not to say that I believe humans are anthropomorphic. I certainly don't. But it's kind of a convenient way to proceed; a way of focussing things,

of making the transcripts noticeable to you. And I don't think it will get you into that much trouble.

(Winter 1967, March 9, page 3, and Spring 1967, Lecture 4, page 9)

While it may not get conversation analysts into that much trouble to use lay concepts and terminology as a convenient way to focus on phenomena, Pomerantz is offering the translation from technical conversation-analytic terminology into common-sense lay terminology "as a resource for carrying on good dialogue with our colleagues," and that may well make for trouble. I think it could result in deeply problematic dialogue, based on some rather serious misunderstandings. It might be more conducive to good dialogue to start out with a clear sense of, and then come to terms with, the alien character of conversation analysis. It is a field, after all, founded by a man who took the position that humans are no more anthropomorphizeable than, say, algae.

Sincerely yours,

Gail Jefferson