

[Review] Gail Jefferson (2015) Talking about troubles in conversation

Article (Accepted Version)

Williams, Simon (2016) [Review] Gail Jefferson (2015) Talking about troubles in conversation. *Discourse Studies*, 18 (6). pp. 770-771. ISSN 1461-4456

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Gail Jefferson, *Talking About Troubles in Conversation*, Paul Drew, John Heritage, Gene Lerner, and Anita Pomerantz (eds). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015; xvi + 234 pp., £27.49 (pbk).

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Conversation Analysis (CA), the project of discovering the rules governing everyday interaction, originated in California in the late 1960s. That project resulted in groundbreaking insights into the orderliness of micro-interactional features, its early work centring on relatively short interactional sequences such as those used to accomplish turn-taking, repair, openings and closings. Gail Jefferson, one of the three original founders of CA, was the first to apply the techniques to more extended interaction, specifically in talk about troubles.

This collection of six of Jefferson's papers on troubles discourse, all previously published in journals (1981-1988), is one of only a few collected editions of work by the early conversation analysts. The papers were the outcome of a UK-funded research project that Jefferson, with John Lee, worked on in Manchester in 1978-1981. Their importance lies not least in their analysis of ordinary social interaction, breaking with Sacks' analysis of institutional data. It was Jefferson herself who steered the Manchester project away from troubles telling in institutional contexts, as originally proposed by Lee, and towards more informal social interaction. She thus immediately had to confront the problem of

how interactants in this less constrained talk managed the moves into and out of talk about troubles, and how trouble tellers responded to the giving of advice by non-professional recipients.

For the reader unfamiliar with CA, the circumstantial detail provided by the editors' introduction, with its biography of Jefferson's early career, details of the 'troubles telling' project, and summary of Jefferson's research findings, places Jefferson in a social context, helping the reader to understand the nature of her temperament: her patience and fastidiousness, her particular expertise, and the motivation that brought her to CA. It provides a mundane backstory, tantalisingly absent from the papers themselves, and explains why a person with Jefferson's already-established reputation as a senior figure in CA came to England as a research associate (1978-1981) to work on the project. Jefferson's relationship to her co-researchers, her informants, and the funding Research Council is alluded to.

Jefferson's thesis, outlined in Chapter 1, is that 'troubles talk is a discrete organizational domain, shaping the interaction in distinctive ways' (p. 56). The ontology of this organizational domain, provisionally described as a six-part array (p. 32), is returned to in Chapter 3 and revisited throughout the collection. It concerns whether the nature of the troubles-talk sequence is 'gross but strong' (a sequence designed to be sufficiently flexible to respond to 'contingencies' as it goes along), 'elegant but weak' (a

concentrated design forcibly disordered by events in the interaction), or the result of local difficulties generated by the structure of the troubles talk itself. It is possibly the tension between the heightened emotional reciprocity of troubles-telling and the more conventional interactional distance of 'business as usual' (p. 45) that creates the problematic instability and disorder of the sequence.

Jefferson provides more general insights into human interaction throughout the papers, some of which have become professional communications training orthodoxy. Chapter 2 discusses troubles premonitors such as 'downgraded conventional responses'; for example, to the enquiry 'How are you?' a potential troubles teller may reply 'Pretty good' rather than 'Fine'. Chapter 3 contrasts the different trajectories of troubles told in service encounters, in which the trouble teller stops giving information as soon as the professional begins to offer advice, and Jefferson's data, in which recipient advice offered before emotional reciprocity has been established is rejected: the teller continues to outline the troubles. Chapter 4 contains two extended conversations from the British data, both involving the same troubles teller speaking to two different friends on the same topic, and in which Jefferson offers Sacks' observation that people are overwhelmingly concerned with 'finding out only how it is that what is going on is usual' (p. 145), initially rejecting more catastrophic explanations even where they might be well founded. Chapter 5, on laughter in troubles-talk, notes that a troubles teller may produce laughter to exhibit 'troubles resistance', but that to show empathy with the teller, the troubles recipient routinely declines to share the laughter and talks rather to the prior utterance (p. 172). The last chapter illustrates how, while remaining other-

attentive, conversation participants achieve the moving away from a troubles telling sequence in stepwise transition. An example would be the introduction of a new topic that is biographically intimate, such as referencing 'being together', eg 'So you're coming down in March huh?' (p. 198). An extensive glossary of transcript symbols includes those representing paralinguistic features such as intonation contours and voice quality, so emphasising Jefferson's painstaking approach to transcription.

The collection is unusual in CA because what is being discussed is a larger unit than the usual turn-based sequence. Some readers may find Jefferson's emic approach and the technical nature of her writing opaque. Jefferson herself, of course, had the advantage of the audio recordings, which must have added another dimension to the interpretation of the transcripts. But the focus on the same conversational feature, each paper exploring a different aspect of the whole 'candidate sequence', lends coherence to the collection. In addition, many of the same extracts from the data re-occur in different papers, or are from different parts of the same conversation, and may extend to around 50 lines or more, so providing substantial co-text. While the content itself is not new, the collection provides a rare opportunity for the reader to reflect on a set of CA papers built around a single theme and arising from a single research project. In this way, it provides a useful addition to the literature. And the collection provides a manual for those who may like to adopt Jefferson's approach in the exploration and description of other large-scale conversational sequences. The very nature of the extended sequence that Jefferson chose to explore is one ubiquitous to human interaction and

perhaps a component of all sustained phatic communication. It should therefore be of interest to every one of us.