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On Goodwin and his Co-Operative Action

Jörg R. Bergmann

The first time I heard the name Charles (“Chuck”) Goodwin was in 1977 when I spent a year studying at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) while working on my dissertation. One of the most intense experiences I remember from that time was a seminar organised by Anita Pomerantz, which was designed as a research seminar and which brought together the bunch of the people in the department of sociology and anthropology interested in conversation analysis or ethnomethodology. The material focus of the research seminar was the recording of a single conversation, the analysis of which was conducted so intensely that after four months the seminar had just reached the end of the first transcript page. Although a video recording of the conversation was available, the seminar decided to work initially just with the audio recording and transcript and to bring in the video only in the subsequent term. Recording and transcript were done and provided by Charles Goodwin, who had just completed his dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (Goodwin 1977) but was unable to attend the seminar himself. The transcript, which Goodwin had named “Meat Market”, documented the interaction of Italo-American butchers in a slaughterhouse in South Philadelphia (Goodwin 1981: 35f.). The recording showed a few men standing side by side and talking to each other (“Your mother was ravin’ about the veal cutlets last night”) while at the same time chopping cutlets and throwing single pieces of meat into a container some feet away. This scene with its layered and dovetailing actions came to my mind when more than forty years after my first acquaintance with his name (and after many personal encounters

with him) I started to read Goodwin's book *Co-operative Action* which he had finished a few months before his death.

Over the four decades between "Meat Market" and *Co-operative Action*, Goodwin not only completed an admirable academic career but revolutionised his field of research in a gentle, yet sustainable manner. I shall not recapitulate here Goodwin's academic career and scholarly achievement in detail. Suffice it to say that Goodwin, along with his wife and colleague, linguistic anthropologist Marjorie H. Goodwin, after studying with Erving Goffman at Philadelphia, first taught at the University of South Carolina, and from 1996 until his retirement as a professor at the Communications Department at UCLA. During his lifetime he has published several books and a long list of papers, many of which were extremely influential and got high citation rates. In addition to his extraordinarily successful publications, he was an acclaimed lecturer who was able to mesmerise the audience with his liveliness and commitment. I guess that nobody who ever had the chance to listen to one of his focussed, fastly delivered presentations will ever forget this experience.

The book *Co-operative Action* is Goodwin's last publication, bringing together and building upon a variety of his papers, which he re-worked and re-arranged. But the book is neither simply a collection of already published work nor is its perspective backward-looking. Its main objective is to construct for a series of empirical studies, which cover quite diverse contexts, a single conceptual framework. Instead of imposing an overall theory created out of the blue, Goodwin returned to the materials which he had already analysed and began to identify common organisational practices and ties between seemingly heterogeneous fields, e.g. ties between what archaeologists and lawyers are doing.

Goodwin's work is firmly rooted in conversation analysis (CA) but from the very beginning he was original in his approach and innovative in his methods. Two points should be mentioned:

- When CA started in the second half of the 1960s with work by Harvey Sacks and Emanuel Schegloff, the data which they analysed consisted entirely of audio recordings of telephone or face-to-face-conversations. It is very well possible that this limitation was of help to bring about CA's specific methodological attitude and its sense for interactional details. But life does not happen on a phone line. As necessary as this limitation may have been, it remained a limitation which had crucial methodological consequences. So, when Goodwin embarked on his scholarly career, he decided to use the new technology of "video" and started to record everyday interaction such as dinner table talk, birthday parties, a picnic of friends, family get togethers, or butchers talking during their work. Accordingly, he was the first to introduce the study of nonverbal, bodily activities as a topic in its own right into CA.
- A common feature of the field of CA was a widespread hesitancy to move conceptually beyond the phenomenon at hand. The analysis was entirely focused on and restricted to the data which were given to the reader in the form of detailed transcripts. The analysis should speak for itself, and if valid, it would not need a backing up by references. Goodwin never shared this hesitancy, he referred to concepts from other traditions of research whenever he was convinced that this would shed additional light on the results of one of his empirical studies. The ease with which he tapped into sociological, linguistic, or philosophical theories was a unique feature of his scholarly profile - and helped to make CA accessible for other research traditions.

As I have already mentioned, the main objective of Goodwin's *Co-operative Action* is to develop a single conceptual framework which would encompass and bring together the results of his prior studies. He searched for commonalities and general patterns in his own research history and made frequent references to semiotics, Alfred Schutz' concept of intersubjectivity, and other theoretical sources. But compared with his pre-

vicious work there is a crucial difference now: In his previously published papers, his theoretical ambitions were attached and, in that sense, were secondary to his detailed analyses of single phenomena of face-to-face interaction. In the book at hand, this relation has been turned around, the numerous empirical analyses that can be found in the book from beginning to end are now meant to serve the theoretical argument.

Goodwin's main theoretical argument is that all social interaction - even when co-interactants are in opposition to each other and perform hostile acts - is basically co-operative insofar as every single action inevitably uses material from prior interaction for its own operation. The indexical features of any single action, its placement, its wording, its phonetic contour etc., provide resources which are re-used - taken up, shaped, transformed, re-composed - in subsequent actions. Since this happens with every new utterance, there is an "accumulation of structure" (31) which manifests itself in the dense coherence of an unfolding interaction and in the progressive aggregation of knowledge and other resources. It is evident that Goodwin's concept of "co-operative action" does not refer to historically or culturally specific forms of doing things together, it is irrelevant whether an interaction effectuates people's benefit or harm; the concept is epistemically rooted on a very deep level and is meant to capture a constitutive feature of our *conditio humana*: "Building action by accumulatively incorporating resources provided by others creates a distinctive form of sociality: it is one of the ways in which we inhabit each other's actions." (31)

Whereas Goodwin uses the hyphen to make a clear-cut distinction between "co-operation" and cooperation, another way to mark this distinction and to capture the aprioristic meaning attached to "co-operation" would be to speak of "proto-cooperation". One implication of such a conceptual shift would be that it makes visible that the concept of "co-operation" is closely related to kindred aprioristic concepts such as proto-sign (Schütz/Luckmann 1989: 151) or proto-morality (Bergmann

1998: 283ff) which share with Goodwin's concept their socio-phenomenological background.

The distinction between cooperation and co-operation - as between sign/proto-sign or morality/proto-morality - is a tricky one. Co-operation, conceived as an *a priori* of human sociality, refers to structures of the lifeworld that precede any empirical forms and cases of cooperative practices or episodes. But how is this concept of co-operation achieved? In phenomenology a concept like "co-operative action" would be generated by "looking" at an object and its "eidetic variation", by disentangling layers of the phenomenologist's consciousness and experience and by imagining that, in doing so, it will be possible to come so close to "the things themselves" that one can directly read their "essence". Goodwin took another path. Instead of introspection, cognitive self-exploration and "eidetic variation" he used the huge variety of empirical cases, which he had collected and already studied during his scholarly life and distilled from them the social entanglement and intermeshing of co-interactants as an ever-present organisational practice.

Thus, Goodwin's theoretical concept of "co-operation" has a paradoxical quality: It claims universal validity as a non-empirical, quasi-transcendental pre-condition of human interaction, yet it is at the same time derived from empirical cases and gains plausibility through empirical evidence. It is this paradoxical concurrency of pre-empirical/empirical that furnishes Goodwin's book its ethnomethodological character. Ethnomethodology has made itself comfortable on a most uncomfortable spot: on top of the fence between sociology and phenomenology, between empirical research and pre-empirical reflection. Garfinkel once issued the ethnomethodological study policy to treat "the objective reality of social facts as an ongoing accomplishment of the concerted activities of daily life" (Garfinkel 1967: VII), but he left it to the reader's intuition what he meant with "concerted" activities. Goodwin's notion of "co-operation" can be seen as a perfect empirically based elucidation and theoretically ambitious reformulation of Garfinkel's expression.

Goodwin's description of "co-operative" action is so general that it is possible to misuse the concept, take it from the area of face-to-face interaction, and transfer it to scientific communication. One could then say: Every new scientific contribution is "co-operative" in the sense that it performs systematic operations on something created by someone else. Whereas in social interaction we "inhabit each other's actions", scientists inhabit each other's texts. Turning this twist on Goodwin himself, one may ask, who is inhabiting Goodwin's texts and how did he re-use, de-and re-compose, and transform the texts of others.

Given Goodwin's strong affiliation with CA, it comes as no surprise, that Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson are the most prominent "inhabitants" in his texts. More interesting is what kind of transformative operations on central propositions of CA he has performed. Mostly, these operations have broadened and enriched CA, sometimes, though, they adopt a new course that departs somewhat from the original CA approach.

His preoccupation with gestures and bodily interaction led Goodwin to realise that the simultaneity of activities is of as much importance as their sequentiality. Traditionally, the sequential organisation of social interaction was a tenet of CA, the sequential position of an utterance was regarded to be the main context, based on which an utterance got its meaning. But every utterance is a multi-layered activity, where gestures, body postures, direction of gaze, prosodic features, lexical choice etc. occur in parallel and in relation to each other. CA had to learn from Goodwin that, in addition to the sequential position of an utterance, there are material features, which in his book he called "substrates" (32) and which, like a body twist or a grid on the ground for a jumping game, may serve co-participants as a resource for understanding and for the construction of a subsequent activity.

Garfinkel (1972) spoke again and again of the "local production of social order" and although it seemed clear without saying that "local" was meant to refer to the situated character of the social world, the ques-

tion remained: what is “local”? and how local is local? Video technology enabled Goodwin to observe in fine-grained detail how situational contingencies shape the production of an utterance. And he was able to show that an emerging turn is co-operatively organised by adapting its course to momentary changes like a shift in a recipient’s alignment, or the rise of an eyebrow. Goodwin thus confirmed a radical thesis formulated already 1929 by Vološinov (1973: 86):

Word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee.

For the ethnomethodological *façon de parler*, the loose talk of “local production” was quite helpful as a sign of membership, although - or because - it was hardly ever substantiated. With his demonstration that the smallest elements of an utterance are the result of co-operative calibration, Goodwin saved this core ethnomethodological expression from becoming an empty phrase.

Although Goodwin dedicated a good part of his scholarly life to come to grips with and to unfold in detail the local production of situated social order, he seemed to be unhappy that the particular local moment was the main - if not the only - focus of CA. He saw that history - or generally: events outside and prior to the local moment - somehow matter for situated interaction and he was, therefore, looking for ways to show how history becomes relevant in a given social moment. Building on Alfred Schutz notion of “predecessors” and studying the work of archaeologists, he started to analyse how objects in a face-to-face interaction make visible earlier activities of actors who had lived in the past. Here Goodwin’s concept of accumulation comes into play and gains prominence. In his view, co-operative action is built not only with interlocutors in a face-to-face situation but also with predecessors, in both

cases, prior actions are used as resources, are re-shaped and made the object of accumulative transformations. The idea (as I understand it) that one can “reverse engineer” a given setting by reading it backward and looking at it as the accumulative result of transformative co-operations is fascinating. It remains to be seen, however, whether this idea of stepping outside of the “local” order production implies such a radical “transformation” that it will eventually blast the methodological frame within which Goodwin’s work is located.

In early CA, the notion of “recipient design” was quite prominent and widely used, although it was never thoroughly explicated. It was introduced to capture the various ways in which a party in a conversation display in their talk an orientation to their particular co-participant(s) (Sacks/Schegloff/Jefferson 1974: 727). Goodwin has not only shown that a story is designed differently depending on whether it is told to a knowing or an unknowing recipient. He has also analysed in detail that a speaker changes - co-operatively - an emerging utterance in its course when they realise that they move from an unknowing to a knowing addressee. When Goodwin developed the distinction between knowing and unknowing actors, he was one of the first in the field to see the importance of the unequal distribution of knowledge among co-participants - and in general: the situational epistemic constellation - with regard to the unfolding interaction in any given moment. What he did miss, though, was that knowledge in everyday life hardly ever occurs as neutral information but in most cases is imbued with social-moral ingredients - normative expectations, entitlements, dubious histories, shady sources etc. In earlier work (Bergmann 1993: 99) I showed, e.g. that information conveyed in gossip is by no means neutral information but mostly “morally contaminated” so that actors take certain precautionary measures when they tell - or ask for - juicy stories. A concept of knowledge which has been purged of these dark sides is in danger of failing to recognise phenomena which result from the co-interactants’ effort to cope with these more awkward sides of knowledge.

This last remark leads to a more general and somewhat critical comment on Goodwin's theoretical ambition. The term cooperation - and generally the prefix "co-" - comes along with a "positive" semantics and evokes associations of teamwork, interplay, or synergy, insinuating that the partners involved are on an equal footing and have equal rights. Of course, Goodwin's more abstract concept of "co-operation" is meant to strip off just this benevolent semantic aura. But the cases he analyses and the examples he offers range from the successful interaction with an aphasic man able to speak only three words to the sharing of food or the pedagogical building of new cognitively rich, skilled members. But what about the refusal of cooperation, paternalistic modes of doing things together, the enforcement or cancellation of cooperation? And although we may "inhabit each other's action", there is also the possibility of "occupying" the other's action. The accumulation of transformative co-operative actions is a persuasive description of the progression of turn-by-turn talk (although I doubt that it can be blown up to a general model of human evolution). But there are voluntary and enforced stops, blockages, recessions, and the negation of accumulation may sometimes even lead to a higher degree of self-determination. - In short, to me, Goodwin's concept of cooperation/co-operation suffers from a harmonistic bias.

Despite this critical remark, I think that there can be no doubt that Goodwin's book is a landmark in the history of CA and the analysis of social interaction in general. He has lifted the research tradition for which he was a most prominent proponent during his entire scholarly life, onto a new level. Forty years ago, I admired the unknown colleague who had the chutzpah to go to a meat market, to record butchers during their daily work and conversation, and to hope that this seemingly trivial event will eventually help him to understand better what is going on when people interact with each other. Today I am enthusiastic about the last work of a dear colleague, who with his curiosity, his imagination, and his persistence was an inspiring role model for many and who, with

his theoretical reformulations, has enriched our work and furnished it with new dimensions.

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