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Conversation analysis and religion: Practices of talking about Bible texts in Seventh-day Adventist Bible study

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to show what ethnomethodology and, especially, conversation analysis as methods have to offer to the study of Bible reading. The methodology of conversation analysis is compared with the methods of the ethnography of reading. The conversation analytical perspective is demonstrated through examining some recurrent practices of talking about Bible texts in Seventh-day Adventist Bible study, namely, recontextualizing words and expressions, and inferences about the characters and events in the texts. The article shows how interactional practices are analyzed as both situated and recurrent. In the concluding section a suggestion is made for how the perspectives of ethnography and conversation analysis can be combined. The data consists of audio-recordings of actual Bible study sessions in a Seventh-day Adventist church in Finland.

Introduction

Since the rise of reader response theory (see e.g. Fish, 1980) we have known that the meanings of texts are constructed by readers. This is especially true of sacred texts. As Boyarin (1989, p. 412) has noted, 'tradition is not a thing but a process'. The meaning of sacred texts is (re)constructed time and time again in different literacy events (cf. Heath, 1982) in which the texts are read, cited, recited, discussed, and so on.

In the present paper I will analyze the construction of meanings in a Seventh-day Adventist (henceforth, SDA) Bible study group in Finland. Earlier qualitative research of studying the Bible has been mainly carried out with ethnographic methods (Boyarin, 1989, Forstorp, 1990, Forstorp, 1991, Forstorp, 1992, Kapitzke, 1995, Keller, 2004, Morris, 1996, Zajac, 2003, Zinsser, 1986). The present study is mainly based on ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967, Heritage, 1984) and conversation analysis (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998, ten Have, 1999). In this paper, my purpose is to compare ethnography and conversation analysis as ways of studying Bible reading. Before presenting the aims of the article in detail, I will briefly compare the ethnographic and conversation analytic perspectives.

Ethnography, as a wide field of study, defies any simple overall description. Such a description is thus not attempted here. Rather, I will describe a few major characteristics of ethnographic analyses of Bible study groups. These studies can be broadly seen as part of the tradition of ethnography of reading (Boyarin, 1993). My main objective is to find points of comparison between ethnography and conversation analysis, and the following description of ethnography stems from this comparative perspective.

The first aspect of ethnography I would like to draw attention to is the nature of the fieldwork and the collection of data. Ethnographic research usually involves lengthy periods of participant observation at the site of the research, during which the observer participates in many kinds of events. In the case of ethnography of reading the Bible, it means that the observer tries to capture as many literacy events where the Bible is used as possible. Kapitzke (1995), for example, examines how the Bible is used in different activities in the church, the home and the school. Many ethnographers also record some of the events they observe (e.g. Zajac, 2003, p. 40). Finally, ethnographers often use interviews (e.g. Ammerman, 1987, pp. 12–33; Forstorp, 1992, p. 107). Thus, ethnography is based on a multitude of data of different kinds of events. The meeting of the Bible study group as an interactional encounter is never the sole, usually not even the primary, object of analysis for ethnographers.

The second point is related to the first. Ethnographies of Bible reading usually search for what could be called holistic explanations. That is, they search for overarching functions of reading in the community that are realized through different kinds of literacy events.

Keller's (2004) study is a case in point. Her data is based on her observations of SDA textual practices in two contexts: in the home and in church services. She sees these practices as mainly serving the function of providing clarity concerning truth about the universe. In many studies a holistic explanation is reached through comparison of different communities. Forstorp (1992), for example, compares a fundamentalist church in which Bible reading is seen as an act of unmediated reception, 'living' the Bible, and a more conventional church in which the Bible is interpreted. Likewise, Morris (1996) compares the practice of Christian Javanese of reading and discussing the text with the Islamic practice of reciting. Thus, Bible reading practices are seen by ethnographers as inherently cultural, as both products and building blocks of different religious (sub)cultures. As Forstorp (1992, pp. 10–11) has stated, ethnographic studies stress differences between cultures, and, at the same time, similarities inside them.

An important aspect of the cultural nature of Bible reading is, for many ethnographers, its relationship to authority. This can be seen in the dilemma Kapitzke (1995) sees between the importance of individual study and the strength of authoritative interpretations of the Bible in the SDA church. A similar kind of a dilemma is presented by Zajac (2003) in her study of a Catholic Bible study group. Unlike the SDA church, the Catholic Church has historically discouraged individual study of the Bible. The Second Vatican Council (1963–1965), however, effected a remarkable change by suggesting that laypeople should study the Bible. According to Zajac (2003, pp. 217–218), this has led to a dilemmatic situation: the Bible study is 'a hybrid that allows for personal opinion and exploration and the comfort of institutional authority'.

The above mentioned characteristics of ethnography can be compared with the perspectives of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967, Garfinkel, 1972, Garfinkel, 2002) refers to the study of situated practical action. It is based on the idea that the analyst's job is to describe how members of any social activity themselves orient to the methodical, rational character of the activity (Garfinkel, 1972, pp. 322–323). Conversation analysis is a strand of ethnomethodology that 'is directed at describing and explicating the competences which ordinary speakers use and rely on when they engage in intelligible, conversational interaction' (Heritage, 1984, p. 241). Conversation analysis has been used for the analysis of both ordinary conversation and institutional interaction (Drew and Heritage, 1992).

In ethnomethodology proper, a range of data gathering techniques are used, including experiments and ethnographic fieldwork (see Garfinkel, 1967, McHoul, 1982). In conversation analysis, however, only video- or audio-recordings of naturally occurring

interactions are used as data (Heritage, 1984, pp. 234–238; Peräkylä, 1997, p. 203). These are seen as more detailed and reliable than, for example, field notes (Heritage, 1984). It is clear, however, that the preference for recording limits the range of interactional situations that can be studied. In some religious settings, for example, recording is not allowed (see e.g. Engelke, 2004, p. 81).

While ethnographic studies often search for holistic explanations, ethnomethodological and conversation analytic studies search for situated explanations. The aim is to describe the structures of interaction that constitute the activity that is being analyzed (cf. Heap, 1985, p.267; Heritage, 1984, p. 241), to find recurrent patterns of interaction (Peräkylä, 1997, p. 202).¹ This means, most importantly, that every turn of talk in interaction is analyzed in its sequential context. Every turn includes an interpretation of the previous turn and, at the same time, furnishes the context for the next turn. The analysis is data-driven in that findings are tightly grounded with the empirically observable behavior of the participants (Heritage, 1984).

However, even though conversation analysts study situated action, they are also interested in culture. Recurrent actions and patterns are, of course, conventional and conventions are cultural, and they may also be related to a subculture. But conversation analysts insist that subcultures, institutions and so on cannot be taken for granted. It cannot be assumed that if an action is performed in the context of a subculture, that culture is necessarily relevant for performing the action. The aim of the analysis is to show what the participants of the interaction themselves treat as relevant and consequential for the interaction (Schegloff, 1991, pp. 49–57). Thus, in conversation analysis, the object of analysis is the interaction itself. In fact, somewhat paradoxically, conversation analysts often end up showing that participants in some institutional situation actually rely on quite general non-institutional resources (cf. Schegloff, 1997).

Even though, as discussed above, there are many differences between conversation analysis and ethnography, these traditions are not totally alien to each other. The role of ethnographic knowledge is important in conversation analysis as well. As ten Have (1999, p. 67) has noted, however, this issue has raised some controversy in conversation analysis. He gives examples of conversation analytic work where researchers have tried to avoid ethnographic knowledge to be able to concentrate solely on the interaction *per se*. Moerman (1988), on the other hand, opts for a ‘culturally contextualized conversation analysis’, where conversation analysis is systematically combined with ethnography. According to Moerman (1988, p. 48), ‘[a]ll speech occurs in some particular socio-cultural setting that must be described if we are to understand what is said’. Arminen (2000, p. 436) also acknowledges

the importance of ethnographic knowledge. He maintains that 'conversation analytical studies use knowledge of the context anyway, either overtly or tacitly'. His aim, however, is not to unite conversation analysis systematically with ethnography, but to acknowledge the importance of cultural knowledge. I agree with Arminen on the importance of cultural knowledge. It is, in fact, important in the analysis of any interaction. Even the analysis of ordinary conversation necessarily assumes common sense knowledge (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998, pp. 112–113; see also McHoul, 1982, pp. 94–95; Turner, 1971, p. 187). In the analysis of ordinary conversation this knowledge is more or less available to anyone, but when analyzing interaction in a partly isolated subculture such as Seventh-day Adventism, specialized knowledge is needed (cf. Arminen, 2000, p. 438). Such knowledge can be attained through ethnographic work, but, as ten Have (1990) notes, a sufficient knowledge for the purposes of conversation analysis can also be attained through membership in the subculture. This member's knowledge is then used to make sense of the interaction. In this study the knowledge has been acquired through membership.

As Beckford (2000, p. 484) has noted, there is surprisingly little ethnomethodological or conversation analytical work on religious practices (see, however, Lehtinen, 2005, Nissi, 2005, Person, 1996). There is, however, some work on reading practices. McHoul (1982) has studied solitary reading with ethnomethodological experiments. Baker and Freebody (1989) and Heap (1985) have studied reading exercises in school. They show, for example, how reading exercises are constituted through teachers' questions, pupils' answers and teachers' evaluative turns. They also draw attention to how pupils must learn to use cultural logic in a situated way, in answering the teacher's questions.

The main aim of this study is methodological. My purpose is to show what ethnomethodology and conversation analysis as methods have to offer to the study of Bible reading, especially compared to ethnography. To do this, I will identify and analyze some recurrent practices the participants of SDA Bible study use when they interpret the Bible together. These practices I will call 'recontextualizing words and expressions' and 'inferences'. I will concentrate on showing how these practices can be seen, from the perspective of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, as both situated and conventional. In the concluding section I will reflect on the possibility of combining the perspectives and methods of ethnography and conversation analysis.

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Section snippets

Seventh-day Adventists and the Bible

In this section I will give a brief overview of the history and sociology of the SDA church internationally and in Finland. I will especially concentrate on how Seventh-day Adventists view the Bible. As discussed in the previous section, the meaning and import of a subculture for the analysis cannot be taken for granted in conversation analysis, so this or any description of the culture cannot be taken as a starting point for the analysis. This section can thus be seen mainly as background...

Data and methods

The data used for the research reported in this article consists of audio-recordings of authentic Bible study interactions in a SDA church in Finland. The data includes 11 Bible study sessions in a small group of 12–38 members, lasting between 35 and 45 min. In seven of these sessions (Ta1–Ta7) the discussion concerns the books of Ezra and Nehemiah (cf. Raamatun sanoma, 1993), in four of them (Ta8–Ta11) different aspects of ‘winning souls’ – evangelism (cf. Raamatun sanoma, 1994). The teacher...

Recontextualizing words and expressions

Lexical choice has been shown to be an important way for speakers to show their orientation to the institutional context of their talk (Drew and Heritage, 1992, p. 29). In the Bible study, the participants, while talking about Bible stories, use words and expressions that refer to their own present-day context. In this way, they implicitly recontextualize the Bible story and make it relevant for themselves (cf. Forstorp, 1992, p. 198). I will show four cases of recontextualizations. My aim is...

Inferences

The participants also make inferences about the Bible texts. Most often these inferences can be described as psychologizations (cf. Ayass, 1997, p. 222; Freebody et al., 1991, pp. 445–

448). The participants make inferences about feelings, motives, character traits and so on that are not mentioned in the text. Sometimes inferences can also involve the historical and cultural context of the biblical story (cf. Forstorp, 1992, pp. 195–197).

Inferences are marked with modal expressions, the most...

Conclusions

In this concluding section, I will reflect on the methodological payoff for the study of religious practices of using ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. In the introduction I compared ethnomethodology and conversation analysis with ethnography on a quite general level. Here I will make a more specific comparison. I will compare the results and methods used in this study with ethnographic studies of SDA Bible study. Such studies have been conducted by Kapitzke (1995) and Keller (2004)....

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...Using written texts as a resource in situated interaction is an important way of articulating text and talk, and an important phenomenon if we wish to overcome the opposition between structure and situation, stability and emergence. Actual empirical studies have either focused on the way written texts are produced in the course of talk-oriented interactions in environments as varied as primary

health care (Heath and Luff, 2000), call centers, service encounters (Whalen, 1995; Moore et al., 2010) and police interrogations (Komter, 2006; Gonzalez-Martinez, 2006) or on the way in which prior written texts can be oriented to and talked about to various effects, depending on how they are referred to, such as political statements quoted in parliamentary debates (Antaki and Leudar, 2001), organizationally relevant written material in professional meetings (Cooren et al., 2007; Lehtinen and Palli, 2011) or religious texts within study groups (Lehtinen, 2009). This special issue collection is more focused on the latter issue, and this paper takes it up in the context of French judicial hearings in France....

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