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A Pioneer in the Use of Video for the Study of Human Social Interaction: A Talk with Frederick Erickson

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In the spring of 2011, Dr. Frederick Erickson retired from his position as George F. Kneller Chair of Anthropology of Education and Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of California, Los Angeles. In this interview, Dr. Erickson recounts his personal interest in the organization of social interaction and those who influenced his work, alongside historical developments in the use of video methods for the close study of human social interaction. He further explains how his use of a quasi-musical transcription method avoids what he considers to be a tendency for logocentrism in empirical studies of face-to-face interaction. The highlight of our conversation with Dr. Erickson is his revelation of an alter identity or “Clark Kent” underneath both his teaching and scholarship. Lastly, we ask the inevitable question, “What intellectual pursuits he will follow upon leaving the Westwood campus” and also seek his advice for future generations of scholars interested in the study of language, interaction and culture.

LA: You’ve been a long-time and generous supporter of CLIC. Why is that? And, in what way do you see the efforts of the CLIC conference and publication as contributing to the study of how language, interaction and culture intersect?

FE: The main reason is that I think the combination of students and faculty doing conferences such as this is a very good idea. At my previous university—University of Pennsylvania—I inherited a role of being a convenor of the Ethnography in Education Forum. Students were involved in helping organize that conference from the very beginning. It was a place that welcomed young scholars and where people tried out ideas. It was also an opportunity for people to have experience presenting fairly early in their careers. The CLIC conference is similar, and I think it is a really good thing for graduate students to be doing. The other reason is, if you look across the different departments at UCLA, we have more people who are interested in social interaction, language, and culture concentrated here than any other place in the world, not just than any place in the United States. And so, it would be a terrible waste if we weren’t doing something like this.

LA: Tell us about the influential persons and events that led to the first videotape you made for analysis.

FE: The story starts with my undergraduate work in music. I was a music history major and a composition major, and I also became interested in ethnomusicology. In my freshman year in music history, even before I encountered ethnomusicology, I was struck by this notion that early Western music from the Middle Ages sounds discordant and weird to modern ears, yet we know from literature that this music was regarded as beautiful. This issue of cultural relativity was fascinating to me. Later, when I took ethnomusicology, we looked at the contemporary range of variation in kinds of music and social purposes of music, and that also was intrinsically interesting. Because ethnomusicologists went around recording performance, particularly with groups where you didn't have a regular musical notation, it seemed obvious that you ought to record people doing things and then study that in detail. I then got involved, along with other music students, in starting an after-school music program in an inner-city neighborhood on the West side of Chicago, where we went on Saturdays and gave free music lessons. This was the time of the Freedom Movement, and partly as result of my teaching I had a strong political passion. After I got a master's in music history, I took two years to work in this neighborhood. I taught an after-school education project with an ethnomusicology curriculum about West African survivals in music and musical style in the New World. I audiotaped the sessions and then started listening to them and doing some transcription. When looking at these transcripts, I became more interested in the way kids talked about what we were doing and less interested in documenting curricular content. When I went back to school for my Ph.D., because of my interest in activism, I went to the education school at Northwestern, rather than to anthropology or linguistics. However, I took a lot of anthropology courses and encountered Ethel Albert, a linguistic anthropologist and a colleague of Gumperz, Hymes and Goffman at Berkeley. In a seminar entitled *Language and Culture*, I remember that Albert said, "Discourse is going to be the next frontier."

LA: Boy was she right.

FE: And she was right. Another person I encountered was Edward Hall, who was interested in cross-cultural communication. He is really the one who introduced me to the visual methods because he was doing studies of cultural uses of space and interpersonal distance. Hall invited William Condon to give a talk at Northwestern. Condon had been influenced by Ray Birdwhistell, and he did microanalysis of face-to-face interaction. He showed his movies, and I

thought, "That's it!" There were really two things that captured me while doing the doctoral study. That was one, and the other was I read Charles Frake's paper called, "How to ask for a drink in Subanun." It was from the special issue of the *American Anthropologist's Ethnography of Communication* that had just come out in 1964. In this article, he describes these men who sucked homemade rice beer through straws, squatting around under a little roof and talking with each other. And I thought, "Wow, what if there was a sound-cinema film of this so you could really see what they were doing at the same time as you were hearing the talk?" That led to the first videotape I made. It was done in the fall of 1967 in a study of small group discussions of middle school youth. I videotaped one discussion group and immediately could see who was addressing whom and how listeners were reacting when somebody spoke. I was interested in the logic of argument and persuasion in the rhetorical process, as an audience buy-in issue. You really have to be able to *see* as well as listen to understand how persuasion in a group takes place.

SJJ: How did you begin to use your music experience in your study of talk?

FE: We began using quasi-musical notation in the mid-seventies, after having done micro-transcriptions of timing. We numbered cinema film frames at 1/24 of a second and were able to show continuous time horizontally on graph paper, with every twenty-four squares representing a second. Across this time line, the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of separate individuals were overlaid vertically. The result was scrolls of transcripts that showed simultaneous as well as sequential embodied social action in real time. After looking at these scrolls for a while, I said "Man, let's see if there is an underlying pulse interval here." Paul Byers, along with Condon, was one of the first persons to talk about interpersonal synchrony. Byers showed me his silent films of Inuit hunters waiting over a seal hole in the ice to throw a spear. There are even timing patterns in loading the dog sled and unloading it; you could see that things were coming off the sled at regular intervals. There are many activities organized like this: Multiple rowers in a canoe time their joint effort, and old time sawing back and forth with a two-person saw also does this. There is a lot of this oscillation around. I got insights out of that kind of material, and I said, "Wait a minute, you know these scrolls that we're making that show the listener and speaker and what they are doing in relationship to each other? They look like an orchestra score." It's as if I reinvented the wheel! I had learned how to do this when I was a composition major and was sort of intuitively reproducing it in these analytic charts. Then I said, "What about using musical notation without pitch, the way a drum part would be written in a musical composition, and start to represent these patterns of both underlying pulse organization and,

at the level of syllables, speech rhythm?" There was a Georgetown roundtable conference that Deborah Tannen organized where I gave a talk that showed a dinner table conversation and the timing of two conversations between the mother and guest and the two kids sitting at two different axes at the dinner table. It showed their simultaneous, yet separate, conversations and how they avoided interrupting each other because they stayed in separate timings. That paper was the first time that actual musical notation was published. I had held off for years on such a publication because I thought people would think I was crazy. After all, some people had thought Condon was crazy and had way over-claimed something about interactional synchrony between listeners and speakers.

LA: What are the advantages or disadvantages of musical notation?

FE: Musical notation became an advantage for me because I was one of the few people that had the musical chops to be able to accurately do this type of transcription, and discourse analysis didn't really appear until the mid-1970s. It's not self-aggrandizing to say that a good deal of what was in my book, *The Counselor as Gatekeeper*, was thirty years before its time. What was a bit of a disadvantage was that some people weren't ready for it. However, some of the people that were ready for it were very good people, such as John Gumperz, Erving Goffman, Dell Hymes, Roger Shuy and others. In anticipation of certain kinds of criticism, I did inter-judge reliability for various codes, like for head nods. This was so people couldn't say, "You're making this up." I remember a Chomskian linguist from MIT who came over once to see my films and slow motion analyses in the seventies. I said, "Did you see? Did you see how the knee of the listener is moving in time with these pulses and the stress syllables in the voice?" And he said, "Yes, but it's theoretically not possible."

SJJ: In your more recent writing you have called for better methods for analyzing talk. What do you mean by this?

FE: This is an enduring issue that keeps coming in and out of the field. Discourse analysis, interactional sociolinguistics and conversation analysis were all growing in the 1970s. Something that struck me over time was they all had the tendency to focus on talk at the expense of listening activity. Increasingly, people were working off of play-script transcripts of various kinds, but that way of displaying things makes it difficult to show listening activity and especially to show its simultaneous occurrence with speaking activity. That has troubled me all along; in the pejorative term, it's logocentrism. Per Linell, who is a Swedish sociolinguist, wrote about this many years ago. People like

Charles and Marjorie Goodwin were very much in the same vein because they studied with Ray Birdwhistell at Penn. Taking a symphony orchestra or, even better, an improvising jazz group as a model for what people do in conversation, I know that the things that are happening simultaneously are just as important as things that are happening successively. Yes, there is a sequential organization that is very important, but simultaneity is also very important. Hall was very clear about that in the paper he wrote in the late sixties about listening behavior.

LA: You were one of the first researchers to use video extensively in studies of workplace settings, including the study of the work of teaching and learning in school classrooms. Throughout your career, classrooms continued to be the main focus of your research. What first interested you in the culture of classrooms and what sustained your interest over the years?

FE: At first, I wasn't intrinsically interested in classrooms, but I have been since. My original motivation for this was an interest in the organization of social interaction and how is it possible that we can make meaning moment to moment, collectively and locally, in concerted social action. While it's now considered a really important topic, back in the heyday of Chomsky, when I got to Cambridge, Massachusetts, nobody big was interested. Now we don't have to fight that battle. I was interested in not only those issues as basic research, but I also had this political commitment that came from my work in the Freedom Movement. In the neighborhood where I was working, I was seeing kids who were really having trouble in school. They seemed to be very serious, yet were being turned off by school. I wanted to try to do something about that. The tack I took was to do microanalysis of social interaction scenes and, in particular, those that had consequences for peoples' life chances. In 1970, I did a study of dyads in job interviews. I was working with kids who went off for interviews and they'd come back and say, "I talked to the man and he acted like I didn't know anything... like I was stupid." I also studied academic advising; "gatekeeping in interaction" was what I called it. The notion was that these are scenes where what happens interactionally can reasonably be assumed to have consequences for the future lives of people. Of course, classrooms are another place, and early grades classrooms are especially where it starts. So, I worked on analyzing dyadic interaction and then went on to study kindergarten and first grade settings. After I left Harvard, I worked for a time researching physician and patient interaction at both Michigan State and Penn. I also did family interaction. In 1974, when I was still at Harvard, my students and I did a classroom study where we followed kids home to see what was happening interactionally after school. This was similar to the

method Roger Barker had modeled years before without audio recording. He wrote a book called *One Boy's Day* that was based on a study where they followed this second-grade boy in a small, Midwestern town. Doctoral students took notes of every situation he went through in the day. The point is that I kept getting led to different places where there were life chances at stake, and I eventually decided I would focus on classrooms.

SJJ: Following from the previous question, how can digital methods or other technologies be used to “see” learning?

FE: I don't think you can see learning directly unless it happens in a moment like the story of Helen Keller at the water pump when she realizes the existence of language. There are “ah ha” moments where we get a new insight or a skill all of the sudden; for example, when learning dance or learning to play an instrument, there may be a breakthrough during a practice session. More often, like language acquisition in early childhood, it is a much more gradual process. If you are going to study learning, you need samples over long strips of time and to look for change in that. Most people don't do it that way. That is another criticism I've had of discourse studies. People have their favorite scenes, and they do a beautiful article or part of a book that shows all kinds of neat details about this single occasion. That makes it look as if people go from one single occasion to another in their world, and it's much more complicated than that. If you really do want to show learning in a strict sense and define it as change in participation in a local community of practice, then you have to do long-term fieldwork with recording in order to get that evidence. If there are actual discrete moments of learning, they may not be on the tape, but at least you can show over time the way things change. Roger Brown did child language studies where they audiotaped kids in the crib from the first days of life through twenty-three months or so. They were able to show that what people thought was random babbling was increasingly intelligible as sound practice. That's what it takes. You've got to have a corpus of material across a substantial amount of time.

SJJ: So you feel that fieldwork should be part of a study that uses video methods?

FE: Well, I have always included fieldwork along with recording. That's what a good ethnomusicologist does. It seemed obvious to me that we needed participant observation. When in the late 1930's Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead studied Balinese dancers teaching their young apprentices, they were doing ethnography as well as filming. It seems to me if you take seriously, as

we now do, the fact of indexicality in talk, but also the importance of it for making meaning in an actual conversation, then what is being indexed implicitly all over the place, you couldn't possibly know unless you were familiar with people.

LA: We are naturally interested in what pursuits will occupy your time upon retirement. Something that is perhaps not as well known about you in the field is that you have been a longtime vocational deacon of the Episcopal Church. From prior conversations, we know that you plan to write about your experience in your post as Archdeacon in which you oversaw the ministry of deacons in the church's Los Angeles diocese. Tell us more about your experience in this post and your interest in writing about it and how this writing will be informed by your work studying social interaction.

FE: My book, *Talk and Social Theory*, is actually an implicit argument for moral responsibility. I've kept my clerical or religious identity hidden as an academic. This is partly because there is a prejudice in the social sciences against religion, but also because it just confuses people. One time at Harvard, I showed up in my clerical collar. People were very confused, so I've never done that again. (If I have to do something where I'm dressed clerically, like Clark Kent I'll find a phone booth and change my clothes.) Another time, when Barbara Rogoff and I were at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences together, she ran into me at the San Jose airport. I was flying down to a church meeting in my priest suit, with my collar. When she saw me, her eyes opened really large, and she went, "Oohp!" She's never forgotten that. So, I've kept that identity hidden, but my involvement with the church was behind my commitment to activism and to educational and social justice in my scholarship. Theologically, and in terms of the way the church defines it, deacons have a special relationship with people who are marginalized and a responsibility in pointing out to the world issues of social justice. In the ordination ceremony, they say, "You are to interpret to the church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world." Churches tend to get very church-centric—just like discourse analysis can be logocentric—and just focus on "Oh God, we've got to fix the roof again" kinds of things. Deacons are supposed to help the church with that and also help liturgically. There's the political side and then there is the artistry side. Liturgy is a performance. It's a dance, like an opera with a dance troupe. As a deacon, one thing I do is teach people how to sing liturgically, and we move in timing—the kinds of timing patterns I've been analyzing for my interactional sociolinguistic work. In fact, a long time ago in an interaction seminar, a group of my students and I videotaped an All Saints Day liturgy at a liturgically elaborate church. In the video, you can see

timing patterns in people handing things to each other and all sorts of moves that people do intuitively. That's what makes part of the power of liturgy, and I'll probably write about that. I'll also continue to teach people how to sing liturgically, which feeds the musician in me as well as connects to my scholarship and political interests.

LA: Can you explain what you said about your book being an argument for moral responsibility?

FE: In my book, I speak of the notion of “wobble room” and co-membership—the inherently opportunistic character of moment-to-moment action and choice making in interaction. This is a place for moral choice. An overly determinist social theory removes the possibility of actual moral choice for people, and the religious side of me is unwilling to give that up. You have a choice of “Do you swim against the currents of your world” or “Do you go downstream with the currents?” Those are political and moral choices. This is a secular version of the free will and necessity argument in Western theology—the question of could inherently sinful people still make good choices or not. Over the years, Christians have killed each other over that argument. I've taken a particular position, which is kind of a Catholic mainstream way of thinking. There are actual opportunities for moral choice; therefore, there's a challenge to make those choices.

SJJ: You've jokingly called your mini-lectures “mini-sermons.” How does your “alter identity” appear in your interactions with graduate students?

FE: In terms of spiritual direction and pastoral counseling, the place in my life where I do the most of this is in thesis advising. Some of the fundamental spiritual issues are too much pride, too little pride or too little self-confidence, that is, trying to do something grandiose when it ought to be a little more down to earth or, alternately, not imagining quite richly enough. These are the sorts of things that come up when I advise students, and it's as if I have my stole on invisibly. I finally realized after years of thinking these were separate lives, with the phone booth in between, that another part of my religious vocation was to help people in a de-theologizing way. I have been a privilege to be able to work with people and realize that sometimes you can help them in ways in which they don't know they've been pastored.

SJJ: We have one last question. What advice can you offer to graduate students and emerging scholars interested in the study of language, culture and interaction?

FE: There are two main things to say: One is to really try to pay attention to how listening works in relation to speaking. If you want to do something about the understanding of speaking, you have to pay attention to the whole social ecology of interaction. Listening is crucial in that. The other thing to say is you should do what you want to do. As I look back, I realize that, as kind of a cohort, Bud Mehan, Ray McDermott and I all took really high-risk positions at the beginning of our careers. We worked on what we wanted to work on, whether people wanted to fund it or not. I think it's absolutely important that people follow their passions, because you end up spending a whole lot of time on whatever you do as a scholar, and it might as well be something that connects with who you are. I see some people being too cautious. In the early seventies, we were maybe naïve and thought there would be jobs and what-not; we weren't worrying as much as people realistically need to, but we did what we were interested in. I've been working directly with doctoral students for forty years and teaching at universities for forty-three years. And some of my early students did take risks—a higher proportion of them did so than compared to more recently. Now some students are saying, "Well... Which journal would be the more prestigious for my first publication?" When people come in and ask a question like that I want to throw them out into the hallway! The famous anthropologist Beatrice Whiting said to me once, "Don't listen to them. Do your work!" Fortunately, I had people who were credible who thought I was doing something interesting even though it was way out there. That kept me going, but I also had to be willing to skate on thin ice myself. As scholars, you don't get new imaginings by coloring within the lines.

Biography

Since 1999 Frederick Erickson has been the inaugural occupant of the George F. Kneller Chair in Anthropology of Education at UCLA, and has also taught in the Department of Applied Linguistics. A specialist in the use of video analysis in interactional sociolinguistics and microethnography, his work has focused especially on timing and rhythm in the social coordination of interaction, on relationships of mutual influence between listening and speaking, and on the signaling of multiple social identities in talk. He has also written extensively on qualitative research methods in educational and social research and on issues of ethnicity, culture, and language in education. His most recent book is titled *Talk and Social Theory: Ecologies of Speaking and Listening in Everyday Life* (Polity Press, 2004). His website is: <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/pages/ferickson.html>.

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