

Pamela Wahler  
Professor Vickers\Smith  
Thesis Proposal  
2/06/08

## WHÀTÈVER

The interjection “whatever” is commonly used in conversation (Kliener 1998). According to the *American Heritage Dictionary* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.), “whatever” is labeled as an interjection and is “used to indicate indifference to or scorn for something, such as a remark or suggestion: *We're having pizza tonight.—Whatever. I don't care.*” I argue that to differentiate whether “whatever” implies indifference or scorn, or something else, we must examine the prosodic contextualization cues that accompany the utterance in real contexts of use. According to Gumperz (1982), suprasegmental (prosodic) features of speech are crucial to understanding the nature of an interaction as they play a major role in conversational inference. In everyday conversational exchanges, subtle messages are conveyed largely through prosody. Gumperz terms such message-conveying features contextualization cues (Gumperz, 1977, pp. 191-211). For example, Johnstone (2002) discusses the interpretation of the utterance “sit down.” If one states “sit down,” stress falls on the word “down.” That could be a simple response to the question “what did you say?” However, if one states “SIT DOWN,” stress falls on both “sit” and “down,” changing the message conveyed. In many western sociocultural contexts, there is a contextualization cue inherent in this latter stress pattern that implies that it is a command. Prosody is an important contextualization cue that allows us to interpret the message actually conveyed. Though “whatever” is commonly used in American

conversational discourse, the different prosodic contextualization cues that act in conjunction with “whatever” to convey a message have not been well studied.

Therefore, the purpose of my thesis is to demonstrate the many different messages that “whatever” can convey in conversational discourse depending on the associated prosodic contextualization cues. Furthermore, I will explore how these different messages conveyed by “whatever” play a role in the construction of identity in face-to-face interaction by applying the frameworks of Interactional Sociolinguistics and Conversational Analysis.

According to Wennerstrom (2001) prosody is comprised of intonation, rhythm and the distribution and length of pauses. A crucial element in understanding how prosody is related to the construction of meaning is to examine social interaction among the participants within a speech event. One such method for analyzing meaning making in social interaction is through Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS). According to Gumperz (1982), “in IS analysis, speaking is treated as a reflexive process such that everything said can be directly related to preceding talk, reflecting a set of immediate circumstances, or responding to past events. Hence, speaking ties into a communicative ecology that significantly affects the course of interaction” (p. 221). Moreover, in conversations, we must continually make judgments at simultaneous levels of meaning, through inferential processes to interpret what has been said and generate expectations about what is to come. This process is context bound, as participants rely on their own background knowledge to make assumptions about the implied meaning and intent of the speaker.

However, meaning is not constructed in a vacuum but in the process of social interaction. Conversation Analysis (CA) conceptualizes social interaction as the means

by which “business of the social world is transacted” (Goodwin and Heritage 1990, p 283). In this social interactional process, the identities of interactants are affirmed or denied (Goodwin & Heritage ,1990, p. 283). Applying CA methodology, the examination of the sequencing of discursive moves among participants illustrates how reciprocal conduct, action and interpretation are linked as each participant must analyze each other’s utterances in order to produce the appropriate response. CA investigates *how* people display identity in terms of membership in social categories and the consequences of display for the interactional work being accomplished.

According to Antaki and Widdicombe (1998b) five principles aid in the analysis of identity in CA. First, to possess an identity a person must be cast into a category with associated characteristics with which there are a multitude of associated actions, beliefs, feelings and obligations. To be cast into a category is to take up those features and characteristics implied by that category. For example, if one looks and behaves like a flight attendant, people recognize that person as a flight attendant. Second, casting is indexical and occasioned, which means the identity only makes sense within that particular context. Third, casting makes the identity relevant to the context. Participants are bound to the categorical identity and this may affect the trajectory of talk. Fourth is consequentiality in the interaction. Because the participant is limited by the category, they are also limited in what they can do within the conversation. Therefore, by studying conversations embedded in particular social contexts, it is possible to assess how the use of particular linguistic features, such as “whatever,” contribute to the construction of identity in interaction.

I plan to use a corpus from the University of California, Santa Barbara to analyze the prosodic features of “whatever.” The Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English is based on hundreds of recordings of natural speech from all over the United States, representing a wide variety of people of different regional and social backgrounds. It reflects many ways that people use language in their lives, such as conversations and sermons. The data has already been transcribed for CA and prosody. Therefore, I will analyze the data in terms of the different meanings of “whatever” that are created through prosodic variation using IS methodology. Further, I will analyze the data in terms of how the different uses of “whatever” (differentiated through prosody) contribute to the construction of identity in conversational interaction using CA methodology.

In terms of organization, this thesis will consist of four chapters. I will include an introduction and literature review. The second chapter will consist of the description of data collection and analysis. The third chapter will include a discussion of the prosodic features found in these data and how these prosodic features contribute to the different meanings of “whatever” and how these different usages of “whatever” contribute to identity construction. The fourth chapter will conclude the thesis and discuss implications for further research.

Pamela Wahler  
2/06/08  
Thesis Proposal  
Professor Vickers/Smith

### Annotated Bibliography

Antaki, C. & Widdicombe, S. (1998). Identity as an achievement and as a tool. In C. Antaki & S. Widdicombe (Eds.), *Identities in talk* (pp. 1-14). London: Sage.

This article explains the five principles of both Ethnomethodology's and CA's approach to identity. The article claims that these five principles are central to an ethnomethodological approach, but more specifically to a conversation analytic one in analyzing identity. Moreover, the article claims that not all analysts will favor all five principles equally as some employ more ethnomethodology in their approach to identity than others. The authors write "there is variety in, and sometimes outright warfare over, what can reasonably be called ethnomethodology or conversational analysis; but getting a sense of how these five principles are used is to get a good flavor of the general ethnomethodological analytic attitude" (p. 2). I plan to use some of the principles in the analysis of identity construction, probably using a straight CA approach rather than more ethnomethodological approach, such as membership categorization.

Benwell, B. & Stokoe, E. (2006). *Discourse and identity*. Eidenberg University Press.

This book discusses different approaches to the study of identity in discourse. Included in these approaches is CA discussed in chapter two. The chapter begins with a debate on how to define identity, concluding that identity, for CA, is something that is flexible, fluid, context dependent and always emerges from the interaction. The chapter also discusses basic concepts in CA such as turn design and sequence organization. The chapter goes on to cover identity in interaction, providing sample analyses as well as categorical identities. I plan to use this book to aid me in the analysis of identity construction.

Du Bois, J. S., Suetze-Coburn, S., Cummings, S., & Paolino, D. (1993). Outline of discourse transcription. In J. Edwards & M. Lampert (Eds.), *Talking data* (pp. 45-90). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

This article provides a description of transcription devices used to document spoken data. I must know this system as this was the system used to transcribe the Santa Barbara corpus.

Goodwin and Heritage (1990) Conversational analysis. *Annual review of anthropology*, 19, 283-307.

This article provides the historical influences from such disciplines such as sociology, linguistics, and anthropology that helped to influence and shape what conversational analysis (CA) is today. CA believes that interaction should occupy a central position in any view of social life and exercises this belief by examining how language is organized within naturally occurring conversation. Moreover, the organization of real talk reveals how meaning is socially created, as well as how participants orient toward one another. Hence, CA provides a framework within which language, culture and social organization can be analyzed as cohesive and coherent units of action. This article will provide the foundation for one of the theoretical approaches to my analysis.

Gumperz, J. (1977). Sociocultural knowledge in conversational inference. In M Saville-Troike (ed), *Linguistics and anthropology* (pp. 191-211). Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

This article discusses the concepts of conversational inference and the importance that contextualization cues play in this process. Gumperz states that conversational inference involves several elements. One element in this process is the perception of prosodic and paralinguistic cues and the other is the interpretation of these cues. He claims that interpretation requires that “judgments of expectedness” are required for a participant to make sense of what a participant knows and perceives. He goes on to argue that we can never know the ultimate meaning of a message, but by examining the systematic patterns in the relationship of perception of contextualization cues, we can shed light on the social basis of face to face interaction. This article will provide the foundation for one of the theoretical approaches to my analysis.

Gumperz, J. (2001). Interactional sociolinguistics: a personal perspective. In D Schiffrin, D. Tannen, and H. Hamilton (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 216-228). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

This article emphasizes the importance of communication as a reflexive process where the context is constantly being co-constructed based on the participants’ reactions to past talk, the immediate situation, and expectations of upcoming turns. Furthermore, the context is influenced by the sociocultural background knowledge of participants within a speech event, as it is crucial to the interpretation of what the participants intend to convey. Gumperz coins the term “conversational inference” to refer to the way participants in a face-to-face conversation negotiate meaning, as meaning making is not just denotational (lexical and grammatical), but instead relies on implication and inferring in order to indicate how an utterance is to be up taken. In relation to this concept of conversational inference is the idea that the meaning of an utterance is only understood within a particular context. When participants are conversing, they are using grammar and lexical items to convey what they are intending to say, but these verbal signals convey only some of the meaning. Gumperz coined the word contextualization cue to refer to those features of face-to-face discursive interaction that imply subtle meanings which co-occur with the grammatical and lexical sign to indicate how an utterance is to be interpreted. One such contextualization cue is prosody. Furthermore, this article argues for and illustrates how an interactional sociolinguistic method “is

applicable to communicative situations of all kinds, monolingual or multilingual, as a means of monitoring the communication processes.”

I plan to use this source to define what “meaning” is and to illustrate how prosody is a contextualization cue and can be used to illustrate how participants in a speech event negotiate\up take the different meaning of the interjection “whatever” depending on the prosodic features of this token.

Johnstone, B. (2002). *Discourse analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

This book is an introduction to the field of discourse analysis that provides general information about the issues, methods and theories which comprise this interdisciplinary field. I plan to use it solely as a reference guide.

Kleiner, B. (1998). The use of “whatever” in pseudo-argumentation. *Journal of pragmatics*, 30, 589-613.

This article identifies and discusses three uses of the discourse marker “whatever” in argumentation, focusing on one particular use in what Kleiner call pseudo-argumentation. Kleiner writes in a foot note on pg 611, “whatever2 and 3 seem to be related to argumentative discourse in a crucial way, although one would expect to find whatever2 in pseudo-argument since participants in that type of discourse have no dispute to resolve. On the other hand, whatever1 is not limited to argumentation and does not seem to play a role at all at the ideational level of discourse. Certainly, other uses of ‘whatever’ may be found, but were not discussed as they did not occur in the data.” I am using this as a niche to begin my research. What are those other uses ‘whatever’?

Schiffrin, D. (1987). *Discourse markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This book examines the functions of discourse markers in conversation. By applying both linguistic and sociological approaches to the study of discourse, “she clearly demonstrates that neither the marker, nor the discourse within which they function, can be understood from one point of view alone, but only as an integration of structural, semantic, pragmatic and social factors.” The findings of her study suggest that markers provide contextual mechanisms which help in the production and thus interpretation of coherent conversation at both the micro and macro level of organization.

This book is useful to my project as it provides a method for analyzing discourse at the micro level. It should help me to answer how the prosodic features of “whatever” are related to meaning and use within a conversation, as discourse structure, meaning and action are simultaneously integrated by both speaker and hearer in their efforts to find and create conversational coherence.

Wennerstrom, A. (2001). *The music of everyday speech: prosody and discourse analysis*. Oxford: University Press.

This book provides an overall framework for the analysis of spoken discourse from a prosodic perspective, emphasizing the importance of intonation, timing and volume in the interpretation of face to face interaction. Hence the purpose of this book is to “demonstrate the centrality of prosody in the interpretation of spoken texts and to draw together a set of theoretical assumptions about prosody common to much of the phonological literature, as well as to provide an overview of prior analyses of discourse that have taken prosody into account” (viii). Her central argument is that discourse analysis should view prosody as central to discourse coherence and thus communication, as the kind of meaning conveyed by prosody can best be understood at the discourse level rather than at the level of the utterance itself. This book covers chapters from several approaches to discourse analysis and contains chapters on particular discourse topics such as “prosody as a discourse marker,” intonation and speech act theory,” and “prosody in the study of conversation.”

I plan to use this book for its discussion of prosody as the explanations of the theoretical approaches are written for the discourse analyst and not the trained phonologist. Moreover, the chapters on discourse markers, speech acts, and prosody in conversation should contribute to my research and argument considerably.

These are just the resources I have thus far. I plan to incorporate more as I continue to investigate this subject.