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## Erving Said That the Rigor and Formal Nature of Linguistics Could Add Status to the Just-Beginning Study of Social Interaction

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## Remembering Erving Goffman

### Deborah Schiffrin: Erving Said That the Rigor and Formal Nature of Linguistics Could Add Status to the Just-Beginning Study of Social Interaction

Dr. Deborah Schiffrin, professor of linguistics at Georgetown University, wrote this memoir for the Erving Goffman Archives and approved posting the present version on the web.

[Posted 07-03-09]

July 3, 2009

Dear Dmitri,

My colleague Deborah Tannen told me about your project and I'll add some memories about Goffman. I first read his work when an undergrad student in Sociology (then my major) in a course on sociological theory from Dean MacCannell (most recently at UC Davis) in Temple University. The course covered the classic Durkheim, Weber, Simmel and then Marx and Foucault and finally Noam Chomsky and Erving Goffman -- people who are not often linked together. I enjoyed G's work the most and as someone else posted in the website I felt "galvanized." MacCannell had written an article on hat tipping in *Semiotica* and my class project was on the handshake, which was then also published in *Semiotica*. When M. told me that G. was at Penn, he urged me to send him my article and I did. I still have the letter that he sent me back, inviting me to meet with him. Our meeting was at his house and it took place on Thanksgiving morning. At that period of time, MacCannell was leaving Temple for UC Davis and I was not interested in working with anyone else in Temple, since I had become obsessed with the study of social interaction. G. offered me several pieces of advice, including that I should not add my (then) fiancée's last name to my name (i.e. Schiffrin-Scavo) because my life as a married woman would be publicized, as would a possible separation or divorce. It turned out not to matter that much since I'm still married to the same person, but I was fascinated at how he gave me advice like that. On the more academic level, I mentioned that I had been

curious about a new area of linguistics called sociolinguistics that was being taught at Penn. G. urged me to apply to the Ling Dept at Penn, which I did and finished my PhD there, but his reasoning was interesting: he said that the rigor and formal nature of linguistics could add status to the just-beginning study of social interaction.

I switched to Penn, as noted above, and it was a very exciting time. Work in Conversational Analysis was just about to appear; Dell Hymes (a linguistic anthropologist) was also developing the ethnography of communication, Labov was studying not only urban dialects, sociolinguistic variation, but also the discourse of narratives. I was able to take a course with Goffman as he was working on *Frame Analysis*. His prerequisite was that we had already read his work – lucky I had done that. I wrote several papers under his tutelage: one on insults and flooding out; one on opening encounters (where I tried a formal approach to greetings and their failures) that was published in ASR – it was very exciting as a grad student! G. was very generous with his personal library in his office. I spent many hours reading up on ecology and animal behavior as well as human behavior.

When it came time to decide on a dissertation project, I got two different types of advice. From Labov, I was told to find a new way to examine an old problem, and from Goffman, to work on something that would be a topic that would be associated with my name (as if coining a new perspective or topic). I ended up working on discourse makers (little words like *y'know, now, then, and, well*), later published by Cambridge. There's been lots and lots of research on discourse markers (sometimes called particles), but apart from some review articles, I don't do research on them anymore.

Going back to the time of my dissertation -- I talked about it at his house several times, especially after he married Gillian (who was in the Ling Dept and one of my teachers). We also talked on the phone several times and I remember a funny time when I called him, announced it was me, and he broke into song -- Frere Jacques -- with my name... It was during my first year at Georgetown University that I learned that he had died. As I recall Gillian called

me to tell me. A few weeks later, I found the papers that I had written for him returning in my mail.

G. has been a major figure in my intellectual life. I have found numerous ways to bring in so many things that he's written about: front/back region, information given/given off, frame analysis and so on -- in my linguistic work. A few years ago, my colleague Ron Scollon, suggested I teach a seminar on G's work for our sociolinguistics students. I've done that twice and I hope I've given the students in that course a way of grounding their linguistic analyses of people talking and interaction with each other. It was also very moving for me, because I was able to find my notes from his classes and use them to make more sense of what we were reading of his published books.

Hope this is helpful!

Best,  
Debby