"Role" as an Interactional Device*

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This paper reports on an aspect of the social organization of interaction, namely, the use by interactants of the concept "role." In contrast with traditional social scientific uses of the concept in an explanatory manner in the analysis of social action, I propose that interactants use this concept to avoid stress of—or as an accom-

pany-action and anxiety in the world. Analysis of segments of conversation taken from vignettes of the Iran-Contra Congressional hearings demonstrate this as well as the more general point that descriptions are a form of social action.

Ko-Ko: Now, as my Solicitor, how do you advise me to deal with this difficulty?
Pooh-Bah: Oh, as your Solicitor, I should have no hesitation in saying "chance it".—
Ko-Ko: Thank you, I will.
Pooh-Bah: — if it were not that as Lord Chief Justice, I am bound to see that the law isn't violated.
Ko-Ko: I see. Come over here where the Chief Justice can't hear us. (They both sit down.)
The Mikado (v.i.S. Gilbert 1917:13)

The concept "role" has a long history in the social sciences. Introduced into sociology by Mead (1934) and Linton (1936), role has been a central concept in the work of diverse theorists (e.g., Parsons 1951, 1966; Merrit 1957, 1968; Turner 1962; Blumer 1969; Snyder 1980; Goffman 1959). Moreover, virtually every introductory sociology textbook notes that long before it was a sociological concept, role was used as a vernacular term by members of society. Many texts even provide a quotation from Shakespeare to help make this point:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances.
And one man in his time plays many parts.
As You Like It, Act II, Scene 7

However, most texts then move on to distinguish and discuss the related sociological concepts of rolesets, status, role conflict, and role strain.

This paper gives detailed attention to the prior point, namely, that the concept "role" is first and foremost, a "social invention" (Goffman 1970) used by members of society. I draw on video-taped segments of interaction to demonstrate how interactants use role to accomplish two interactional tasks, issuing and avoiding an accusation and, suggest how this re-division of role can lead to productive insight into the organization of social interaction. The point is to broaden our understanding of role beyond its use as an analytic, or second-order (Schutz 1942:99), concept, used by professional social scientists, to include an appreciation of how members use it as an interactional device in their everyday lives.

* A version of this paper was presented at the 1980 -1st Meeting of the American Sociological Association in Washington, D.C. I would like to thank Derek Bobkis, Steven Clayman, Anthony Caffaro, David Mannheim, Thomas Wilson, and Dan Zimmerman for their advice and suggestions. Earlier drafts of this paper I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of Social Problems for their insightful comments. This work was completed while the author was a National Institute of Mental Health pre-doctoral fellow. Grant Number 1F11MH17531. Correspondence to Department of Behavioral Science, College of Medicine, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40536-0088.

SOPHIE, PROBLEMS VIOL. 35. NO. 4, NOVEMBER 1970
"Role" in Social Theory and Everyday Life

Role is used in the social sciences to refer to the set of behaviors appropriate to a particular social position or status. Linton (1936) proposed that the "rights and duties" that constitute status are put into effect through one's role-performance. Social order is thus explained by reference to the sets of interlocking social positions in society (e.g., wife, husband, employee, employer) and the rights and duties these who occupy these positions have toward each other (Parsons 1966; cf. Hilbert 1961, forthcoming; Giddens 1964:83-84).

Turner (1962) criticized this functionalist conception of role and proposed an interactionistic account of how roles are organized, and in turn, how they organize the social world. Instead of treating role performance as the indifferent enactment of rights and duties prescribed for a particular status, Turner argued that role behavior is actively produced by people in interaction.

While both functionalist and interactionist approaches use role as an analytic tool to account for social order, members of society invented the concept of "role" as a useful, practical part of their language. As employed by members, the concept and conception of role allow for a distinction between a person and a "slot" in an organization (Coleman 1976:163) or some organized setting (see Kantorowit 1957). And Dorothy Smith (1974:44, drawing on Marx, has noted):

Marx's example instructs us not to treat a concept as a theoretical primitive, in the logical sense, nor as inescapable solely in terms of other concepts. Rather, a concept requires to be discovered again in the actualities of what living people do... Thus, a very ordinary piece of sociological currency, the concept of role. ... This concept could not be thought unless we already knew how to make a separation between person and role as a practical accomplishment.

Rather than treating "role" as a self-evident, social-scientific resource for analysis and following work by Garfinkel (1967) and Zimmerman and Poliner (1979), social scientists should take it as a topic of study. Doing so will help illuminate how individuals organize the social world by their use of these conceptions and actions (Schutz 1962:59; Sacks 1984).

Such a transformed way of analyzing "role" has been proposed by Hilbert (1981, forthcoming). After a powerful critique of the logical and practical possibility of "literal role prescription," Hilbert (1981:216-17) offers an empirically grounded, alternative view:

Our recommendation is to view "role" as an organizing concept used on occasion by actors in social settings, and to view its utility for actors in terms of what they can do with it, i.e., the work they require it to do, in retaining the perceived stability of social behavior, whatever their immediate purposes. Toward this end, rules and social behaviors must be described and explained but are conceptual resources across the to-strengthen, sanction troubleshoot, transmit others in the ways of the world, and so forth.

In a similar vein, Goffman (1981:143) pointed out that a speaker can "alter the social role in which he is active... what in committee meetings is called 'changing hats.'... (To select the capacity in which we are to be active is to select (or to attempt to select) the capacity in which the recipients of our action are present."

Analysis: "Mister Moose" vs. "the Attorney General"

The data I use are transcriptions of videotapes of the Iran-Contra Congressional hearings, which were broadcast on television in the summer of 1987 (see also Halasinski 1990). These transcripts are useful for exploring how interactions use the concept of role since much of their talk concerns people's actions and how they should be seen.

Consider the following. 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>W: <em>I</em> can't understand (Mr. Nickle) W - witness (Lt. Col. Oliver North).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>W: <em>I</em> can't remember. (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>W: Whether an November twenty first there was a document in your files reflecting presidential approval of the diversion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>W: As a matter of fact I'll tell you specifically that I thought they were all gone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>W: Because by that time I was told</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>W: that some point early on November twenty first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>W: that there would be an [inaudible]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>W: Conducted by: (36) Mr. Moore.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>W: Assured (36) Admiral Poindexter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>W: an [inaudible]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>W: Admiral Poindexter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>W: (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>W: Incredibly it's it seems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>W: that A/E (1) of those documents no longer exist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>W: and so that is EXRey (36) on November twenty-first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>W: EXRey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>W: because I believe the decision (36) to make an inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>W: (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>W: to have that Attorney General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>W: (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>W: President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>W: (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>W: conduct a fact finding corcom.</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>W: that happened in September of the Nineteen Eighty-Five.</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>W: I assumed the Admiral.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>W: (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>W: don't worry. (36) to all taken care of.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>W: (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>W: Told (36) all ready should I'd 'em.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>W: (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>W: That's right. (continues turn)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. In the data segments, brackets indicate overlapping talk by two or more speakers. Intonations are indicated by (36), interjections by (36). Underlining is used to indicate emphasis. Emphasis is used to represent backchannels. Pronouns are used to indicate minlength, with periods indicating taking turns, commas indicating "pausing" intonation (i.e., slight intonation, and question marks indicating strong intonation. Equal signs indicate utterances which are "identical" or produced one immediately after the other. Colons indicate a sound effect, and numbers in parentheses indicate silence in excess of seconds. Finally, * is used to mark talk that is produced entry and quickly. For a more complete list of transcription conventions, see Atkinson and Heritage (1984).
Note that in the first part of the answer turn, the witness references "Mister Moste," (line 15), in a subsequent portion of the turn, the witness references "the Attorney General;" then cuts off this utterance, as represented by the hyphen (line 29). He then produces the self-correction, "Attorney General" (see Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977). After this self-correction ("Attorney General"), the speaker pauses for 0.4 seconds, and then produces a "contrast marker" ("in"); which is used to introduce another repair: "Mister Moste in his role as friend to the President." (lines 31-32).

Note that the witness produces three different formulations of a particular individual: "Mister Moste;" "the Attorney General;" and "Mister Moste in his role as friend to the President." Furthermore, the first reference is left to stand as adequate, while the second one is twice self-corrected by the speaker. The first correction repairs a "production error"; the witness mispronounces "Attorney" as "Artorially." The second repair is a "reference repair," in which the witness drops the prior reference term, "the Attorney General," and substitutes another, "friend to the President."

One thing to notice here is what the speaker is doing interactationally by replacing the second reference term with the third. Prior research has shown that people routinely use descriptions to accomplish interactional tasks (Sacks 1972a, 1972b, 1979). As Schegloff (1984:19) put it, "Descriptions are inspected by co-participants to see what their speaker is doing by talking in that way, by describing in that way. Describing is a vehicle for acting." And Maynard (1984:197-198) has shown how person descriptions are used to do various interactional tasks in plea bargaining:

Defendants' attributes are used to the extent that they can support proposals, position papers, and their replies in actual negotiations over dispositions. More generally, when persons are talked about in any conversation, descriptions are selected and produced according to what activities are being done.

Similar examples have been noted in analyses of interaction within British Tribunals (Atkinson and Drew 1979), news interviews (Glamann 1987:120-35), Thai criminal trials (Moormann 1968), and group therapy sessions involving "juvenile offenders" (Sacks 1979).

When the speaker in the present case repairs the second reference term, "Attorney General" (line 29), he doesn't simply replace it with the first (apparently adequate) reference term, "Mister Moste" (line 15). Instead, he replaces it with "Mister Moste in his role as friend to the President." (lines 31-32). In what follows I consider specifically what the witness is doing in these repairs.

Membership Categorization Devices

When the witness refers to "Mister Moste," he uses what conversation analysts call a "recognitional" term (Sacks and Schegoff 1979). Using a recognitional assumes that the hearer will recognize the person so named. The term "Attorney General," by contrast, is a category, specifically a "membership category" (Sacks 1972a, 1972b). Interlocutors see membership categories to classify one another. As a property of their use, categories are grouped in sets or "device" that can be discovered empirically (Sacks 1972a:430, note 5). For example, in this culture there are the categories catcher, first baseman, and pitcher, and they belong to the device "baseball team" (Sacks 1972a, 1972b). Similarly, interlocutors can treat the category "the Attorney General" as belonging to the device "cabinet members" or "law enforcement officers."

In addition, Sacks (1972b:335-37) demonstrated that for membership categories there are activities that people in interaction treat as bound to the category in question. These "category bound activities" can be used by interlocutors to invoke a particular categorization device without specifically naming it.
With the first reference term he uses, "Mister Meese" (line 15), the witness uses a representation, which displays his orientation to his hearers as others who will know he is speaking of. In the witness's second reference (line 26), he uses a membership category: "the . . . Attorney General." In his last reference (lines 31-32) he reproduces the same recognition used earlier, but adds to it a new membership category (MC) phrase:

\[ \text{[recognition]} + \text{[MC phrase]} \]

"Mister Meese" + "in his role as" + "Attorney or thum President."

Why does the witness refer to the same person three different ways?

Sacks (1972a) and Schegloff (1968) have noted that there are many possible correct ways to reference any particular object, person, or place. Given this, members cannot simply produce the correct description; rather, a correct description must be selected from a relevant set of forms. Sacks (1972a:320) and Schegloff (1968) referred to this as the problem of relevance and is doing so to demonstrate that "an examination of instances of members' descriptions is central to the question of how sociolinguists might solve their own problem of constructing descriptions."

With the availability of many different categorization devices (e.g. the derived "family") containing the categories "father," "mother," "son," "daughter"); the device "sex;" containing the categories "male" and "female;" or the device "cabinet members," containing the categories "Secretary of the Treasury," "Secretary of Defense," "Secretary of Education," "Attorney General," etc.), how does the witness decide which way to refer to the person in question?

One choice the witness might use is simply to use a recognition to name, as in line 15's "Mister Meese." This solves the possibly difficult problem of deciding which membership categorization device is appropriate, a decision that can have significant interactional consequences and is in some sense simplified given the details of the setting. As Sacks (1972a:36) pointed out, "The reproducibility of any categorization, whether done by members or by sociologists, requires . . . some method whereby the reduction of the categorization devices to be used in making that categorization may be reproducibly provided for." In other words, members have systematic methods for choosing a categorization device. In addition, when a speaker categorizes someone, hearers can and will perform an operation on that category as to find the device from which that category was used. By employing a particular membership category, a speaker thus provides a resource through which others can figure out how to fit the referenced person into the talk-at-large. By using these categorization devices to reference persons, interactants make their talk understandable (Sacks 1972a:272).

Note that the first reference term ("Mister Meese" line 15) does not replicate a categorization device while the second ("the . . . Attorney General") line 29) and third ("Mister Meese in his role as Attorney . . . thum President") line 31-32) do. In addition, the first reference term stands alone in its sequential environment, whereas the second and third are in close proximity (the third being a replacement for the second).

Reconsider a segment from excerpt one, using the use of different action descriptions for Meese's talk. The witness changes his original description of the work that Meese was to do:

From excerpt 1

26 because I believe the division (63) to many an
27 inquiry
28 .
29 to have the two Actonnally-Attorney General
30 .
31 or Mister Meese in his role as thum to thum
32 President.

3. Members in category crafts the device "instructor role" (Sacks 1972a:272) and . . . thum to thum President. It a membership category that implies the device "Teacher to the President". thum . . . thum.
This work is first referred to as an "inquiry," then it is referred to as a "fact-finding excursion" (lines 27, 34). This repair of the action description is done in the immediate sequential environment of the repair of person-reference I considered earlier. With his person-reference repairs, as well as with his action-description repairs, the witness is shifting from one categorization device to another; from devices that might be implicated by the categorizations "Attorney General" and "inquiry," and repairing those referents with categorizations that implicate the device "relation to the President." With these descriptions the witness makes Meese and his actions seizable as non-official. The witness thereby also proposes a description for his own actions. While he might be seizable as having destroyed documents that were being sought by "the Attorney General," he refers to Meese as a "friend of the President," Depending on which description of Meese and his action prevails, the witness either impeded an internal "fact-finding excursion" or was involved in the "obstruction of justice" and the destruction of evidence needed by an official inquiry.

Category/Device Shifting

Recall that when the reference term "Mister Meese" is first used (line 15), it is the only reference to him in that turn constructional unit (lines 9-21). Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974(72). But in the second turn constructional unit of this answer turn (lines 22-41), there are two references to Meese (line 28; lines 31-32), and each is device-implicative.

Example 1

22 (0.3)
23 → conduct a fact-finding excursion.
24 (0.3)
25 ... and so that is RAtly (0.3) on November
26 (0.3)
27 yesterday.
28 (0.3)
29 because I believe the decision (0.3) to make an
30 inquiry
31 (1)
32 to have that Attorney - attorney General
33 (0.4)
34 to Mister Meese in his role as friend to that
35 (0.3)
36 President.
37 (0.3)
38 conduct a fact-finding excursion.
39 (0.4)
40 on what happened in September an November in
41 Nineteen Eighty-Five.
42 (0.4)
43 I assured the Admiral.

4. The speaker made this change of "activity description" at a reply by repeating the word that frames the two alternative descriptions ("to", lines 26, 28), as well as by the use of the word "me" between the two alternatives (line 35). Schematically, the reply looks like this:

26-7 to [activity description 1]
28 (1)
29 to have [person description 1]
30 (0.4)
31 to [activity description 2]
33 (0.3)
34 (activity description 2).

For other examples of marking of "locating" a repairable, see Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977), especially section 9.22.
Once the witness has referred to the person with a category, which is by definition device-implicative, any move to eliminate that device's implications must be achieved by the interlocutors. One way that the initial device's implications can be eliminated is by offering an alternative device. The witness's repair of his original formulation ("there . . . Attorney General") with the recognition of "Mister Meese" plus category appended ("in his role as") plus categorical reference ("friend to shush President") is an example of that procedure.

A few minutes later, the interlocutors come back to this same topic:

Excerpt 2 [DCo8:20-21]

1 CC: I think I was asking you had an meeting
2 W: with these Attorney General on thir twenty third.
3 CC: (0.2)
4 of November.
5 CC: (0.4)
6 W: That's correct.
7 CC: (0.8)
8 CC: An you were (0.2 away were you not (0.4) some
time during those days on Friday November
9 CC: twenty-fifth (0.2) that (0.2) (0.2) Attorney General's
10 CC: (0.3) people were going to come in and look at
11 CC: (0.3) documents over that weekend.
12 CC: (0.3)
13 W: (0.5)
14 W: That is correct.
15 CC: (0.1)
16 CC: And you shredded documents before they got there.
17 CC: (0.1)
18 CC: I would prefer to say that I shredded documents
19 CC: that day like I did on all other days, but (0.5)
20 CC: perhaps with increased intensity.
21 CC: (0.7)
22 CC: So that these people you were keeping (0.2) these
documents from (0.8) there once that you shredded.
23 CC: (0.3) were representatives of thee Attorney
24 CC: (0.3) General of these United States.
25 CC: (0.3)
26 CC: They work for him.
27 CC: (0.3)
29 CC: And it was these people (0.2) from whom you were
30 CC: keeping (0.2) these documents.
31 CC: (0.3)
32 W: Yes.
33 CC: (0.3)
34 W: Because, as I've already testified counsel.
35 CC: (0.2)
36 W: (0.2)
37 I believed
38 CC: (0.8)
39 when I was approved by Admiral Poindexter
40 CC: (0.3)
41 CC: (0.3)
42 CC: in his role as (0.4) Mister Meese.
43 CC: (0.2)
44 CC: NOT (0.2) that thee Attorney General is gonna come
45 - by (0.3)
46 - as to a full fledged investigation, a thud word
47 - investigation wasn't used.
48 - (0.3)
49 - Thet
50 - (0.3)
51 - Mister Meese
52 - (0.3)
53 - had been asked to do eye fact finding inquiry.
54 - (0.3)
55 - In would be sending people over
56 - ()
57 - to review documents.
58 - (0.3)
59 - I assured Admiral Vertolener
60 - ()
61 - incorrectly (0.4) it turns out.
62 - (0.3)
63 - that all of those documents that pertained to
64 - those [0.5] esp (0.6) residual funds being used to
65 - support that Nigeriran resistance.
66 - ()
67 - had already been destroyed.
68 - (0.3)
69 - (Witness continues answer)

In this "line of questioning" (Atkinson and Drew 1979), the witness's first two answers are
unmitigated agreements with the preference built into the questions.* That is, both questions
propose a state of affairs that the witness is asked to confirm or deny, and they are formulated
in a manner that prefers confirmation.

At line 15 the counsel first formulates a question that is hearable as an accusation:
15 - CC: = And you shredded documents before they got there.
16 - (2.3)

Rather than simply agreeing, as in the prior two answers, the witness reformulates the action
asked about, and confirms his own reformulation:
17 - W: = I would prefer to say that I shredded documents
18 - that day like I did on all other days, but (0.3)
19 - perhaps with increased intensity.
20 - () that is correct.

At lines 22-26, the counsel attempts to draw a conclusion from the previous series of
questions and answers:
21 - CC: So that then people you were keeping (0.2) trace
22 - documents from (0.3) those that you shredded.
23 - (0.3) were representatives of the Attorney
24 - General of the United States.
25 - (1.3)

The conclusion that the questioner issues to the witness for confirmation or denial hinges
on the reformulation of the people who were sent to look at documents in the wit-
ness's office: "representatives of the Attorney General of the United States." In asking this

* The concept of preference is discussed by Searle (1973) 1987, Davidson (1986), Penczowski (1944a, 1984b), and
Schegloff (1986).
question, the committee counsel means the nature of how these people should be formulated as consequential. In the witness's response, he too treats this question as consequential, both by withholding confirmation of the question as well as by reformulating the reference phrase in his turn:


The witness with this response (line 37), shifts the relevant device through which these people, and their activities, should be seen. By reformulating "representatives of the Attorney General of the United States" as people who "work for him," it becomes possible to hear their actions ("looking at documents") lines 71-72) as done in an unofficial capacity.

Having received a reformulation rather than a confirmation from the witness, the counsel recycles his question in shortened form:

29 CO. And it was these people ( ) from whom you were keeping ( ) these documents.

Again, the question is formulated to elicit a confirmation or denial, with confirmation being the response preferred by the formulation of the question (Sacks 1987).

Throughout this series of questions and answers, the counsel has referred to "the Attorney General," "the Attorney General's people," and "representatives of the Attorney General of the United States." By using these categories the counsel invokes a particular device: members of the Attorney General's office. This can be seen as predatory to issuing an accusation about the willful destruction of evidence sought by that office, or, more generally, the obstruction of justice.

The witness has gone along with these formulations until the accusatory question lines 5-6) elicits from him the reformulation without confirmation: "they work for him." In his long answer to the reformulated question (lines 29-30), the witness refers to Mene as "the Attorney General" (line 40). Record the following verbatim portion of the witness's answer:

Excerpt 2
40... that the Attorney General.
41... in his role as Member.
42... of the.
43... NOT the Attorney General is going to be by:
44... with:
45... do an full
did not used.
46... investigation.
47... investigation.
48... has not.
49... The
50... The
51... Member.
52... Member.
53... had been asked to do eye

After the witness refers to "the Attorney General," he attempts a category-shift via the same technique used in data except one. By using the category-appender phrase "in his role as," the witness is attempting to shift off of the device implied by the category he has just employed. But after the category appender phrase, the witness places not an alternate category, which would implicate an alternate device, but a recognitional, "Member of the" (line 42). Here are the relevant segments from the two excerpts:

Excerpt 1
50... to be the Attorney General.
51... in his role as friend is that
The attempted category-shift in excerpt two, above, is treated by the witness as inadequate, and he abandons that attempt and produces a reference repair:

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Specifically, the witness produces a repair initiation, in which he negates the category he originally used ("NOT 0.2 that thee Attorney General."); as well as an action description that he had not used ("a full fledged investigation."). Indeed, the negation of the action description, "NOT 0.2 that thee attorney general is gonna come by; 0.2 an do ah full fledged investi-
gation.") uniting the repair format "not that x, then y" (lines 40-44, 44-47, Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977). That is, the witness used the occasion of directly negating an action description to less directly negate his prior person description. Thus "Mister Meece," a recognitional term, is used to replace "the Attorney General," a device-implicative category. But the recognitional term is not successful in replacing the category term until the device implied by the original category is somehow negated (lines 44-47). Via this technique, the implication of the category device "position in government" is eliminated, thus a subsequent recognitional can be used to refer to the person. After the device implicativity of a category is removed, a recognitional can again become an adequate free-standing referent.

The phrase "in his role as" is a specific instance of a general category/device shifting technique. Interlocutors need not use the word "role" to do this shifting work. The data segment below is part of a tape-recorded conversation from the Nixon White House during the Watergate affair:
9 P: I can’t see how. Let me say I can’t see how a legal case could be made against you, John.
10 D: It would be tough but, you know, I can see people pointing fingers. You know, to get it out of
11 their own, put me in an impossible position. Just
12 still give me a (unintelligible).
13 P: Oh no. Let me say I got the impression here - But
14 just looking at it from a cold legal standpoint:
15 you did at counsel. You were not - What would you
16 go to jail for?
17 D: The obstruction of justice.
18 P: The obstruction of justice?
19 D: That is the only one that bothers me.
20 P: Well, I don’t know. I think that one, I feel it
21 could be cut at the jugular, you know, the

In lines 17-18 above, President Nixon is arguing that Dean need not worry about going to jail for his actions because those actions were performed “as counsel.” More generally, this excerpt suggests that how an actor is described is oriented to by interactants as partially constitutive of his or her action.

A second brief excerpt comes from one of President Bush’s press conferences reported in The New York Times (1990:13):

Excerpt 4 “Bush’s Answer to Question about Son”
1 "Bush’s Answer to Question about Son"
2 1 I agree that the President ought to stay out of it and
3 that the system ought to work. And I have great
4 confidence in the integrity and honor of my son. And
5 beyond that, I'm not sure. And if he's done
6 something wrong, the system will, will digest
7 that. I have, I think this is not easy for me, as a father,
8 it’s easy for me as the President because the system is
9 going to work, and I will not interfere. I've not
discussed this with any officials and suggested any
10 outcome.

Speaking of his son’s alleged involvement in a savings and loan scandal, President Bush makes two statements regarding how he feels about the situation (lines 6-7), but he carefully marks the guise under which each statement is uttered (“as a father”; “as the President”). Bush thus displays that the way his utterances will be heard is tied to the capacities in which he expresses them. Again, we see evidence that interactants are oriented to the partially constitutive character of person and action descriptions. Along with this orientation comes the need to use role as an interactional device in order to display to others (and thereby partially constitute) the guise through which a particular action is performed and, in fact, what sort of action it is.

In both excerpt 3 (lines 17-18) and excerpt 4 (lines 6-7), the word “as” does the work of category-appender, works like the phrases in excerpts 1 and 2 by the phrase “in his role as.” Again, member use of the word “role” is not necessary to the analysis. Instead, what is important is the general technique that interactants use to shift off of an initial reference term, where that term implicates a particular categorization device, and how they are able to introduce a new reference term, thus “deleting” the original device.

Category shifting is a way that interactants sequentially delete or “bury” the relevance of a particular categorization device. This becomes a crucial resource when there is an interactional context regarding what motives should be ascribed to an actor (cf. Drew forthcoming).
"Role" as Resource and Topic

By examining annual conversations where people used the concept role, we found that interactants' descriptions, formulations, and references are themselves part and parcel of the social world they are used to describe. But more generally, descriptions themselves are social acts. Garfinkel (1967), Sacks (1972a, 1972b, 1985), and Houts (1984) have shown in great detail how talk within an interaction is co-construc-
tive of that self-same interaction. This point also has been nicely demonstrated with respect to plea bargaining sessions and their among acquitall and unacquited dyads (Maynard and Wilson 1980). By treating role as a topic for social scientific analysis rather than only a resource we have now cast person and action categorizations performed in a Congressional hearing can be used to formulate and denote actions. We also have seen that a powerful technique in this category shifting work is key usage of the concept role. This analysis also extends G. Wright Mills (1960) concern with the empirical study of vocabularies of motive. Mills called for the study of motives as social phenomena. By seeing how the concept role is used as a key device for shifting categories, we have uncovered part of the specific interactional "machinery" Sacks 1980) that provides for the social organization of motives. Because interactants demonstrate that the constitutive character of person and action descriptions, they re-
quire the category/device shifting techniques analyzed above. In just these ways, interactants display to others, and thereby partially constitute, the game through which a particular action is performed, as well as the very character and intelligibility of that performed action.

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