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“Killers” and “Friendlies”: Names *Can Hurt Me*

Alec McHoul, Murdoch University

Abstract

This paper concerns an incident in 2003 when two American fighter pilots mistakenly fired on a ‘friendly’ British convoy and on the reportage of that incident in the British press some four years later. It starts with a focus on the designation of the airmen as ‘killer pilots’ (by *The Sun* newspaper which broke the story), using some concepts from membership categorisation analysis as developed by Harvey Sacks. It is contended that such an approach can afford insights into the nature of quite specific social identities. Hence the paper goes on (via the transcript of the air-to-ground tape) to contrast how the press ascribes identities to the pilots with how they avow identities for themselves. This contrast, I argue, gives us some insights into the moral culpability or otherwise of the ‘killer pilots’.

1. The situation

In March 2003 in Iraq, an American A-10 Thunderbolt fighter plane fired into a convoy of trucks and armoured vehicles belonging to the British Household Cavalry. It was, if anything could be, a classic case of “friendly fire” or, as the current military euphemism has it, a “blue-on-blue situation”. The result was not only damage to allied transport, but also the death of Lance Corporal Matty Hull. This was common knowledge for some time. But it was not until almost four years later, when *The Sun* newspaper published the air-to-ground tapes, that the moment-to-moment details became available to a larger (British and international) public. What motivates this analysis has to do with both the newspaper report, as such, and also the events reproduced in the transcript.

2. The report

Let's turn to the first of these, the news item and its intro. *The Sun's* defence editor, Tom Newton Dunn, under the banner "The tape they wanted to hide", gives us the details of the relevant call signs, the planes in the vicinity, the timing (hours, minutes and seconds) of the exchanges, and so forth. But there is one particular feature of this report that interests me, at least for now. So here is the prelim to the complete news report with the relevant part underlined:ⁱ

The tape they wanted to hide

By Tom Newton Dunn

Defence Editor

February 06, 2007

This is the full transcript of the cockpit video from call sign POPOV36 during the disastrous friendly fire attack on the Household Cavalry patrol.

Lasting just over 15 minutes, it begins just before the A-10 Thunderbolt pilot spots the four British vehicles.

The local time is 4.36pm, or 1.36pm Greenwich Mean Time which is what the military use.

The killer pilot's wingman, hunting targets with him in a second A-10, had the call sign POPOV35.

...

The other main call signs on the radio net are MANILA HOTEL, MANILA34, and LIGHTNING34 – three US Marine Corps Forward Air Controllers on the ground attached to British units.

Later on, other call signs come on the net to relay emergency ceasefire messages.

They are SKY CHIEF, an American AWAC {{airborne warning and control}} jet controlling the overall air battle and COSTA58, a British pilot nearby.

The time code in hours, minutes and seconds is from the digital clock on the pilot's display. {{Transcript follows}}

< <http://www.thesun.co.uk/article/0,,2-2007060131,00.html>>

Accessed 7 February 2007

3. Membership categorisation and social identity

What are we to make of this designation: "killer pilot"? One way of dealing with it would be to take a contrast case. One of my favourite magazine headlines – though I'm not sure where this comes from – is "Killer Nuns". The nuns in

question were learning karate: hence they were (potential) killers. But “killer” and “nuns” are rarely co-located. And this is how headlines routinely announce news: by deliberately mismatching membership categories (designations of types of persons) with their expectable actions (predicates) – hence the famous “man bites dog” (see Cuff & Payne, 1984: 188).

What I am rehearsing here is a perspective known as membership categorisation analysis (MCA) as pioneered by Harvey Sacks (1972a; 1972b; see also Silverman, 1998: 74-97, 128-152) and my argument will be that this can give us an insight into expressions like “killer pilot” in particular and, more importantly perhaps, a very useful analytic perspective for dealing with the broader question of social identities as such. But before running this through the category “killer pilot”, we need to explicate the basic vocabulary of MCA or, if you like, its terms and conditions.

Sacks’s innovation was to note that when we refer to members in the society we do so via clusters of possible terms.ⁱⁱ This is not “stereotyping” or anything of the sort. It is a logical consequence of the sheer fact that any given member can be referred to in an indefinite number of ways. The “pilot” in question here (noting that this is our first way of designating his membership) might also be “the boy next door”, “a Californian”, “a boxing champion”, “a heavy smoker” and so on through a long list of possible membership designations. How we solve this problem of sheer multiplicity in a practical way is, as noted, to cluster such membership designations into what Sacks calls membership categorisation devices (MCDs). These are things like FAMILY,

OCCUPATION, NATIONALITY and so forth; noting here that I will use capitals for MCD names and quotation marks for the *categories* relevant to those devices. Hence we get sets of devices and categories like the following (see Table 1):

Table 1: Devices and their categories

Devices	Categories
FAMILY:	"mother", "father", "brother", etc.
OCCUPATION:	"postman", "butcher", "professor", etc.
NATIONALITY:	"Australian", "Albanian", "Afghan", etc.

So, when we're referring to a person via a particular category, it will always be by using a particular category *from a particular device*. And this is important for, as Sacks shows (1972b), some categories (membership terms) can belong to more than a single device. In his example, the designation "baby" can belong to the device FAMILY or else to that of STAGE OF LIFE; and the difference is crucial given that the "baby" of the FAMILY may be quite well advanced in years but still the youngest, while the "baby" from the STAGE OF LIFE device has to be a neonate.ⁱⁱⁱ In ordinary talk and texts, we use such membership sets to make that talk and those texts consistent. If, in one turn at talk, I refer to someone as "a postman", it's not as consistent in the next turn for my interlocutor to add a reference to another as "a blonde" as it is for them to designate them as, say, "a police officer" or "a plumber". Hence Sacks's consistency rule:

If some population of persons is being categorized and if some category from a device's collection has been used to categorize a first Member of the population, then that category or other categories of the same collection *may* be used to categorize further members of the population (1972a: 33; original italics).

This, I believe, gives us enormous insight into how societies (a) cope with the problem of having available indefinitely many ways of referring to any given person and (b) form specifically *social* identities for persons within them. That is, the membership devices are collections, perhaps even collectivities, not of individuals but of *types of person* in the society. They are, in short, social identities. Hence an MCD analysis can, at least potentially, show us how social collections (not just any particular individuals) do actual, accountable, on the ground, here-and-now, identity *work*.

What's of further importance for the analysis of social identities is the *moral* (sometimes even judgmental) work that the selection of particular categories from particular devices can accomplish.^{iv} Above, I referred to the *predicates* that category selections carry with them. These are sometimes also called "category-bound activities". Hence the expectable predicates for "nuns" would be *praying, helping the needy and sick, abstaining*, and so forth; noting that I will henceforth mark predicates with italics. *Killing*, then, is not on the list of expectables for this category of persons – which is not to say that it can't get used for a deliberately disjunctive (or "newsy") effect.

One of the more elegant aspects of this triplet (device + category + predicate) is that it frequently accomplishes its moral work by inference and implication, rather than by direct mention.^v In fact, direct mention can be a signal of a certain kind of social incompetence. We don't say (unless when perhaps writing a reading primer for kids) "Bill's the postman, he comes to our house each day and leaves mail in the mailbox". Bill's being designated as the postman is

sufficient for competent members to hear (infer) just what it is he expectably does. And this cuts both ways. So if I offer you a well-chosen predicate re some person I'm talking about, you can hear which category from which device I'm implying. In Wowk's (1984) example, a man is being interrogated by police re a woman he has allegedly killed. He refers to her prior conduct in the bar where they met as, *inter alia*, "getting kind of prickly". From the predicate, I take it that readers will not need to have it spelled out what category of person is being implied here and the moral work that that could be attempting in a police interrogation.

4. Who goes there ... ?

Given this brief outline of how membership categorisation works in a rather general way, can we now say anything along these lines about the particular category of "killer pilot" from our news article? A first thing we might like to notice here is that the category "pilot" is *explicitly* collocated with a predicate, *killing* via the adjectival use of "killer". What kind of work could this be accomplishing in just this locale? I take it, from the plethora of available contextual cues (for example, that this is a "friendly fire attack", that the pilot is flying an A-10 Thunderbolt, and so on), that the category "pilot", in this case, is taken from the device MILITARY PERSONNEL (perhaps even COMBATANTS) and not, for example, from the broader device of PROFESSIONS or OCCUPATIONS; where these latter devices could include civilian and commercial pilots, hobbyists, naval helmsmen, and the like. So, more specifically, we can very easily hear "pilot" as glossing something more specific, like "fighter

pilot". Now surely that category from just this device already carries with it – by ordinary implication, for any competent member of the society – the predicate *killing*. Fighter pilots do, unless they are inept, expectably, routinely and accountably *kill*. This is one predicate we can, from a list of candidates, be extremely sure of. Fighter pilots may protect bomber fleets, strafe runways, escort convoys, and a whole range of similar military functions but, in and as part of these duties, their engagement in *killing* is beyond doubt. We might even say that they have the proverbial licence to kill, in the sense that, their engagement in that activity is, as for most categories from the device COMBATANTS, exempted from the usual social-moral sanctions against killing, if the killing is done within the "rules of war". What then is the effect, in this particular news context, of Dunn's explicit mention of *killing* (via "killer")?

If pilots kill legitimately, my suspicion is that actually mentioning the *killing* is designed to reverse that legitimacy. That suspicion goes along the following lines: while, in a strictly literal sense, *killing* is a routine predicate for the category "(fighter) pilots", the very legitimacy of their being ones who kill means that several alternative ways of formulating that predicate can, especially in intra-military contexts, be brought into play. To be sure, fighter pilots, since the early days of WW1, have boasted of "kills" though this has rarely referred to the taking of human life but rather to the more anonymous matter of the number of enemy planes shot down in combat. Outside this restricted usage, various (could we say?) euphemisms are brought into play.^{vi} Those belonging to the various categories from the device COMBATANTS should, on this account, explicitly not

be “killers”. Rather they do their duty *taking out* enemy command posts, *eliminating* obstacles to the “progress of the war”, *defending* crucial personnel and matériel, *advancing* into enemy territory ... the alternatives to *killing* are legion while, at the same time, all concerned are fully aware that these activities themselves can, and frequently do, involve the taking of enemy lives. Taking an extreme case, in *The Pentagon Papers*, Noam Chomsky refers to a military report in which it was said that, during the Vietnam War, the villagers of My Lai “showed a 100% mortality response”, nicely shifting the focus away from what was *done to* the villagers and towards how they acted (Chomsky & Zinn, 1972).^{vii}

So, if as we have seen, predicates commonly imply categories of persons (or social identities as types), what are the predicates the pilots and their ground controllers use to refer to their (the pilots’) actions and, hence, what are the social identities implied by those predicates? A number of formulations of possibly fatal activities are worked up in the transcript following the news report (above). For example, at the very start of the published transcript and video, the ground controller (Manila Hotel, MH) and one of the pilots (Popov35, P35) engage in the following exchange:^{viii}

Extract 1

1336.30 MH: Popov from Manila Hotel. Can you confirm you engaged that tube and those vehicles?
1336.36 P35: affirm sir.=and looks like I have multiple vehicles in (reve:ts) ah (*.*) ah:: (*.*) eight hundred metres to the no:rth of your arty rounds. c’n you ah switch fire, and ah (*.*) (shift/shoot) fire, try and get some arty rounds on those,
1336.47 MH: roger,=I >understand< that those are the impacts that ah you observed earlier on my timing?
1336.51 P35: affirmative.

1336.52 MH: >roger,< standby.=>let me make sure they're not on another mission.<

Referring to a strafing run on enemy vehicles just prior to the start of the tape,

MH doesn't mention anything that might connote hostilities, let alone killing.^{ix}

He asks P35 if he has "engaged" the convoy, an altogether more benign prospect.

At the next turn (1336.36) during which P35 notices the British convoy (though he

does not yet know that that's just what it is), he doesn't ask MH to *kill* the

personnel on the ground, merely to train the artillery that he controls on their

vehicles. Coming back then to the earlier run, MH again prefers a downgraded

formulation: in this case "impacts". And we can see parallels peppered

throughout the video and its transcript. Some relevant examples:

Extract 2

1337.36 MH: roger. that matches our intel up there. ah and under- understand you also have the other fixed wing up this push? ah::: (.) for terminal control, if you can.

1337.44 P35: I'd love to::: I didn't talk to him yet.

Extract 3

1339.23 P35: okay, copy. >like I said<, multiple (revetted) vehicles.=they look like flatbed tru:cks. ah (*.*) are those your targets?

1339.30 MH: that's affirm.

Extract 4

1341.37 P36: Popov Three Six ah:: is rolling in.

1341.40 MH: tell you what.

1341.41 P35: I'm comin' off west. you roll in. (*.*) it (*.*) it looks like they are: exactly what we're talking about.

1341.49 P36: we got visual.

1341.50 P36: okay. I want to get that first one >before he gets into town then.<

1341.53 P35: yeah, go get 'im.

1341.55 P36: awright, we got ah ro:cket launchers, it looks like. um number two is rolling in: (0.2) from

the sou:th to the no:rth, (*.*) and ah two's
in.
1342.04 P35: get it.
((P36, "rolls in" for an attack i.e. turns his
A-10 aircraft into a vertical dive to fire on
the vehicles))
1342.09 ((sound of gunfire))
1342.18 P35: I'm off your west.
1342.22 P35: good hits.

This last extract particularly interests me as it involves the first of the two runs on the British convoy, the major incident that this *Sun* report takes as its main news. Firstly the strike is formulated as "rolling in"; the aviaional manoeuvre, as it were, standing proxy for the actual strafing and eventual "killing" of a British soldier on the ground. Popov36 then (1341.50) softens his intentions from anything like wanting to kill persons to wanting to "get" the first vehicle, a formulation immediately echoed by P36. Following this first run, again, there are no "kills", only "hits" – and good ones. It may be important also to consider here the timing of the "runs" on the convoy: the first takes, from the tape timings, somewhere in the vicinity of 13 seconds; the second closer to seven seconds – such that the sheer speed of current technologies of combat effectively rules out intense ethical discussion about, say, the exact nature of the targets.^x

So, if nothing else, we have to conclude that at least the pilots themselves continually formulated their actions as markedly distinct from anything like killing and, hence, themselves as anything but killers as such. What is *ascribed* to them by Dunn is quite the reverse of what they *avow* of themselves (cf. Coulter, 1979 on the social consequences of the distinction between ascription and avowal). And they have, as it turns out, very good reason not to avow what Dunn ascribes; at least until after the second run on the convoy when the Popovs realise

their mistake. That is, a pilot becomes ascribably a “killer pilot” when he fires on what all parties to the talk refer to as “friendlies”: allied troops and vehicles. And we should bear in mind that the tape itself became public only as a consequence of the 2007 inquest on the victim, Matty Hull, and so the determination of “killing” friendlies rather than “rolling in” on foe has potentially major consequences for the Popovs; as P35 confirms at 1348.12: “we’re in jail dude”.^{xi}

There is, though backgrounded by many reports in the UK press, ample evidence that P35 and P36 had every good reason to believe that they were well clear of any allied forces. In fact, near the start of the tape, immediately following Extract 1 (where the convoy is first spotted), we get the following:

Extract 5

1336.52 MH: >roger,< standby.=>let me make sure they’re not on another mission.<
1336.57 P36: hey, I got a four ship. looks like looks like we got orange panels on them though.=do we have any- any ah (.) friendlies up in this area?

Orange panels are the official signal to allied forces that vehicles on the ground are friendly. They are a specific convention to that effect. And before the actual attack, P35 raises the question with the ground controller as to any possibility of “friendlies” being in the area only to have the possibility denied:

Extract 6

1337.16 P35: confirm, north eight hundred metres. (0.2) confirm no friendlies this far north ah: on the ground.
1337.21 MH: That is ‘n affirm.=you are well clear of friendlies.

Having received this definite call, the pilots still do not attack immediately. They go in for a closer look to see if they can find a reason as to why there might be orange markings on enemy trucks. P36, that is, is still not convinced that the panels do not mark “friendlies” but P35 assures him of ground control’s assessment:

Extract 7

1338.49 P36: they look like they have orange panels on
though.
1338.51 P35: he tol- (*.*) he told me there’s nobody north
of here.=no friendlies.

So, going in to investigate, this is what they (still cautiously) conclude:

Extract 8

1340.13 P36: okay, well they got orange ro:ckets on them.
1340.17 P35: o:range ro:ckets?
1340.17 P36: yeah, I think so:
1340.18 P35: let me look.

In the device COMBATANTS, then, we can see that there are contrast pairs, one of which is “friend”/“foe” and such things work asymmetrically with regard to predication. The former, if shot, is “killed” while the latter is “rolled in on”; the former carries “orange panels” and the latter may carry “orange rockets”, and so forth. Shooting the former, then, makes one a killer; the latter makes one a hero (or at least a dutiful member of the military). The somewhat oxymoronic phrase “friendly fire” is in the local-cultural vocabulary precisely to mark this asymmetry. And so, it’s no surprise that the term “kill” isn’t used of the strafing runs until after the “blue-on-blue” (“friendly fire”) situation has come to light and the mistake (as much that of ground intelligence as that of the pilots) is realised.^{xii}

Extract 9

1347.01 P35: go.
1347.02 M34: roger we are getting an initial ah brief that
there w's ah one killed and one wounded, over.
1347.09 P35: Popov three::: fi:::ve (*.*) copy. R T B
((return to base))
1347.18 P35: I'm going to be sick.
1347.24 P36: ah::: fu::ck.
1347.48 P35: >did you hear?<
1347.51 P36: yeah, this sucks.
1347.52 P35: we're in jail dude.
1347.59 P36: AH:::..

Membership categorisation analysis, then, tells us – via its central concepts and their relations – how societies generate social identities and how crucial it is that the “right type of person” be identified given the situational particulars. The category “friend” works symmetrically with its co-category to produce the pair “friend/friend”. One cannot just be a friend in isolation; another is required to avow the reciprocal descriptor. “Avowing the reciprocal descriptor” – through such predicates as *eating together*, *exchanging birthday cards* or, indeed, *observing orange panels* – may sound like a slice of merely technical sociological language in its own right; but it can be, very literally, a matter of life and death.

Notes

ⁱ A link to the video is deleted at the ellipsis. My interpolations are shown {{thus}}.

ⁱⁱ It should be noted that, while the area has not been extensively researched, there is some evidence that it is not just persons-in-the-society that are organised in a “membershopping” way. One further instance may be buildings, places, geographical locations and the like (see McHoul & Watson, 1984).

ⁱⁱⁱ For an applied and legally/politically consequential use of Sacks’s analysis of the device FAMILY, see Summerfield & McHoul (2005).

^{iv} I use the term “moral” in the traditional sense of what were once called the moral sciences; studies of the “doctrine or practices of the duties of life” (as *Chambers* has it). By saying that category selections are “moral” I mean to say that they carry with them common senses of what any person-so-categorised “ought” to do.

^v See Watson (1978) and Wowk (1984) for perspicuous and socially-consequential examples. See Rapley et al (2003) for another case involving news reportage and killing. See Eglin & Hester (1999a, 1999b) for a similar case.

^{vi} Naturally, the other way of putting this would be to class “kill” (let alone “murder”) as a dysphemism.

^{vii} As best as I can tell, the reference is right. However I am unable to find the original and cannot be re-quoted on this with any veracity.

^{viii} My citations from the transcript are not exactly as published in *The Sun* (and later in other newspapers). Maurice Nevile (University of Canberra) has kindly lent his expertise in air-to-ground communications by working from the video footage to provide a transcript closer to the usual conversation-analytic conventions. See Appendix 1 (below) for a brief summary and Schegloff (2007: 265-269) for a complete description. In later extracts, there is a fourth speaker, Manila34 (M34), also a ground controller.

^{ix} The term “connote” here is weak. The literature on connotation is legion and a great deal of it, especially in literary studies, takes connotation to be emotional, associative, figurative and variable from individual to individual. Even the more formal semiotic conception of connotation – where first-level signs are used as signifiers at a second level to generate further meanings (Barthes, 1967: 89-94) – by no means evades such psychologism. For a snapshot, see the range of definitions at:

<http://www.google.com.au/search?hl=en&q=define%3Aconnotation&btnG=Search&meta=>

One promise of MCA for the sociology of identity formation is a displacement of any such version of connotation by a semi-formal, yet situationally responsive, socio-logic of implication and inference. For such an argument drawing on Sacks and Wittgenstein inter alia, see McHoul & Rapley (2003).

x My thanks here to the editorial referee for *Social Identities* who put the matter succinctly: “the velocity eliminates the space for ‘friendlies’ to be a viable identity within the killing zone”.

xi This was the single most broadcast line from the tape on TV news bulletins on and around 7th February. On radio, at least one talkback caller condemned P35 not so much for his actions as for thinking, having taken a life, only of his own skin. The various other comments (“I’m going to be sick” and several expletives that have definite tones of deep regret) did not make it to air; but see Extract 9, below.

xii In a quite different context, at 1340.35, P36 says: “I think killing these damn rocket launchers would be great”. Again, note the reference to matériel, not persons, as the object of “killing”.

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Appendix 1: transcription symbols

(0.5)	Pause in seconds and 10ths second
(.)	Micropause, under (0.2)
(*.*)	Untimed pause
()	Transcriber doubt, inaudible
(word)	Transcriber doubt, but likely hearing
((word))	Transcriber comment
(word)/(world)	Alternative hearings
wor::d	Sound extended/prolonged
<u>word</u>	Emphasis
WORD	Increased emphasis
=	Latching, next word follows immediately
>words<	Compressed/rushed talk
<words>	Slowed/drawn out talk
°word°	Spoken quietly
word?	Intonation rise
word¿	Slight intonation rise

Appendix 2: *The Sun's* diagram

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.