

Discourse as an Interactional Achievement III: The Omnirelevance of Action

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For those concerned with communication, information has long seemed at the heart of the matter. When Shannon and Weaver (1949) put information at the center of their *Mathematical Theory of Communication*, they were in effect formalizing and quantifying a position less explicitly in play for many other workers, toiling (and yet to toil) in a great variety of vineyards. The very concept of information, of course, adumbrates another, namely “truth,” and with it associated disciplines such as logic as an apparatus for evaluating truth. Scrambling to keep a place in this pantheon of respected preoccupations has been another

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claimant for attention where communication is involved, understanding; and, not far away from that, yet another, "meaning."

This article is addressed to those for whom information (and its kindred concerns) is the key, if not virtually the sole, focus for the study of language and its deployment in discourse—often as an alternative to the formalism of much of the dominant trend in contemporary linguistics. I address among others those committed to functional grammar and functional linguistics more generally, to computational approaches to language, to studies of communication processes per se, and those who see the teaching and learning of language as centered on its service or disservice as a communication vehicle. These are our friends and closest colleagues.

I want to make such a focus on information problematic, and to juxtapose to it another focus of attention. Hence the title of my article and its subtitle: "The omnirelevance of *action*." Not then information, or information alone. My message is, first, that action figures centrally and generically, and, second, that the absence of actions can be as decisive as their occurrence for the deployment of language and the interactional construction of discourse.

Let me begin by articulating three premises of what I have to say, both as context for my central themes and to make explicit my understanding of discourse's place in the world. The first is that I take real-world, naturally occurring ordinary discourse as the basic target; it is as a student of *that* that I offer what follows. There may well be grounds for those with other interests to opt for a different point of reference or a different target of inquiry; but for me these involve departures from the natural and cultural bedrock.

Second, whereas for many linguists and other students of language, conversation is one type or genre of discourse, for me discourse is, in the first instance, one kind of product of conversation, or of talk-in-interaction more generally.¹ It can be a contingent product of participants in ordinary conversation, or it can be the designed product of a form of talk-in-interaction that is some systematic variant or transformation of ordinary conversation, like the interview or the lecture. But I take conversation to be the foundational domain. And this leads to the third point of departure I want to make explicit.

I take it that, in many respects, the fundamental or primordial scene of social life is that of direct interaction between members of a social species, typically ones who are physically co-present. For humans, talking in interaction appears to be a distinctive form of this primary

constituent of social life, and ordinary conversation is very likely the basic form of organization for talk-in-interaction. Conversational interaction may then be thought of as a form of social organization through which the work of the constitutive institutions of societies gets done—institutions such as the economy, the polity, the family, socialization, and so on. It is, so to speak, sociological bedrock. And it surely appears to be the basic and primordial environment for the development, the use, and the learning of natural language.

Therefore, it should hardly surprise us if some of the most fundamental features of natural language are shaped in accordance with this home environment in co-present interaction—as adaptations *to* it or as part of its very warp and weft (Schegloff, 1989, forthcoming a). For example, if the basic natural environment for sentences is in turns at talk in conversation, we should take seriously the possibility that aspects of their grammatical structure, for example, are to be understood as adaptations to that environment. In view of the thoroughly local and interactional character of the deployment of turns at talk in conversation (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), grammatical structures—including within their scope discourse—should in the first instance be expected to be at least partially shaped by interactional considerations (Schegloff, 1979b).

So much for premises. The two themes on which I want to focus your attention are endemic to the organization of talk-in-interaction, and follow from these points of departure. The first concerns the centrality of action.

Among the most robust traditional anchors for the analysis of language beyond the level of syntax are orientations to information and truth. This position needs to be reconsidered. It is critical that the analysis of discourse incorporate attention not only to the propositional content and information distribution of discourse units, but also to the *actions* they are doing.² Especially (but not exclusively) in conversation, talk is constructed and is attended by its recipients for the action or actions it may be doing. Even if we consider only declarative-type utterances, because there is no limit to the utterables that can be informative and/or true, the informativeness or truth of an utterance is, by itself, no warrant or grounds for having uttered it or for having uttered it at a particular juncture in an occasion. There is virtually always an issue (for the *participants* and, accordingly, for professional analysts) of what is getting done by its production in some particular here-and-now.

In order to make vivid the consequentiality for conversational participants of the action an utterance is doing, quite apart from the information it is conveying, I offer a condensed and partial analysis of one conversational fragment. The discussion shows at least one way that action can matter and indicates an order of analysis inquiry must incorporate if this view of the inescapability of action is correct.

In the conversation between Debbie and Nick (who is her boyfriend Mark's roommate), a peculiarly insistent exchange develops that exemplifies my theme. The entire conversation is given in the Appendix.

(1) Debbie and Nick, 34-59

- 34 Debbie: hhh Um:: u- guess what I've-(u)-wuz lookin' in the
 35 paper:.-have you got your waterbed yet?
- 36 Nick: Uh huh, it's really nice °too, I set it up
- 37 Debbie: Oh rea:lly? Alre:ady?
- 38 Nick: Mm hmm
- 39 (0.5)
- 40 Debbie: Are you kidding?
- 41 Nick: No, well I ordered it last (week)/(spring)
- 42 (0.5)
- 43 Debbie: Oh- no but you h- you've got it already?
- 44 Nick: Yeah h! hh= ((*laughing*))
- 45 Debbie: =hhh [hh hh] ((*laughing*))
- 46 Nick: [I just] said that
- 47 Debbie: O::hh: hu:h, I couldn't believe you c-
- 48 Nick: [Oh (°it's just) [It'll sink in 'n two
 49 days fr'm now (then)((*laugh*))]
- 50 Debbie: ((*l a u g h*)) Oh no cuz I just
 51 got- I saw an ad in the paper for a real discount
 52 waterbed s' I w'z gonna tell you 'bout it =
- 53 Nick: =No this is really, you (haven't seen) mine, you'll
 54 really like it.
- 55 Debbie: Ya:h. It's on a raised frame and everything?
- 56 Nick: [Yeah
- 57 Debbie: hh Uh (is) a raised frame?
- 58 Nick: °mm hmm
- 59 Debbie: How: ni::ce,

At a point which I will characterize later, (line 35), Debbie asks Nick whether he has gotten his waterbed yet. He tells her that he has, and this is met with three rounds of questioning, challenging, or disbelief, to settle for preanalytic characterizations initially. First (at line 37), "Oh really? Already?" When Nick confirms, she asks again (line 40), "Are you kidding?" "No," he says, and notes that it has been a while since he ordered the waterbed. And still again she asks (line 43), "Oh no but you h- you've got it already?" Finally, Nick complains (line 46) that he has already said so. What is going on here?

Debbie has asked a seemingly simple, informational question, and Nick has answered it. Questioning of the sort Debbie engages in here can be undertaken in conversation (among other uses) as a kind of harbinger of disagreement, sometimes verging on challenge, and one response to such a usage is a backdown by its recipient. Sometimes this is a backdown in the substance of what was said,³ sometimes in the epistemic strength with which it was put forward.⁴ If a first questioning does not get such a backdown, sometimes a second one does. But what kind of backdown is possibly in order *here*? If Nick has in fact taken possession of his waterbed, is he now to deny it? Is he to retreat to a position of uncertainty or supposition about the matter? What could Debbie be after?

It is also true that, in keeping with the peculiar interactional style of teasing and laughing that some Americans in their late teens and early 20s practice, Nick has been indulging himself in unrelieved "kidding around" in the earlier part of this conversation. Thus it is not implausible that, if the first of Debbie's response was hearably "surprise," the second could be checking out whether this is not just more teasing by Nick. But then what is the *third* about (at line 43)? And why the persistence of her stance? Why should this information come in for such scrutiny and doubting?

We can get some analytic leverage on what is going on here if we attend to these utterances not only as a matter of information transfer involving issues of truth and confidence and stances toward that information, but as actions in a course of action, constituting an interactional sequence of a recurrent form.

Begin by noting (at line 34) Debbie's "guess what." This is a usage virtually dedicated to a particular type of action referred to in past work as a "pre-announcement" (Terasaki, 1976). Announcements, or other

prospective “tellings,” face the familiar constraint that they generally should not be done to recipients who already know “the news.” Pre-announcements and their responses—comprising pre-announcement sequences—allow a prospective teller and recipient to sort out together whether the “news” is already known, so that the telling or announcement can be withheld or squelched, if need be. Of course, the very doing of a pre-announcement displays its speaker’s supposition that there is indeed news to tell, and to tell *as* news to *this* recipient. Still, one thing prospective tellers can do (and regularly *do* do) before telling is to check whether the news is already known. And among the recurrent response forms to such pre-announcements, two central types are the “go ahead” type of response (such as: “Guess what,” “What”), which forwards the sequence to its key action, announcing or telling; and the blocking type of response (e.g., a claim of knowledge, such as “I heard”), which aims to forestall such telling.⁵

Often the pre-announcement provides clues about the news to be told (e.g., “Y’wanna know who I got stoned with a few weeks ago?” or “You’ll never guess what your dad is looking at”; Terasaki, 1976, pp. 27–28). The clues better allow the recipient to recognize the news if it is already known, or provide a context for understanding it and an interpretive key, if it is not already known. And here Debbie does provide such clues; “I was looking in the paper” (at lines 34–35) intimates that what she has to tell is something that one can find (and that she has found) in the newspaper. And then (at line 35), “have you got your waterbed yet?” So the thing to be told (about) has something to do with waterbeds, and with Nick’s possibly being in the market for a waterbed in particular.

So there is another constraint on Debbie’s telling here, one not generic to “telling” in the way in which “already known-ness” is. Debbie has information to offer, information relevant to Nick only contingently. Offers and offer sequences too can take what we call “pre-sequences,” just as announcements can and do. With pre-offers, prospective offerers can try to assess whether what they have to offer is relevant to their recipients and may be welcomed by them, so as to not make offers that will be rejected, for example. What Debbie has to offer is information on a cheap waterbed or an especially desirable one, but her pre-offer is designed to find out whether such information is relevant to Nick—whether what will be offered will be relevant. That is what “Have you got your waterbed yet?” appears designed to do; it is an

analyzable pre-offer.⁶ As such, it too (like pre-announcements) takes among its alternative response types a go-ahead response, which forwards the sequence to an offer, or a blocking response, which declines to do so.

So when Debbie asks, "Have you got your waterbed yet?" she is not just asking for information; she awaits a go-ahead to the pre-offer, on which her offer of the information she has come across in the newspaper has been made contingent. And when Nick responds affirmatively, he is not only confirming the proposition at issue—that he already has his waterbed—he is blocking her from going on to tell the information she has seen in the newspaper.

And this is the proximate sequential and interactional context for Debbie's repeated questionings. The backdown relevant here concerns not the factualness of the presence of a waterbed and not Nick's confidence in asserting it; and perhaps not even whether he is teasing. What is at issue is a backdown from the blocking response to the pre-sequences. One form it could take is, "Why?," as in (starting at lines 37–38) "Oh really? Already?" "Mm hmm, why." Or (at line 40), "Are you kidding?" "No, why." Or (at lines 43–44), "Oh- no but you h- you've got it already?" "Yeah! Why."

As it happens, it appears that Nick has not caught this, and so he responds only at the level of information transmission.⁷ When for the third time Debbie asks, "You've got it already?" he says, "Yeah, I just said that . . . It'll sink in two days fr'm now." That is, he just says it again, and more pointedly. He makes her out to be not too quick on the uptake; she'll get it eventually.⁸

But it is *Nick* who has apparently not gotten it. And it will be we who do not get it if we do not systematically distinguish what an utterance is *about* or what is it *saying*, on the one hand, from what it is *doing* on the other. Backing down from the one is quite different from backing down from the other. Attention will virtually always need to be paid to the issue "what is someone doing with some utterance? What action or actions are involved?" Because overwhelmingly actions are involved, they are oriented to by the participants both in constructing and in understanding the talk, and the discourse cannot be appropriately understood without reference to them, precisely because they are key to the participants' conduct.

It follows, of course, that the actions analysis needs to attend to are not those defined by the conceptual commitments of professional

discourse analysts (as, e.g., in any of the varieties of academic speech act theory), but those units and understandings of action that are indigenously to the actors'—the interactional participants'—worlds. Hence, the analyses discussed here of "pre-offer" and "pre-announcement," which figure in no speech act theory I am familiar with, but exemplars of which are common in ordinary conversation.

To recap, the first theme involves how an action done by a speaker—*taken as an action*—has decisive consequences in shaping the trajectory of the talk's development. The second theme concerns how the *absence of an action* can have such consequences. But the absent action here is not that of the speaker of the discourse but rather of its recipient. This is another aspect of the interactivity of discourse production, its "co-construction," as it were.

It is some 15 years now since Charles Goodwin (1979, 1981) gave a convincing demonstration of how the final form of a sentence in ordinary conversation had to be understood as an interactional product. He showed that the speaker, finding one after another prospective hearer not properly aligned as an actual recipient (i.e., not looking at him), reconstructed the utterance in progress—the sentence—so as to design it for the new candidate hearer to whom he had shifted his gaze. Goodwin showed the effects on the utterance of both the candidate recipients' conduct and the speaker's orientation to the several possible recipients, a feature we call recipient design. Goodwin's account served at the time (and still serves) as a compelling call for the inclusion of the hearer in what were purported to be speaker's processes, and for the inclusion of the nonvocal in purportedly vocal conduct. In an article published the following year, Marjorie Goodwin (1980) provided another such demonstration, showing how a hearer's displayed uptake and assessment of a speaker's in-process talk shaped the final form the utterance took.⁹

The general point here is that units such as the clause, sentence, turn, utterance, and discourse are all in principle interactional units. For it is not only that turns figure in the construction of sequences (by which I mean *action* sequences implemented through talk and other conduct), sequences—and their projected, contingent alternative trajectories—figure in the construction of turns and of the extended turns we sometimes call discourse(s). In examining the following conversation, I want to explicate how the sequence being incipiently constructed figures

in the production of what appears to be an extended spate of talk by a single speaker – a discourse of sorts.¹⁰

(2) Marcia and Donny, Stalled

- 01 1 + rings
 02 Marcia: Hello?
 03 Donny: 'lo Marcia, =
 04 Marcia: Year:h
 05 Donny: | = ('t's) D onny.
 06 Marcia: Hi Donny.
 07 Donny: Guess what.hh
 08 Marcia: What.
 09 Donny: 'hh My ca:r is sta::lled. .
 10 (0.2)
 11 Donny: ('n) I'm up here in the Glen?
 12 Marcia: Oh::.
 13 {(0.4)}
 14 Donny: {'hhh}
 15 Donny: A:nd.hh
 16 (0.2)
 17 Donny: I don' know if it's po:ssible, but {'hhh}/(0.2) see
 18 I haveta open up the ba:nk.hh
 19 (0.3)
 20 Donny: a:t uh: (.) in Brentwood?hh =
 21 Marcia: =Yeah:- en I know you want- (.) en I whoa- (.) en I
 22 would, but- except I've gotta leave in aybout five
 23 min(h)utes. (hheh)
 24 Donny: | Okay then I gotta call somebody
 25 else.right away.
 26 (.)
 27 Donny: Okay? =
 28 Marcia: =Okay [Don
 29 Donny: | Thanks] a lot. =Bye-.
 30 Marcia: Bye:.

The “discourse of sorts” which eventually gets produced here (at lines 9, 11, 15, 17–18, and 20) could be rendered as follows: *My car is*

stalled (and I'm up here in the Glen?), and I don't know if it's possible, but, see, I have to open up the bank at uh, in Brentwood? Put this way, each component (e.g., each clause or phrase) appears to follow the one before it, although I have tried to capture (with punctuation in my text and with prosody in my articulation of it on delivery in conference settings) the possibly parenthetical character of the second component, with consequent revised understanding of the relative organization of the components surrounding it. Now aside from the "Oh" interpolated by Marcia (at line 12) in response to this element, all that I appear to have left out in this rendering of the talk is . . . *nothing*—that is, silences, some of them filled by hearable in- and out-breaths. But, of course, these silences are *not* nothing. The something that they are—the something that each is—is given by its sequential context, and it is *that* that requires us to attend to the actions being done here as well as to those *not* being done here. Then we can see that—and how—this is not a unitary discourse produced by a single participant; and we can see that and how some of its components follow not the components of talk that preceded them, but the silence that followed the talk component that preceded them. Thereby we can come to see that it is not just a hearer's uptake and actions that can enter into the shaping of a speaker's talk; it can be the absence of them that does so.

To begin then, the utterance at line 07 should now be readily recognizable for the action it is doing: It is (*doing*) a pre-announcement. It may be useful to be explicit about what is involved in making and sustaining such a claim. Virtually always at least two aspects of a bit of conduct—such as a unit of talk—figure in how it does what it does: its position and its composition (Schegloff, 1992b, pp. 1304–1320). A sketch will have to suffice.

We have already noted that this formulaic utterance "Guess what" is virtually dedicated to doing pre-announcements, as are various extensions and variants of it, such as "Guess what I did today," "Guess where I went," "Guess who I saw," and so forth.¹¹ I should say that this account of composition is only rarely available; there are precious few configurations of talk that are so dedicated, and even those that are are contingent on their position. "Hello," said by an actor upon tripping over a prone body in a British firm, is not a greeting, however much that formulaic expression might appear dedicated to doing that action.

And what is the position of this utterance? How is it to be characterized? It comes just after the opening—the telephone ring's

summons and the recipient's response (lines 01–02)—and the exchange of greetings intertwined with the explication of the identities of the two participants (lines 03–06). I can only mention here something that would inform the parties' conduct of the ensuing interaction, namely the rushed, charged, almost breathless quality of Donny's participation, embodied here in his preemptive self-identification at line 05, rather than waiting to be recognized (Schegloff, 1979a). It is a way of doing "urgency," and it is a part of the positioning of "Guess what." Another part is the possible absence here of the start of an exchange of "Howaryous," a highly recurrent next sequence type in conversations between familiars under many (though not all) circumstances (Schegloff, 1986). In moving directly to "first topic" and the "reason for the call," Donny preempts "Howaryou"s as well, and this further informs the position in which "Guess what" is done. This position and the utterance in it, then, contingently foreshadow not only a telling of some news, they adumbrate the character of that news as well—that is, as urgent (or in some other respect "charged").

The pre-announcement projects further talk by its speaker, contingent on the response of the recipient, and I have already said a bit about the fairly constrained set of response types by the recipient that it makes relevant: a go-ahead response (the "preferred" one in the terminology of CA¹²), a blocking response, a preemptive response, or a heckle-version of one. In the data here, the response (at line 08) is a go-ahead. Once again, it may prove worthwhile to make analytically explicit the practices by which this is achieved (which provide the warrant for the analysis being proposed), if only in a sketched version of the position and composition involved.

The position (at line 08) is the turn after a pre-announcement that has made a response to it relevant next. The composition is a common one for responses to pre-announcements of the "guess + question word" form (as well as the "y'know + question clause" form): repeating the question word from the pre-announcement ("Guess what." "What." "Y'know where I went?" "Where." etc.) (cf. Terasaki, 1976; Schegloff, 1988d).

With her response, "What" (line 08), Marcia both shows that she understands Donny's prior turn to have been a pre-announcement (thereby further grounding *our* analysis of it along these lines), and she provides an appropriate response to it. And note that that is how Donny hears Marcia's response; for otherwise, her "what" could invite

treatment as displaying some trouble in hearing or understanding. It is not, of course, doing that, and it is not heard that way. "What" displays an understanding of "Guess what" as a pre-announcement; and Donny's ensuing turn displays his understanding of it as a go-ahead response to a pre-announcement. Of course Donny's ensuing turn (at line 09) is in the first instance otherwise engaged, and that is what I turn to next.

The pre-announcement sequence having been completed with a go-ahead, what is Donny's next utterance doing? It seems clearly enough designed to deliver the projected news. Note well: that it is *conveying information* is one formulation; that it does so by an utterance designed to be a recognizable action—"announcing," or "telling"—is another. For, of course, information can be conveyed by utterances designed to do something else in the first instance and on the face of it. But this one is clearly enough designed to do "telling."¹³

But what are the design features that make that "clear?" I can only tick off a series of observations whose development would be pertinent to such an analysis. First, the utterance is in an assertion or declarative format. Second, it refers to a speaker-specific event (what Labov & Fanshel, 1977, p. 62, called an "A-event"¹⁴). Third, it is presented as a recent, indeed as a current, event (Donny says, "My car *is* stalled"). Fourth, as a current, A-event, it is not otherwise accessible to recipient (by definition; else it would be an "A-B event"). There is undoubtedly more; and surely none of this may itself appear to be news. Still, if we are to get clear on how the actions people do with talk "are" transparently what they "are," we will have to make analytically explicit how they are *constructed* to be transparently that (or equivocally that, for that matter), and how they may therefore be *recognizable* as transparently that (or equivocally that)—both to their recipients and (derivatively) to academic analysts.

It is not enough that there was a pre-announcement sequence with a go-ahead response. What follows is not necessarily an announcement; it will have to be constructed by its speaker as a recognizable, analyzable announcement, though its position after a pre-announcement sequence will potentiate such recognition. Once again, then: Position *and* composition matter. So if discourse analysis takes the actions being done in the discourse as key to understanding its organization, this will be part of the job.

Anyway, just as pre-announcements make sequentially relevant a

response from some restricted set of next actions, so do announcements or tellings. Among them (and again, I must be brief) are some form of *information uptake* (such as registering the new information as new, for example, through the use of the “oh,” which Heritage, 1984a, termed a “change-of-state token,” or alternatively registering it as having already been known after all), or some form of *assessment* of what has been told: as good, awful, interesting, discouraging, and so on. And indeed, these forms of action both regularly occur in the immediate sequential context of announcements. Not here, however.

It now becomes pertinent for us to note that what follows this bit of news—“My car is stalled”—is silence (at line 10). Only two-tenths of a second of silence to be sure; still, it is a silence after the prior speaker has produced a possibly complete utterance, one that makes relevant a response from its recipient, indeed, as noted, one that makes relevant quite specific types of response. Although everyone is silent (which silence as a state requires), someone in particular—Marcia—is “relevantly not talking.” Donny has produced a possibly complete turn, one that implicates some responsive action next—by Marcia. Absence of talk is then, in the first instance, attributable to Marcia. So although the effect of her silence is that no action seems to get done, what she is specifically and relevantly “not doing” is registering some uptake of what has been told, and/or some assessment of it—for it is these that Donny’s announcement has made conditionally relevant.

At least that is some of what she is not doing, for a bit of talk can do more than one action. And some sorts of actions regularly serve as the vehicle or instrument by which other actions are done, announcements or tellings prominent among them (as are “questions” and “assessments”). In this case, I suggest, “My car is stalled” is not only an announcement, it is as well a possible complaint.¹⁵

The features that provided for this utterance as a possible “announcement” do not, of course, analyze its status as a possible “complaint.” In a variety of contexts it appears that formulating a state of affairs or an event as an absence, as a failure, as a nonoccurrence is a way of constructing a recognizable complaint. And although the utterance under examination here is not as distinct an embodiment of such a usage is its “surface” realization as many others (e.g., “You didn’t get an ice cream sandwich,” analyzed in Schegloff, 1988b, pp. 118–131), “stalled” is used to mean “engine will not start or run,” it does formulate a failure.

Again, a complaint or report of trouble makes different types of response relevant next than does an announcement. Among such sequentially implicated next turns to complaints (depending on the character and target of the complaint or reported trouble) can be such ones as a sympathy expression, apology, excuse or account, agreement and co-complaint or disagreement and rejection, and—perhaps most relevant here—a remedy or help or the offer of a remedy or help.¹⁶ So the silence at line 10 is to be understood not only for its withholding of news uptake and assessment, but for its withholding—by Marcia—of an offer to help. Though the silence by definition has no talk, *it is as fully fledged an event in the conversation as any utterance and as consequential for the ensuing talk*. The talk that follows is properly understood as following not the utterance “My car is stalled,” not the information that utterance conveys, and not the announcement that utterance embodies or the complaint that announcement implements; rather, it follows the *silence* following that announcement/complaint, in which its “preferred” response (in the technical conversation-analytic sense of that term; cf. note 12) is hearably and analyzably withheld.

Note that not every silence in conversation can be accorded an analysis along these lines. Silences get their interactional import from their sequential context (their position). A silence developing where an utterance has not been brought to possible completion is generally heard not as the interlocutor’s, but as a pause in the continuing turn of the one who was talking (Sacks et al., 1974, p. 715). And not all silences following a turn’s possible completion are equivalent either. The silence following a question has a different import and consequence than one following an answer or one following receipt of an answer. That something is missing and what that something is should not simply be asserted; both need to be analytically grounded, based on structural analyses of relevant empirical materials. (This is so not only when silence develops, but at any apparent juncture in the talk where the analyst is drawn to introduce claims about what is “missing.”)

Were sufficient space available, it would repay the effort to continue tracking in detail the development of this interaction, the whole of which lasts barely 18 seconds. A selective set of observations will have to suffice, focusing on the recurrent reentries of Donny in the aftermath of “My car is stalled.”

(3) Marcia and Donny, Stalled (partial)

- 09 Donny: 'hh My ca:r is sta::lled.
 10 (0.2)
 11 Donny: ('n) I'm up here in the Glen?
 12 Marcia: Oh:.
 13 (0.4)
 14 Donny: {'hhh }
 15 Donny: A:nd.hh
 16 (0.2)
 17 Donny: I don' know if it's po:ssible, but {,hhh}/(0.2) see
 18 I haveta open up the ba:nk.hh
 19 (0.3)
 20 Donny: a:t uh: (·) in Brentwood?hh=
 21 Marcia: =Yeah:- en I know you want- (·) en I whoa- (·) en I
 22 would, but- except I've gotta leave in aybout five
 23 min(h)utes. [(hheh)

Note that each of these reentries (at lines 11, 15, 17, and 20) is constructed by Donny as an increment to the earlier talk, with the series of “turns-so-far” laced with silences, at many of which intervention from Marcia with an offer of help might be relevant. This incrementally constructed discourse is a multiply renewed effort (or series of efforts) to elicit help from Marcia, without ever requesting it (as we say in the vernacular) explicitly.

First, although we lack independent ethnographic knowledge, “'n I'm up here in the Glen” appears designed to reassure Marcia of Donny's proximity and thereby to mitigate the costs or difficulty of helping for Marcia. Note further that it is delivered as a sort of parenthetical insert,¹⁷ projecting a further continuation. In making itself out to be a continuation of what preceded (it begins at line 11 with a compressed conjunction), it treats what preceded as having not been complete, and the silence it breaks as having been not a postcompletion withholding of response, but a pause in the continuing production of an ongoing turn. That something might have been missing is thereby suppressed or camouflaged.¹⁸

The projection of continuation carried by the parenthetical informing is echoed and renewed (after Marcia's receipt of the informing,

once again with no response to the complaint) by a substantial hearable (pre-talk) in-breath (line 14) and an isolated continuation marker "A:nd" (line 15), after which another silence is allowed to materialize (line 16), with provision already made that further talk by Donny (should it be necessary) will be a further continuation of the utterance-in-progress. It turns out to be necessary.

With "I don' know if it's possible, but" Donny adumbrates the conventional grounds of rejection of requests (cf. note 16) and thereby comes to the very verge of doing an outright request himself, for this usage virtually serves as a form of marking an utterance or an incipient utterance as a request. It serves, then, as a form of *pre*-request, a form cognate with the earlier-mentioned pre-announcement and pre-offer. But unlike those forms, the preferred response to a pre-request does not promote the sequence to doing the request; it preempts the request with an offer (Schegloff, 1979a, p. 49, 1990, p. 61). So, as in the initial installment of his now-extended turn, Donny is providing for help to be offered without requesting it explicitly. But by now the utterance has become not a complaint, but a pre-request. That is, as the turn is extended, the action it is analyzably doing can be—and here is—transformed.

As just the point where the request itself would be specified, and thereby brought to realization, Donny self-interrupts (with "See" at line 17) and suppresses the clearly projected request. In its place, "I haveta open up the bank" underscores both the urgency and the potential costs of failure. For the first time since "My car is stalled," the utterance is brought to possible completion both grammatically and prosodically (cf. Ford & Thompson, forthcoming), and once again there is no uptake or response from Marcia. Again Donny breaks the silence (as he did at line 11), with talk built as an increment to the prior—otherwise apparently completed—talk, again with a place reference delivered with upward intonation, in the manner of a try-marked recognitional reference (Sacks and Schegloff, 1979) for a place, inviting its recipient's claim of recognition, and whatever other response might be forthcoming to this by now elaborately constructed, multiply laminated utterance.

Each of these increments comes after, and is analyzably directed to, the absence of any response to the complaint or (later) to the pre-request Donny had presented as the reason for his call. When she eventually responds, Marcia declines to offer help, without ever saying "no." But her response does display (line 21) her understanding that a solicitation

of help was being made relevant (“en I know you want-”) and that she would ordinarily comply (“en I would,”), but for a disabling circumstance.

Donny’s “discourse of sorts,” whose presentation was at the start of this discussion, has now been analyzed into the components from which it was assembled through a series of sequential and interactional contingencies. Its elaborate pursuit of help has been anatomized as the proposed underlying action. Here is one use of such analytic and terminological tools as the “parts” of an “adjacency pair,” which are sometimes bemoaned as merely jargon. It is the analysis of “My car is stalled” as a possible announcement (a first pair part that makes one of a set of potential second pair parts relevant next) and consultation of other empirical announcement sequences (to establish what kinds of utterances serve as second pair parts that satisfy these sequence-organizational constraints) that ground claims about what is missing in the following silence. It is analysis of that utterance as also a possible complaint (another type of first pair part) and examination of complaint sequences that (1) provide for the possible relevance next of the variety of responsive turn types proposed earlier, (2) characterize them as preferred or dispreferred, and (3) underwrite further claims about what might be hearably missing. Without some such analytic resource (as well as analytic resources bearing on turn organization such as “possible completion” and further talk as either new “turn-constructive unit” or “increment” to the prior unit), it is easy for a post hoc observer (unlike an in situ participant) to overlook that an action is missing. The prior speaker (here, Donny) may talk in such a manner that obscures that missingness and makes it appear a mere pause in an ongoing utterance-in-progress. That action by the speaker, together with our vernacular inclination to normalize and naturalize the events in the interactional stream, can give the air of inevitability to what ends up having transpired. To say “My car is stalled” is a possibly complete turn that is a first pair part of a particular type or types prompts thinking explicitly about the possibly relevant second pair parts. Thus one looks for them and finds them “missing” if they are not there. The relevant “missing,” however, is “missing for the participants,” and one must then go back to the data to find evidence of the participants’ orientation to something being awry.

The point of this analysis, however, has been that not only is action a relevant facet and upshot of the talk, but that *actions by other than the*

speaker are relevant to understanding a speaker's construction of discourse. Relatedly, the *absence of actions by recipient*—the absence of actions made relevant by the speaker's prior talk, the speaker's turn-so-far—may be crucial to understanding the speaker's further construction of the discourse.

This, then, is my second theme: Discourse involves not just action, but action in interaction and the consequential eventfulness of its absence. Once again, then, co-construction may be most critical to our analysis of discourse when one of the participants is not producing talk or doing anything else visible or hearable. The very production of a discourse may be one contingent response by a prior speaker to the absence of a response by a co-participant to an apparently completed, action-implementing turn-constructural unit.

This logic—an interactional or socio-logic, if you will—is at work throughout talk-in-interaction. To get at it, a focus on information will not suffice. It is the action import of utterances and not just what they are about or what they impart—the action import or nonaction import—that regularly drives the interactional construction of extended spates of talk, or discourses.

NOTES

- 1 The term *discourse* now has a variety of uses. In contemporary cultural criticism one can speak of the “discourse of modernity” or “the discourses of power” or “feminist discourse”; indeed, I was tempted to begin the present sentence by referring to “the discourse of contemporary cultural criticism.” In a more technical usage current among linguists and computational linguists, as one reader has reminded me, “. . . ‘discourse’ is simply a broad term that includes interactional talk, but also includes written essays, advertisements, sermons, folk tales, etc. With this view of ‘discourse,’ your characterization is hard to interpret.” My point is meant to contrast with this fundamentally taxonomic usage. The taxonomic usage reflects academic interests in discriminating and conceptualizing a variety of genres, and the relationship of these genres is derived from their relative positioning in this conceptual mapping, not in the naturally occurring processes that might conceivably have engendered them. It is this which the point in the text is meant to invoke.

That point turns on what is both a broader and a narrower sense of *discourse*, one that underlies these other usages (and is a common characteristic of the usages discussed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*), and that is the usage that contrasts *discourse* with single sentences. If one examines the usage of a term like

discourse analysis, for example, one rarely finds it invoked to deal with single sentences. *Discourse* regularly refers to extended, multisentence “texts.” And it originally had reference to speech or talk. Hence my point, which is that discourse—extended or multiunit talk production—be understood processually, as one sort of product of conversation, rather than conversation being understood taxonomically, as simply one subtype of discourse. In this view, extended spates of text by a single speaker have as their source environment turns-at-talk in conversation in which that is the concerted product of a company of participants in interaction (e.g., spates of storytelling). A kind of virtual natural history of interactional genres and speech exchange systems may then track the disengagement of such sustained, multiunit talk production by a single speaker from the interactional environment of conversation into settings such as religious ceremony, political speech making, prophetic invocation, philosophical disquisition, and so forth. The development of writing then enables an explosion of yet further genres.

- 2 As becomes clear later, I do not mean here to be invoking speech act theory, whose ability to deal with real ordinary discourse is subject to question, but that is another story (cf. Schegloff, 1988d, 1992a:xxiv–xxii, 1992c).

- 3 For example:

A: Is Al here?
 B: Yeah
 (0.?)
 C: He is?
 B: Well he was. ←

- 4 For example, in the following fragment from a conversation in a used furniture store (US, 27:28–28:01), Mike is angling to buy (or be given) Vic’s aquarium when Rich intervenes with a challenge to Vic’s ownership of it (at line a). Note the backdowns in epistemic strength at lines c and e in response to Vic’s questionings at lines b and d, respectively: first from assertion to assertion plus tag question, and then to fully interrogative construction. (Note finally that in the end Vic does disagree with Rich’s claim and rejects his challenge.)

MIK: Wanna get some- wannuh buy some fish?
 RI?: Ihhh ts-t
 VIC: Fi:sh,
 MIK: You have a tank I like tuh tuh- I-I
 like-
 VIC: Yeh I gotta fa:wty:: I hadda fawtuy? a fifty, enna
 twu:nny:: en two ten::s,
 MIK: Wut- Wuddiyuh doing wit dem. Wuh-
 a RIC: But those were uh:::

- a Alex's tanks.
VIC: enna fi:ve.
- b VIC: Hah?
- c RIC: Those'r Alex's tanks weren't they?
- d VIC: Podn' me?
- e RIC: Weren't- didn' they belong tuh Alex?
VIC: No: Alex ha(s) no tanks Alex is tryintuh buy my tank.

- 5 For a more general treatment, see Terasaki, 1976; Schegloff, 1990. For an instance with both—indeed, simultaneous—go-ahead and blocking responses, see Schegloff, 1995.
- 6 Among the design features that make it so analyzable is the negative polarity item “yet,” which displays its speaker’s orientation to a “no” answer, and builds in a preference for that sort of response (note that “yet” is replaced by “already” after Nick’s affirmative response). The placement of the pre-offer after the pre-announcement is a way of showing the former to be in the further service of the latter and part of the same “project.” For a formally similar series of sequences, see the data excerpt in note 13, where positioning “Didjer mom tell you I called the other day?” after “Wouldju do me a favor?” puts it under the jurisdiction of the projected request sequence and in pursuit of that project.
- 7 It is possible, of course, that he has caught it, but prefers not to hear of the better buy he could have had, having just taken possession of, and taken pride in, his new acquisition.
- 8 Debbie does find a way of conveying what she saw in the newspaper in spite of it all, namely in the questions she eventually asks about Nick’s waterbed. Her specific questions (about the bed being on a frame, on a raised frame, etc., cf. lines 55–57), are almost certainly prompted by what she saw in the paper.
- 9 Others have contributed to this theme as well. I leave with a mere mention Lerner’s work (1987, 1991, forthcoming), pursuing several observations by Sacks (1992, I, pp. 144–147 et passim; 1992, II, pp. 57–60 et passim), on “collaboratives,” in which two or more speakers collaborate in producing a turn, in the sense that each actually articulates part of it. See also Schegloff (1982, 1987), Mandelbaum (1987, 1989), and in a somewhat different style of work, Erickson (1992) and the articles in Duranti and Brenneis (1986).
- 10 The following discussion documents another point as well. A number of articles (e.g., Jefferson & Schenkein, 1978; Schegloff, 1980, 1988b, 1990) describe various ways in which sequences get expanded as the vehicle for interactionally working out some course of action between parties to talk-in-interaction. Sequence expansion is embodied in the number of turns composing the trajectory of the sequence from start to closure. But the amount of talk in a

sequence can increase in ways other than expansion in its sequence structure. Among these is expansion of the component turns that make up the sequence (cf. Zimmerman, 1984, pp. 219–220, and the discussion in Schegloff, 1991, pp. 62–63, concerning different formats of citizen complaint calls to the police). Most commonly it is the second part of an adjacency-pair-based sequence that gets this sort of elaboration, as when a question gets a story or other elaborated response as its answer. There may then still be a “simple,” unexpanded (or minimally expanded) sequence structure of question/answer, or question/answer/receipt, with the second of these parts being quite a lengthy “discourse unit.” “Turn expansion” may then stand as a contrast or alternative to sequence expansion, rather than be in a subsuming or subsumed relationship to it (cf. Schegloff, 1982, pp. 71–72). In the data examined in the next portion of the text, the discourse or turn expansion occupies not the second-part position in the sequence, but the first.

- 11 Cf. Terasaki, 1976. Note that such utterances are neither designed, nor are they heard, as commands or invitations to guess, that is, to venture a try at what their speaker means to tell, though hecklers may heckle by so guessing (though I must say that I have seen very few empirical instances of this). On the other hand, some recipients of pre-announcements who know—or think they know—what the pre-announcer has in mind to tell may not simply block the telling by asserting that they know; they may show that they know by preempting the telling themselves.
- 12 Cf., for example, Sacks, 1973/1987; Levinson, 1983, pp. 332–356; Heritage, 1984b, pp. 265–292; Pomerantz, 1984; Schegloff, 1988c, pp. 442–457.
- 13 See, for example, Schegloff, 1990, p. 63, note 6, for a discussion of the same bit of information first being conveyed in an utterance designed to do something else, and immediately thereafter done as a “telling” at arrows a and b, respectively, in the following exchange:

B: But- (1.0) Wouldju do me a favor? heheh
 J: e(hh) depends on the favor::, go ahead,
 B: a→ Didjer mom tell you I called the other day?
 J: No she didn't.
 (0.5)
 B: b→ Well I called. (.) [hhh]
 J: [Uhuh]

- 14 By this they referred to “representations of some state of affairs . . . drawn from the biography of the speaker: these are A-events, that is, known to A and not necessarily to B” (Labov & Fanshel, 1977, p. 62).
- 15 Alternatively, it could be characterized as a possible troubles telling (cf. Jefferson & Lee, 1981; Jefferson, 1988) or a pre-request (see later discussion).

I cannot here take up the differences between these formulations, which in any case are not material to the issues I am presently concerned with.

- 16 Drew (1984, pp. 137–139 et passim) described the use of reportings that leave it to the recipient to extract the upshot and the consequent appropriate response. He addressed himself specifically to the declining of invitations by reporting incapacitating circumstances. His materials share with the present data the feature that a “dispreferred” action is circumlocuted by the use of a simple reporting of “the facts”—there, declining invitations; here, requesting a service.
- 17 For recent treatments of parenthetical prosody from a variety of approaches, see the articles by Local (1992) and Uhmman (1992).
- 18 On the use of additional increments to otherwise possibly completed turns after developing silences portend incipient disagreement or rejection, see Ford (1993).

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APPENDIX: DEBBIE AND NICK

- 01 ((ring ring))
 02 ((click/pick-up))
 03 Nick: H'llo
 04 Debbie: 'hh- 'z < Who's this,
 05 (0.2)
 06 Debbie: This'z Debbie
 07 (0.3)
 08 Nick: Who's this.
 09 Debbie: This'z Debbie
 10 Nick: This is > the Los Angeles Police <
 11 Debbie: [Nno: =
 11a = ((laugh))
 12 Nick: = ha ha ha
 13 Debbie: Hi Nicky how are ya.
 14 Nick: O:kay
 15 Debbie: hh u- Did Mark go to Ohio?
 16 Nick: Ohio?

- 17 Debbie: Uh huh_z
- 18 Nick: I dunno did he?
- 19 Debbie: 'hh I: dunn_oo::
- 20 Nick: _{ha} ha
- 21 Debbie: Ny-
- 22 Nick: Yeah I think he's (com-)/(still) ()-
- 23 when's Mark come back, Sunday_z ((off phone))
- 24 (0.8)
- 25 Nick: Yeah I think he's comin back Sunday =
- 26 Debbie: = Tomorrow_z Is Rich gonna go get 'im?
- 27 (0.2)
- 28 Nick: I guess
- 29 Debbie: Or is he gonna ca:ll_z
- 30 (0.8)
- 31 Nick: h! (h)I du(h)nno he didn't tell me =
- 32 Debbie: = Oh:: you have nothin' t'do with it
- 33 Nick: (n)ha ha
- 34 Debbie: 'hhh Um:: u- guess what I've-(u-)wuz lookin' in the
35 paper:-have you got your waterbed yet?
- 36 Nick: Uh huh, it's really nice °too, I set it up
- 37 Debbie: Oh rea:lly? Already?
- 38 Nick: Mm hmm
- 39 (0.5)
- 40 Debbie: Are you kidding?
- 41 Nick: No, well I ordered it last (week)/(spring)
- 42 (0.5)
- 43 Debbie: Oh- no but you h- you've got it already?
- 44 Nick: Yeah h! hh = ((laughing))
- 45 Debbie: = hhh 'hh 'hh } ((laughing))
- 46 Nick: I just said that
- 47 Debbie: O::hh: hu'h, I couldn't be lieve you c-
- 48 Nick: Oh ('it's just) It'll sink in 'n two
49 days fr'm now (then) ((laugh))
- 50 Debbie: ((l a u g h)) } Oh no cuz I just
51 got- I saw an ad in the paper for a real discount
52 waterbed s' I w'z gonna tell you 'bout it =
- 53 Nick: = No this is really, you (haven't seen) mine, you'll
54 really like it.
- 55 Debbie: Ya:h. It's on a frame and everythin'g?
- 56 Nick: _{Yeah}

- 57 Debbie: 'hh Uh (is) a raised frame?
- 58 Nick: °mm hmm
- 59 Debbie: How: ni::ce, Whadja do with Mark's cou:ch,
- 60 (0.5)
- 61 Nick: P(h)ut it out in the cottage,
- 62 (0.2)
- 63 Nick: goddam thing weighed about two th(h)ousand
- 64 pound_s
- 65 Debbie: |mn:Yea::h
- 66 I'll be: t
- 67 Nick: |ah
- 68 (0.2)
- 69 Debbie: Rea:lly
- 70 (0.3)
- 71 Debbie: 'hh O:kay,
- 72 (.)
- 73 Debbie: Well (0.8) mmtch! I guess I'll talk tuh Mark later
- 74 then.hh
- 75 Nick: Yeah I guess you will. |eh heh huh huh huh |huh
- 76 Debbie: |hhh |W e : l l : - |eh heh
- 77 'hh that that: (.) could be debatable too I dunno
- 78 (0.2)
- 79 Debbie: Bu:t 'hh so um: 'hh =
- 80 Nick: =So (h!) um |uh |let's see my name's Debbie =
- 81 Debbie: |h |um
- 82 Nick: =|I don't ((laugh))
- 83 Debbie: =|((laugh))
- 84 Debbie: 'hhh! Okay I'll see you later Nick =
- 85 Nick: =Okay
- 86 Debbie: Buh bye
- 87 Nick: Bye bye
- 88 ((*phone hung up*))
- 89 ((*click*))