# Home position

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This paper describes a possible formal organizational device that serves to bound episodes of body movement such as gestures, fidgets, instrumental moves and the like. It involves a spate of movement — whether a single move or a series of moves — being completed by returning the moving body part to the position from which it departed at the outset. A series of specimens are examined which display this organizational device across a number of dimensions of variation — in the body part being moved, the characteristics of the mover, the amplitude of the move, etc., underscoring the formality and adaptability of the device.

*The electronic edition of this article includes audio-visual data.*

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## Editors' note

The use of film recordings in the micro-analysis of naturally-occurring interaction with concomitant observations of structure in bodily action was pioneered in large part by Gregory Bateson and Ray Birdwhistell (see Leeds-Hurwitz, 1987 and Kendon, 1990 for historical accounts). However, towards the end of the nineteen sixties video-tape had become available and cheap enough for researchers to take advantage of it. Most important, *portable* video became possible which allowed researchers to make recordings in field situations of all kinds. This development intersected with Conversation Analysis most directly in 1973, apparently as a result of an encounter between Harvey Sacks and Emanuel Schegloff with Charles and Marjorie (Candy) Goodwin at the Linguistics Institute held that summer in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The Goodwins, in Philadelphia, beginning in 1970, together with Gail Jefferson and under the

influence of Erving Goffman and Ray Birdwhistell, among others, had begun pioneer work on the analysis of video-recordings of interaction in every day settings. They were a part of what was then a newly developing realization that the bodily actions of all sorts by participants in occasions of interaction were patterned and organized in the service of accomplishing occasions of interaction *qua* occasions (Goodwin 1981; see also Goffman 1967: 1–3). Sacks and Schegloff were teaching at the Linguistic Institute and participated in a series of data sessions with the Goodwins, Jefferson and others, examining materials collected by the Goodwins. In the aftermath of that summer experience, work with video materials took root in Southern California. This paper, 'Home Position,' is one product of this new exploration.

The paper, which was presented orally at the American Anthropological Association in 1975, we publish here not only for its historical interest. It is also valuable because it is an example of something that has always been rather rare in gesture studies and related areas, though still much needed. That is, it is an example of systematic *description* of certain kinds of bodily action and the structured patterns this can reveal, yielding the beginnings of an underlying organizational design informing the construction and uptake of the body's doings. The paper seems to reflect some of the early excitement that those of us who had begun to explore what was then a novel technology experienced as we began to detect orderliness in the organization of bodily action which, hitherto, had been largely overlooked.

## Introductory note by Emanuel A. Schegloff

In mid-November, 1975, Harvey Sacks was killed in an automobile accident, some three weeks before we were scheduled to deliver a paper at the Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association, held that year in San Francisco. Sacks and I had discussed several possible topics for our presentation. The tentative decision had been to talk about some work on body behavior, and specifically work which Sacks in particular had been pursuing with a graduate assistant, Blaine Roberts (it was Roberts who had assembled the collection of video fragments from which the presentation which is reproduced here drew). We agreed to talk further about that and to plan out a presentation, but the talk never occurred. What I presented was my own version of the paper that we were to have offered jointly, grounded in the discussion with Sacks, whose project it most centrally was. As presented it was offered as a report of work in progress.

The crediting of authorship lists Sacks as first author, but that saddles him with responsibility he sadly did not live to assume. As I authored the text as it stands, I accept that responsibility.

The text which follows is a modified version of a transcription of an oral presentation that was given at meeting of the American Anthropological Association in San Francisco, on December 6, 1975. There are two types of modifications to the transcription that I have undertaken. First, I have removed many of the infelicities, redundancies, insertions and self-interruptions present in the original oral presentation. These had little to offer the reader but confusion and obstacles to reading. I have not removed them all, however, in the hope of recurrently reminding the reader that it is a talk and not a finished paper.

Second, the talk was built to rely heavily on direct observation by the audience of the video displays of instances of the phenomenon being discussed. The talk accompanying these displays was often so indexical as to be thoroughly inaccessible to anyone not simultaneously watching the video being displayed. I have supplemented the text in most of these instances (and sometimes replaced it) with discursive description of the phenomena being focussed on in the video.

The replacement of direct viewing of the video by such description engenders a number of methodological reservations and problems (e.g., selectivity) which can not be taken up here, but one of which at least must be mentioned. Viewing these excerpts from ordinary interaction on videotape, one can orient *both* to the utterly mundane and background status of these bits of movement in the interaction *and* to their status as the focus of the analytic inquiry being reported here. These bits of movement are thoroughly out-of-focus – I would venture even a metaphoric "invisible" – for the participants. When rendered in the text discursively, they lose that "off-line" character, and become ipso facto "noteworthy." As discursively described, then, they can assume a monumentality, a substantiality, and solidity which misses completely the transitory, ephemeral, background character which can continue to inform visual uptake, even in the context of analytic discussion being elaborated around the video on an occasion of professional inquiry. I have no solution to this distortion, other than to alert readers to it, and to invite compensatory efforts on their part. Just prior to publication, it proved possible to salvage all but one of the original video displays, although not up to contemporary technical and aesthetic standards. The text has been amended to refer the reader to the relevant video clips.

Chuck and Candy Goodwin, Gail Jefferson, Anita Pomerantz and Blaine Roberts helped to get this paper together under extremely adverse circumstances,

and Paul Ekman lent the equipment which made that, and the actual presentation, possible. More recently, Scott Phillabaum provided invaluable help in preparing the digitized video clips. My thanks to all of them.

## Home position

For those who are not familiar with the work that has been going on in this area let me just supply a very brief background. A group of us has been working for some time now on the organization of interaction using materials of audio and video tape with transcripts of everyday scenes trying to study them naturalistically. Most, though not all, of the reports to date have focused on the talk, and have been concerned, most generally speaking, with attempts to locate and describe various types of sequential organization that operate on interaction and produce observable orderlinesses within it. But we have been interested as well all along in the organization of body behavior in interaction, and that's what I want to talk about a bit today. I hope to be brief, and I hope to be straightforward.

Body behavior in interaction also seems to be, in many respects, sequentially organized. Part of its apparent sequential organization is related to its being partially ordered vis-a-vis the talk, and insofar as the talk is informed with sequential organization, the body behavior that is part and parcel of it will be informed by a sequential organization. One very brief example, with no data, except that you can go out after the meeting today and see it as much as you like. If you examine the behavior of eyes in interaction, one thing you can repetitively enough watch happen is that, in multi-party interactions, some collection of the current non-speakers in the talk will direct their eyes at someone who has been selected to speak next *before* that one starts to talk. You have, then, a bit of body behavior organized by reference to what we have elsewhere described as the turn-taking organization of conversation. It is a sequentially organized phenomenon. It is sequentially organized – though it's body behavior – by virtue of the sequential organization of the talk, and is ordered with respect to it.

But how about its own internal organization – internal, that is, to body behavior itself. It appears that there too body behavior is sequentially organized. The question is: How can we characterize the kind of organization it has? In particular, can we find for it a *formal* organization, one that would give us access to the orderliness to be found in body behavior while allowing us to

transcend the immense variability that is also findable, variability in types of moves, body parts, places, in the so-called contexts of interaction, in the so-called statuses of the parties to it, and in the cultures to the study of which anthropology is traditionally devoted.

This report of work in progress then is intended to call attention to one candidate component of one such formal organization internal to body behavior, to display some instances of it – we'll get to that on the video in a moment – to consider its formality, and to suggest some of its import. And since we will be looking for an organization independent of the talk, we will be looking at a lot of the data without the sound on. When you are looking at taped interaction, especially without sound, and watching it for its detectable orderliness, that can invite attention to the starting and stopping of moves.

The observation that is the focus of this report, the thing I want to invite your attention to, is this: *A very large number of moves and sequences of moves in interaction end where they begin. That is, they end in the same place and regularly in the same position, which we are calling "home position." The moves depart from home and return to home.*

Now, since the organization of a segment of talk – which is sequentially organized – regularly has as important loci of its organization its beginning and its end, the organization often relates the beginning *to* the end, and often involves the reappearance at the end of something that occurred at the beginning. It is striking to find a body movement unit that is built to end where it began. It is striking for several reasons, three I'll mention now.

One, it's a potentially simplest organizational format for the organization of a segment of behavior – end it where you began. That's very nearly as simple a way of organizing it sequentially as one might imagine. Second, it suggests the presence of an organizational *system*, not just a mere orderliness, but a systematically organized and produced one. And third, it suggests the formality of its operation. The fact that the object "place from which a move departed and to which it returns" (or "home") is a purely formal object and can characterize any place in particular would suggest then that a system that was built with parts like that would be a purely formal system of the kind we'd like to find.

And so, let's explore the observation that there is a large number of these returns to home position. Actually, you won't have a chance to see a large number because I'm not playing you straight through a piece of interaction in which you can see whether there is a large number or a small number; you're only going to see instances of it; but again I invite you to watch for yourselves whenever you care to. By no means all moves will return to the place from

which they departed, which suggests that the little bit of organization we are talking about today is not exhaustive. There ought to be more of it, and part of the interest I hope that the talk will have is that somebody might be motivated to try and go to find more of it.

Okay. So let's turn to the observation.

For various reasons that we won't go into right now, the observation was originally noticed on *gestures*, and we'll look at some eight of them to get a sense of some of the potential parameters of variation that this phenomenon – the departure from and return to home – operates across; variations, for example (and I don't mean to be proposing these as otherwise serious candidate important parameters of variation, just ones that would occur to one off the top of one's head potentially) – such as faint vs. ample moves, quick vs. slow ones, or potential variations between a home position at rest vs. a moving home position (I had written in my notes "a rest home vs. a moving home"), variations in the direction of the gesture and the direction of the return to home (whether, for example, it is up or down or sideways), variations in statuses of the participants (such as male/female, republican/democrat, and all the rest), and variations in the "context" (and we'll even have a piece of data from Japan – since these are anthropology meetings and variations in culture are of special interest). There will be some other parameters we can consider later. Again, I'm not inviting your attention to the variations; but in the segments we are about to examine you'll see the way in which this operation seems to transcend all of those potential parameters of variation.

In the first of these segments a fellow is talking (the sound is going to be off), and you'll see a series of three hand gestures, each one returning to home – the first involving a slight hand drop, then a short gesture, then a longer-held gesture, in each case returning to home. I'll try to play it twice.

**Movie 1.**  1Mb

The man is sitting on the ground, his knees drawn up, his arms resting on them just below the elbow, the hands meeting midpoint, and holding a matchbook. This position of the hands is the home position from which each of the series of hand movements departs and to which it returns. In the first, the right hand drops with a bent forefinger pointing to the ground (also seeable as disposing of a bit of cardboard which has become detached from the matchbook), and then returns to the matchbook and the other hand. In the second move, the right hand is articulated outward with the extended thumb in effect pointing off

to the right; as soon as the hand/thumb reaches its maximum extension, it begins a return to home position. In the third move in this series, both hands are moved apart with a swivelling somewhat upward to a palms-up position; the gesture is held immobile at its point of maximum extension for about one second, and then both hands are returned to home position. The three moves are of progressively greater amplitude, from very minor, to substantial and "point-underscoring."

In the next, a young woman is sitting at a meeting, talking. She is holding with both hands a clipboard which is resting on her lap. She makes a gesture with her left hand (articulated from both the elbow and the wrist) and, without a hold/pause, returns the hand to a grasp of the clip board.

**Movie 2.** 0.4Mb

The third segment records a crowd of people standing or milling about at a county fair. Two men are standing together in L-formation, arms akimbo (i.e., with hands on hips) and talking. One of them (presumably the then-current speaker) makes a series of gestures (one of them a pointing gesture) with his right hand/arm, and each time returns the limb to his hip (in the first case departing into a second gesture at just the moment of return to the hip, or just before it).

**Movie 3.** 1Mb

In the fourth exemplar, a citizen is addressing an open session of the City Council, and is holding on to the podium behind which he stands, with his left hand at its highest and farthest point, and his right hand at its nearest and lowest point. Both hands let go of the podium and depart for a two-handed gesture with palms toward his body; the gesture is not held but is immediately resolved, with both hands returning to their original positions, grasping the podium.

**Movie 4.** 0.4Mb

The fifth specimen is a rather longer segment, in which are displayed a whole series of moves with returns to home. But whereas in the previous instances the home position was stable or at rest, in the following instances the home position is itself moving. Here, a young woman is testifying to the same City Council, and the gestures which occur in this segment of her testimony depart and return to two different *moving* homes – one a pencil fidget, the other a hand

wring. At the start of this segment, the speaker is fidgeting with a wooden pencil as she speaks, continuously alternating the position of its point and eraser respectively between her two hands. From the pencil fidget, her right hand (holding the pencil) departs to a series of gestures — a point at the document before her on the podium, and two points off to her right — each of which returns to the pencil fidget with the left hand — which has remained in the same place, at the same level. Then, in a quite different matter we will not be talking about today, she uses a groom (adjusting the hair behind her right ear with her right hand) to move into a different home position — a hand wring in which the thumbs, forefinger and middle fingers of her two hands are intercalated and articulated against one another. From this moving position of her hands, she makes a number of other gestures, each of which returns to the hand wring. (Again: home position #1 (the pencil fidget), to gesture #1, to home position #1, to gesture #2, to home position #1, to gesture #3, to home position #1, to gesture #4, to home position #1, starting the hand wring (home position #2), to gesture #5, to home position #1, to the self-groom, to home position #2 (hand wring), to gesture #6, to home position #2, to gesture #7, to home position #1.)

**Movie 5.**  3.5Mb

In the sixth display (which involves another fidget but of a different kind, sitting down, with various other parameters changed), a woman at a staff meeting is fidgeting with a cigarette, moves her right hand to a gesture, returns to the cigarette without a fidget (it appears that the fidget has moved to her right leg instead), then resumes the fidget, then launches another, even broader, gesture with the right hand, and returns to the cigarette fidget again . (As a bonus, one can observe a man in the background smoking a pipe, and see him withdraw his mouth from the pipe, turn his head up and away to blow out the smoke in the way pipe smokers do, and then return his mouth to the pipe — to home position. That is not what this segment was selected for, but it happens to be there.)

**Movie 6.**  2.3Mb

The seventh of these instances is a rather more ample move away from the home than the ones so far have been. A woman is sitting next to a low end table, and is starting to pick up some papers. In response to something said to her, she freezes the motion, stands up, performs an elaborate mock salute, and comes back to exactly the same point of the picking up action while seated from which she had launched this responsive course of action.

**Movie 7.**  0.7Mb

Finally, a touch of cross-cultural evidence. This is from a Japanese talk show. We see a man and woman seated next to one another, she in traditional dress, he (to her right) in a business suit. He is lightly kneading his right forearm with his left hand, performs a gesture with his left hand, and then returns it to just its point of departure, including the kneading.

**Movie 8.**  0.6Mb

Okay. Enough of those. Now, this initial observation of the home position return and the segments we just showed all concern *gestures*, and although gesture constitutes a sizable enough domain, if the device (the return to home device) operated only within that domain, it would be a major constraint on its generality. In particular, it would be a constraint on its potential generality as a basic device for the organization of body behavior in interaction, and that's because of another fact that is so simple as to invite complete inattention (well, at least it did for me for a long time), and that is that the domain "gesture" is a *speaker's* domain. Speakers gesture, non-speakers don't gesture. They do lots of other things, but they don't gesture. If the home-position phenomenon operates only for the domain "gesture," then it is specifically tied to the organization of conversation, in particular to that aspect of it that we call the organization of its turn-taking system, because "speaker/non-speaker" is organized by that system. That wouldn't particularly be bad. I mean, there are lots of things that seem to be organized that way, but it is not the thing we were looking for. It would not be the kind of general, formal, broad scope *internal to body behavior organization* there is some interest in having.

So what we need to do is to look at non-speakers as well, and look to see if the departure from and return to home position operates for them. That would be one way of seeing (and there will be another one very briefly later on) whether or not home position operates across the speaker/non-speaker dichotomy. I'm making it sound like a hypothesis, but you know the outcome is fore-determined at this point. It does. And let me show you some pieces; there will be about nine of these (in addition to the one featuring the pipe smoker, described before), and they are selected to vary on certain parameters so you can get a little bit more sense of the robustness (as the mathematicians call it) of this thing. We have seen a bunch of variation types already in the ones examined for speakers; the ones that figure here for non-speakers figure in the same way when speakers are the movers as well.

The first one of these is a simple round trip from home to a move and a return to home, where the move is a self-groom. This staff member at a meeting has his hands clasped in front of his face, he goes to a forehead scratch, and returns back to home position. It is clear even from the video alone that he is not speaker.

**Movie 9.** 1.3Mb

In this series of displays, we are just going to vary the kinds of moves. In the next one the secretary at the staff meeting moves her hand from her lap to write something, and then returns the hand to the same position on her lap.

**Movie 10.** 0.6Mb

And in the next, someone (the man on the right) will move their right hand, rest on an arm rest, to a glasses adjustment, and back home. Again a single move — just a variety of moves being organized by the return to home. The next one is a sip. I'm not going to go through an endless number of these. There are cigarette drags, etc., etc., etc., all of which come back to the position from which the acting limb departed.

**Movie 11.** 0.6Mb & **Movie 12.** 0.7Mb

The next instance is a little bit more complicated. It has two moves before the return to home. Most of the exemplars we have been looking at have been starting at some place, doing a move and returning home. And now we will get a little bit of expansion on what goes on between the two home positions, and this one will have two moves between the departure and the return, and we will expand it to three, but beyond that it gets really complicated to monitor it through, and I will not subject you to it today, though anybody who wants to some other time, I would be delighted.

In the first of these, we are looking at a woman who is positioned with her arms crossed, she does two grooms, and then returns back home to the arms-crossed position.

**Movie 13.** 0.6Mb

And here is a series of three grooms, and then a return to home. Here a man has his finger to his cheek or to the side of his forehead (not leaning on it, however). In groom one he rubs his nose; in groom two, he picks his nose; in groom three, he rubs his nose again; and then he returns home, with his finger to his cheek or temple. Again. Home, one, two, three, and home.

**Movie 14.** 1.5Mb

Now a very, very faint one. You'll have to watch closely on this one. A young woman seated with her arms crossed in front of her. The move is a very small forefinger flick with her left hand which is resting above her right elbow. It's just that we were talking about ample and faint before; here is a very faint one. Watch that finger. ((laughter))

**Movie 15.** 1.4Mb

One other parameter to vary – most of these have been departures from, and returns to, rest homes; the positions they come back to are at rest. Let's get one which has a fidget as home, and in this one the gentleman in grey hair will be in an oral fidget, will go to a nose groom, back to the oral fidget, to a chin groom, to a finger groom, and returning to the oral fidget. There is the fidget, nose groom, back to oral, chin groom, finger groom, back to the oral fidget, still moving. One more time. You might, if you want, catch another by-product in this segment, and that is the person to his right in the black jersey will go from a chin-on-hand to two chin pulls – or just sub-chin pulls – back to the lean. So you can either watch the first one again or watch that as a side show.

**Movie 16.** 1.5Mb

We have examined the departure from and return to home position. We had it operating for gestures, but that was restricted to speakers. So, as one way to detach that from being specifically a speaker object and therefore geared into the turn-taking system, we have looked at non-speakers to see whether it operated for them too. And it operates for them too. One other way to consider that issue – and we'll just have one further segment on this – is to see whether the series "departure from home to some move or series of moves with the return to home" operates *across changes* in somebody's status as speaker or non-speaker. If the operation transcends the turn-taking system, then you ought to be able to have changes within its operation, and indeed it seems to work that

way. We will be looking at that fellow who is fidgeting with his glass. He continues that fidget for a while, starts a turn in which he gestures and, on the completion of the gesture, resumes the glass fidget, and in the course of that resumed glass fidget talks again. So there is a change from non-speakership into speakership and to non-speakership and into speakership again. ((Taped conversation not transcribed; video segment not salvageable.)) So speakership status does not interfere with the operation even of a single cycle of the departure to a gesture and return to home position. Okay, that's all the looking I'll ask you to do, and I'll be finished very quickly.

The data we have examined show the home position phenomenon operating (and I'm not sure we in fact kept into this display tape all the variants I'm going to mention) for faint moves and gross ones, from and to homes at rest, homes in action, homes at grooming, homes in fidgets, and from a home in one of these states returning to that home in another one of these states. The home postions bound various kinds or types of moves: speaker gestures, grooms, sips, writing spurts, fidgets, cough covers, laugh covers, and many, many others. Not that I'm seriously proposing, by the way, a typology of moves there; again, it is a set of quite vernacular types. And there are various combinations of these home types and move types: rest to groom to rest, groom to gesture to groom, fidget to gesture to fidget, fidget to groom to fidget, fidget to fidget to fidget, where a fidget in one place operates as home around a fidget elsewhere, and many others. It operates as well for single moves between the homes and series of moves at least up to three (that's as many as I showed) but also more than three. So it seems, I think, that home position is an organizational device for moves (and not only gesticulation by hand and arm, I might add, for a range of other body movement and posture as well) that is general, formal, and has some considerable scope of operation.

One more note on a possible practical import: Because the home phenomenon is a formal organizational operation, it – and whatever may be found to be other components of the same system of organization – can be examined in very, very diverse types of materials. For example, preliminary inspection of ethnographic films in which there is some substantial display of interaction which can be tracked by persons not particularly acquainted with the language, the culture, or anything else allows the detection of this phenomenon. Work is then available to be done on a topic that surely must be central to an understanding of the social organization of human activity that will bear on the organization of human interaction in which conversation occurs, conversation being the major locus in this world for the use of language, that being the topic

of this symposium, and therefore my excuse for, in a seminar on language, having talked about its absence – or brought data in which it is absent. Thank you.

## Discussion following the presentation

*Question*: Re Adam Kendon's similar observation two years ago. ((Mostly unintelligible on tape))

*Answer*: Right, we have talked to Adam about it, and he said that he has noticed the same thing and indeed said he had a paper about it, which he promised to send, but it hasn't arrived yet. So, one of the things I wanted specially to emphasize: It may well be that lots of people have noticed the observation. I'm not sure whether there has been the full appreciation of its potential significance, which is to say, its formality, its potential organizational status, and the promise of what it allows us to do with some piece of it already in hand.

[The observations of Kendon to which reference was made in this exchange had been published in Kendon (1972) and were developed further in Kendon (1975). It should be noted, however, that these papers are concerned with the relationship between body movement, and gesticulation in particular, and speech. The observation which is closest to the present discussion of "home position" concerns the ending of what Kendon (1975) termed a "gesture phrase" by a return to "rest position." On one reading, this is the same position from which the movement departed, and converges with the notion of "home position." On another reading, it refers to the return of the gesticulating body part to a rest position, not necessarily the same one from which the gesticulation was launched, and is a notion distinct from "home position."]

[Note added by Adam Kendon: In fact "rest position" and "home position" refer to the same thing and the 'first reading' suggested above is the correct one.]

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**Harvey Sacks** was educated at Columbia College, Yale Law School and the University if California, Berkeley, and taught at the University of California, Los Angeles and the University of California, Irvine. He was killed in an automobile accident in 1975. In addition to some dozen papers written alone or in collaboration with Emanuel A. Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, his two-volume *Lectures on Conversation* (ed. by Gail Jefferson) was published by Blackwell in 1992.

**Emanuel A. Schegloff** was educated at Harvard College and the University of California, Berkeley, and has taught at Columbia University and the University of California, Los Angeles. A former Fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (1978–79) and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford (1998–99), he has also held a Guggenheim Fellowship. He is the author or co-author of some seventy five papers or chapters. His book *A Primer in Conversation Analysis: Sequence Organization* is to be published by Cambridge University Press.