2

Parties and Talking Together: Two Ways in Which Numbers Are Significant for Talk-in-Interaction*

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I

Among sociology's intellectual ancestors, it was Georg Simmel who first brought sustained analytic attention to bear "On the significance of numbers for social life," in a classic essay bearing that title and in other essays on the theme "Quantitative aspects of the group" (in Simmel, 1950: 87-177). Of course, what Simmel introduced was a particular set of significances which numbers could have for social life. Some of the themes to which he called attention were subsequently developed within "mainline" social psychology, for example a preoccupation with coalitions and coalition formation in interaction (Caplow, 1968). Other themes were developed in directions bearing more on social structural concerns (e.g., Blau, 1977). Whatever the thematic direction of development, tracing the import of numbers is regularly accompanied by the sense of a bedrock analytic undertaking, a conviction that something with a first-order significance for the domain under examination is being engaged.

With the so-called "linguistic turn" in studies of the domain which was previously the prerogative of social psychology, occasions of interaction were increasingly referred to globally as "dialogues," little respecting the underlying semantic connation of "two"-ness in that term's Greek roots. And occasions which *were* dialogic, i.e., composed of two participants, came often to be referred to generically as "conversation" or "interaction." But the detailed technical organization of talk in interaction is sensitive to the number of participants because those participants can and do design their conduct and understand one another's conduct as shaped in part by reference to numbers of participants.

Here I mean to take up two somewhat related matters bearing on this theme. The first concerns one way in which variation in the number of participants is systematically dealt with in the organization of talk-in-interaction (the more general term which I will prefer to "conversation"). The second concerns the bearing which number of participants has on the forms

which *simultaneous* talk can take when it occurs in talk-in-interaction, and in "ordinary conversation" in particular.

Both of these topics involve us in reflections on the organization of turn-taking in talk-in-interaction. This is in some ways unfortunate, because too many people believe that turn-taking is the only aspect of talk in interaction which conversation-analysts focus on, and it would be good to dispel this mis-impression. However, the most direct bearing of numbers on interaction concerns the organization and distribution of participation; *what* one does in interaction by virtue of the numbers of participants clearly depends upon one having an opportunity to do *something* in the first place. And, with respect to participating via *talk*, this implicates the organization of turn-taking. And so to the first of my topics.

II

Unlike most other prevalent efforts to characterize the organization of the distribution of opportunities to talk, which are designed for two person interaction (e.g., Duncan, 1972; Duncan and Fiske, 1977; Jaffe and Feldstein, 1970; Cappella, 1979, 1980; Cappella and Planalp, 1981), the model of turn-taking proposed in the 1974 paper by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (henceforth SSJ) presumes an unspecified number of participants. Indeed, one of Sacks' originating observations (Winter, 1965; cf. Sacks, 1992: Vol. I, p.95; but not explicitly addressed in the ensuing paper) was that the allocation of turns among more than two participants cannot be derived by extrapolation from the pattern characteristic for two -- namely, a pattern of alternation. For two, the pattern is ABABAB...; for three it is *not* ABCABCABC..., nor does there appear to be any determinate or formulaic pattern for three or more. Rather, as the SSJ paper claimed, there is a set of procedures by which participants, any number of participants, can organize the allocation of participation among themselves, on *that* occasion, honoring whatever relevant aspects of the occasion or the participants they find themselves constrained or disposed to honor given their culture, their attributes, etc. The turn-taking organization's design thus appears to be for "n" participants, with a special pattern for two participants deriving from it. The solution to the generic organizational problem of turn-taking, we proposed, was *procedural*, not formulaic; *interactional and contingent*, not stipulated or derivative from other aspects of social or cultural organization (although its realization on particular occasions could surely be made sensitive to such features of context). It seems clear enough that, although no limitation on numbers is *built in* to this mode of organizing participation, some actual limitations *do* turn out to operate. Above a certain number of participants, conversations become vulnerable to "schism," to division into a number of separate conversations, each of which is self-organized in the same way as the progenitor of the schism, into which the several separate conversations may subsequently remerge.

But there *is* an important provision which bears on number of participants which I have left out of this account so far, and which, although by no means new, I want to foreground as my first point here. And that is that the turn-

taking system as described in SSJ organizes the distribution of talk not in the first instance among persons, but among *parties*. Now not uncommonly, of course, parties are composed of persons -- *single* persons. But on some occasions, or for some particular phase or topic or sequence *within* some occasion of talk-in-interaction, the aggregate of persons who are, as Erving Goffman called them, "ratified participants," are organized into parties, such that there are fewer parties than there are persons. Sometimes, these parties coincide with units of social organization which can be claimed to have a persistence and reality quite apart from the interaction -- for example, couples or families or economic or political associates. But they form a party in interaction not by virtue of this extra-interactional tie (they regularly do conduct themselves as separate parties, after all) but by virtue of interaction-specific contingencies and conduct. This can involve their relative alignment in current activities, such as the co-telling of a story or siding together in a disagreement, or their several attributes relative to a momentarily current interactional contingency, for example, whether they are host or guest, whether -- as a new increment is being added to a number of interactional participants -- they are the newly arrived or pre-present. Or the interactional contingencies can make their extrainteractional linkage relevant -- as when three couples discuss plans for the evening *as* three couples rather than as six persons.

The point is that, on the model of turn-taking with which I am operating, what is organized is the distribution and sizing of opportunities to participate among *parties*. If there are multi-person parties in the interaction, the turn-taking organization does not *necessarily* provide for the selection of a person to speak for the party, nor does it provide procedures for doing so (aside from a procedure, or device, for resolving overlapping talk if/when it arises, about which more in a moment).

Consequently, in understanding the interactional significance of simultaneous talk-in-interaction, and in appreciating its relevance to the assessment of models of turn-taking, one important discrimination will be between simultaneous talk between coincumbents of a single party on the one hand, and between separate parties on the other. One characteristic finding which results from close examination of a spate of talk in which a fair amount of simultaneous talk occurs is that much, and often all, of the simultaneous talk is between participants who, at that moment in the conversation, are co-incumbents of a party. Here I can offer only one exemplar of this quite characteristic occurrence.

Frieda and Reuben have come to have dinner at old friends Dave and Kathy's apartment, and on the way have stopped at a hospital to visit a mutual friend who is suspected of having cancer. They bring to the dinner what they think are good tidings, that the friend instead has a "giant fullicular lympho-blastoma" (which will eventually turn out to be cancer). On arrival, after an initial round of greetings and remarks about the apartment, the following transpires:

#1. KC-4:3

Reuben:	Hey we got good news.	
Kathy:	[I know.	<---- a
Dave:	[What's the good news.	<---- a
Frieda:	[Ya heard it?	<---- b
Reuben:	[Oh ya do?	<---- b
	(0.5)	
Dave:	(What's-)	
Reuben:	Oh good.	
	(0.8)	
Dave:	Oh yeah, mmhmm	
	(1.0)	
Kathy:	'xcept I don' know what a (0.2) giant fullicular:: lympho: blastoma is.	
Reuben:	Who the hell does, ex[cept a] doctor.	
Kathy:	[Well]	
Dave:	Mm.	
Kathy:	(I d'nno-)=	
Frieda:	=This is nice=did you make this?	

What I want to note about this is very simple. Although Reuben and Frieda on the one hand and Dave and Kathy on the other can be characterized in various ways, each of which would group them together -- for example, as married couples, as guests and hosts respectively, etc. (as well as in ways that would group them differently and separately, e.g., via gender), for the purposes of this sequence as it is initially projected they are respectively "the informed" and "the uninformed," the announcers and the news recipients -- a casting which is no less relevant for being factually incorrect (i.e., Kathy has spoken to the hospitalized friend after Reuben and Frieda visited him). Although two successive turn-positions are occupied by simultaneous talk, note that in each case the simultaneous talkers are co-incumbents of a same party of a sort directly relevant to the conversational business which is at that moment in progress.

In announcement sequences, of which this is designed to be an instance, as is projected by Reuben's "pre-announcement" (i.e., "Hey, we got good news;" cf. Terasaki, 1976), there is generally likely to be some sort of expression of "surprise." What qualifies some bit of information for delivery in such a sequence is that it is figured by its teller to be not known to the targetted recipient(s) and hence potentially news. Either it will be, or the teller will react to its failure in this regard as itself news and/or a surprise. And that is what happens here.

Note then the following few points.

The first overlap (at the arrows marked "a") involves Dave and Kathy. They are cast as the news recipients in this projected and in-progress

announcement sequence; in that regard they are co-incumbents of a party (their couple-hood and host status are not demonstrably relevant to the conduct of this sequence). Note that their co-incumbency is *not* based on their taking up similar stances toward the sequence in progress, for they do not do so. Although they talk simultanously, and although they both talk as projected news recipients, thereby showing their orientation to *that* as the basis for their talking at that point, they take up *opposite* alignments toward the projected news -- one claiming already to know it and thereby blocking progress by the teller from pre-announcement to announcement, the other validating the premise of not knowing the news item and forwarding the projected sequence to its next, announcement, phase.

Similarly, the second overlap (at the arrows marked "b") which directly follows is composed of members of the other party relevant to the currently ongoing sequence -- the news deliverers. Although only Reuben speaks in initiating the announcement sequence, he turns out to be a member of a party whose other incumbent is equally privy to the news and its potential telling (cf. Lerner, 1992). Both members of this party display the second sort of surprise which I mentioned a moment ago -- surprise that their projected news is already known. Note that each independently selects the same one of the preceding simultaneous and divergent turns as the one to be addressed -- namely Kathy's turn which blocked the progress of the announcement sequence.[1] Each addresses that turn and its move from the same stance -- prospective news deliverer, and adopts a similar alignment toward it -- surprise at the claim/fact of already knowing the news.[2]

So that is my first point, or cluster of points. Turn-taking is organized for any number of participants, but the number of participants is directly organized into number of parties. Both can change; people can come and go in the course of talk-in-interaction, but, more directly consequential, even if that number stays the same, the number of parties into which those participants may be seen to be organized (because they see *themselves* so to be organized, and embody that stance in their conduct) can change continuously as the contingencies of the talk change, contingencies most centrally supplied by the participants themselves and the nature of the talk which they undertake with one another.

Understanding this should affect efforts to understand the organization of turn-taking and our assessment of the adequacy of that understanding. In assessing the adequacy of the SSJ model of turn-taking, such considerations will be important, for without them we will not properly appreciate the character of different kinds of simultaneous talk for the participants, and therefore their different bearing on assessment of the model.

III

The second matter I want to take up also concerns simultaneous or overlapping talk. The points to which I will draw attention are considerations preliminary to a systematic account of how simultaneous or overlapping talk

is managed in talk-in-interaction -- a model of an "overlap-resolution device." I cannot deal here with that set of practices itself,[3] but one important set of preliminary considerations bears on numbers of participants. It concerns the sort of materials for which a model should in the first instance be built and be adequate, the sorts of materials which can properly be taken to exemplify the general case.

As a first step in taking up that question, I want to exclude from the materials relevant to my concerns here certain types of episodes of overlapping talk -- primarily those types in which the simultaneous speakers do not appear to be contesting, or even alternative, claimants for a turn space. In these cases, that is, the conduct of the participants does not show these occurrences to be taken as problematic by them, and that governs their treatment by us as analysts. There are four types of these occurrences of simultaneous talk which do not appear to be "problematic" with respect to turn-taking.

First there are so-called "terminal overlaps" in which one speaker appears to be starting up by virtue of a prior speaker's incipient finishing of a turn (although this may turn out to have been an inaccurate hearing).

Second are "continuers" (Schegloff, 1982; C. Goodwin, 1986), by which a participant shows precisely the understanding that another is in the course of an extended turn at talk which is not yet complete, and which is alternative to an independent and competitive spate of talking (here excluding, therefore, the shift-implicative tokens; cf. Jefferson, 1984).

Third, there are various phenomena which can be collected under the rubric "conditional access to the turn," in which a speaker of a not possibly completed turn-in-progress yields to another, or even invites another to speak in their turn's space, conditional on the other's use of that opportunity to further the initial speaker's undertaking. The most familiar instances are those of the word search in which recipient may be invited to participate, and collaborative utterance construction in which one participant initiates an utterance and provides for another to complete it. Both of these phenomena, initially formed up as research topics by Sacks, have been recently made the topics of penetrating accounts -- the former by the Goodwins (1986) and the latter by Gene Lerner (1987, 1991). Again, in each case, should the initial and subsequent speaker end up talking at once, this is generally treated (by them) as noncompetitive and non-problematic.

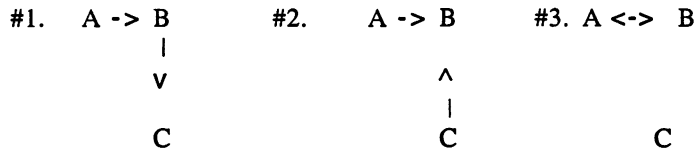
Fourth, I wish to exclude that set of forms of talk which we can refer to as "chordal" or "choral" in character. By these terms I mean to call attention to forms of talk and activity which are treated by interactional co-participants as not to be done serially, one *after* the other, but simultaneously. There is first of all laughter, whose occurrence, Jefferson has shown (1979), can serve as an invitation for others to laugh, but whose elicited product is done in concert with other laughter, and not after it. Otherwise, there are such various activities as collective greetings and leave-takings, congratulations in response to announcement of personal good news, and the like. Such activities in multi-person settings are regularly produced "chorally," and not serially; and the choral production is done and heard as consensual, not agonistic. Here again, as in all the classes of occurrence which I mean to exclude from the

ensuing discussion, the several overlapping participants do not appear to be, or to conduct themselves as, alternatives or competitors, but as properly simultaneous occupants of the floor -- either as a permissible matter (as with overlapping continuers, for example) or as a mandated one (as in choral congratulations, for example).[4]

These classes of overlap aside, in the materials drawn from ordinary talk-in-interaction with which I am familiar, it turns out with very great regularity that when more than one person is talking at a time, *two* persons are talking at a time and not more, and this is more or less invariant to the number of participants in the interaction. There is no time here to explicate this finding; I introduce it as a necessary ingredient for the theme I mean to take up. And keep in mind that I am speaking of single conversations, and not circumstances in which several conversations are going on in one ecological area.

Now in general there are three patterns which overlapping talk by two speakers can take. They may be characterized schematically as follows:

#2.



In pattern #1, A is talking to B and B is talking to C. In pattern #2, A is talking to B and C is talking to B. In pattern #3, A is talking to B and B is talking to A.

As with my first topic, I want to offer only a very few observations about these patterns of simultaneous talk. The first observation (more the product of casual though careful observation than of systematic analysis of video materials) is that deployment of the body, and especially gaze direction, appears to figure differently in the three. In pattern #2, the gaze direction of B is likely to feature centrally. A and C can be understood to be competing for a recipient, *this* recipient, and gaze direction can be an indication of which of the competitors this recipient is favoring. Commonly, if B directs gaze at A, C will drop out of the competition, and B can thereby be understood to have decided the matter. But, on occasion, C can respond by competing for the recipient more vigorously -- talking louder still, at higher pitch, etc. Although almost certainly the body can be deployed in a manner relevant to overlap in pattern #3, it does not appear to figure as centrally in that circumstance.

A second observation is that, although these appear to be three discrete and different patterns of overlapping talk, #1 and #2 can naturally alternate under the operation of the turn-taking system. Begin with pattern #1: A is talking to B and B is talking to C. Then one "natural" next phase is that, on possible completion of B's turn, C -- properly -- responds to B. If C does so,

then pattern #2 is brought into existence: A is talking to B and C is talking to B. And when C comes to a possible completion, B may appropriately address C again, and pattern #1 is again brought into existence. These two patterns are, in that sense, natural alternators.

Lest this be thought a merely theoretical, logically generated possibility, let me hasten to provide an instance of the sort of empirical material it is meant to characterize.

The material was collected by Richard Frankel in a used furniture store in the Bronx about fifteen years ago. Mike works in the furniture store; Vic and James are janitors in nearby apartment houses. Earlier in the day, a window was broken in James' building while he was away. Mike found out about it, told Vic, and Vic cleaned up the broken glass, encountering the likely culprit while doing so. Upon James' return, the story of the incident is told and retold. James mainly wants to know who did it; Vic mainly wants credit for cleaning up.[5]

#3. US:43

01	James:	But dis [person thet DID IT,
02	Vic:	[If I see the person,
03	James:	-IS GOT TUH BE:: ·hh taken care of. You
04		know what [I mean,
05	Vic:	[Well Ja:mes, [if I see duh person=
06	James:	[Yeh right. e(hh) !e(hh)!
07	Vic:	=[en you happen tuh be th- by me,
08	James:	=[Yeauh.
09	James:	Yeuh.
10	Vic:	Or if I see [the person, [(stannin=
11	James:	[Yeh. [I dus =
12	Vic:	=[outside) by you (I'll- y'know I'll
13	James:	=[wantuh know who (dih-)
14->>	Mike:	=[The least they coulda do:ne wz-
15->>	Mike:	Well the least he c'd=
16		=[do is letchu know it happened.
17	James:	=[I DIS WANTUH KNOW DIH- WHO BROKE
18		THAT GLASS [OUT. That's all.
19->>	Mike:	[The least he coulda=
20		=[done wz letchu know it happened?
21	Vic:	=[He might come by still en-[.hh
22	James:	[Hu [h?
23->>	Mike:	[Th-
24	Vic:	[You know I
25		cut [myself on yo'=
26->>	Mike:	[Th'least they c'd do-
27	Vic:	=[freakin gla:ss,
28->>	Mike:	[Th' least they coulda do:ne,

29 James: [Ye:h
30->> Mike: [Least he coulda done [wz come do:wn en=
31 James: [e(hh)h!
32 Mike: =letchu know what happened hey [look yer=
33 James: [Tha:t-
34 Mike: =gla:ss broke,
35 James: Yeh dass ri:ght,

Seven times Mike tries to say his piece (marked by the arrows at lines 14, 15-16, 19-20, 23, 26, 28 and 30-32-34,). Four of these tries are abandoned before possible completion as Mike finds himself talking simultaneously with another. The tries initiated at lines 15 and 19 are pressed to completion, but in each case Mike finds them ineffective, that is, not sequentially implicative or consequential, by virtue of their involvement in overlap. Only the last try, starting at line 30, is said substantially in the clear, and is acknowledged by a recipient.

Let us identify Mike with "A" in our patterns of overlap, and James (who is the "you" of Mike's "The least they could have done is let *you* know it happened") with "B". Then note that at Mike's tries at lines 14 and 15, James is talking to Vic (B is talking to C), and at the try at line 19-20 Vic is responding to James (C is talking to B). At the tries at lines 23 and 26 and 28, Vic is talking to James as Mike is also addressing him (C to B, A to B) and in the try at line 30, James is responding to Vic.

So we have here just the circumstance described schematically. There is a colloquy in progress between B and C, here James and Vic, into which A is trying to break, here Mike. And these two patterns, #1 and #2, alternate as A's repeated efforts to gain B as a recipient run into an alternation in the conversation between B and C.

Of course it is unusual to find as extended a series of efforts as this, which displays so clearly the alternation of these two patterns, which shows them to be alternate "values" of a single form of organization. It allows us to appreciate that much briefer episodes, ones in which either pattern #1 or pattern #2 is observed, are moments caught in a potential stream of conduct which has this potential trajectory, but which the involved parties ordinarily arrest before it gets to this point. The competition for B's eyes which I remarked on earlier can thus be seen to have a history and/or a future -- it will be enmeshed in an ongoing or prospective effort to prevent a colloquy from forming or to intervene in one already in progress.

Clearly occurrences of the sorts described by patterns 1 and 2 are *not* the *general* cases of overlap. For one thing, they necessarily involve three participants. If we want to understand in the most general way how simultaneous talk comes to occur and how it is resolved, we should examine occurrences structured like pattern #3. It requires for its occurrence only that which talk-in-interaction *per se* appears to require -- two participants. And that is the number who generally are talking if more than one is talking. It is surely possible that overlapping talk between two participants to one another will be dealt with differently, by them, when there are other ratified

coparticipants than when those two are the only present company. But it does appear that the mechanism, the practices of conduct, by which overlapping speakers deal with their simultaneous talk is formed up in the first place for talk by two, and to one another. If things are different when more are present, it appears that this involves modifications to those practices. What these overlap management practices are, however, cannot be taken up here.[6]

One last point, however, needs to be mentioned concerning these three "patterns." I have offered them here to characterize alternative possible forms which simultaneous talk can take. Quite independently, Gene Lerner (1987: 213-215) has formulated quite similar patterns in characterizing the contexts for collaboration between several participants in producing a turn at talk. Lerner has been finding that aspects of the form which a collaborative completion of another's utterance is given, and aspects of how such a proposed completion is received, vary with the "directionality" of the first part of the turn and of its candidate completion by another, where "directionality" refers to just such matters as are summarized by the "patterns" diagrammed in #2 above. Something robust is afoot here, something real for those who share a turn's space -- whether by competing for it or combining to produce the talk in it. And what is central or peripheral for studying simultaneous talk may have to be differently assessed for studying other joint occupations of a turn's space.[7]

IV

I have touched on the bearing of numbers on two aspects of talk-in-interaction, two aspects of the organization of participation in that talk, two aspects of the turn-taking organization.

For inquiry into the general topic of turn-taking, it has seemed necessary to begin not where many efforts have begun, with the case of two persons, but rather with the case of "n" participants. But order is quickly introduced into this potentially chaotic circumstance by making turn-taking operate not on the participation of persons *per se*, but on the participation of parties. Turn-taking organizes the distribution of talk among *parties*, but not necessarily among the persons who compose a party.

When we come to investigate the "social star" of the turn-taking family, the one which excites wide popular interest, i.e., overlap, it turns out that just that starting point which can set us off in the *wrong* direction with respect to turn-taking in general is precisely where we must start. Not only is it empirically the case that more than one speaker at a time is almost always two speakers at a time; it is also the case which requires no more than two -- the case where the two speakers are speaking to each other -- which is the general case of overlap, the one with which inquiry must begin. Whereas for turn-taking in general "two" is precisely *not* the general case, for overlap it precisely *is*.

In these and other cases of the significance of numbers for interaction, that significance will not turn out to be merely geometric or logical or formal. It will require digging out from the details of conduct in interaction. For the

significance of numbers is not in the first place a significance for academic social science; it is a significance discerned, and imposed, by the parties to interaction, whose conduct it is our calling to describe.

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1 This provides a neat demonstration of the general claim (requiring more elaboration than is appropriate here) that dispreferred responses are sequence-expansion relevant, whereas preferred responses are sequence-closure relevant.

2 Note also that in the case of each of these overlaps, neither speaker withdraws in favor of the other, but each speaks to completion. That is, the practices by which overlaps are regularly resolved are not adopted here (although the import of this observation is somewhat blunted by the brevity of the utterances involved, a brevity which is projectable from the start of each turn, and which has the overlaps resolving themselves within the span ordinarily achieved by quickly resolved overlaps.)

3 Cf. Jefferson and Schegloff, 1975 for an early partial formulation of such an account.

4 Of course, there may be much more to be said about the temporal and sequential organization of these activities than that they are done in concert. There is now ample documentation of the detailed orderliness of laughter (e.g., Jefferson, 1985, for example, among many others). And Alessandro Duranti has suggested (p.c.) that there may be a detailed orderliness in the apparent randomness of collective greetings. So also may there be normative obligations on who should lead in collective congratulations or condolences, and who should join in, and when.

5 Because of the complexity of the patterns of overlap here, I offer some guidance on the reading of the transcript. I presume familiarity with the convention that brackets mark co-incidence of the points on lines that they connect: left brackets marking the simultaneous onset or continuation of the utterances at the point of placement; right brackets simultaneous arrival of the preceding talk to that point. Equal signs (=) mark (in this excerpt) the no-break continuation of an utterance by a speaker which has been deployed over

two or more lines (e.g., Vic's talk at lines 05-07 or at lines 10-12; or James' talk at lines 11-13, or Mike's at lines 15-16). So:

At line 14, Mike comes in on the already overlapping talk of Vic and James on lines 12 and 13. After all three speakers have stopped, Mike starts "in the clear" at line 15, but has James come in on his talk at lines 16-17. In turn (so to speak), Mike comes in on James talk at lines 18 and 19, and Vic comes in on Mike's at lines 20 and 21.

Mike and Vic start together at lines 23 and 24, terminally overlapping James talk at line 22. And Mike then comes in on Vic's talk at lines 25 and 26, and then again at lines 27 and 28. At lines 29 and 30 James and Mike start simultaneously, Mike's turn then continuing at lines 32 and 34, with intermittent overlaps by James.

6 Cf. Jefferson and Schegloff, 1975 and work in preparation.

7 Also cf. Goodwin, 1980 and Schegloff, 1987[1973] for another use of a conversational device -- in this case, cut-off + identical restart -- for dealing with different, but related, contingencies of talking-in-interaction, namely "turn launching" contingencies.