

**Concurrent Operations on Talk:  
Notes on the Interactive Organization of Assessments**

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The analysis of conversation has a strong relevance to the study of pragmatics. Thus in introducing the scope of pragmatics Levinson (1983: 284) notes that

It is not hard to see why one should look to conversation for insight into pragmatic phenomena, for conversation is clearly the prototypical kind of language usage, the form in which we are all first exposed to language — the matrix for language acquisition.

The field of study that has provided the most extensive analysis of the pragmatic organization of conversation is the line of inquiry initiated by the late Harvey Sacks and his colleagues.<sup>1</sup> Indeed

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1. For a detailed study of both work in conversation analysis, and how that work is relevant to pragmatics in general, see Levinson (1983). See Heritage (1984a) for more extensive treatment of the relationship between conversation analysis and the ethnomethodological tradition it emerged from within sociology, and Heritage (1985) for a detailed summary of work within the field. For collections of specific analysis see for example Atkinson and Heritage (1984), Button and Lee (in press), Schenkein (1978), and Zimmerman and West (1980). C. Goodwin (1981) and Heath (1986) examine in detail the

Levinson (1983: 285) observes that

if, as we shall argue, the proper way to study conversational organization is through empirical techniques, this suggests that the largely philosophical traditions that have given rise to pragmatics may have to yield in the future to more empirical kinds of investigation of language use.

Though starting from an ethnomethodological, rather than linguistic or philosophical, tradition the basic goals of conversation analysis are quite compatible with those of pragmatics. Thus Heritage and Atkinson (1984: 1) note that

The central goal of conversation analytic research is the description and explication of the competences that ordinary speakers use and rely on in participating in intelligible, socially organized interaction. At its most basic, this objective is one of describing the procedures by which conversationalists produce their own behavior and understand and deal with the behavior of others. A basic assumption throughout is Garfinkel's (1967:1) proposal that these activities — producing conduct and understanding and dealing with it — are accomplished as the accountable products of common sets of procedures.

Much research within conversation analysis has investigated how subsequent utterances display an analysis of prior ones, and how such *sequential organization* is a basic resource utilized by participants for the production and understanding of action, and the talk that embodies it. Analysis in the present paper will focus

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 pragmatic organization of nonvocal phenomena, and processes of interaction between speakers and hearers that occur *within* individual turns at talk, a topic that is quite relevant to the analysis being developed within the present paper.

instead on how **individual utterances and single turns at talk are themselves constituted through an ongoing process of interaction between speaker and recipient**. To do this we will examine the process of *assessing* or *evaluating* entities that are being talked about. Study of this process will provide an opportunity to investigate within a coherent framework of action a range of phenomena that are typically studied in isolation from each other, including:

- How participants achieve, and display to each other, *congruent understanding* of the events they are talking about;
- The dynamic achievement of *social organization* within the turn at talk;
- The *interactive organization of affect and emotion*;
- How participants attend in detail to *structure in the stream of speech* as a resource for the organization of their ongoing interaction.
- The *integration of speech and body movement* within coherent activity systems.
- The way in which *activity systems* provide organization for both interaction and the talk occurring within it.

In brief, the analysis of assessments will permit us to analyze the pragmatic organization of a range of social, linguistic, and cognitive phenomena, as they are displayed and utilized by participants in the details of their actual talk.

## 1 Interaction Within the Utterance

One very productive strategy for uncovering the interactive organization of talk has focused on ways in which subsequent utterances display an analysis of prior ones (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974: 728). However, despite the great power of this

methodology, and in particular its ability to reveal how participants themselves analyze prior talk in a way relevant to the activities they are engaged in, there are limitations to it. For example, with it it is difficult to determine precisely how participants attend to utterances as they are being spoken. The treatment that a bit of talk gets in a next utterance may be quite different from the way in which it was heard and dealt with as it was spoken; indeed, rather than presenting a naked analysis of the prior talk next utterances characteristically transform that talk in some fashion — deal with it not in its own terms but rather in the way in which it is relevant to the projects of subsequent speaker. Thus while subsequent utterances can reveal crucial features of the analysis participants are making of prior talk they do not show how participants hear the talk as it is emerging in the first place, what they make of it then, and what consequences this has for their actions, not in a next turn, but within the current turn. From another perspective it can be noted that the stream of speech is highly organized in syntactic and other ways. What, if any, consequences does such structure have for the organization of action within a turn of talk; for example when the utterance manifestations of a noun phrase emerge within the stream of speech, can the distinctive properties of such a structure (including the syntactic framework it displays, and the ordering of elements within it) be used by participants as a resource for the organization of their interaction with each other?

In brief it would be valuable to begin to uncover the types of organization that a strip of talk provides, not simply for subsequent talk, but for the organization of action as it is being spoken.

## 2 Data and Transcription

We will investigate in some detail sequences of conversation recorded on audio and videotape. The tapes are from a larger sample of data recorded in a range of natural settings. The data to be examined here are drawn largely from a family dinner, a

backyard picnic, and a telephone call between two college students.<sup>2</sup> Talk is transcribed through use of the Jefferson transcription system (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974:731-733). The following are the features most relevant to the present analysis:

- **Italics** indicate some form of emphasis, which may be signaled by changes in pitch and/or amplitude.
- A **Left Bracket** connecting talk on separate lines marks the point at which one speaker's talk overlaps the talk of another.
- **Colons** indicate that the sound just before the colon has been noticeably lengthened.
- A **dash** marks a sudden cut-off of the current sound.
- **Intonation:** Punctuation symbols are used to mark intonation changes rather than as grammatical symbols:
  - \* A period marks a falling contour.
  - \* A question mark indicates a raising contour.
  - \* A comma indicates a falling-raising contour.
- **Numbers in parentheses** marks silences in seconds and tenths of seconds.
- A series of 'h's preceded by a dot marks an **inbreath**.
- **Double parentheses** enclose material that is not part of the talk being transcribed, for example a comment by the transcriber if the talk was spoken in some special way.
- A **degree sign °** indicates that the talk following it is spoken with noticeably lowered volume.

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2. For more detailed analysis of the data and the means used to obtain it see C. Goodwin (1981).

### 3 Assessments

One activity that both speakers and recipients perform within the turn at talk is evaluating in some fashion persons and events being described within their talk. The following provide examples of such **assessments**:<sup>3</sup>

(1) G.126:22:40

Eileen: Paul en I got ta the first green,  
 → (0.6) An this beautiful, (0.2) Irish Setter.  
 (0.8) Came tearin up on ta the first *gree(h)n*  
 an tried ta steal Pau(h)l's go(h)lf ball. hh

(2) G.84:10:30

Curt: → *This* guy had, a beautiful, thirty two O:lds.

In both cases speakers preface descriptive nouns with the word "beautiful" and thus evaluate the phenomena referenced by those nouns (i.e., in #1 Eileen *assesses* the "Irish Setter" she is talking about by describing it as "beautiful").

The word "assessment" can in fact be used to refer to a range of events that exist on analytically distinct levels of organization. In view of this some definitional issues arise:

1. The term can be used to describe a structural unit that occurs at a specific place in the stream of speech, for example the adjective "beautiful." For clarity this sense of the term, which is used to designate a specific, segmental unit in the stream of speech can be called an *assessment segment*. Though we will quickly see that not all assessment

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3. For other relevant analysis of how assessments are organized within conversation see C. Goodwin (1986), M.H. Goodwin (1980), and Pomerantz (1978, 1984a).

signals are limited to specific segmental phenomena in this way (and moreover that segments that precede the explicit assessment term, for example intensifiers, might also be part of the activity of assessment), being able to talk about an assessment occurring at a particular place offers great advantages for starting analysis of the larger activity of performing assessments — e.g., once an *assessment segment* is located an analyst can look in detail at the different types of action that not only co-occur with this event but also precede and follow it. Moreover, participants themselves attend to the distinctiveness and salience of such segmental phenomena; for example they distinguish an *assessment segment* from events that precede it, and treat it as a place for **heightened mutual orientation** and action (a phenomenon to explored in detail later in this paper).

2. In addition to using phenomena that can be neatly segmented in the stream of speech, such as assessment adjectives, participants can also display their involvement in an assessment though nonsegmental phenomena such as intonation, and also through recognizable nonvocal displays (M.H. Goodwin 1980). Indeed it sometimes becomes quite difficult to precisely delimit the boundaries of an assessment.<sup>4</sup> As a function of language (in the Prague sense of that word) rather than a specific act, the activity of assessment is not limited to word or syntactic level objects, but rather, like prosody in an utterance, runs over syntactic units. In this sense it acts much like intonation (which is

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4. Frequently the left boundary of an assessment is especially difficult to precisely delimit. Note, for example, not only the analysis later in this paper of how participants attend to intensifiers, etc. that precede assessment segments as displaying emerging involvement in the activity of assessment, but also the way in which prior talk can “seed” a subsequent assessment by foreshadowing that an evaluation is about to occur (a phenomenon that is being investigated in work currently in progress).

indeed one principal resource for displaying evaluation)<sup>5</sup> vis-à-vis segmental phonology.<sup>6</sup> A display showing a party's involvement in an assessment can be called an *assessment signal*. *Assessment segments* constitute a particular subset of *assessment signals*. It is however quite relevant to distinguish *assessment segments* from the larger class of *assessment signals* since they have the special, and quite useful, property of being precisely delimited in the stream of speech.

3. The term "assessment" can also be used to designate a particular type of speech act. This sense of the term differs from the first two in that emphasis is placed on an action being performed by an actor, rather than on the speech signal used to embody that action, or the particular place where it occurs in the stream of speech. An assessment in this sense of the term can be called an *assessment action*.

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5. With respect to the close ties between evaluation and intonation note that Pike, in his seminal study of English intonation (Pike 1945), argued that the principal function of intonation was to show the attitude of the speaker toward what he was saying. While such a view of the function of intonation is clearly inadequate as a general analysis of the work that intonation does, it does capture and highlight the way in which intonation can tie together phenomena being talked about, with the speaker's alignment to, and experience of, those phenomena. Such analysis of the way in which intonation can display speaker's evaluation of the talk being produced is most relevant to the structure and organization of assessment actions.
6. In his analysis of narrative Labov (1972) classifies *evaluation* as one distinct element of narrative structure, but also notes that unlike other features of narrative which occur at specific places within the overall structure of a narrative (for example the coda occurs at the end) evaluation can pervade the narrative. Such analysis supports the argument about the distribution of assessment signals that is being made here.



Several issues relevant to the analysis of assessments on this level of organization can be briefly noted. First, while most analysis of speech acts has focused on actions embodied by complete sentences or turns, assessments constitute a type of speech act that can occur in the midst of an utterance. Subsequent analysis in this paper will investigate some of the consequences of this. Second, a crucial feature of *assessment actions* is the way in which they involve an actor taking up a position toward the phenomena being assessed. For example in assessing something as "beautiful" a party publicly commits themselves to a particular evaluation of what they have witnessed. By virtue of the public character of this display others can judge the competence of the assessor to properly evaluate the events they encounter (such a process is clearly central to the interactive organization of culture), and assessors can be held responsible for the positions they state. Third, in so far as assessments make visible an agent evaluating an event in his or her phenomenal world, they display that agent's *experience* of the event, including their *affective involvement* in the referent being assessed. *Affect displays* are not only pervasive in the production of assessments, but also quite central to their organization. Moreover, public structures such as this, that display the experience of one participant, also provide resources for the interactive organization of *co-experience*, a process that can be accomplished and negotiated in fine detail within assessments.

4. Assessment actions are produced by single individuals. However (as will be investigated in some detail in this paper) assessments can be organized as an interactive activity that not only includes multiple participants, but also encompasses types of action that are not themselves assessments. This can be called an *assessment activity*. Within this activity individuals not only produce *assessment actions* of their own but also monitor the assessment-relevant actions of others (M.H. Goodwin 1980), and indeed dynamically modify their own behavior in terms of both

what they see others are doing, and the recognizable structure of the emerging assessment activity itself (a topic to be explored in detail later in this paper).

5. Finally the word *assessable* will be used to refer to the entity being evaluated by an assessment.

In subsequent analysis the context in which the word "assessment" is being used will usually indicate which of the several senses of the term noted above is relevant at that point. Therefore these distinctions will not be marked in the text unless necessary.

#### 4 Assessments that Precede Assessables

What consequences does the fact that a speaker doesn't just describe something, but also does an assessment of it, have for how that talk is to be heard and dealt with by recipients? To start to investigate this issue we will look at #1 in some detail. For completeness a full transcript of this sequence will now be provided. However to make the presentation of the analysis as clear as possible simplified extracts from this transcript will then be used to illustrate specific phenomena.

##### (1) G.126:22:40

- Paul: Tell y- Tell Debbie about the dog  
on the golf course t'day.
- Eileen: °eh hnh {*hnh* ha has! ha!
- Paul: {hih hih {Heh Heh! hh hh
- Eileen: ·h Paul en I got ta the first *green*,  
(0.6)
- Eileen: ·hh An this beautiful, ((*swallow*))
- Paul: Irish Setter. ((*Reverently*))
- Eileen: {Irish Setter
- Debbie: Ah::,
- Eileen: Came tear<sub>in</sub> up on ta the first *gree(h)n*,=
- Paul: {°Oh it was beautiful

Eileen: =an tried ta steal Pau(h)l's go(h)lf ball. 'hh  
 Paul: Eh hnh hnh.  
 Eileen: 'hheh! 'hh

#### 4.1 Using an Assessment to Secure Recipient Co-Participation

Returning to the question of how speaker's assessment might be consequential for recipients' action it can be noted that in #1 just after the noun phrase containing the assessment, one of Eileen's recipients, Debbie, responds to what has just been said with an elaborated "Ah::".

(1) G.126:22:40

Eileen: this beautiful, (0.2) Irish Setter.  
 Debbie: → Ah::,  
 Eileen: Came tearin up on ta the first gree(h)n  
 an tried ta steal Pau(h)l's go(h)lf ball. 'hh

By placing an assessment in her talk speaker secures an immediate subsequent assessment from a recipient. Moreover, though the way in which she pronounces her "Ah::" Debbie coparticipates in the evaluative loading of Eileen's talk, and indeed matches the affect display contained in Eileen's assessment with a reciprocal affect display. The talk marked with the assessment is thus not treated simply as a description, but rather as something that can be responded to, and participated in, in a special way.

Further insight into what this might mean from an organizational point of view can be gained by examining the sequential structure of this talk in more detail. It can be noted, first, that recipient's action does not occur at the end of speaker's current turn-constructional unit, the characteristic place for recipient response, but rather at a point where her current sentence has recognizably not reached completion. Structurally, the

assessments of both speaker and recipient are placed in the *midst* of a turn-constructural unit.<sup>7</sup>

#### *4.2 Differential Treatment of Talk as it Emerges and When it Reaches Completion*

The issue arises as to what relevance such sequential placement has for the organization of action within the turn. For example does access to multiple places to operate on the same strip of talk provide participants with resources for the organization of their action that they would not otherwise have, and if so how do they make use of these resources? One way to investigate this issue is to look at how this talk is treated when it does eventually come to completion. Looking again at the data it can be seen that at its completion Eileen's talk is not dealt with as an assessable but rather as a laughable. Moreover such treatment of this talk was in fact projected for it before it began (arrows mark points of laughter in the preface, climax and response sequences):

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7. For more detailed analysis of how assessments contrast with continuers in terms of their precise placement relative to the talk of another see C. Goodwin (1986).

## (1) G.126:22:40

- Paul: Tell y- Tell Debbie about the dog on  
the ((*Smile Intonation Begins*)) golf course  
t'day.
- Eileen: → °eh hnh {hnh ha has! ha!  
Paul: → {hih hih {Heh Heh! 'hh hh  
Eileen: 'h Paul en I got ta the first green,  
(0.6)
- Eileen: 'hh An this beautiful, (0.2) Irish Setter.  
Debbie: Ah::,  
Eileen: Came tearin up on ta the first gree(h)  
→ an tried ta steal Pau(h)l's go(h)lf ball. 'hh  
Paul: → Eh hnh hnh.  
Eileen: → 'hheh! 'hh

Components of this sentence are thus dealt with in one way as it emerges through time, while the sentence as a whole is treated in a different fashion when it reaches completion. Schegloff (1980) has argued that one systematic issue posed for recipients of extended sequences of talk is whether to operate on a current piece of talk in its own right or treat it as a preliminary to something else. Here we find the participants able to deal with a single piece of talk in both ways. By marking the description of the dog as an assessable speaker was able to extract it from its embedded position within the story as a whole for treatment on its own terms. However in that that description occurred at a point where speaker's sentence was recognizably incomplete, the not-yet-actualized tying of this talk to relevant further talk is also an operative feature of its structure, with the effect that the larger sentence remains something to be returned to after the assessment activity has been brought to completion. Within this single utterance the participants are thus able to perform a range of

different interactive activities, and deal with the talk that it contains in distinctive, separable ways.

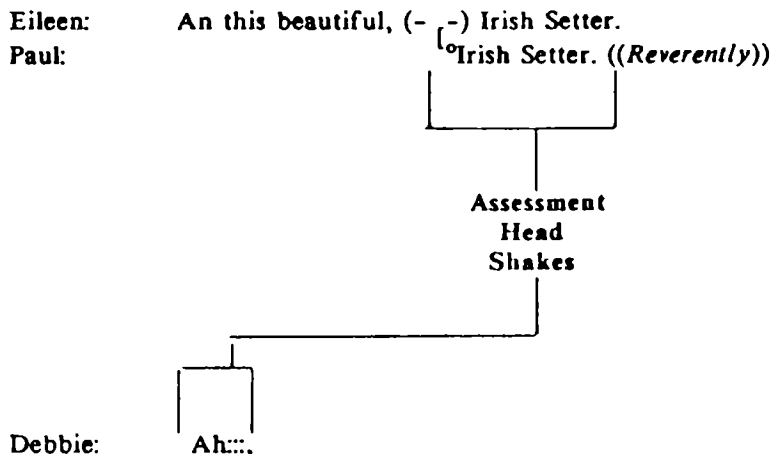
#### *4.3 Pre-Positioned Assessment Adjectives as Guides for Hearers*

Let us now examine in more detail the interactive organization of the noun phrase itself, the way in which its components might be attended to as it emerges through time. It can be observed that within it speaker's assessment term occurs in a particular position relative to the object being assessed, i.e., it occurs before that object. Thus by the time the object itself emerges recipients have been alerted to hear it in a particular way. The issue arises as to whether recipients do in fact track the emerging structure of a noun phrase on this level of detail. Is it the case that at the completion of the word "beautiful" a recipient will deal with the next words to be spoken in a different way than he would have before hearing this term? Features of these data not yet examined provide some evidence that indeed recipients do deal with the interactive import of emerging talk on this level of detail. Just after saying "beautiful" speaker hesitates. Paul, the party who experienced with teller the events being described, appears to interpret this hesitation as the beginning of a word search; just after it he provides the projected next item in speaker's talk, the words "Irish setter," beginning an instant before speaker herself says this. However, Paul does not simply speak these words; rather through his actions while speaking he makes visible an *alignment toward* them that is congruent with the assessment just made by the speaker. His talk is produced in a lowered "reverent" tone and while speaking Paul performs a prototypical nonvocal assessment marker, a lateral head shake.<sup>8</sup> Indeed this action is escalated during Debbie's receipt of the assessment when he closes his eyes and performs an even larger head shake over her "Ah::;":

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8. For more detailed analysis of the way in which such a headshake is used as an assessment marker see M.H. Goodwin (1980).

(1) G.126:22:40



Thus in the very next moment after Eileen says "beautiful" Paul treats as an assessable what is about to be described in the not-yet-completed noun phrase. Moreover this marks a definite change in his alignment to that phenomenon. When, in asking Eileen to tell the story, he first made reference to "the dog" he did not orient to it as an assessable.

What happens here is also relevant to the analysis of **affect as an Interactive phenomenon**. It was noted earlier that Debbie reciprocated the affect display made available by Eileen's assessment. We now find that Paul does this as well. Eileen's assessment thus leads to a sequence of action in which three separate parties coparticipate in the experience offered by the assessment through an exchange of affect displays. These data also demonstrate how evaluative loading is not restricted to specific segments within the stream of speech, but instead can accrue to a sequence of rather heterogeneous phenomena (for example the noun "Irish Setter" and the non-lexical "Ah:::") and can even bridge actions performed by separate speakers (i.e., Paul's head

shake encompasses not only the joint production of "Irish Setter" but also Debbie's subsequent "Ah:::").<sup>9</sup> In brief, while on the one hand assessments constitute a mode of interaction that can occur within utterances, indeed within subcomponents of utterances, on the other hand they also provide an example of an activity structure that can seamlessly span multiple utterances, and even utterances by different speakers.

The following provides further information about how the activity of assessing what is being said might provide organization for the interaction of participants within relevant descriptive units, such as the utterance manifestations of noun phrases. Here, even though the original description of the ice cream is responded to as an assessable (lines 1 and 2), when speaker, after describing the machine used to make it, returns to the ice cream itself in line 9, recipient does not display any heightened alignment to it. Speaker then interrupts the noun phrase in progress before it has reached a recognizable completion and redoes it, only this time placing the word "homemade" before the type of ice cream. Just after this word, over the second production of "peach" recipient begins to treat the talk in progress of as an assessable:

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9. For other analysis of actions spanning multiple speakers see Ochs, Schieffelin and Platt (1979).



## (3) G.126:31:40

- 1 Debbie: Oh we had homemade ice cream today.  
 2 Eileen: Ah:::  
 3 Debbie: They had big- (0.4) We-  
 4 I don't know what they're like.  
 5 =I never saw 'em before.  
 6 But 'you' put 'ice' and 'salt' around 'them'?  
 7 =And 'there's a 'little' can 'in' the 'middle'  
 8 and 'you' just 'pert- We had  
 9 peach? *Homemade peach*, en strawberry.  
 10 Eileen: ↑ Ahoh,

↑  
*Eileen Begins*  
*Assessment Head Shake*

The second version of "peach" is treated by recipient in a way that the first wasn't, and this change in alignment appears to be responsive to the details of the way in which speaker organizes her emerging description. First, by interrupting that talk before it has reached a point of recognizable completion speaker shows recipient that for some reason it is no longer appropriate for that talk to continue moving towards completion. What speaker does next, in part by virtue of its status as a repair of the talk just marked as flawed, provides some information about what she found to be problematic with the earlier talk. Insofar as the second version differs from the first primarily through the addition of the word "homemade" that term is marked as in some sense essential for proper understanding of the description in progress. However, recipient has already been told in line 1 that the ice cream was homemade. Thus speaker is not telling recipient something new, but instead informing her that something that she already knows has not yet been taken proper account of. By taking up the same alignment to this new version of the description that she gave to its first production in "homemade," speaker attends to the repair as having precisely this import. In brief it would appear that the problem being remedied with the repair lies not so much in the talk itself as in the way in which recipient is visibly dealing

with it. Moreover speaker is able not only to see this problem but to initiate action leading to a remedy of it while the description itself is still in progress. Such events enable us to see in greater detail some of the ways in which concurrent operations on talk are sustained and shown to be relevant through an active processes of interaction between speaker and recipient as the talk is being spoken.

## 5 Post-Positioned Assessments

In the data so far examined the assessment term and the phenomenon being assessed have been packaged together within a single unit, for example within a single noun phrase. It is, however, possible to perform these activities separately. For example, in the following "asparagus pie" is introduced in a first sentence and then it is assessed in a second:<sup>10</sup>

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10. Constructions such as this, in which an entity is introduced in a first structure, and then commented on in a second, have been the subject of extensive analysis from a number of different perspectives. Thus linguists have studied such structures both in terms of syntactic processes such as left dislocation (Gundel 1975; Ross 1967), and in terms of how topics, and comments on those topics, are organized with respect to the contrast between "given" and "new" information (Chafe 1976; Li and Thompson 1976). It should however be noted that while organizing information is a very important aspect of the discourse organization of such constructions, information management is nonetheless only one of a range of functions that such structures can perform (Silverstein 1976). Thus, as will be seen later in this paper, in many cases recipient collaborates in the assessment, operating on it even before speaker has explicitly stated her position. In addition to marking the salience of different types of information, such a structure thus invokes a framework for

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heightened mutual focus on, and coparticipation in, the talk containing the assessment. Though the current analysis emphasizes the organization of participation structures, rather than the transfer of information, it seems quite compatible with the emphasis in previous analysis on foregrounding the material in the comment or proposition. Recently students of discourse (Duranti and Ochs 1979; Ochs and Schieffelin 1983a, 1983b) have begun to investigate the pragmatic organization of left-dislocation, examining phenomena such as how the 'Referent + Proposition' structure can be used to organize and focus recipient's attention, the way in which such structures might be fruitfully investigated as *discourses* (i.e., sequences of communicative acts), rather than as single syntactically bound units (Ochs and Schieffelin 1983a), and how, as a multi-purpose grammatical construction, left-dislocation can be used to provide a warrant for a speaker's current claim to the floor (Duranti and Ochs 1979). Such a pragmatic focus is quite consistent with the analysis being developed here. The present data provide an opportunity to expand the dimensions and frames of reference that have so far been employed to study structures of this type. On a more general level we think that it is quite important that study of the functional organization of linguistic and discourse structure not be restricted to issues of information management, but also include the multifaceted activities, pragmatic functions and participation structures that are invoked through talk.

## (4) G.50:03:45

Dianne: *Jeff* made en asparagus pie=  
 → =it wz s::sɔ: goo:d.

Here the assessment occurs after the assessable has been made available<sup>11</sup> and is the only activity done in the speaker's second sentence. The ability to perform assessments in this fashion is useful to participants in a number of different ways. For example, with such a structure participants are able to assess phenomena that would not fit neatly within a single unit. In the following speaker has provided an extended description of a movie she has seen:

## (5) HGII:12

Hyla: A:n then they go t'this country club fer a party  
 en the gury, 'hh u::m. (0.2)  
 en they kick him out  
 becuz they find out eez *Jewi:sh*, 'hh  
 → an it's j's r:rilly s::sa:d,

The issue arises as to how actions such as these are perceived, attended to and participated in by recipients.

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11. Where the assessment occurs in the stream of speech relative to the assessable is attended to in the fine detail within these utterances. Thus in #1, in which the assessment preceded the assessable, the clause containing the assessment was introduced with "this" (i.e., "this beautiful Irish Setter"), which established its upcoming referent as an available object for commentary, while in #4 the anaphoric term "it" presupposes the prior establishment of the referent as available within the discourse.

### 5.1 Post-Positioned Assessments as Techniques for Displaying Closure

A first observation that can be made about such post-positioned assessments is that, by moving to the assessment, speaker shows that though her talk is continuing, a marked structural change has occurred in it. Looking again at #5 it can be observed that when speaker begins the assessment she is no longer describing events (here incidents in the movie), but instead commenting on the description already given:

(5) HGII:12

- Hyla:           *Jewi:sh*, 'hh an it's=  
 Hyla:           → =j's r:ri:lly s:::s a:::d,  
 Nancy:                                    Guy *that* sounds so goo|::d?  
 Hyla:           =En *ao* I mean it jist (.) a f:fantastic moo-  
                   *oh* en then the *one* thet's *bigotted*,  
                   'hhh she's married tih this guy who's,

Such a shift from *Description* to *Assessment of Described Events* in fact constitutes one of the characteristic ways that speakers begin to exit from a story. Here Hyla does not end her story but instead begins to tell Nancy more about what happened in the movie. However the way in which she resumes the telling in fact supports the possibility that participants do attend to assessments as marking a move toward closure. After Nancy produces her own assessment Hyla does not, as she had after earlier continuers and brief assessments, produce a next event in the story. Instead she follows recipient's assessment with another one of her own. Hyla then interrupts this assessment before it reaches completion and marks her return to the description of the movie with a misplacement marker, "*oh*."<sup>12</sup> Thus the resumption of the telling

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 12. See Heritage (1984b) for more detailed analysis of how the particle 'oh' functions within interaction.

is shown to be a misplaced activity, rather than one that would follow unproblematically from the assessment activity then being engaged in.

## 6 Performing an Assessment as a Structured Interactive Activity

Looking now at the structure of the sentences used to construct post-positioned assessments in #4 and #5, it can be noted that despite differences in the words used a similar format is found in both assessments:

(4) It wz s::so: goo:d.

(5) an it's r:rilly s::sa:d,

[it] + [copula] + [adverbial intensifier] + [assessment term]

A first observation that can be made about this format is that it seems to reflect a division of activity within the utterance, with the first part of the sentence being occupied with referencing the assessable and the second, specifically the material after the verb, with the activity of assessment itself. Moreover the way in which each utterance is spoken is consistent with such a possibility. In both cases the speech quality of the assessment term itself is heightened through noticeable lengthening of sounds within it. Such enhancement of the talk is absent from the first part of the utterance but begins to emerge at the beginning of the adverbial intensifier, which in both cases receives additional stress in addition to lengthening of sounds within it. In brief both the semantic organization of these sentences, and the way in which they are spoken, seem to reveal a movement toward heightened participation in the activity of assessing by speaker, as the sentence unfolds.

Looking at these data from a slightly different perspective it can also be noted that speaker's heightened participation in the activity of assessment begins before the assessment term itself,

with the intensifier.<sup>13</sup> Earlier it was seen that immediately upon the occurrence of an assessment adjective recipients could begin to treat the talk to follow as an assessment. This raises the possibility that by attending to the pre-positioned intensifier recipients of sentences of the type now being examined might be able to align themselves to the emerging talk as an assessment before the assessment term itself is actually produced. Indeed when the actions of hearers to these utterances are examined it is found that

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13. The intensifier is clearly part of the *assessment activity* and it would be wrong to suggest that the assessment does not begin until the adjective explicitly states an evaluation. It is however quite useful to distinguish the intensifier from the assessment adjective in order to demonstrate how participants collaboratively work toward achieving heightened mutual focus over the assessment adjective. The distinctions at the beginning of the paper between *assessment segments* and *assessment activity* were drawn precisely to deal with situations such as this. The intensifier is an *assessment segment* in its own right, but one that can be clearly distinguished from the assessment adjective that follows it.

in both cases recipients start to produce an assessment of their own just as the intensifier comes to completion:

## (4) G.50:03:45

Dianne: *Jeff* made en asparagus pie  
it wz s : :so; goo:d.

Clacia: → I love it.

## (5) HGII:12

Hyla: an it's j's r:ri:lly s : : : s a : : d,

Nancy: → Guy t that sounds so goo] :-d?

Thus at the point where speaker actually produces her assessment term recipient is simultaneously providing her own assessment of the same material. Such activity has a number of consequences for the present analysis. First, it provides a clear demonstration of how the production of an assessment can constitute a social activity involving the collaborative action of multiple participants. Second, the placement of recipient's action supports the possibility that she is tracking in rather fine detail both the emerging structure of speaker's sentence, and the activity that speaker is progressively entering. It would thus appear that subcomponents of speaker's utterance, such as the intensifier, as well as the details of its sound production, contribute to the interactive organization of the actions of speaker and hearer in the activity they are jointly engaged in. In this sense the emerging structure of speaker's utterance, and the details of the way in which it is spoken, constitute one aspect of the *context* that recipients are actively attending to within the turn as consequential for the organization of their own actions. Moreover that context, and the utterance itself, are intrinsically dynamic, and are attended to as such by participants. By making projections about the future course of an utterance, recipients demonstrate that they are not dealing with it as a monolithic whole, or simply as a static string of symbolic components tied together through



syntax, but rather as a process that emerges through time and carries with it an expanding horizon of projective possibilities that are relevant to the actions that recipient might engage in while acting as a hearer to the utterance.<sup>14</sup>

### 6.1 *Extended Overlap*

The assessments produced by recipients in these data take the form of complete substantial sentences in their own right. In that they are placed not after speaker's action has come to completion, but *while* speaker's assessment is also in progress a state of extended simultaneous talk by different participants results (i.e., in length and structure something more than overlap of ongoing talk by continuers or brief assessment tokens such as "oh wow".)<sup>15</sup>

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14. For other analysis of how the way in which recipient projections about the future course of a sentence are relevant to the organization of their interaction with speaker see Jefferson (1973) and Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974). For analysis of how deictic terms dynamically modify emerging context as an utterance unfolds see Hanks (1986).
  15. For more detailed analysis of the interactive organization of brief assessments such as "oh wow", and the way in which they contrast with continuers such as "uh huh" see C. Goodwin (1986). Assessments by recipient can range from fully referential and predicational ones down to relatively desemanticized displays of empathy, etc., that lack an explicit referent and evaluation, but do display affective involvement in principal speaker's statement. Indeed some evidence suggests that this division of labor, with principal speaker providing the referent that recipient is responding to, may be attended to in fine detail in the sequential organization of concurrent assessments. Thus, when recipients produce brief concurrent assessments, speakers may delay entry into subsequent units of talk until the assessment has run its course, so that the a new

This is not, however, treated as a situation requiring a remedy,<sup>16</sup> for example, neither party's talk contains restarts, hitches, or other perturbations, or indeed any displays that problems exist with the current state of talk. Moreover, if the analysis developed above is correct, this simultaneous talk is not the result of an accidental failure to achieve proper coordination but rather something that the participants have systematically achieved through close attention to the emerging structure of the talk and activity in progress. What happens here thus provides further support for the possibility that assessments do indeed constitute ways of analyzing and operating on talk that can be performed while that talk is still in progress. Indeed it appears that constraints which elsewhere exert quite powerful influence on the sequential organization of talk, for example an orientation to one but only one party speaking at a time, can be relaxed for assessments. It would thus appear that, in a number of different ways, the activity of assessing something provides participants with resources for performing concurrent operations on talk that has not yet come to completion.

## *6.2 Differential Access as an Organizing Feature of Concurrent Assessments*

Though the talk of both speaker and recipient in #4 and #5 is assessing the same material each party in fact says rather different things. Is such variation simply haphazard or does it reveal further aspects of the phenomena the participants are orienting to as relevant for the organization of their activity? Looking more carefully at precisely what is said it can be noted that in its details the talk of each party attends to the access each has to the phenomena being assessed. For example, Hyla with her initial

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referent does not occur while the assessment is still in progress (C. Goodwin 1986).

16. For analysis of how participants can negotiate speakership within overlap see Jefferson (1973) and Schegloff (in press).

"it's" makes reference to an actual movie she has seen, and assesses it in unequivocal terms. Nancy, however, by saying "That sounds *so: goo:d?*" attends to what she is assessing as being available only through Hyla's current description of it. Similarly in #4 Dianne, who depicts herself as having directly experienced in the past the pie she is now describing, makes reference to that specific pie. However, Clacia, by putting her assessment in present tense, deals not with the specifics of that particular pie, but rather with it as a class of phenomena that the pie currently being described instances. A moment later, after Dianne has described the pie in more detail, Clacia says "Oh: *Go:d* that'd be fantastic." Here by constructing her assessment in conditional tense, she again makes visible in her talk the limited access<sup>17</sup> she has to the phenomena she is assessing. Thus one of the reasons that the assessments of the separate participants differ from each other is that each has different access to and experience of the event being assessed. This feature provides organization for a range of phenomena implicated in the construction of each utterance, such as the choice of particular words and verb tenses. By constructing their assessments in this fashion participants also attend in detail to how they have been organized relative to each other by the telling in progress. For example the different positions of describer and describee are shown to remain relevant even when both are assessing in a similar fashion the events which have been described. In brief, despite their apparent simplicity, assessments show a view of the assessable as something perceived by an actor who both takes up a particular alignment to it and sees the assessable from a particular perspective, one that may be quite different from that of a coparticipant who is simultaneously assessing the same event.

It can also be noted that insofar as both the assessable, and the activity of assessing it, emerge as talk unfolds through time,

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17. For other analysis of how the structure of talk displays the type of knowledge that speaker has of the event being talked about see M.H. Goodwin (1980), Hanks (1986) and Pomerantz (1980).

differences in participant perspective have a temporal organization as well. To note one simple example, in #1 Paul, the party who saw with speaker the dog being assessed, was able to act just after the pre-positioned assessment adjective was spoken. However at that point the assessable itself was not yet available to speaker's addressed recipient, Debbie, and indeed her response occurred only after the assessable had been described. Issues of emerging perspective within the activity of assessing are clearly relevant to other processes as well, such as ways in which recipients project from an intensifier that an assessment is about to occur.

### *6.3 Making Visible Congruent Understanding*

Though the talk of the separate parties shows that each is viewing the assessable from a different perspective, in other ways the assessments produced by each seem to have an underlying similarity. For example in #4 both speaker and recipient assess asparagus pie positively. Thus with their assessments the participants are able to display to each other that they evaluate the phenomena being assessed in a similar way. Moreover by virtue of the way in which each assessment takes into account the distinctive position of the party making it, these similar evaluations are shown to result from independent appraisals of the phenomena being assessed. In essence with the assessments the participants show each other that, on this issue at least, their minds are together; they evaluate the phenomena being discussed in a similar way.

**Assessments reveal not just neutral objects in the world, but an alignment taken up toward phenomena by a particular actor. Moreover this alignment can be of some moment in revealing such significant attributes of the actor as their taste, and the way in which they evaluate the phenomena they perceive. It is therefore not surprising that displaying congruent understanding can be an**

issue of some importance to the participants.<sup>18</sup> Further support for active attention to such an issue is found when a visual record of the actions of the participants in #4 is examined. As Clacia produces her assessment she nods toward Dianne:

(4) G.50:03:45

|              |  |        |     |              |       |   |   |     |     |
|--------------|--|--------|-----|--------------|-------|---|---|-----|-----|
| Dianne:      | <i>Jeff</i> made en asparagus pie<br>it wz s::sə: good.  |        |     |              |       |   |   |     |     |
| Clacia:      | <table border="0" style="margin-left: 100px;"> <tr> <td style="padding-right: 40px;">I love</td> <td>it.</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">┌──────────┐</td> <td style="text-align: center;">┌───┐</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">│</td> <td style="text-align: center;">│</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Nod</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Nod</td> </tr> </table> | I love | it. | ┌──────────┐ | ┌───┐ | │ | │ | Nod | Nod |
| I love       | it.  |        |     |              |       |   |   |     |     |
| ┌──────────┐ | ┌───┐  |        |     |              |       |   |   |     |     |
| │            | │  |        |     |              |       |   |   |     |     |
| Nod          | Nod  |        |     |              |       |   |   |     |     |

With her nods Clacia proposes that the talk she is producing, and the position taken up through that talk, is in agreement with Dianne's. Indeed, taken as a whole the actions she performs here provide a strong display of agreement. First, with the content of her utterance she states a view of the assessable that is compatible with Dianne's. Second, with her nods she marks that talk nonvocally as an agreement. Third, she performs this action not after hearing Dianne's assessment but at the very moment it is being spoken. It is of course true that the talk so far produced provides materials (for example the intensifier) that strongly suggest, and perhaps actually project, a favorable assessment. Nevertheless at the point where Clacia acts, Dianne has not officially stated a position. By placing her talk where she does Clacia argues that her way of viewing the assessable is so attuned to Dianne's that she is prepared to both commit herself to a position, and categorize that position as an agreement without

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18. For other analysis of displaying congruent understanding see C. Goodwin (1981:114-116) and Jefferson (1983).

actually hearing Dianne's.<sup>19</sup> Thus with the content of her talk, nonvocal displays about it, and its sequential placement, Clacia argues strongly that her view of the assessable is congruent with Dianne's.

It is being argued that recipients produce concurrent assessments by making projections about events which have not yet occurred. If this is indeed the case then it would be expected that on some occasions the projections made by recipients would turn out to be inaccurate. Rather than providing evidence against the position being argued in this paper, such an event would constitute strong evidence that recipients are in fact engaged in the activity of anticipating future events on the basis of the limited information currently available to them. The following provides an example of how a recipient's projection of an emerging assessment can be erroneous, with the effect that the concurrent appreciation being displayed by recipient is quite inappropriate to what speaker turns out to in fact be saying:

(6) NB:II:4:R:24

- |    |        |  |
|----|--------|--|
| 1  | Emma:  | ·hh I: MA:DE ME A DAHLING                            |
| 2  |        | DRESS tih WEAR dih the                               |
| 3  |        | DESERT.  |
| 4  |        | God I go <sub>o</sub> t the p-purti <sub>i</sub> es: |
| 5  | Nancy: | {↑Didju↑↑.:h?}                                       |
| 6  |        | (0.2)  |
| 7  | Emma:  | p-print it's almos'like s:ilk                        |
| 8  |        | but it's euh·hh·hh<                                  |
| 9  | Nancy: | [ <sub>o</sub> Mm.: [ <sub>o</sub> Mm]hm             |
| 10 |        | (.)  |

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19. It may be noted that the placement of this strong agreement is almost the mirror image of one of the ways in which impending disagreement is displayed sequentially. Pomerantz (1984a) describes how recipients prepared to disagree frequently delay a response to what has just been said.



actually produced, but the talk has progressed in ways quite incompatible with her projection of it, with the effect that she is responding inappropriately to what Emma is saying. Such data provide a strong demonstration of how **projecting what another is about to say so as to concurrently coparticipate in it constitutes a contingent accomplishment**. Fortunately the emerging structure of interaction provides resources for moving past, and attempting to recover from, such a faux pas, and in line 33 we find Nancy once again producing a concurrent assessment to Emma's description of the weather, only this time her response is quite appropriate.

Returning now to example #4 we find that Dianne also performs a number of relevant nonvocal actions. As she produces the assessment term she lowers her head into a nod while simultaneously lifting her brows into a marked eyebrow flash. These actions are preceded by movement of her head and upper body in a way that shows heightened orientation toward recipient over the intensifier:

(4) G.50:03:45

Dianne:           *Jeff made en asparagus pie*

*Lowers*  
*Upper    Nod With*  
*Trunk   Eyebrow Flash*

Dianne:           it wz s::sə:    goo:d.  
 Clacia:           | I love    it.  
                     |           |  
                     |           |  
                     *Nod    Nod*

Dianne's nonvocal behavior like her talk seems to display a progression toward heightened involvement in the assessment as



her utterance unfolds.<sup>20</sup> These actions become most intense over the assessment term itself, and indeed at this point in the talk quite a range of both vocal and nonvocal action is occurring. The ensemble of things done over the assessment does not, however, seem a collection of separate actions, but rather integrated elements of a single interactive activity of assessment. Moreover the visible behavior of speaker, as well as the unfolding structure of her talk and recipient's participation in that talk, seem to demonstrate systematic movement toward this point through time. In essence one seems to find here an organized activity that participants recognize and systematically bring to a recognizable climax.

#### *6.4 Bringing Assessment Activity to a Close*

Having seen how participants attend to the structure of assessments as an activity so as to collaboratively bring that activity to a recognizable peak or climax, we will now look at some of the ways in which movement away from such a point might be accomplished. One way to approach this issue is to ask "What can participants do next?" Some actions within conversation have the property of being nonrepeatable (see for example the analysis of summons-answer sequences in Schegloff (1968)), i.e.,

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20. In that recipient's nod begin after speaker's body displays heightened orientation toward her over the intensifier, one might be tempted to argue that the nods are solicited or at least triggered by the body movement speaker has just made. However it seems more accurate to say that recipient is responding to the emerging activity of assessment, something visible in a range of different ways, e.g., the intensifier itself, its placement in the talk so far produced, the way in which it is articulated, the visible actions of speaker's body relevant to it, etc. Arbitrarily segregating interactive events in terms of whether they are produced vocally or nonvocally seems neither helpful analytically, nor to accurately reflect what the participants are doing.

once they have been validly performed they cannot be immediately redone. Assessments, however, are repeatable. Moreover while some repeatable actions are used to progressively operate on new material, for example a series of questions in a medical interview, so that each instance of a similar action actually deals with separate phenomena, a participant can make continuing assessments of the same assessable. For example after producing "Irish setter" as an assessment Paul continues to display involvement in the activity of appreciating it. First, he coparticipates in the assessment made by Debbie's "Ah:::", by producing an assessment head shake in time with it. Then, as his eyes return to Debbie, he uses an assessment format similar to that found in #4 and #5 to extract the assessment from the embedded



use of both vocal and nonvocal phenomena to produce repeated assessments of the assessable.<sup>21</sup>

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21. Paul's continued assessments co-occur with Eileen's return to her story.

It can be noted that Paul's talk is produced with noticeably lowered volume and that he does not orient toward the same recipients Eileen is then gazing at. He thus seems to produce minimal intrusion into Eileen's talk. For example with the contrast in volume between his talk and Eileen's he shows others present that though that talk overlaps Eileen's, it should not be heard as competitive with hers, and indeed she does not treat it this way. Moreover, even while continuing in the assessment, Paul seems to remain aware of the emerging structure of Eileen's talk, and to organize at least some features of his actions in terms of it. For example as she comes to the completion of the background material in her story he brings his assessment activity to a close and returns his gaze to her as the climax segment of the story is entered (for more detailed analysis of how participants might attend to the emerging structure of a story to organize even actions unrelated to the story see C. Goodwin (1984)). Finally, it can be noted that insofar as Paul actually participated in the events being described by Eileen the issue arises as to how he can act as a recipient to her current talk (for more detailed consideration of this issue, and the interaction it engenders, see Sacks 10/19/71 and C. Goodwin (1981, chapter 5). By performing the extended assessment Paul finds a way to deal with the events being described in the current talk in a way that is appropriate to his experience of them.

Returning to #4 it is found that just after the assessment produced concurrently with Dianne's, Clacia repeats that assessment:

(4) G.50:03:45

Dianne:        en asparagus pie  
                   it wz s::so: good.  
 Clacia:                    I love it. °Yeah I love that.

However during this second assessment she acts quite differently than she had during the first. Thus the subsequent assessment is spoken with markedly lowered volume (this is indicated in the transcript by the smaller type). Moreover while speaking Clacia actually withdraws from her coparticipant.

(4) G.50:03:45

Dianne:        en asparagus pie  
                   it wz s::so: good.  
 Clacia:                    I love it. °Yeah I love that.

↑  
*Clacia Starts To  
 Withdraw Gaze*

Thus, while the initial concurrent assessment was produced within a state of heightened orientation toward coparticipant and the talk in progress, this second assessment is done while Clacia is displaying diminished participation in the activity, and indeed seems to be withdrawing from it.

It is thus found that a single assessment activity can encompass a range of different types of participation. The sequencing of participation in these data — collaborative orientation toward the emergence of the assessment, elaborated participation in it as it is actually produced and finally a trailing off of involvement in it — is consistent with the possibility that

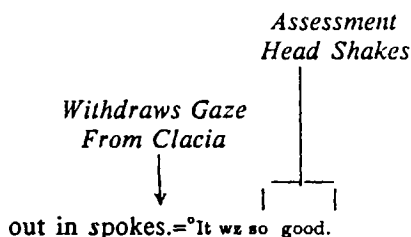
what is occurring here are successive stages of a single natural activity that emerges, comes to a climax and is then withdrawn from.

### *6.5 Assessments as Resources for Closing Topics*

Instead of just analyzing these different participation structures as successive stages of an unfolding activity it is also useful to examine in more detail how the possibility of investing assessments with different kinds of participation might provide participants with resources for the organization of their activity. For example, assessments are one of the characteristic activities used to exit from larger sequential units in talk such as stories and topics. Indeed one frequently finds strings of assessments at such places. When one examines precisely how such assessments are spoken it is found that frequently they are operating not only to exit from what was being talked about in the story to topic, but that in addition the different participation possibilities provided by assessments are systematically being used to bring the heightened mutual orientation that such a focused activity has engendered to a close. A simple example is found shortly after the sequences analyzed in #4. In the intervening talk Dianne has described in greater detail the asparagus pie that Jeff made:

(7) G.50:04:50

Dianne: En then jus' (cut-up) the broc- 'r  
the *asparagus* coming



As Dianne moves from a description of the pie to an assessment of it, she noticeably reduces the volume of her talk while simultaneously withdrawing her gaze from Clacia. Thus she has not only moved into a different kind of talk (e.g. from description to assessment) but also changed the nature of her involvement in that talk and the structure of her orientation to coparticipant. Despite the apparent simplicity of what Dianne has done, the changes produced are in fact rather intricate. Thus some of what happens — the move from description to assessment, the reduction in volume and the withdrawal of gaze from recipient — indicate that she is proposing topic closure. However even as she does this she is displaying heightened involvement in the substance of her talk. The assessment itself with its “savoring” voice quality (achieved in part through the same lowering of volume that might otherwise indicate move toward closure of the sequence) and actions of her body during it, such as the assessment head shakes, all display elaborated appreciation of what she has been talking about. In essence the actions Dianne performs seem both to foreshadow topic closure and to show heightened involvement in the topic.

At first glance such a combination might appear inconsistent or even contradictory. However to see this mixture of phenomena in

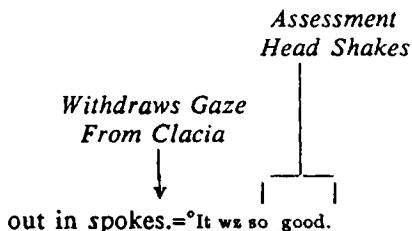
such a way is to implicitly assume that topics run out only because participants lose interest in them. If a topic has in fact engrossed the attention of those talking, this would be a very poor way to end it. On the other hand, one would not want to talk about that topic forever. Thus one might want to look for ways of dealing with talk in progress that show heightened appreciation of it, without however proposing that others need continue talking about it forever. Dianne's assessment has precisely these properties. She is able to show coparticipant (for example with her gaze withdrawal) that she is not awaiting further talk from her, while simultaneously appreciating what has just been said. Indeed one of the reasons why assessments might be so extensively used to close stories and topics is that they provide this mixture of participation possibilities for organizing the interaction then in progress.

Some demonstration that the participants themselves might analyze an assessment such as Dianne's as including an ensemble of activity of the type just described is provided by the talk Clacia produces next. In its productional features this talk responds to the various elements of Dianne's talk, while ratifying the change in participation status she has proposed. First, as Clacia begins to speak she too withdraws her gaze from her coparticipant. Second, her talk is produced with not simply lowered volume but drastically reduced volume (indicated in the transcript by the two degree signs before it.) The talk itself is, however, a marked upgrade of the assessment Dianne just made:



(7) G.50:04:50

Dianne: En then jus' (cut-up) the broc- 'r  
the *asparagus* coming



Claica: °°(Oh Go:d that'd be fantastic.)

↑  
*Withdraws Gaze  
From Dianne*

The exchange of affect provided by the exchange of assessments gives the withdrawal the intimacy of a parting touch, in which the character of the apparent *referent* of the assessment becomes far less important than the shared affect and coexperience the participants display to each other. In these data speaker and recipient, through the details of the ways in which they performed their assessments, have moved away from the substance of the topic in progress while simultaneously showing their ongoing appreciation of it. At the same time they have dismantled the **facing formation** that had been sustained through that talk. Insofar as no new topic is yet on the floor, the state of disengagement which has thus been collaboratively entered

through this process of **phased withdrawal**<sup>22</sup> is quite appropriate to their current actions.

## 7 Refusal by Recipient to Coparticipate in the Assessment

In the data so far examined recipients have accepted speaker's proposals about how the entity being assessed should be evaluated. However not all assessments are responded to in such a felicitous fashion. **Recipients can refuse to treat as an assessable something that speaker proposes should be so treated**, and in so doing call into question a speaker's competence to properly evaluate the phenomenon being assessed. Example #2, which has not yet been examined in detail, provides data in which this happens. By looking at it we will be able to investigate some of the consequences that producing something as an assessable has for both the party making the assessment, and the talk in progress.

This utterance was produced as speaker was beginning an extended story. In form it is quite similar to #1:

(2) G.84:10:30

Curt:            *This* guy had, a beautiful, thirty two O:lds.

With the word "beautiful" speaker marks the talk to follow as a description of an assessable. Indeed both the word "beautiful" and the talk after it are given special salience through the comma intonation around "beautiful." Moreover this talk is accompanied by relevant nonvocal actions, including gestural intensifiers and head movements by speaker, that seem to both enhance the assessable character of his talk and invite recipient participation in

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22. For more extended analysis of the organization of engagement displays and entry into disengagement see C. Goodwin (1981, chapter 3).

it (for purposes of the present analysis it is not necessary to examine these actions in detail).

It was seen in the data examined earlier that after hearing an assessable recipients are not only able to respond to such action but participate in it in a variety of different ways. Indeed less than two minutes earlier in this same conversation Mike produced a description of a car that Curt assessed in rather elaborate fashion:

(8) G.84:8:55

- Mike: Well I can't say they're ol: clunkers=  
eez gotta Co:rd?  
(0.1)
- Mike: Two Co:rds,  
(1.0)
- Mike: And  
Curt: → [[ Not original,  
(0.7)
- Mike: Oh yes. *Very* original.  
Curt: → Oh:: reall<sub>y</sub>?  
Mike: | Yah. Ve(h)ry origi(h)nal.  
Curt: → °Awhhhh are you *shittin m<sub>e</sub>*?  
Mike: | No I'm not.  
(0.3)

However, in #2, despite the explicit assessment term before Curt's description of the "thirty two O:lds", and the intonational and nonvocal emphasis given it, Mike does not respond to what Curt has said in any way. After leaving a full half second of silence that not only provides Mike time for response,<sup>23</sup> but also makes

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23. For more extended analysis of how speakers analyze the absence of response to their talk and use further talk to pursue such response see Pomerantz (1984b).

visible interactively the absence of such a response, Curt produces further talk:

(2) G.84:10:30

- Curt:            *This* guy had, a beautiful, thirty two O:lds.  
                   →            (0.5)  
 Curt:            → Original.

By providing further information about the car being described Curt shows that he is still awaiting a response to his earlier talk. Moreover the word chosen is informative about the type of response he is seeking. Specifically this term provides recipient with further grounds for treating what has just been described as something to be assessed. Indeed "original" was the very first attribute used by Curt to assess the Cords two minutes earlier (c.f. #8).

At this point Mike does provide a response:

(2) G.94:10:30

- Curt:            *This* guy had, a beautiful, thirty two O:lds.  
                   (0.5)  
 Curt:            Original.  
 Mike:            → ((Nod))

Mike's nod receipts Curt's talk but in no way assesses it. Rather the nod seems to constitute a type of continuer, an action which deals with the talk which has just been heard as preliminary to further talk, rather than as something to be appreciated in its own right (C. Goodwin 1986; Schegloff 1980). Insofar as Curt's talk is recognizably one of the early stages of a story it is technically possible to analyze it in this way. However, as #1 demonstrated, it is also possible to deal with such talk in its own terms, and indeed Curt has formulated this description as an assessment, an action recipients can and do participate in. Thus by responding in the way that he does Mike shows that he has dealt with what Curt has said, without however treating it in the way that Curt proposed it

should be treated. Rather by responding with a continuer Mike has made a **counterproposal** — that Curt should move forward with the story.

Such a sequence of action makes it relevant to examine what happens next. After Mike's action Curt produces further description of the car, and then reveals this to be not a next event in the story but additional demonstration of how "original" the car was. When this assessment extends into yet another turn constructional unit Mike turns away from Curt and begins to search for a cigarette.

(2) G.84:10:30

Curt: Original  
 Mike: ((Nod))  
 Curt: (They'd) painted it 'n green'n black.  
 All - original all the way through.  
 Everything *ju:st*, Yihknow, 'hh=

↑  
*Mike Withdraws  
 From Curt*

Curt: =*He* restored that thing en ih *wz so*  
 beautiful I couldn't believe it.

Mike does not return his gaze to Curt for over 33 seconds, moving back into orientation toward him at the point where the story approaches its climax.

These data provide some demonstration of how establishing the assessable character of an object is not something done by speaker alone, but rather an interactive event. The participation possibilities provided by assessments enable participants to negotiate both the status of a proposed assessable, and the way in which the talk containing it will be attended to.



to be taken for granted, but rather something to be interactively achieved.

Indeed it would appear that making such assessments is one of the places where a participant's fine grained competence in a particular domain of culture is not only displayed to coparticipants but challenged or validated by them. Thus in these data we find that Mike is someone who will refuse to give a "thirty two O:lds" the kind of evaluation that Curt would give both it and a "Cord." Indeed, unlike Curt, Mike is someone who makes distinctions between Cords. In essence it would appear that what is at issue in showing competence in making such distinctions is not simply a cognitive phenomenon (though the processes involved may be central to the construction and operation of "domains of knowledge" that anthropologists and other students of the cognitive organization of culture have studied as static phenomena, and analyzed in isolation from the detailed interaction within which they become visible) but a social and interactive process, and indeed one that can have real consequences for the standing participants achieve vis-à-vis one another.

Looking back at #1 in light of these considerations it can be seen that in unproblematically accepting Eileen's assessment as something that she will participate in, Debbie validates Eileen's competence to properly evaluate the phenomena she encounters. Though this might seem so unremarkable as to escape notice, it is quite a bit more than Mike gives Curt.

## 9 Initial Alignment and Subsequent Understanding

Do any systematic reasons exist for Curt to pursue his assessments of the car with such tenacity? Curt's activity of assessing the car occurs in a particular sequential position, in an initial "background" segment of a more extended story. In #1 it was seen that assessments made in this position might treat phenomena quite differently from the way in which they are dealt with later in the story. This does not however exclude the possibility that on

some occasions assessments performed on phenomena in such a position might nonetheless also be relevant to the larger organizational structure of the emerging story. Indeed attending to the kind of work that assessments could do here would help us to uncover in more detail the range of activities that participants are engaged in while attending the initiation of a story. In Curt's story it is eventually revealed that the ex-wife of the owner of this car caused its engine to blow up by stuffing a rag in its radiator hose. After the story reaches its climax the participants deal with it by debating what would be proper punishment for the ex-wife — the mildest (and only printable) suggestion being Curt's "I'd kill y'know that'd be enough t'go after a shotgun with." Quite clearly punishment like this would not be appropriate for someone who damaged the engine of just any car. Rather to understand the events in the story in the way that participants show that they understood them, one must conceptualize the car as an extremely special, very highly valued object, one whose destruction merits extraordinary punishment. Thus, when Curt introduces the car early in the story he is faced with the task of aligning his recipients to it in a particular way. A process well suited to not only displaying alignment, but securing it from others, is the activity of assessments. When used to introduce entities that will figure prominently in a story a noun phrase containing an assessment adjective, such as "a beautiful thirty two O:lds", contains within its structure elements capable of performing two of the central tasks posed during story initiation: **making phenomena available for subsequent reference<sup>24</sup>** and **aligning participants to those phenomena in an appropriate fashion**. From such a perspective Curt's attempt to have the car evaluated in a particular way

would appear to be neither idiosyncratic, nor simply an attempt to remedy an affront to his judgment, but rather a systematic part of the work he is faced with in beginning a story: preparing his

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24. For more extensive consideration of how this issue is relevant to the organization of stories and other multi-unit turns see Schegloff (1980:114-115).



recipients to understand what he is to tell them in an appropriate way, or at least the way that he wants them to understand it.

Assessments are found to occur in a diverse range of sequential positions within talk, for example, as subordinate parts of sentences dealing primarily with other matters, in the background segments of stories, and as extended sequences when stories and topics are brought to completion. The phenomena just noted would suggest that the assessments in these apparently heterogeneous positions might in fact be related to each other. For example, the understanding of a story displayed in a sequence of assessments at its conclusion is intimately tied to ways in which participants were led to see characters and events in the story when they were first introduced. **Assessments thus constitute a most important resource for collaboratively building within the talk itself an interpretive context that will be utilized for the analysis of subsequent talk and action.** In brief, despite their apparent simplicity assessments constitute one central resource available to participants for organizing the perception and interpretation of what is being talked about, providing them with the ability to not simply display alignment to ongoing talk, but establish and negotiate that alignment through a systematic process of interaction while the talk being aligned to is still in progress.

The data which have been investigated here have enabled us to investigate a range of issues relevant to how assessments are organized as an activity within the turn at talk. One of the very interesting things about assessments is the way in which they integrate a range of phenomena occurring within the turn that are frequently studied quite separately. In so far as assessments are achieved through the collaborative action of multiple participants they provide an elementary example of **social organization within the boundaries of the turn.** At the same time they constitute a key locus for the display and achievement of congruent understanding, and thus are quite relevant to the study of cognition as a practical, everyday activity. In addition they provide an example of how affect and the display of emotion are organized as interactive phenomena. In accomplishing this activity participants must pay close attention to what other participants are doing, the details of

what is happening in the stream of speech, and the recognizable structure of the activity itself. The study of assessments thus permits analysis in an integrated fashion of a range of phenomena relevant to the organization of language, culture, cognition and emotion in the midst of actual interaction.

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