

7 Unilateral departure¹

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Work on the analysis of conversation has demonstrated a multitude of ways in which talk spoken in conversation is intrinsically interactive. For example talk is exchanged through a sequence of turns at talk, turns themselves are constituted through the joint work of both recipients and speakers, and participants use the talk of others as a resource for the proper understanding of what is currently being said.² The present paper will analyse an utterance, an instance of what Goffman (1978) has called 'self talk', that lacks these features.³ It is not organised with reference to turn-taking, and indeed is not situated within a speech exchange system. It neither responds to the prior talk of another or elicits further talk that is responsive to it. It is not addressed to another, and is not explicitly attended to by anyone else. Both its speaker and those in a position to hear it treat it as a bit of talk that is irrelevant to the conversation in progress. The utterance thus provides an example of talk that appears to have no interactive import or organisation.

However when we look at the production of this utterance in detail we will find that both the lack of attention to it, and its irrelevance to the conversation of the moment, are carefully organised through the actions of both its speaker and its recipients. In the analysis to follow we will begin by investigating how the talk is to be understood, focussing on the way in which this utterance is embedded within activities other than talk. Then we will look at what information the utterance provides to those in a position to hear it. Finally, we will examine the participation framework proposed by the utterance and the types of orientation it receives. Investigation of all of these phenomena will require careful attention not only to talk but also to a range of nonvocal activities that the participants are engaged in. In essence we will find that what is officially formulated as a unilateral, single party event in fact displays quite careful attention to others and is sustained through an ongoing process of interaction.

The data which are to be examined are taken from a videotape of a picnic held in the back yard of Pam and Curt. The adults present at the picnic have divided themselves into two conversational clusters. Curt, Mike, Gary and Phyllis are seated around the picnic table, and are the group that is being taped, while Pam, Carney and Candy are seated a short distance away. Analysis will focus on the talk of Phyllis in line 11:⁴

- 1 **Curt:** Keegan usetuh race uhr uh– er ih was um, (0.4) usetuh
2. run um,
3. (2.7)
4. **Curt:** Oh:: shit.
5. (0.4)
6. **Curt:** Uhm,
7. (0.4)
8. **Curt:** Fisher's car.
9. **Mike:** Three en₁na₂ quarter?
10. **Curt:** Thr₁ee enna₂ quarter.
- 11. **Phyllis:** Need some more i₁ce.
12. **Mike:** Yeh,
13. (1.0)
14. **Curt:** (When I) wz foolin around.
15. **Gary:** I usetuh go over there with my cousin (when he had a
16. car),

Finding an Environment for Phyllis's Talk

A first observation that can be made about the talk Phyllis produces is that it is not tied in any way to the talk around it. The subject matter of her utterance and the types of orientation it receives. Investigation of all of these (cars), and sequentially it is not a next utterance to some prior utterance and no subsequent talk is tied to it. Indeed it is begun at a point where not one but two other parties are already speaking. However, despite this it is not oriented to by either its speaker or the other speakers as a characteristic instance of overlap. For example, none of the parties relinquish prior to completion; no perturbations, cut-offs, or changes in volume or pace occur, and the talk produced in overlap is not treated as in any way requiring remedy, repair or re-introduction.⁵ This talk could in fact be removed from the conversation and the organisation of the surrounding talk would be in no way changed.

If this talk is in fact not tied to a local sequential environment the issue of how it is to be understood emerges as a serious, and perhaps unsolvable,

problem, not only for the analyst but also for participants. A relevant sequential environment is one of the principal resources participants utilise to make adequate and appropriate sense out of talk. For example, taken in isolation the words 'three and a quarter' can make reference to an indeterminate number of phenomena and perform an unspecified range of actions such as naming a price in a service encounter, providing the weight of an object, specifying the distance for a race, etc. However by taking into account the sequential position of this expression in these data (lines 9 and 10) participants on this occasion of its use can find that it is providing an alternative formulation of an object located in a just prior piece of talk, 'Fisher's car', and is doing the activity of checking and demonstrating independent recognition of that object.

Unless Phyllis's talk is tied to a relevant sequential environment what would constitute adequate understanding of it remains problematic. Is it 'you', 'I', 'we', or 'they' who need more ice? What kind of ice? Why is it needed? etc. Given the words in isolation an indefinite number of accounts can be imagined, but criteria for deciding a relevant and appropriate understanding of the talk for these participants remains unavailable.

The inadequacy of the talk in isolation suggests that, despite the absence of ties to the talk around it, a relevant environment for what Phyllis is saying does none the less exist. When the visual record of the conversation is examined it can be seen that Phyllis begins to talk just after she has poured the end of a bottle of coke into a cup in front of her and while she is still looking at the cup. If others present tie her talk to her actions with the coke an environment for making sense of the talk becomes available. For example, the embeddedness of the talk in these activities can locate the party needing ice as the speaker and the ice as ice for a drink.

Looking further at the videotape it can be seen that as Phyllis speaks she picks up the cup of coke, gets up, and walks away from the table. Thus her talk, when analysed with reference to her actions with her drink, makes visible a reason for why she is leaving the conversational cluster.

Tying the talk to these activities is however not something that occurs automatically but rather a task to be achieved by the participants. The data suggests that the speaker in fact goes into somewhat special work to make these activities, and the relationship of them to her talk, visible and available for her co-participants.

First, the talk is noticeably sequenced as an event in these activities, occurring just after the pouring is finished and just as the act of leaving is begun.

Second, in large part by virtue of the placement of the talk after the pouring, the talk appears to be occasioned by the pouring, the finding of no ice emerging at that point. Such a finding need not however have been made just at that point, but could have been done earlier, and perhaps was (less than half a minute before her remark Phyllis takes a sip from the coke and then shortly afterward looks into the glass as she starts to pour). Moreover, ice is not always, or even characteristically, added to a drink after it has been poured, but rather is placed in the glass prior to the pouring. While the sequence that occurs here (pouring of the drink followed by a search for ice) is certainly possible, such observations invite consideration of what would have happened if the pouring had not been done first, but speaker had rather just picked up her cup and left. In such a case of the activity of leaving would have been both more sudden and far less explicable, the placing of soda in the cup not emerging as a seeable event. The sequencing chosen is thus consistent with the possibility that the speaker is doing special work to make her activity visible and available to her co-participants. Moreover, by virtue of this work the departure becomes both a locally occasioned and an accounted-for event.

Ice is needed at the present moment (the coke has already been poured) and is not available in the present environment.⁶

Third, the speaker carries the empty bottle, as well as the cup of coke, off with her. One of the few advantages of pouring first would seem to be that the bottle could then be abandoned, and indeed such an action would be appropriate at the present picnic; the table is full of empty beer cans. However by carrying the bottle as well as the cup, speaker again heightens the visibility of what she is doing.

The speaker thus seems to systematically organise her actions so as to provide her co-participants with resources that will enable them to clearly see both the activities she is engaged in and the embeddedness of her talk in those activities. Indeed, there is good reason for such work since it is those activities which provide her talk with an environment within which it becomes comprehensible.

However, while these activities inform the talk, and make it comprehensible, the talk simultaneously informs the activities, and makes them comprehensible, providing an account for what the speaker is doing and why she is leaving. Co-participants thus use the activities to find the sense of the talk and simultaneously use the talk to find the sense of the activities.

Orientation to the Talk of Phyllis by Others

In many circumstances the talk that occurs within a task activity is crucial to actually getting the task accomplished. For example when a guest at a restaurant asks a waiter for more ice the request that is communicated through the talk is an important component of the process of getting ice from the kitchen to glass; were the request not made the task would not be accomplished. However the talk that Phyllis produces does not help her actually perform the activity of getting more ice; she could replenish her glass just as effectively by going to the refrigerator without saying anything at all. Rather than helping her get more ice this talk functions to make the activity that Phyllis is engaged in accessible to others. Thus, though the talk is embedded in a specific activity it is designed and placed there exclusively for observation by others. In view of this it is relevant to examine how others present attend to what Phyllis is doing and the talk she is producing.

When the tape is examined it is found that none of the others present orient to the speaker, for example by gazing toward her, or attending to what she is saying in any way. Rather, they remain exclusively involved in the talk they are already engaged in. Speaker's talk thus passes without any displays of co-participation in it, or hearership to it, whatsoever.

Speakers who find that they do not have a hearer have systematic methods for requesting such co-participation and delaying the onward production of their talk until it is obtained (see for example Goodwin, 1981: Chapter 2). In the present case, however, the speaker in no way treats lack of displayed co-participation as a situation requiring remedy. She neither interrupts her talk nor makes any effort to secure the orientation of a hearer.

The data thus provide an example of a strip of talk produced without the displayed co-participation of a hearer and without speaker seeking such co-participation.⁷ In essence the talk comes off as an instance of what Goffman (1978) has termed self-talk. Goffman notes that one of the characteristic places where such talk occurs is at the 'interstice between a state of talk and mere co-presence' (1978: 796) and that, unlike talk addressed to someone within a particular conversational cluster, self-talk is available to the gathering at large (1978: 794). The talk that Phyllis produces explicitly accounts for a movement from a particular conversational cluster. Not only is such a movement visible to all who are present but it may in fact be relevant to them. For example if Phyllis is now to move to a different cluster those already within that cluster might have to re-arrange their actions to incorporate her. From this perspective it is interesting to note that the talk Phyllis produces not only states a reason for withdrawing from her current

cluster but also provides information about the actions she is about to engage in. All present are thus able to see, not only that a movement has been initiated, but where that movement is going and what it is doing.⁸

However, despite the information that Phyllis makes available to others, both her talk and her departure are performed without the explicit collaboration of anyone else, and thus come off as single-party events. This is notable in itself in that departure from a state of talk is frequently, perhaps characteristically, performed as a multi-party event, and indeed an event achieved within the conversational sequence itself (see for example Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, and Heath, 1979). The fact that this does not happen in the present data helps maintain the integrity of the other events then in progress. If Phyllis had done her departure as a multi-party event others in her cluster would have had to set aside their talk to attend to her. But when departure is managed in the way it is here, others do not have to disrupt what they are doing, and the activities they are engaged in remain intact.

One feature of the departure that may be relevant to the treatment it receives is that, unlike the closing of an encounter, it does not mark a definitive end to the current accessibility of the parties to each other. The picnic is still in progress and it is quite certain that Phyllis will make contact with the people she is moving away from within a rather short period of time. From this perspective it is interesting to note that the reason she gives for leaving and attending to her drink, shows an orientation to her continued involvement in the event within which the particular cluster that she is leaving is lodged (note the very different effect that would have been produced if she had said that she was leaving to attend to matters unrelated to the picnic, for example 'I'm gonna go read a magazine'). Her departure can be seen as a brief hiatus undertaken to take care of needs relevant to the gathering in progress, rather than a rupture with the gathering and its participants.

However, though such features of the departure make it possible for it to be ignored, they in no way establish that this is the way it must be treated. For example a similar departure occurs in the following but it gets an answer in a next turn from a recipient:⁹

Don: I'll go get some more water ((Leaves with pitcher))
John: Okay.

Indeed, Phyllis's departure *is* attended to by one of the parties she is leaving, though that noticing is organised in such a way that the unilateral character of her departure is preserved. What happens will be examined in some detail. During her talk and the silence in line 13 Phyllis lifts herself around and off

the picnic bench she has been seated on. She actually steps away from the table during the word 'fooling' in line 14. Only after that has happened (i.e. when she is no longer physically part of the cluster and is in fact turned away from it) and as his own talk reaches completion (over the word 'around' in line 14) does Curt move his gaze in the direction of Phyllis:

10. **Curt:** Three enna quarter.
 11. **Phyllis:** ^loNeed some more i₁ce
 12. **Mike:** ^lYeh,
 13. (1.0)
 Phyllis Steps Away From Table
 ↓
 14. **Curt:** When I wz foolin around.
 ↑
 Curt Starts to Move his Head in
 the Direction of Phyllis

Moreover, though Curt positions his head so that Phyllis falls within his line of regard, he mitigates that look in a number of different ways so that something less than official gaze toward Phyllis is visible. First, his hand is to the side of his head so that it is between his face and Phyllis. Second, his head does not track the movements Phyllis is making. Thus, his head movement toward her does not come to a complete stop (so that he could be seen to be gazing at her) but instead bobs slightly, and he lets her walk out of his line of regard without following her. He then moves his head sharply in front of her with the effect that she again passes through his line of regard while he appears to be looking past her. With his sporadic head movements Curt manages to take note of what Phyllis is doing without tying his gaze to her movements and thus making her the visible, official object of his gaze. The effect of all this is that what Phyllis is doing is noticed but the noticing is organised in such a way that it does not propose the relevance of either of the others attending to what Curt is looking at,¹⁰ or of Phyllis interrupting her leaving to deal with it. Though her action is taken account of, it remains unilateral.

Both speaker's lack of effort to secure a hearer, and co-participant's efforts to avoid making the noticing of her departure something speaker has to attend to, raise the possibility that non-coparticipation of others in speaker's actions is in fact something they systematically work to achieve. Noting the structural properties of self-talk (Goffman, 1978) sheds important light on the organisation of the events occurring here but it does not explicate the detailed interactive work participants are doing to have a strip

of talk come off as an instance of such a phenomenon. The organisation of the talk Phyllis produces will therefore be examined in more detail.

First, though her departure with its talk is available to the situation as a whole, and not just the cluster she is leaving, these actions do have special relevance for that cluster. Not only would they be the ones to participate in a sequence with her if the event were to be formulated as a multi-party activity, but her departure might be seen as informative about their treatment of her. Indeed, for some time prior to the departure she has occupied a somewhat special position in that group. Talk within the cluster has turned to cars, a subject that this group treats as a male domain (detailed examination of the way in which this is accomplished is beyond the scope of the present analysis). Thus, although Phyllis is physically part of the cluster she is not included with the participation structures made available by the current topic. The other women present at the picnic have formed a separate cluster and it may indeed be appropriate for Phyllis to leave what is now a recognisably male cluster. However such a noticeable action may have the effect of focussing attention on the fact that those she is with are not providing for her inclusion in their talk, i.e. her departure from the cluster could be seen as responsive to the way that she is being treated by the others in the cluster. The talk that she produces while leaving undercuts such a possibility by providing not simply *an* account for the departure but *the* official account for why she is leaving.¹¹ As the person performing the action she can be seen to have privileged access to the reasons laying behind it¹² and by showing that she is leaving to attend to needs of her own rather than reacting to her co-participants she permits their activities to continue unhindered. Not only are her co-participants not left to puzzle about why she is leaving but they are provided with a reason that is not in any way relevant to their own actions, and thus not something to be dealt with by them.

Just as the content of the talk avoids implicating others so also is its production and articulation carefully performed so as to display that co-participation is not sought or even appropriate.

First, the talk is produced with noticeably lowered volume (indicated in the transcript by the degree sign before the talk). This volume contrast not only sets off this talk from the other talk then occurring but also provides a means for displaying that the talk is not claiming space within that other sequence of talk. Through use of this technique that speaker is able to produce her account while simultaneously displaying that this talk is not being performed as an intrusion into the talk of the other participants.

Second, while speaking Phyllis does not gaze at any of the others present but rather keeps her eyes lowered and is in fact moving them away from the

conversational cluster by the end of her turn. The only thing that she does look at is the cup in her hand as she is picking it up. By organising her gaze in this fashion she performs a number of relevant actions.

First, the movement of gaze is shown to be a component of the act of leaving the table. The particular way in which gaze is handled thus helps make more visible the particular activity within which the talk is embedded.

Second, one of the principal rules organising gaze within talk argues that a recipient should gaze at the speaker when the speaker is gazing at the recipient.¹³ By not bringing her gaze to a recipient the speaker avoids invoking the relevance of this rule. The parties who fail to gaze at her during this talk are thus acting in a way that the speaker herself has proposed that they should act through the way in which she has managed her own gaze.

Third, but related to the last point, by not gazing at any of the others present the speaker avoids performing the act of addressing any one of them or all of them in general. With reference to this it can be noted that one way in which the talk she produces might be analysed is as a request, i.e. by stating that something is needed she might be heard as requesting that someone get her the needed item. A more formal description of how talk such as this can be analysed as a request is provided by Labov & Fanshell (1977). In their analysis, *speech acts*, such as requests for action, include a set of preconditions, for example that the requested action needs to be done, that the recipient of the request has the ability to perform it, etc. (Labov & Fanshell, 1977: 78). Someone can perform an *indirect request* by making a statement that refers to one of these preconditions (Labov & Fanshell, 1977: 82). The talk that Phyllis produces could be heard as referring to one of the preconditions they identify, the need for a particular action to be performed.¹⁴ Moreover someone who might be seen as the proper recipient of such a request is part of the current conversational cluster. Curt is both the host of the picnic and the owner of the house in which the ice will be found (from this perspective it is interesting to note that he is the one who takes note of her departure). By making it clear that neither Curt nor anyone else is being addressed, and by carefully situating the talk within the act of leaving, Phyllis shows her recipients that the talk is not to be analysed as a request. The task they are posed is not recognition of a precondition presumed to underlie some speech act but recognition of an activity, and speaker provides her recipients with abundant resources to see this task and to accomplish it.

Fourth, by moving her gaze, and situating it within the act of leaving, the speaker makes herself unavailable for co-participation with others present not only during the turn, but also after it. The speaker thus displays

unavailability both during her talk and in the position just after it where subsequent action might be addressed to it.

Through use of all of these phenomena together the speaker manages to construct a piece of talk that does not propose the relevance of other parties' displayed co-participation in its production by, for example, acting as hearers to it. The lack of orientation by others to it is consistent with the way in which the speaker proposes through the details of its production that the talk is to be dealt with. When Mike overlaps it in line 12, he treats this talk in the way in which it carefully and systematically displays that it should be treated, and the departure itself can come off as a totally irrelevant and unnoticed event.

The line of argument which has been advanced here suggests that though the other parties present do not officially display hearership they may none the less hear the talk and take it into account in the organisation of their actions, for example by not co-participating in what would otherwise be a noticeable event, the departure. The unilateral, single-party departure that is not attended to by others, as well as the talk which receives no official displays of hearership, are thus still interactive events, achieved through the collaborative action of multiple participants. What is at issue is not the distinction between interactive and non-interactive action, but rather alternative structures available to participants that propose the relevance of different types of co-participation in ongoing events.

With the procedures employed here the speaker has constructed a strip of talk which passes as uninteresting and indeed irrelevant. This talk nevertheless has interesting properties. For example, it provides an example of talk that does not claim space in the sequence of talk when in progress, talk that invokes the sequential relevance of an organisation other than talk for its comprehension, and talk produced for the hearing of others who are simultaneously instructed not to act as hearers to it. Such properties are neither contradictory nor accidental, but rather sensitive in detail to the particulars of the local environment where the talk is placed, and the tasks the speaker is attempting to accomplish in that environment.

Notes to Chapter 7

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 74th Annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Boston Massachusetts, August 1979. I am indebted to Marjorie Goodwin, Erving Goffman, Richard Holmes and Anita Pomerantz for helpful and insightful comments on that version of the analysis. I alone am responsible for the weaknesses that remain.

2. The most detailed analysis of the sequential organisation of conversation is to be found in the work initiated by Harvey Sacks and his colleagues. See Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson (1974) for analysis of how turns at talk are exchanged in conversation and Atkinson & Heritage (1984) for a collection of recent research into organisation of conversation. For analysis of interaction within the turn see C. Goodwin (1981), M. Goodwin (1980), Heath (1979), Jefferson (forthcoming), and Sacks (1974).
3. For analysis of a range of different types of speech that fall outside a ratified state of talk see Goffman (1978).
4. I am indebted to Gail Jefferson for audio-transcribing the tape from which this sequence is taken.
5. For analysis of some of the procedures available to participants for the negotiation of overlap see Jefferson (1973).
6. I am indebted to Paul Drew for bringing to my attention the importance of such displays in the organisation of accounts. Work of his that is currently in progress provides detailed analysis of such structures.
7. For some analysis of other types of talk produced without the co-participation of a hearer see Goodwin (1981, Chapter 3) and Goffman (1978).
8. In view of the way in which the information Phyllis provides is relevant to others present the argument by Corsaro (1979: 333–35) that providing a verbal justification for leaving a conversational cluster is a form of ‘modality redundancy’ that carries only ritual meaning (which Corsaro recognises to be quite important in its own right) does not appear correct. Corsaro also argues (1979: 333) that the nursery school children he observed left a cluster of co-participants without any comment or remark whatsoever. However in the one example he provides he describes the child’s leaving as follows: While looking toward another child the party about to leave, Barbara, said ‘I’m tired’. Following this ‘there was then a pause, and Barbara turned and saw Rita at the swings; then she said “Oh” and ran off’ (1979: 333). Corsaro argues that the ‘I’m tired’ should not be heard as an account for withdrawal. However both the look toward the activity she is about to become engaged in, and the verbal ‘Oh’ which informs co-participants of that noticing (for more detailed analysis of the use of ‘Oh’ in conversation, including its ability to mark a shift to a new activity or topic, see Heritage, 1984) would seem to do much the same work that Phyllis’s talk and activity do. For example they show that a new activity has claimed her attention and provide information about why she is leaving and where she is going.
9. Note that in this case the party who provides the answer is not concurrently engaged in another sequence with other participants. His action to the party leaving thus does not disrupt another line of action.
10. For analysis of how recognisable gaze toward something can make it relevant for others to join in that looking see Goodwin (1981: 98–100).
11. On this issue see Sacks (Spring 1966, Lecture 20). He notes for example that ‘this phenomenon of if an explanation is available then its *that* explanation that is *the* explanation, and formulates what it is that’s happened, is of course very general’.
12. For more detailed analysis of the differential access different types of participants are seen to have to events see Pomerantz (1980).
13. For more detailed analysis of this process see Goodwin (1981, Chapter 2).
14. See also Ervin-Tripp (1976) in which it is noted that directives which are ‘need statements’ are as baldly stated as the imperative form.