11 | Conversation

The fundamental site for language use is conversation, spontaneous dialogue among two or more people. Although conversations are created from utterances, they are more than the sum of their parts. Let us return to the telephone conversation discussed in Chapter 7 (8.11.851):

Jane: (rings C's telephone)
Kate: Miss Pink's office - hello
Jane: hello, is Miss Pink in .
Kate: well, she's in, but she's engaged at the moment, who is it?
Jane: oh it's Professor Worth's secretary, from Pan-American College
Kate: m,
Jane: could you give her a message *for me*
Kate: *certainly*
Jane: u:m Professor Worth said that, if . Miss Pink runs into difficulties, . on Monday afternoon, . with the standing subcommittee, . over the item on Miss Panoff, - - -
Kate: Miss Panoff?
Jane: yes, that Professor Worth would be with Mr Miles all afternoon, - so she only had to go round and collect him if she needed him, - - -
Kate: ah, - - - thank you very much indeed,
Jane: right
Kate: Panoff, right *you* are
Jane: *right,*
Kate: I'll tell her, *(2 to 3 syllables)*
Jane: *thank you*
Kate: bye bye
Jane: bye

Here Jane and Kate complete one main task, passing a message from Professor Worth to Miss Pink. They do this through a series of smaller sections – opening the conversation, exchanging information about Pink, exchanging the message from Worth, and closing the conversation. They complete each section by means of adjacency pairs (e.g., questions and answers), and complete each adjacency pair turn by turn. Viewed as a whole, the conversation consists of a hierarchy of parts: conversation, sections, adjacency pairs, and turns.

Where does this structure come from? It is tempting to answer "the participants' goals and plans." In this view, the participants devise plans for each conversation, section, adjacency pair, and turn, where each plan is designed to achieve a specific goal. The *goals-and-plans view* of conversation is the received view for many students of language use.

Actual conversations pose problems for this view. Although people talk in order to get things done, they don't know in advance what they will actually do. The reasons are obvious: They cannot get anything done without the others joining them, and they cannot know in advance what the others will do. Jane and Kate's conversation is a good example. Jane called to tell Miss Pink where Professor Worth would be that afternoon. When she discovered Miss Pink was busy, she recruited Kate to pass on the information. Kate had her own purposes in answering the telephone – to take messages and keep callers from interrupting Miss Pink – but she had no idea who was calling or what they would say. Jane and Kate entered the conversation with certain purposes, but without specific plans about how they would achieve them.

Conversations, therefore, are *purposive* but *unplanned*. People achieve most of what they do by means of joint projects, both large and small, in which they establish and carry out joint purposes they are willing and able to commit to (see Chapters 7 and 10). To complete these, they have to work at the level of minimal joint projects, for it is with these that they negotiate broader purposes and complete extended joint projects. What emerges are sections and, ultimately, the entire conversation itself. Conversations look planned and goal-oriented only in retrospect. In reality, they are created opportunistically piece by piece as the participants negotiate joint purposes and then fulfill them. Let me call this the *opportunistic view* of conversation.

In the opportunistic view, the hierarchical structure of conversation is an emergent property. It appears because of principles that govern any successful joint activity. Conversations cannot work without coordination of both content and process. So the participants try to complete each joint action in accordance with the principle of closure and its corollaries.

They work together to complete the levels of execution and attention, presentation and identification, signaling and construing, proposal and uptake, and more extended joint projects. Once the participants apply these principles, adjacency pairs, conversational sections, and entire conversations simply emerge. So do turns. Let us consider turn taking first.

Turn taking

In one folk view of conversation, people take turns talking. Only one person speaks at a time. This view, of course, hardly does justice to what actually happens. In the last four chapters, we have seen a much more complicated account of how people proceed, including who speaks when. How does this account fit with the view that people take turns? For an answer let us turn to a landmark paper on turn taking in 1974 by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson.

TURN ALLOCATION

Sacks et al.'s proposal was that turn taking is governed by rules. The rules they proposed were designed to account for common observations about everyday conversations such as these (pp. 700-701):

1. Speaker change recurs, or, at least, occurs.
2. Overwhelmingly, one party talks at a time.
3. Occurrences of more than one speaker at a time are common, but brief.
4. Transitions from one turn to a next with no gap and no overlap between them are common. Together with transitions characterized by slight gap or slight overlap, they make up the vast majority of transitions.
5. Turn order is not fixed, but varies.
6. Turn size is not fixed, but varies.
7. Length of conversation is not fixed, specified in advance.
8. What parties say is not fixed, specified in advance.
9. Relative distribution of turns is not fixed, specified in advance.

These observations are mundane, but they are difficult to account for. Sacks et al.'s rules offer an ingenious account.

A system of turn taking must specify, first, what it is to be a turn. For Sacks et al., a turn consists of one or more *turn-constructional units*. These range in size from a single word (e.g., Kate's "certainly") to clauses filled with many embedded clauses (e.g., Jane's "u:m Professor Worth said that, if . Miss Pink runs into difficulties, . on Monday afternoon, . with the standing subcommittee, . over the item on Miss Panoff, - - - that

Professor Worth would be with Mr. Miles all afternoon, - so she only had to go round and collect him if she needed him, - - -"). Each unit ends at a *transition-relevance place* – a point at which the next speaker could begin a turn. Sacks et al. said little about these units. All we have to go on is an intuitive but circular notion: A turn-constructional unit is a unit that could constitute a complete turn at that moment in the conversation.

A system of turn taking must also specify the allocation of turns. In Sacks et al.'s system, the current speaker may "select" the next speaker, for example, by asking a question that obliges the addressee to take the next turn. Otherwise, a party may "select him- or herself" by speaking before anyone else begins. If neither of these actions occurs, the current speaker can resume speaking. The rules Sacks et al. proposed are as follows (p. 704):

1. For any turn, at the initial transition-relevance place of an initial turn-constructional unit:
   a. If the turn-so-far is so constructed as to involve the use of a "current speaker selects next" technique, then the party so selected has the right and is obliged to take next turn to speak; no others have such rights or obligations, and transfer occurs at that place.
   b. If the turn-so-far is so constructed as not to involve the use of a "current speaker selects next" technique, then self-selection for next speakership may, but need not, be instituted; first starter acquires rights to a turn, and transfer occurs at that place.
   c. If the turn-so-far is so constructed as not to involve the use of a "current speaker selects next" technique, then current speaker may, but need not continue, unless another self-selects.
2. If, at the initial transition-relevance place of an initial turn-constructional unit, neither 1a nor 1b has operated, and, following the provision of 1c, current speaker has continued, then the rule-set a–c reapplies at next transition-relevance place, and recursively at each next transition-relevance place, until transfer is effected.

These rules result in an orderly sequence of turns. Let me call the rules *turn-allocation rules*. Sacks et al.'s claim is that they govern the allocation of turns.

These rules readily account for the observations they were intended to deal with. They allow for variation in turn order, turn size, and number of parties. They also allow certain biases to operate. There is, for example, a bias for the just prior speaker to be selected as the next speaker. So when there are three parties, one of them tends to be left out, and when there are four, the conversation tends to split up into two two-party conversations. With rule 1b, there is also a bias toward turns of only one turn-constructional unit – a bias toward brief turns (Schegloff, 1982). That makes it difficult to take extended turns, as in telling a story, without special techniques. The rules also leave open the length of the conversation, what is said, and the relative distribution of turns.

These rules, Sacks et al. emphasized, are *projective*. Speakers use evidence from the current turn to project its completion and to time their next turn to begin at that point. The traditional view is that turn taking is *reactive*. Speakers wait until the current turn has ended before initiating their next turn (e.g., Duncan, 1972, 1973). The evidence favors the projective view. If speakers project turn completions, speaker switches should often be accomplished with little or no gap at all, and they are. In one study (Beattie and Barnard, 1979), 34 percent of all speaker switches in both face-to-face and telephone conversations took less than 0.2 seconds. There should also be overlaps when next speakers misproject the end of the current speaker's presentation, and there are, as in this example:

Jane: could you give her a message *for me*
Kate: *certainly*

Kate projected Jane's turn to finish after "message," so her "certainly" overlapped with Jane's "for me."[1] If turn taking were reactive, these brief transitions and slight overlaps should not have occurred. It is cognitively impossible to react to a stimulus in less than 0.2 seconds and logically impossible to do so before the stimulus even exists.

If listeners project the current turn's end before it is reached, how do they do it? Not much is known about the process, but they probably rely on many sources of information. They may use eye gaze, gestures, and intonation. Speakers tend to gaze away from their listeners during their turn and to gaze back as they finish it, whereas listeners tend to gaze at the speaker throughout his turn (Chapter 9). These patterns are magnified in conversations among strangers or about difficult topics. At turn ends, speakers may also elongate the last syllable, drop the pitch of their voice, relax their bodies, and complete gestures they have been making.[2] Yet gaze and gestures aren't necessary. There are no more gaps, and no

[1] On the other hand, Kate may have chosen to overlap with Jane, with precision timing, to emphasize her eagerness to comply (Jefferson, 1973).

[2] For details, see Beattie (1981), Duncan (1972, 1973), Goodwin (1981), Kendon (1967), among others.

longer gaps, in telephone conversations than in face-to-face conversations (Beattie, 1983; Beattie and Barnard, 1979). In one study (Beattie, Cutler, and Pearson, 1982), people were asked to judge whether utterances from a television interview had occurred in the middle or at the end of the speaker's actual turns. These judges were quite accurate in distinguishing turn middles from turn ends when they were shown full video recordings of the utterances. They were still quite accurate with only the visual or audio portions. They failed entirely with only written transcripts. Listeners probably project the ends of turns from a combination of facial features, eye gaze, syntax, and intonation.

LIMITATIONS OF TURN-ALLOCATION RULES

The turn-allocation rules, however, have limitations. There are many conversational phenomena they were never intended to account for, and once we include these, we get a different picture of who speaks when and why. One presupposition behind the rules is that conversations are all talk, and once we include other forms of communicative acts, we get yet another picture.

The turn-allocation rules are really about *primary* presentations – that part of what speakers present that deals with the official business of the discourse (Chapter 9). They seem to be contradicted by most types of *secondary* presentations, such as these:

Acknowledgments, like "uh huh," by B of A's presentation
Constituent queries by A followed by B's response
Collaborative completions by B of A's presentation
Turn restarts by A to secure B's attention
Recycled turn beginnings by A to request B's attention

Acknowledgments such as "uh huh" often deliberately overlap with the primary speaker's current utterance (Chapter 6). That makes them a pervasive and systematic exception to the generalization "one party talks at a time" and apparent counterevidence to rules 1a through 1c. Other acknowledgments are presented after the pieces of installment utterances, where they mean "please continue" (Schegloff, 1982). So do mid-turn queries, as in this excerpt from Jane and Kate's conversation:

Jane: u:m Professor Worth said that, if . Miss Pink runs into difficulties, . on Monday afternoon, . with the standing subcommittee, . over the item on Miss Panoff, - - -

Kate: **Miss Panoff?**
Jane: **yes,** that Professor Worth would be with Mr. Miles all afternoon, - so she only had to go round and collect him if she needed him, - - -

Every secondary presentation that comes midturn is apparent counterevidence to the rules.

Why aren't acknowledgments and their kind considered counterevidence to the turn-allocation rules? They aren't considered genuine turns, apparently because they don't carry out official business. There is a danger here of circularity: Something is a turn only if it fits the turn-allocation rules. To decide whether the turn-allocation rules apply, we need to know whether the business is official or not, and that takes us back to more basic principles.

The turn-allocation rules, however, don't even cover all primary presentations. Take these strategies (Chapters 6 and 7):

Truncations. A invites B to interrupt, and B interrupts
Fade-outs. A leaves an utterance deliberately incomplete
Strategic interruptions. A deliberately interrupts B mid-presentation

All three phenomena violate the turn-allocation rules, although they aren't considered violations by the people who use them. Even strategic interruptions are legitimate when the speakers have the right to take over the floor whenever they want or need to – teachers, police interrogators, military officers. Again there is a danger of circularity: A strategy is a violation of turn taking if it violates the turn-allocation rules. But truncations, fade-outs, and strategic interruptions are not true violations of conversational practice.

The turn-allocation rules also don't fare well in conversations that aren't all talk. The point is nicely illustrated in a study by Susan Brennan (1990). Pairs of people, exemplified here by Ben and Charlotte, sat at separate computer terminals with maps of the Stanford University campus on their screens. Ben's job was to guide Charlotte as she moved a car (represented by her cursor and moved by her mouse) from one place on her map to another, clicking on the mouse when she reached the destination. Here is a brief example:

	Speech	C's cursor
Ben:	oooh! right in the muh- middle of Memorial Church	
Charlotte:	Memorial Church	
Ben:	*complete*ly enclosed	*[moves 300 pixels]*
Charlotte:	*complete*ly enclosed? okay	*[moves 20 pixels]*
	# I'm clicked in	[# = clicks mouse]
Ben:	awright	

Here Ben directs, and Charlotte confirms, in turns that fit the turn-allocation rules. But when Charlotte's cursor appeared on Ben's map as well as her own – and they both knew that – their talk looked very different. Here is a conversation with the same map and destination:

	Speech	C's cursor
Ben:	okay now we're at Mem Chu	
	no to your right	*[moves 80 pixels]*
Charlotte:	uhh	
Ben:	**no over by the quad**	**[moves 230 pixels]**
	right there yah right there	*[moves 10 pixels]*
	#	[# = clicks mouse]

Adjacency pairs took different shapes in the two conversations. They had a standard form when there was auditory evidence alone, as here:

Ben: oooh! right in the muh- middle of Memorial Church
Charlotte: Memorial Church

But their form changed when there was visual evidence as well, as in this comparable adjacency pair:

Ben: okay now we're at Mem Chu
Charlotte: [moves cursor 80 pixels]

In the first pair, Charlotte confirmed Ben's directions by saying "Memorial Church," but in the second, by moving her cursor to Memorial Church ("Mem Chu"). In the second pair, Charlotte's turn isn't speech, but a manifesting act of compliance, a different type of signal, but still a signal (Chapter 6). The turn-allocation rules don't recognize manifesting actions as turns and therefore treat the two sequences as fundamentally different. Yet as minimal joint projects, they are equivalent (Chapter 7).

Although speakers tend to avoid overlap in primary talk (Chapter 9), they are happy to overlap verbal and nonverbal presentations. With auditory evidence alone, Ben started his second instruction only after Charlotte stopped speaking:

Charlotte: Memorial Church
Ben: completely enclosed

But with visual evidence, he started his next instruction as soon as he saw her cursor move:

Charlotte: *[moves 80 pixels]*
Ben: *no* to your right

People don't have to take turns in primary presentations that are not spoken.

The most striking phenomenon with visual evidence is the continuous reformulation of utterances. When Ben had continuous evidence of Charlotte's understanding, he adjusted his utterance phrase by phrase to take account of it. What emerged was an utterance in four installments:

okay now we're at Mem Chu,
no to your right,
no over by the quad,
right there yah right there

Recall that in installment utterances, speakers seek acknowledgments of understanding (e.g., "yeah") *after* each installment and formulate the next installment contingent on that acknowledgment (Chapter 8). With visual evidence, Ben gets confirmation or disconfirmation *while* he is producing the current installment.

Utterances with visual evidence of understanding are common enough in everyday settings. Suppose Ben is getting Charlotte to center a candlestick in a display:

Ben: Okay, now, push it farther - farther - a little more - right there. Good.

Charlotte nudges the candlestick bit by bit as Ben is speaking, stretching vowels and repeating words to tell her how far. Ben's and Charlotte's actions are simultaneous, and deliberately so, whereas the turn-allocation rules, if applicable, allow only sequential actions. Ben and Charlotte, of course, are still observing the principle of closure. It is just that they aren't taking turns.

These examples bring out several problems for turns. Secondary presentations, like acknowledgments, regularly overlap with primary presentations, and primary presentations are often designed to overlap with each other as well. Also, many communicative acts in conversation aren't spoken, and these can overlap without causing difficulties for attention, identification, or understanding. And when there is external evidence of understanding, speakers may continuously reformulate their utterances without forming true turn-constructional units. The turn-allocation rules cannot account for these observations, so we need principles that do.

EMERGENT PHENOMENA IN CONVERSATION

The placement of speech and other actions in conversation really emerges from the way people try to advance joint activities. As we saw in Chapters 7 through 10, the participants in a joint activity work hard to get closure at all levels of talk – execution and attention, presentation and identification, meaning and understanding, projection and uptake. What emerges is a set of procedures that determine who speaks and acts when. These in turn account for Sacks et al.'s turn-allocation rules. To see this, let us look at three procedures: minimal joint projects, one primary presentation at a time, and presentation and acceptance phases.

Recall that the responses in minimal joint projects do double duty (Chapter 7). When Ben asks Charlotte a question, he (1) needs evidence that she has understood him and (2) projects as her next action an answer to it. Charlotte, by answering his question and by doing so immediately, both (1) provides that evidence and (2) takes up his proposed joint project. That accounts for turn-allocation rule 1a, the "current speaker selects next" rule. It explains both who is selected (Charlotte) and why she has the right and the obligation to begin the next turn at that point.

Joint projects also explain why Charlotte's next turn can be nonlinguistic. Often she can complete minimal joint projects without speaking at all – as when she opens a door at his request, or takes the program he has offered in a quiet concert hall, or nods when he pays her a compliment. It also accounts for why Ben's projection and Charlotte's uptake can be simultaneous rather than sequential. When Ben asks Charlotte to move the candlestick in the display, she can both give evidence of understanding and take up his request as he speaks. And, finally, the explanation also shows how rule 1a is related to other action–response pairs. Suppose Ben hands Charlotte a concert program and she says "Thanks." Although rule 1a doesn't apply, Ben may well expect Charlotte to provide evidence that she deems his deed a favor. That makes her "Thanks" like other next turns that are covered by rule 1a.

Next recall the argument for "one primary spoken presentation at a time" (Chapter 9). Speakers and addressees cannot coordinate execution and attention whenever the demands on their attention are too strong, so they generally restrict themselves to one primary spoken presentation at a time. That accounts for several main features of rule 1b. Charlotte cannot begin a primary spoken presentation after Susan has begun one and expect to succeed at the level of execution and attention. If Ben is speaking and Charlotte wants to contribute next, and if she sees Susan as a possible competitor, she must try to speak up before Susan does. That leads her to project the end of Ben's utterance and minimize the gap between their utterances.

The one-primary-spoken-presentation constraint yields other conversational strategies as well (Chapter 9). Charlotte can use a recycled turn beginning to preempt Susan for the next turn; this signals the beginning of a next primary presentation before the last one is ended. Also, Charlotte can use a deliberate interruption to take the floor from Ben when she believes her contribution takes priority at that moment over Ben's. Even if she uses these techniques exploitatively, what she does is accounted for not by rule 1b but by the one-primary-spoken-presentation constraint itself.

Recall, finally, that participants generally contribute to discourse in two steps – a presentation phase and an acceptance phase (Chapter 8). In the first phase, Ben presents Charlotte with an utterance, and in the second, she provides evidence that she has identified it and understood him well enough for current purposes. It is this process that determines Sacks et al.'s turn- constructional units and accounts for the workings of rule 1c.

Turn-constructional units are really primary presentations. When Ben begins speaking, he has some idea of what he wants to contribute, and he formulates and produces his presentation accordingly. For an assertion, he may produce the clause "I've just been up in Caribou"; for a request for repair, the phrase "Which woman?"; or for an acknowledgment, "uh huh." He realizes that he must get Charlotte to hear his presentation as complete and as offering her the chance to give evidence of acceptance. So his presentation must ordinarily be a complete syntactic unit appropriate to the work he wants it to do and marked with the right intonation and gestures. It can range from a simple "uh huh" to an extended assertion.

Primary presentations are needed in accounting for all three turn-allocation rules, but they are especially important in interpreting rule 1c. By that rule, "the current speaker may, but need not, continue unless another self-selects." Whenever Charlotte accepts Ben's presentation with a backgrounded acknowledgment, that falls under rule 1c. Whenever she accepts each installment of an installment utterance, that also falls under rule 1c. Whenever Charlotte hesitates in accepting Ben's presentation, so he expands on it until she does, that too falls under rule 1c. It isn't that Ben (the current speaker) simply continues unless Charlotte (another party) speaks first. The pattern arises from the several ways of managing the presentation and acceptance phases of Ben's contribution. The two phases of contributing account for who speaks when in ways that go beyond the turn-allocation rules.

Is there anything left for the turn-allocation rules to account for? Apparently not. There is no evidence that people try to preserve turns per se. If they seem to take turns in a conversation, it is because they are trying to contribute to the current joint activities, which leads to presentations and acceptances, one primary spoken presentation at a time, and minimal joint projects.

FORMAL TURNS

Many of the strategies that work in spontaneous conversations get changed or suspended in other types of discourse. In debates and church services, turns are allocated by predetermined formulas, and in formal meetings by the chair. In court rooms, turns are allocated by the judge and attorneys, with the judge having ultimate control. In school classrooms, teachers allocate turns and wield control over their length and content.

Even in these settings, the discourse is ultimately shaped by the attempts to contribute to it. Take strategic interruptions. In formal meetings, according to *Robert's rules of order* (Robert, 1970), a member who "has been assigned the floor and has begun to speak" can be legitimately interrupted by another member or the chair in order to raise a point of order, raise a question of privilege, make "a request or inquiry that requires an immediate response," make an appeal, or make an objection to the consideration of a question, among other things. In court, judges and attorneys can and do legally interrupt witnesses, preempting their testimony, on a variety of grounds (Atkinson and Drew, 1979). In classrooms, students and teachers can acceptably interrupt each other in the right circumstances. In a study of British university tutorials, strategic interruptions were used on 34 percent of all speaker transitions when there were three to six students plus the tutor, but on only 11 percent when there was only one student. In the larger tutorials, students interrupted the previous speaker on 51 percent of the transitions from other students and on 37 percent of the transitions from the tutor, whereas the tutor interrupted on only 26 percent of the transitions from the students (Beattie, 1981, 1982). Interruptions like these are legitimate in forums where the participants are encouraged to compete with their ideas.

In informal business meetings, university seminars, and briefing sessions, the participants often allocate turns by explicit agreement. They work out a formula for who is to talk on what for how long and then abide by it. They can agree to alter or limit turns in any number of ways.

Nor do all formal systems for allocating turns respect the one-primary-spoken-presentation limit. In religious services, the congregation often speaks simultaneously. But these utterances are formulaic litanies or prayers that make no extra demands on the speakers' attention. The one-primary-spoken-presentation limit only applies when having more than one primary speaker would demand too much competing attention. So although people don't always honor the one-primary-spoken-presentation limit, they do adhere to the more basic principles.

Who speaks when, in brief, has its origins in the joint activities that the participants are trying to complete. It often conforms to Sacks et al.'s turn-allocation rules, but not because the participants are trying to adhere to them. They are simply trying to succeed in advancing their joint activities. Other systems of turn allocation have evolved in formal settings, but they too work in service of completing contributions. The fundamental problem is how to act jointly and succeed.

Sections in conversations

Conversations tend to divide into sections, longer stretches of talk devoted to a single task, point of discussion, or subject matter. Jane and Kate's telephone call, for example, might be divided into (1) an opening, (2) an exchange of information about Miss Pink, (3) an exchange of information about Miss Panoff, and (4) a closing. At first, each section seems to follow a plan that is designed to achieve a specific goal, and together, these plans achieve Jane's and Kate's overall goal.

There are two complications for the goal-and-plans view, as Sacks et al. argued in their analysis of turns. First, conversations are managed locally. The rules of turn taking specify only two adjacent turns – the current turn and the next turn – and the transition between them. What gets said when is managed turn by turn. Second, conversations are controlled jointly. Each turn is shaped by all the participants as they engineer the selection of the current speaker, and influence the course and length of each turn. Both properties hold even when turns are viewed as emergent phenomena. What they amount to, in this framework, is that conversations are managed contribution by contribution. People may have general goals on entering a conversation, but they cannot prepare specific plans to reach them. They must achieve what they do contribution by contribution.

EMERGENCE OF CONVERSATIONS

If conversations emerge one contribution at a time, how does that happen? Recall that for any joint activity, the participants go from not being engaged in it to being engaged in it to not being engaged in it again (Chapter 2). If so, we should be able to identify three time periods of a conversation:

1. Entry into the conversation
2. Body of the conversation
3. Exit from the conversation

If a joint action is brief enough, the participants can manage its entry, body, and exit by coordinating on only three features: (1) the participants; (2) the entry time; and (3) the action each participant is to perform (Chapters 3 and 7). But conversations are too complicated. It is impossible to specify in advance what actions each participant is to take in a long conversation. How, then, are their actions determined?

The secret lies in establishing joint commitments. It takes Ben and Charlotte's joint commitment to enter a conversation, to continue it at each point, and to exit from it. And the commonest way to establish joint commitments is through joint projects – ultimately minimal joint projects. These enable Ben and Charlotte to coordinate on everything they need to – entry times, participants, and actions at each point in the conversation. If so, the entry, body, and exit of a conversation should ordinarily be achieved sequentially by means of minimal joint projects, and they are. What emerges on entry is an opening section and on exit is a closing section.

OPENING SECTIONS

Ben and Charlotte will never decide at the identical moment that they want to talk to each other. Rather, one initiates, and the other accedes. Ben, for example, might want to talk to Charlotte. He proposes a conversation and, if she is willing and able, she accepts. Both take for granted that he has a purpose in initiating the conversation, and her decision to accept depends ultimately on agreeing to that purpose. So opening sections are a type of joint project.

Opening a conversation has to resolve, among other things, the entry time, the participants, their roles, and the official business they are to carry out. One way to resolve these face to face is with a summons–answer pair, as here (Schegloff, 1968):

Ben: Charlotte?
Charlotte: Yes?

With his summons, Ben does several things. He proposes that moment as the entry time for a conversation. In using "Charlotte," he presupposes the other person to be Charlotte and to have a particular status (he could have said, "Miss Stone?" or "Madam?") and proposes that the participants of the conversation are to be Charlotte (in that status) and himself. By using rising intonation, he turns the floor over to Charlotte and asks her if she is tentatively willing and able to talk on a topic yet to be specified.

Charlotte now has several choices (see Chapter 7). She can take up the proposed joint project ("Yes?"), alter it ("It's Miss Stone. Yes?"), decline it ("Sorry, I can't talk now"), or withdraw from it (by turning away). Here she takes it up. In doing so, she accepts his utterance as marking the entry into a potential conversation. She also displays her recognition of Ben, accepting his identification of her as Charlotte and of the two of them as the participants. With the rising intonation on "Yes?" she proposes that Ben raise the first topic. This way she shows that her willingness to continue is conditional on what Ben specifies as the first topic. If she finds it unacceptable, she can still withdraw. So two people can coordinate on the entry time, participants, roles, and conditional content of a conversation with just a single adjacency pair. The summons is really a pre-topic opening designed for entry into a conversation.

Opening a telephone conversation is often more elaborate because, without vision, it takes more work to identify the participants, their roles, and their commitments (Schegloff, 1968, 1979, 1986). On the telephone, the summons takes a special form, the ringing of a telephone. Unlike "Charlotte?" it doesn't identify the proposed participants or their roles, so that has to be done in separate moves, as here (8.1f.624):

Jane:	(rings Helen's telephone)
Helen:	hello? . Principal's office
Jane:	uh this is Professor Worth's secretary? from Pan-American College
Helen:	yes?
Jane:	u:m could you possibly tell me, what Sir Humphrey Davy's address is, -

Helen responds to the ring with "hello," marking her possible entry into a conversation with Jane. She immediately identifies the role she expects to play in the conversation (as the Principal's agent), and Jane reciprocates, as if requested, by identifying her own role (as Professor Worth's secretary). These professional identifications define their official duties and responsibilities and allow them to proceed to their official business. It is only then that Helen requests the first topic ("yes?"), and Jane obliges.

Other times it is personal rather than professional identities that are needed, and they may take time to establish, as here (7.2k.939):

Karen:	(rings Charlie's telephone)
Charlie:	Wintermere speaking? -
Karen:	hello?
Charlie:	h*e*llo
Karen:	Charlie
Charlie:	yes
Karen:	actually it's
Charlie:	hello Karen
Karen:	it's me
Charlie:	m
Karen:	I (- laughs) I couldn't get back last night, [continues]

Although Charlie identifies himself on answering Karen's summons, she expects him to identify her from one small sample of her voice ("hello?"). He responds "h*e*llo," but doesn't appear to have identified her. She returns with a second voice sample, "Charlie," and by moving from his "Wintermere" to her "Charlie," she also displays an intimacy with him. Still, he doesn't seem to recognize her, and she is about to identify herself ("actually it's") when he recognizes her, interrupts, and greets her. Indeed, once he has identified her, he says "hello Karen" as if he hadn't already said "hello" to her, *qua* Karen, in the conversation. Establishing personal identities can be a delicate process (Schegloff, 1968, 1979, 1986).

Establishing a joint commitment to talk often requires a greeting, the social process of making acquaintance or reacquaintance. People coming together after a period of separation may make it common ground that: (a) they find pleasure in each other's company, or are willing to accept each other for this occasion; and (b) the separation now ending hasn't been out of ill will or lack of interest (Goffman, 1971), as here (7.2h.677):

Ken:	(rings Margaret's telephone)
Margaret:	extension five uhu two? ,
Ken:	(. giggles) hello? .
Margaret:	hello? .
Ken:	hi, .
Margaret:	**how are you**
Ken:	**me? . I'm very well, - . and you? - .**
Margaret:	**fine, -**
Ken:	**are you? .**
Margaret:	**yes, . aren't you? -**
Ken:	I'm sorry I haven't rung before, . this week [continues]

Ken and Margaret greet each other by inquiring ostensibly about each other's health – "how are you?" "me? . I'm very well" etc. (Sacks, 1975). What gets included in a greeting varies greatly from culture to culture (e.g., Irvine, 1974). The point is that greetings are joint activities of their own, to be entered and exited from, and that creates their own structure.

The opening section is closed, and the next section opened, by introducing the first topic. This is often accomplished with a pre-announcement such as "Did you hear what happened to Wanda?" or "Let me ask you about the party tonight." So the opening section emerges with the usual entry–body–exit structure:

Entry. Orienting to the possibility of conversing
Body. Establishing a joint commitment to converse
Exit. Opening of first topic

With the exit, the participants enter the conversation proper – talk on the first topic – and the opening section has accomplished just what it should have accomplished.

CLOSING SECTIONS

Exits from most conversations are as complicated as entries. Two participants, Ben and Charlotte, cannot make their exit simply by stopping. They must exit from the last topic, mutually agree to close, and then coordinate their actual disengagement. If Ben exits without warning, he will threaten Charlotte's self-worth, offending her, because she is still committed to their *joint* activity in the mistaken belief that he is too (see Chapter 10). The closing section has an entry–body–exit organization of its own:

Entry. Terminating the last topic
Body. Taking leave
Exit. Terminating contact

As an illustration, I will consider the closing of urban American telephone calls (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973).

The first task is to agree that the last topic is complete. Ben may be ready to close a conversation when Charlotte isn't, because she has another topic to bring up, or vice versa, so reaching that agreement is tricky. The characteristic solution, Schegloff and Sacks argued, is for one person, say Ben, to offer a *pre-closing statement*, like "yeah" or "okay," to signal a readiness to close the conversation. If Charlotte has another topic to bring up, she can do that in response. If not, she can accept the statement with "yeah" or "okay," which opens up the closing section. A pre-closing statement and its response constitute a pre-sequence: They project the closing of the conversation.

Consider the end of a conversation between a mother and a daughter, June and Daphie (7.3h.1012):

June:	yes	
Daphie:	thanks very much	
June:	**OK?**	[*apparent* pre-closing statement]
Daphie:	**right**, *I'll see you this*	[response]
June:	*because* there how did you did you beat him?	[initiation of new topic]
Daphie:	no, he beat me, four one (. laughs)	
June:	four one .	
Daphie:	yes, . I was doing quite well in one game, and then then I I- I lost	
June:	oh, how disgusting	
Daphie:	yes .	
June:	**OK**, . ***right***	[pre-closing statement]
Daphie:	***right***	[response]
June:	see you tonight	[proposal for future]
Daphie:	right,	[uptake]
	bye	[terminal exchange]
June:	bye love	[terminal exchange]
Both:	(hang up telephones)	[contact termination]

In the first two turns, June and Daphie complete a topic (not shown here), potentially their last topic. In the third turn, June seems to offer a pre-closing statement ("OK?"), which Daphie accepts ("right") in order to begin the closing section ("I'll see you this evening"). But June then raises another topic – Daphie's squash game – and that takes precedence. Once this topic has run its course, June offers a second pre-closing statement ("OK . right"), which Daphie accepts ("right"), and the two of them enter the closing section proper.

Once the last topic is closed, the participants still have to prepare for their exit. If they are acquaintances, they may reassure each other that the upcoming break isn't permanent, that they will resume contact in the future (Goffman, 1971). Here are five minor projects people often accomplish in taking leave, and in this order (Albert and Kessler, 1976, 1978):

1. Summarize the content of the conversation just completed
2. Justify ending contact at this time
3. Express pleasure about each other
4. Indicate continuity of their relationship by planning for future contact either specifically or vaguely ("see you tonight")
5. Wish each other well ("bye")

The last two actions often get conventionalized as farewells. Action 4 is expressed in such phrases as *see you*, *auf Wiedersehen*, *tot ziens*, *au revoir*, and *hasta la vista*, and action 5 in *good-bye*, *good evening*, *guten Abend*, *goede dag*, *bon soir*, *bon voyage*, *buenas noches*, *adios*, and *shalom*. With these actions, the participants reach the mutual belief that they are prepared to exit the conversation.

The final problem is to break contact together. On the telephone, that means hanging up the receivers. If Ben hangs up before Charlotte, or vice versa, that may offend the other, so the two of them try to break simultaneously. They work up to saying "bye" together, at which moment they begin replacing their receivers. If they do this just right, neither of them hears the click of the other's receiver.

If the second section is expressly for leave-taking, then it should be absent when there is no need to reaffirm acquaintance. In routine telephone calls to directory assistance, callers and operators generally exchange "thank you" and "you're welcome" and hang up without an exchange of "goodbye"s. Yet when callers ask operators for less routine information and become even slightly more acquainted, they are more likely to initiate a "goodbye" exchange (Clark and French, 1981). And two friends breaking contact only briefly won't need "goodbye"s either. The "goodbye" exchange is for exiting from the optional process of leave-taking, not from the conversation per se.

What does and doesn't get included in closing sections, therefore, hangs on the joint actions needed for the participants to close the final topic, prepare to break contact, and then break contact. Each joint action emerges with a characteristic entry–body–exit structure.

Organization in conversation

Conversations often seem organized around a set plan, but that is an illusion. This organization is really an emergent property of what the participants are trying to do. When Ben talks to Charlotte, he has goals, some well defined and some vague, and so does she. Most of Ben's goals, however, require her cooperation. She has the power to complete, alter, decline, or withdraw from any joint project he proposes, and she can propose joint projects of her own. The broadest projects they agree on emerge as sections, and the narrower ones, as subsections or digressions. The organization of their conversation emerges from joint actions locally planned and opportunistically carried out.

One source for this illusion is the transcripts from which we ordinarily infer the organization of conversations. The problem is that transcripts are like footprints in the sand. They are merely the inert traces of the activities that produced them, and impoverished traces at that. The structure we find in a transcript only hints at how a conversation emerged.

ORGANIZATION OF ACTIONS

Most intentional actions, indeed, look organized. If we watch Ben bake a cake and record what he does, we might create a sequence of statements like these: "Ben gets out a mixing bowl"; "Ben measures two cups of flour"; "Ben puts flour into the mixing bowl"; "Ben answers the telephone." Each of these describes a small completed task – Ben wants a mixing bowl and gets one – and these are parts of larger tasks:

Task 1. Ben bakes a cake
  Subtask 1.1. Ben mixes ingredients
    Subtask 1.1.1. Ben gets out mixing bowl
    Subtask 1.1.2. Ben measures out flour
    Subtask 1.1.3. Ben puts flour into mixing bowl
    ...

Subtask 1.1.20. Ben pours mixture into baking pan

Subtask 1.2. Ben bakes mixture
Subtask 1.2.1. Ben sets temperature on oven
Subtask 1.2.2. Ben opens oven
...

Subtask 1.3. Ben frosts cake
Subtask 1.3.1. Ben gets out icing sugar
...

Ben, we infer, began with the project of baking a cake, and that entailed certain subtasks, which themselves entailed other subtasks and so on.

This trace, however, hides the local and opportunistic nature of these tasks and subtasks. What led to the action "Ben gets out a mixing bowl"? Ben needed something to prepare the ingredients in, so he projected a goal – getting a mixing bowl. How could he reach that goal? Knowing there is usually a bowl in the cupboard, he looked there, found it, and got it out. If it hadn't been there, he would have considered alternative methods and chosen the most opportune one. He might have looked for a bowl in the dishwasher, borrowed a bowl from his next door neighbor, or got out a saucepan instead. For all we know, Ben went to the cupboard only after failing to see a bowl on the counter. The trace tells us nothing about the choices he did *not* make – the *opportunities he did not take*. On the contrary, it lulls us into assuming that Ben's choices were there from the start.

What the trace does represent are the opportunities Ben *did* take, and these bear several relations to one another. Three of the commonest relations between two tasks *s* and *t* are these:

	Relation of *t* to *s*	**Condition on *s***
Sequence	*t* is subsequent to *s*	*s* must be complete before *t* is begun
Part–whole	*t* is part of *s*	*t* must be complete for *s* to be complete
Digression	*t* is a digression from *s*	*s* need not be complete before *t* is begun or completed

In our example, baking the mixture is *subsequent to* mixing the ingredients, and measuring flour is subsequent to getting out a mixing bowl. In contrast, putting flour into the mixing bowl is *part of* mixing the ingredients, and setting the oven temperature is part of baking the mixture. Answering the telephone is a *digression from* making the cake, mixing the ingredients, and putting flour into the bowl. Each of these relations is subject to certain conditions. For sequence, Ben must have completed mixing the ingredients before baking the mixture. For part–whole, he must have completed measuring out flour in order to have completed mixing the ingredients. But for digression, Ben need not have completed putting flour into the bowl in order to answer the telephone – though he will probably complete the call before returning to making the cake.

The identical relations appear in *joint* actions. Anna is in the middle of Frankfurt trying to find Goethe House, a well known landmark, and asks a passerby, Bernd, for directions. Here is what they say, in English translation (Klein, 1982, p 171):

Anna:	Excuse me, could you tell me how to get to Goethe House?
Bernd:	(3.0) Goethe House?
Anna:	Yes.
Bernd:	Yes, go up that way, always straight ahead, first street to the left, first street to the right.
Anna:	First left, first right.
Bernd:	Yes.
Anna:	Thank you.

The task structure of this conversation is something like this:

Project 1. A and B converse
- Subproject 1.1. A and B enter conversation
  - Subproject 1.1.1. A and B agree to open conversation
- Subproject 1.2. A and B carry out business of conversation
  - Subproject 1.2.1. A and B exchange route directions
    - Subtask 1.2.1.1. A proposes that B give A route directions
    - Subtask 1.2.1.2. B gives A route directions
  - Subproject 1.2.2. A and B exchange thanks
    - Subtask 1.2.2.1. A proposes to thank B
    - Subtask 1.2.2.2. B acknowledges A's thanks
- Subproject 1.3. A and B exit from conversation
  - Subproject 1.3.1. A and B break contact

Here, too, we find the relations of sequence and part–whole. The exchange of thanks, for example, is subsequent to the exchange of route directions. And these are each part of the joint action of carrying out the business of the conversation. At an even lower level, the confirmation of understanding ("Goethe House?" "Yes") is part of Anna's contribution of asking Bernd how to get to Goethe House. (There are no digressions in this conversation.) So Anna and Bernd carry out many joint actions, all bearing the relation of either sequence or part–whole.

What is the status of this structure? In the goals-and-plans view, it would reflect a plan Anna and Bernd adhere to in order to reach their goals, much as the syntax of a sentence is a structure that speakers try to adhere to in performing an illocutionary act. In the opportunistic view, the structure emerges only as Anna and Bernd do what they need to do in order to deal with the joint projects that get proposed in the conversation. It is a trace of the opportunities taken, not of the opportunities considered.

Like all conversations, Anna and Bernd's dialogue has an entry, body, and exit. Its entry is initiated by Anna when she says "Excuse me," makes eye contact, and establishes that Bernd is willing to talk to her. Its body consists of one main joint project: Anna proposes that Bernd tell her how to get to Goethe House, and he takes her up. Although she tries to make her proposal with "Could you tell me how to get to Goethe House?" it takes her and Bernd two more turns to ground it. Once it is grounded, Bernd commits himself to the joint project and gives Anna the directions; and the two of them take the next two turns to ground those directions. Finally, Anna thanks Bernd for the information, and they exit from the conversation by breaking contact.

As this conversation unfolded, it could have taken very different directions depending on what Bernd did. Here are two alternatives: (1) Bernd could have ignored Anna's "Excuse me," refusing to make eye contact, and they wouldn't even have entered a conversation. (2) Or Bernd could have entered the conversation but declined Anna's proposal because he didn't know where Goethe House was, as in this second conversation initiated by Anna (accompanied by a friend) (Klein, p. 180):

Anna: Could you tell us how to get to Goethe House?
Carl: Goethe House? No address?
Anna: No, it was Great Hirschgraben, I think.
Carl: Sorry?
Anna: Great Hirschgraben, the street. (5.0) You don't know. We'll ask someone else.

Even though Carl offers no directions, there is still an opening, a joint project proposed and considered, and a closing.

In this view, Anna's and Bernd's conversation is structured by their *attempted* joint projects and actions. Project 1 ("A and B converse") is the total conversation. Subprojects 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 (the entry, body, and exit) are joint projects that are required of any conversation. Subprojects 1.2.1 and 1.2.2 (the exchange of route directions and the exchange of thanks) are two joint projects that are parts of Subproject 1.2. And so on. Although the task structure is hierarchical and may look as if it had been there all along, it emerges only utterance by utterance as Anna and Bernd complete one contribution after another, proposing and taking up one joint project after another.

Route directions aren't special. All conversations have entries, bodies, and exits, which account for some features of route directions. All contributions require grounding, which sets other features. All successful joint projects get proposed and taken up, which leads to still other features. Most of these features are mutable because they depend on the joint commitment and actions of the participants. Conversations take the course they do, not because they follow a prescribed scheme, but because they follow general principles of joint action.

TOPICS OF DISCOURSE

Conversations are often assumed to divide into topics. The topic, or *discourse topic*, of any section or subsection is what that section is about. The idea is that after two people open a conversation, the one who initiated it introduces the first topic. Once they have completed the first topic, they may take up new topics recursively until they decide to close the conversation. Discourse topics, in turn, are often assumed to be related to what each utterance is about – its *sentence topic*.[3]

The notion of topic is notoriously vague, with little consensus on how it is to be defined and applied. In classical rhetoric, it describes the subjects or themes of essays and speeches, and there the notion has a rationale. Essays and speeches consist mostly of assertions organized into arguments that are designed to persuade, so "what the discourse is about" is really "what the writer or speaker is talking about," which is readily identifiable for each argument. And because essayists and orators work alone, editing and practicing what they write and say, they can make their subjects and themes as clear, complete, and consistent as they want. Essays and speeches can be divided into topics, then, because they are (1) highly planned, (2) under unilateral control, and (3) comprised mostly of assertions.

Conversations, in contrast, are (1) opportunistic, (2) under joint control, and (3) comprised of much more than assertions. Here "what the

[3] For a review of the notion of discourse topic, see Brown and Yule (1983). For sentence topic, see Reinhart (1981).

speaker is talking about" has to be changed to "what the *participants* are talking about," a more slippery notion. Such a topic is negotiated by all the participants, and often gets altered in each new contribution. If asked, the participants may even disagree on what they take it to be. The greatest problem comes with nonassertions. What are Ben and Charlotte talking about in a request and compliance: "Please sit down" "Okay"? Or in an offer and acceptance: "Have some cake" "Thanks, I will"? Or in an exchange of gratitude: "Thanks" "Don't mention it"? Or in greetings: "Hi" "Hi"? The notion "what the participants are talking about" may apply to assertions or unilaterally designed sections with an assertive force. It doesn't apply to other joint projects.

The more basic notion, I suggest, is joint project. Suppose we take the topic of Anna's and Bernd's conversation to be Goethe House, the route to Goethe House, or even getting to Goethe House. Such a topic doesn't help us account for what Anna and Bernd actually said, or why they chose the subtopics they did. It doesn't tell us, for example, why Anna asked "Could you tell me how to get to Goethe House" and Bernd answered "Go up that way," etc. In contrast, if we describe the emergent joint project as "A and B exchanging route directions," we see how it got initiated with Anna's request and taken up with Bernd's response. Discourse topic is a static notion that doesn't do justice to the dynamic course of joint actions and what develops out of them.

Treating discourse topics this way isn't really new. According to proposals by Barbara Grosz (1981) and Rachel Reichman (1978), conversational sections are a direct reflection of the pieces of the task the participants are trying to carry out. Grosz called these pieces *focus spaces*, and Reichman, *context spaces*. Both are organized by the relations of sequence, part–whole, and digression. The notion of joint project covers many aspects of both notions.

DISCOURSE TRANSITIONS

Extended joint projects (like exchanging route directions) have a complication that extended autonomous projects (like baking a cake) do not – the coordination of entry into, and exit from, their parts. Recall that for many joint actions, exits from one are coordinated by entry into the next (Chapter 3), and that holds for extended joint projects.

Transitions from one extended joint project, *s*, to the next, *t* – traditionally called *topic shifts* – depend on the relation between *s* and *t*. With the three relations, we can distinguish five types of transitions:

	Description	Relation of *t* to *s*
Next	Enter next project	*t* is subsequent to *s*
Push	Enter subproject	*t* is part of *s*
Pop	Return from subproject	*s* is part of *t*
Digress	Enter digression	*t* is a digression from *s*
Return	Return from digression	*s* is a digression from *t*

There is a range of devices for accomplishing these transitions, and we have already seen some of them. Here are two major types.

Adjacency pairs. One standard way to enter an extended joint project (Chapter 7) is to initiate a minimal joint project – to produce the first part of an adjacency pair. One might make an assertion ("oh it's Professor Worth's secretary, from Pan-American College"), ask a question ("is Miss Pink in?"), or offer thanks ("thank you very much indeed"). The type of transition it brings about depends on its relation to the previous utterance. For examples of next, push, and pop, consider this exchange at a notions counter (Merritt, 1984, p. 140):

C: Hi, do you have uh size C flashlight batteries?
S: [**Next**] Yes sir.
C: [**Next**] I'll have four please.
S: [**Push**] Do you want the long life or the regular?
[**Push**] See the long life doesn't last ten times longer than the regular battery.
[**Next**] Usually last three times as long.
[**Next**] Cheaper in the long run.
[**Next**] These're eight-eight.
[**Next**] These're thirty-five each.
C: [**Pop**] Guess I better settle for the short life.
S: [**Next**] How many you want?
C: [**Next**] Four please.
S: [**Pop**] Okay (picks four and puts on counter).
[**Next**] That's a dollar forty and nine tax, a dollar forty-nine.

With "Do you have uh size C flashlight batteries?" the customer C initiates the joint project of exchanging information. The expectable next turn is an answer, so with "yes sir," the server S proceeds to the next project. With "I'll have four please," C initiates an exchange of goods, another next. But as part of that exchange, S needs more information. She initiates one subproject with "Do you want the long life or the regular?" (a push) and then a second with "How many you want?" (a next) before returning to the main project with "Okay" (a pop).

Digressions are a bit like subprojects in their entries and exits, as illustrated here (1.4.121):

Adam:	and uh so they're probably their own pictures, aren't they
Brian:	m - -
Adam:	well, I don't know -
Brian:	[**Digress**] is there any milk? - .
Adam:	yeah there's this this uh powdered milk
Brian:	ah yes, - what does that do in tea, does that dissolve in tea
Adam:	I've only just discovered that, uh a week ago
Brian:	we used to have that in the war,
Adam:	I had it in coffee, . *earlier*,
Brian:	*m*
Adam:	the thing is, that it's quite handy, if you run out of *milk*
Brian:	*quite,* yeah, will it ** melt** in tea though .
Adam:	**it keeps**
Adam:	j- I suppose so - - it's dehydrated milk .
Brian:	m - - - to make a pint it says
Adam:	[**Return**] actually, he caught me, on the hop, because uh when you rang up, unfortunately, I was speaking to the bee-est gasbag I've met for years

Adam and Brian are fixing tea as they talk, and Brian initiates a digression by asking "Is there any milk?" Adam eventually initiates a return by resuming their previous discussion.

Broader joint projects, as we saw before, are often entered with adjacency pairs called pre-sequences. Here are examples cited in Chapter 7:

Pre-sequence	**Example**
Pre-question	Oh there's one thing I wanted to ask you.
Pre-announcement	Tell you who I met yesterday -
Pre-invitation	What are you doin'?
Pre-request	Do you have hot chocolate?
Summons	Hey, Molly
Telephone summons	(rings telephone)
Pre-closing statement	Well okay
Pre-narrative	I acquired an absolutely magnificent sewing-machine, by foul means, did I tell you about that?

Each pre-sequence specifies the entry time and content of the larger joint project. Respondents can commit to both by taking up the pre-sequence as in:

A: Guess what?
B: What?

Or they can decline ("Sorry, I've got to run") or withdraw altogether, refusing to commit themselves.

Discourse markers. Another device for marking transition points is what have been called *discourse markers*.[4] Here is an example (1.6.387):

A: I mean the fact that you you - study a thing, doesn't mean to say, you can't also feel it, does it .
B: m .
A: **[Pop] but, anyway,** this is his line, and he's sticking to it, at the moment, till he changes next year.

In A's second turn, he uses the discourse marker "but anyway" to signal a pop from a subproject. It is the preface to the minimal joint project that constitutes the actual return, and tells B explicitly how the project is to be construed.

Different transitions are marked in different ways. Here are a few discourse markers that have been noted (see Reichman, 1978; Schiffrin, 1987).

Transition	Description	Examples
Next	Enter next project	and, but, so, now, then; speaking of that, that reminds me, one more thing, before I forget
Push	Enter subproject	now, like
Pop	Return from subproject	anyway, but anyway, so, as I was saying
Digress	Enter digression	incidentally, by the way
Return	Return from digression	anyway, what were we saying

Which marker gets used depends on the joint project being proposed. For example, *and* can mark a next proposal as a continuation of the current extended project, whereas *but* marks the next proposal as a contrasting project. And *now* is often used to mark next subprojects of a main project. In essays and formal speeches, we find such discourse markers as *let me begin by saying*, *first*, *for example*, *then*, *thus*, *finally*, and *in conclusion*.

Returns from subprojects and digressions reveal an important property of unfinished business. When the participants return to a project

[4] See Schiffrin (1987). Other terms that have a similar meaning are *disjunct markers* (Jefferson, 1978), *discourse operators* (Polanyi, 1985; Redeker, 1986, 1990), *clue words* (Reichman, 1978), *cue words* (Grosz and Sidner, 1986), *cue phrases* (Hirschberg and Litman, 1987), and *discourse particles* (Schourup, 1982).

they have yet to complete, they also reinstate their attention to the common ground required by that project. That often allows them to continue the earlier project as if they had never left it. The point is nicely illustrated in the digression about milk. Before the digression, Adam and Brian had been talking about a man named Tim. After the digression, Adam continued to refer to Tim with the pronoun *he* ("actually, he caught me on the hop"), even though the digression had been ten turns long. Adam treated Tim as if he was still in their focus of attention (see Grosz, 1981; Reichman, 1978). Joint projects that have been left incomplete can often be reinstated with a minimum of effort.

Stories in conversation

When people tell stories – jokes, personal anecdotes, narratives – in conversation, they talk for extended periods of time. It is tempting to treat these stories as autonomous performances. When I tell friends a joke, I do all the telling, and it looks as if I am working on my own. On closer examination, I am not. These stories are part and parcel of the conversation, with the audience participating as much as the narrators. They are extended joint projects that require coordination and joint commitment. If so, they should have an entry, a body, and an exit, and as Harvey Sacks (1974) argued, they do:

Entry. The preface
Body. The telling
Exit. The response sequence

This structure emerges for most types of stories told in conversation.

ENTRY

Most stories in conversation are "locally occasioned," as Jefferson (1978) put it. An issue reminds people of a story, so they methodically introduce it into the talk the way they would introduce any extended joint project. In some conversations, stories are told for entertainment as ends in themselves, either in rounds or in a series by one storyteller, and these have slightly different entries and exits (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1974). All stories take time and effort, so the participants must be convinced that a proposed story is worth their time and effort or they won't make room for it. It is just this work that gets accomplished in the preface.

Stories need justification. People must agree that: (1) they want *this particular person* to tell a story; (2) they want *this particular story*; and (3) they want it told *now*. One way to establish these conditions is for a member of the prospective audience to ask for a particular story now, as here (1.3.215):

Kate: **how did you get on at your interview, . do tell us**
Nancy: . oh - - God, what an experience, - - I don't know where to start, you know, it was just such a nightmare - - [proceeds on long narrative]

Kate proposes a particular joint project – that Nancy tell them now how she got on at her interview – which Nancy takes up with a thirty-minute narrative. Questions and answers are a standard way of establishing joint commitments, and they are useful in making room for stories.

If the participants don't realize that someone has a particular story to tell now, it is up to prospective narrators to broach the possibility, and an effective way to do that is with pre-sequences. With these, they offer to tell a particular story now and justify the time and effort everyone will spend on it. In some pre-sequences, the potential narrator makes an offer while taking the justification for granted, as Sam does here in a conversation with Reynard (1.1.446):

Sam: **let me tell you a story - - -**
Sam: a girl went into a chemist's shop and asked for . contraceptive tablets - - [proceeds on a three-minute joke]

Sam offers to tell Reynard the story, gives Reynard time to accept or reject (in the pause after *story*), then goes ahead. The cardinal rule for telling stories is that one shouldn't knowingly tell people a story they've heard before. So in many pre-sequences, potential narrators preview their story and ask whether the listeners have heard it before, as Nancy does for this anecdote (1.3.96):

Nancy: I acquired an absolutely magnificent sewing-machine, by foul means, **did I tell you about that**
Kate: **no**
Nancy: well when I was . doing freelance advertising - [proceeds to give a five-minute narrative]

Conversational partners can of course decline a story, as here (2.14.600):

Connie: **did I tell you,** when we were in this African village, and *- they were all out in the fields, - the*
Irene: ***yes you did, yes, - yes***
Connie: babies left alone, -
Irene: yes .

Connie aborts her story once she has described enough of it that Irene can say "yes" in a strategic interruption.

With jokes, the preface takes the same shape, but in this example, it became more elaborate (Sacks, 1974, simplified):

Ken: You wanna hear- My sister told me a story last night.
Roger: I don't wanna hear it. But if you must. (0.7)
Al: What's purple and an island. Grape, Britain. That's what his sister told him.
Ken: No. To stun me she says uh, (0.8) there was these three girls and they just got married?

In his first turn, Ken offers to tell a joke and justifies it by suggesting it is new – he has just heard it from his sister. Roger first feigns rejection and then accepts the offer, but Al suggests that the story will be immature – after all, Ken's sister is only twelve. So Ken feels obliged to justify it further ("to stun me") and describe it briefly ("there was these three girls and they just got married?"). By using a rising intonation, he is still requesting permission to proceed. Roger and Al finally agree, and he tells the joke. The preface, as Sacks analyzed it, is a textbook example of a coordinated entry into a joint project.

Stories may also be introduced as a part of a joint project already in play, as here (Jefferson, 1978, p. 224, simplified):

Ken: He was terrific the whole time we were there.
Louise: I know what you mean. When they- my sister and her boyfriend [continues anecdote]

Louise justifies her anecdote as a continuation of Ken's claim ("He was terrific the whole time we were there") and starts right in on it. There is a similar justification in this entry (Jefferson, 1978, pp. 224-225, simplified):

Fran: I feel sorriest for Warren - how he sits there an' listens to it I don' know? But, um.
Holly: Well he must've known what she was like before he married her.
Fran: I guess. And -
Holly: He can be a bastard too, he uh one- one day we [continues anecdote]

Holly introduces an anecdote to illustrate her claim that Warren too can be a bastard, and that appears to be justification enough. Stories can be introduced even more simply with discourse markers like "speaking of that" – even as digressions with "incidentally" or "that reminds me." The story, whatever its relation to the current discourse, requires an entry coordinated by all the participants.

TELLING

The telling proper may appear autonomous, but it is far from that. Narrators still coordinate with their audience at the levels of execution and attention, presentation and identification, and meaning and understanding (Chapters 5, 7, 8, 9). Although the entry gives narrators the opportunity to tell their story, they still need evidence of attention, identification, and understanding. Throughout Nancy's narrative about the sewing-machine, Kate provided just that evidence, with acknowledgments like *m*, laughs, and, presumably, eye contact and head nods. The mere possibility that narrators can be interrupted for clarification makes their telling collaborative.

Sometimes, the course of a story is explicitly shaped by both narrator and audience. Narrators look for interests in their audience in deciding which direction to go, as Margaret does here in a narrative about fainting on the subway (Polanyi, 1989, p. 95, simplified):

Margaret:	I'm very scared of fainting again - um - I don't know if you've ever
Peter:	um
Margaret:	experienced -
Peter:	I haven't
Margaret:	There is *no* experience in the *world* [continues narrative]

Margaret might have gone another direction if Peter's answer had been different. Later, Peter adds a comment that explicitly prompts her to change direction:

Margaret:	And it's just dehumanizing.
Peter:	But people were pretty nice, hm?
Margaret:	People - are - always nice when there's a crisis like that [continues]

Interlocutors aren't passive receptacles, even during the telling of a story. Their participation may add details, heighten the drama, or change the direction, making the stories more effective.

Some stories are narrated by two people together.[5] Here is part of an anecdote told by Nancy and Susan to Livia and Bill about being robbed (Polanyi, 1989, p. 68, simplified):

[5] Falk (1979) called this dueting.

Susan: I didn't hear the guy in the car talking. Right?
Nancy: But he was shouting out things the whole time and I couldn't understand a word
Bill: He stayed in the car or whatever and
Susan: Yeah, he was in the driver's seat
Nancy: He was driving the car and and [continues]

As Nancy and Susan proceed, they correct, elaborate on, or continue what the other has just said. They coordinate all this with evidence of understanding from their audience, as when Bill says "He stayed in the car or whatever and."

The story proper tends to be opened and closed in characteristic ways. It may be marked with a distinctive formula, such as "Once upon a time," which varies depending on whether the story is a parable, joke, legend, or whatever (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1974). It may begin simply with a setting, as in Sacks' joke, "There were these three girls. And they were all sisters. And they had just got married to three brothers." Exits are usually distinctive too. The punch line of a joke tells the audience when the joke proper has ended and the response should begin.

RESPONSE SEQUENCE

When narrators tell a story, they are proposing a joint project for their audience to take up: a joke to laugh at, an anecdote to appreciate for the point it makes, a narrative to appreciate for its drama, relevance, or moral. So once a story is complete, the audience is expected to take it up, alter it, decline it, or even withdraw. The initial uptake may be simple, as in Reynard's remark after the punch line to Sam's joke (1.1.517):

Reynard: Sam . you're a wicked fellow - that's very nice

Or as with Nancy's sewing-machine anecdote (1.3.196):

Nancy: so I've got this fabulous machine
Kate: *oh*
Nigel: *how nice*
Nancy: *which I -* in fact and in order to use it I have to read my *instruction booklet cos it's so complicated*
Kate: *(laughs)* - marvelous

For jokes, the expected uptake is laughter, but, as Sacks (1974) noted, achieving laughter isn't simple. The place to laugh is immediately after the punch line, but there are opposing forces at work here. If the audience delays too long, they may be seen as slow-witted – the joke being a type of understanding test. But if they laugh too quickly, without understanding, and the joke isn't funny, they may suffer loss of face. The audience must attend not only to the joke, but to each other's laughter, a rather unexpected problem of coordination. They can also, of course, decline to laugh, objecting they don't get it, it is sexist, or it isn't funny. The audience to a political speech must also attend not just to the speech, but to each other to decide when and how long to applaud (Atkinson, 1984; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1986).

With the response sequence, the participants must initiate new activities as they reenter their turn-by-turn conversation. The story itself is often the source of new topics – new joint projects (Jefferson, 1978). Sam used his joke as a springboard for telling another joke about contraception. Nancy used her anecdote as a justification for talking about wanting a special room for her sewing-machine. Al and Roger used Ken's joke as a reason for talking about Ken's sister and her maturity. If the conversation is to continue, the exit from one joint project must lead to the entry into a next one. The participants accomplish that just as they would any transition: They initiate new joint projects.

Conclusions

Conversations aren't planned as such. They emerge from the participants' attempts to do what they want to do. When Ben strikes up a conversation with Charlotte, he will have things he wants to accomplish – certain joint projects. But each of these projects takes a joint commitment, and Ben can never take Charlotte's commitment for granted. He can propose a project, but it requires her uptake to complete it, and she can alter it into a quite different project, decline to take it up, or withdraw from it altogether. She can also propose joint projects of her own. The result is often a conversation that looks orderly even though each step of the way was achieved locally and opportunistically.

Much of the structure of conversations is really an emergent orderliness. Although the participants appear to follow rules in turn taking, they are merely trying to succeed in contributing to the conversation. Other phenomena emerge as the participants enter, complete, and exit from the joint projects that get proposed, taken up, or abandoned. These include the opening, closing, and other sections of conversations, and the hierarchical organization of their subsections. They also include stories. Although jokes, anecdotes, and other narratives may seem special, they are still joint projects that are proposed and taken up.

Joint actions demand much coordination among two or more people, and joint projects demand even more. Orderly conversations are a testimony to the remarkable skill by which people are able to coordinate their actions with one another.